



Life Writing Prize 2021
Longlist Anthology

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*Trigger warning: these stories include references to sexual assault, violence, rape and child sex abuse.

FOREWORD

The Spread the Word Life Writing Prize, in association with Goldsmiths Writers' Centre, is now in its fifth year. The twelve pieces featured in this anthology form the longlist selected from over 900 entries sent in from across the UK. In a challenging year they are proof that life writing is thriving.

As with last year, the judging took place virtually with Catherine Cho, Damian Barr and Frances Wilson deliberating to pick a shortlist of six, followed by two highly commended entries and one winner. The winner of the Life Writing Prize 2021 is *The Nicer One* by Santanu Bhattacharya, a piece that mixes the familiar experience of bumping into a childhood classmate at a party with a harrowing retelling of schoolboy abuse. Catherine Cho described it as a 'gut-punch of a piece that reads like a taut thriller.' Frances Wilson hailed it as 'a masterclass in the exploration of trauma,' while Damian Barr commented that Bhattacharya's piece 'ends on a powerful note of healing which manages not to be too neat — the idea that telling our story for ourselves is healing.'

The two highly commended entries are Carla Jenkins' *Carving* and Matt Taylor's *Tromode House*. Written in part to capture memories of her father, Jenkins' *Carving* is both a touching exploration of the father-daughter bond, and the fragility of remembrance. Damian Barr described it as, 'a vibrant character study that shows flair.' Catherine Cho remarked on its 'immediacy that was striking and unusual,' while Wilson commented on the nuances of the portrayal of the father as both 'hero and antihero.' Taylor's *Tromode House* recounts the chain of events that led him and his brother being taken into care – but emotionally this is far from the story you might expect. Frances Wilson noted that 'here is a writer who holds the reader in the palm of his hand,' while Cho commented on how it was both 'heartbreaking and humorous.' Damian Barr commented on how *Tromode House* explores the 'tragedy of lack,' but with a sense of

‘excitement of escape, which many would fear.’

Three entries were shortlisted. Sara Doctors’ *Grief Bacon* is a touching and humorous food memoir, ‘Ephron vibes!’ Damian Barr exclaimed while Cho noted that it ‘thrums with a real energy and life.’ SJ Lyon’s *People That Might Be Us* explores what it means to celebrate a birthday as a queer person. Frances Wilson described it as, ‘fragile, poised and intangible – a tremendous achievement.’ Damian Barr praised it as, ‘a vulnerable examination of being a butch queer woman. Of having to hide to survive and then trying to thrive after that.’ Lois Warner’s *White Lines* covers four seasons spent recovering in a cottage following a violent assault. Damian Barr commented on how it is ‘rich with strong nature writing and folded in upon itself with magical elements,’ while Catherine Cho described it as, ‘a finely crafted exploration of loss and healing with beautiful prose.’

Our final six pieces cover a diverse range of themes from nature to the loss of a parent, family histories, sexual abuse and a little rock ’n’ roll. Nic Wilson’s *By The Wayside* entwines a family memoir with a love of nature, Frances Wilson described it as ‘an ambitious meditation on memory and the senses, with its roots in the soil of John Clare.’ Laura McDonagh’s *Commonplace* begins with the death of a parent then journeys to an exploration of the Irish diaspora, ‘full of betwixt and between—life and death, Ireland and England, middle and working class,’ as Damian Barr described it. Penny Kiley’s *How To Watch Your Mother Die* is a guide to coping with the loss of a parent viewed through the lens of autism. Catherine Cho described it as, ‘an unflinching examination of grief that feels very moving.’ Imogen Phillips’ *Taken and Left* details the years of trauma and recovery following a rape. Damian Barr expressed his respect for the author in sharing this story. He described her description of disassociation as both ‘affecting and disarming.’ *The Secret* by Susan Daniels centres childhood experiences with an abusive father and summoning the courage to seek help. Frances Wilson noted Daniels’ ‘terrific eye for detail and grasp of narrative control,’ while Catherine Cho described the piece

as, 'haunting and claustrophobic, it is unflinching in its examination of pain and trauma.' Our final entry is *The Straws* by Pete Williams, an endearing retelling of his teenage guitar lessons with a former member of a progressive rock band long since fallen out of the limelight. Catherine Cho described it as 'an incredibly polished and confident piece of writing that explores the subject of unfulfilled ambition in a moving way,' while Frances Wilson declared it had 'perfect pitch'.

In such a challenging year, everyone who entered this Prize deserves our applause for sharing what is most intimate, raw, and truthful. It is a pleasure to share with you the exceptional pieces of life writing in this anthology. I'm honoured to help share their endeavours and look forward to supporting them as they make their next steps as authors.

Bobby Nayyar
Spread the Word
May 2021

Winner

The Nicer One

Santanu Bhattacharya



Santanu Bhattacharya grew up in India. He started his writing life with short stories. In 2012, he won the Chapter One Promotions Short Story Prize. In 2021, he won a London Writers Award and was selected for the Tin House Writers' Workshop in Portland, USA. His work-in-progress novel was longlisted for the BPA First Novel Award 2020. His non-fiction essays have appeared in *The Oxford Student*, *Feminism in India*, and the book *Revealing Indian Philanthropy* (published by London School of Economics). Santanu has degrees in public policy from Oxford University and in engineering from National University of Singapore. He works as an education consultant and has previously worked with the United Nations, British Civil Service and Teach For India. After having lived in eight cities across three countries, Santanu now lives in north London.

 [@santanu_x](https://twitter.com/santanu_x)

The Nicer One

Santanu Bhattacharya

When you turn around, I instantly know who you are. In fact, I know even before that. Not that I have any reason to be familiar with the shape of your head, the bulges and ripples of your back muscles, the close crop of hair in short curls, but it all falls into place in a nanosecond, only in the way human minds can work, the way no computer with the most advanced artificial intelligence can. It has been twenty-two years, and yet I know.

I thought I'd put all that behind me. In fact, I told myself it wasn't me. It was a different person in a different world leading a different life. It was a story I liked to tell sometimes as if it were someone else's, when the wine was flowing aplenty, when close friends were opening up about their pasts. The first time I told it, it hurt – I was unprepared and unscripted; I blurted it out in an impulsive moment and felt shivers go down my throat into my chest and down to my stomach. But now... I am an expert, seasoned, choosing the right words and pauses, taking sips of wine at key moments, looking into my listeners' eyes as they shake their heads in horror. In this story, I have successfully journeyed from *victim* to *survivor* to *winner*. They hug me, leave wet lipsticked pecks on my cheeks, tell me I can call them anytime I want, can count on their support. After they leave, I wash and dry the wine glasses, and fold the words back into their box and put it on the high shelf along with the Christmas decorations. And just like no two Christmas trees are decorated exactly the same way, the baubles and lights and reindeer never twice on the same branch, my words too will slightly change the next time they are brought out, sequences rearranged, dialogues rewritten, intonations tweaked. It is an alive and living thing, a story.

Yet now, when you turn around, all the words melt away into beads of

perspiration on my scalp. I wish my face to be suddenly disfigured so you won't recognise me, wish you'd have a lapse of memory. But you're flashing that sideways smile on your handsome face, walking towards me with your hand held out for a shake.

We were the outsiders, you and I, in a world where everyone seemed too well-settled. We were the uprooted ones in a sea of the rooted – the ones who spoke with accents, had back stories, had a bit of the exotic about us. Ha! It's a wonder then that you and I didn't become friends, that we weren't drawn closer by our other-ness. Maybe because you always seemed to fit in so well. You made friends, never referred to your past, your years abroad, the life you went away to every summer, leaving the rest of the class imagining your world, your foreign friends, maybe a red-brick bungalow with a snow-covered garden, while we wiped sweat off our foreheads with white handkerchiefs our mothers folded neatly into our pockets every morning. You seemed to belong in that class, in that school, in that uniform. And of course, you had your football – you played day and night, during breaks, after school, over weekends when all the boys gathered at your house to run over the details, thump each other's backs, plan out the tournament.

I, on the other hand, always ferociously retained my other-ness, because that is the only thing I had. I insisted on speaking English when everyone spoke the local language. I turned my nose up at the stink of garbage, the sticky heat, the traffic snarling on the narrow roads. I held on steadfastly to the past, one in which I had won accolades in another school thousands of miles away. I spoke incessantly of the good weather and the broad streets and the parks of where I'd come from. Not because I was a snob. Not because I didn't want to fit in (which boy of thirteen wouldn't want to?). But because I didn't have the football, like you. I didn't have the height. I was a scrawny short bespectacled boy. And I spent my weekends painting, singing and watching art-house movies on TV. I read *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* during my holidays. I entered essays for competitions

and sometimes won prizes. But none of those had the razzmatazz of the football. No thumps on my back. No group hugs. No anthems.

It's no wonder then that we didn't become friends. Though I would've loved to. You were one of the nicer ones – always polite, soft-spoken, never involving yourself in any ugliness, even if to stop it.

Manhood comes to different boys in different ways. Some, like you, grow more handsome as they go from one teenage year to the next. You grew tall – taller than most of us suddenly – so much so that, if I remember correctly, you were one of the first in class to wear *full-pants*, while we still flapped in our *half-pants*. Your jawline grew stronger, your shoulders broader, your voice deeper, your facial hair perfectly placed. Your walk was confident, laugh measured. Your jokes were never juvenile.

To others, like me, manhood is an eternal work-in-progress. Even today, in my late thirties, I find myself laughing too loudly, or cracking a kiddish joke, or rolling my eyes. At work, I need to be aware of how I present myself – the big bosses are almost always old, serious men who like other serious men who will grow old like them. What I would give back then to blossom overnight into your elegant manhood. Awkward sprigs of hair suddenly appeared on my face that my father thought was too early for grooming. My legs turned bearishly hairy under my half-pants. My voice cracked into a medley of cacophonous sounds and took years to come round to a smooth timbre. My arms were too long for my body. My height grew slower than most of you, and I went from fifth row to second in a matter of months, whenever some whimsical teacher arranged the class in *height order*.

But deeper still, manhood didn't inhabit my spirit like it seemed to have done yours. My gait still had a swing, I covered my mouth and giggled, I flicked hair off my forehead with an artistic brush of my fingers, I checked out boys from the corners of my eyes. I had told myself that these evils would disappear with puberty, once I'd become a *man*. But they held on to me stubbornly, cohabiting with my attempts at manhood, like when I tried

to walk with a swag or used my mother's eyeliner to darken my moustache or chain-smoked cigarettes to deepen my voice. I was a half-formed creature – neither man nor boy; neither handsome nor ugly; neither loved nor hated – just a curious object, easy to accompany but weird to be friends with, easy to talk to but unfamiliar to have conversations with, easy to have around but scandalous to be seen alone with.

Suddenly, at the sight of your smile, a memory floats up from my depths. I thought I'd wiped it all clean, but I didn't know this had mattered enough to survive the purge. There is too much from that time stuck inside me like bits of metal after an explosion.

It was during an exam, a paper that had a lot of writing. We were in our classroom, the invigilator walking around ominously. The sound of pens scribbling echoed in the silence. I turned the page and realised I'd run out of paper. I shot my hand up and called out: 'Ma'am, paper please!' As I waited, I felt a ripple pass through the room. It slowly grew into a wave, louder and louder, thundering, bouncing off the walls and ceiling and floor and blackboard, so contagious that even the invigilator broke into a smile.

It took me some time to realise that my voice, spontaneous and in a hurry, had come out too shrill, a girl's voice in a boy's school! A split second of letting my guard down. I was so angry with myself! I sat there red-faced, trying to go back to writing, the laughter around me booming in newfound men's voices. And there you were – laughing, your eyes closed as if your stomach hurt from the fun, your perfect jawline trembling up and down as your body rocked front and back.

* * *

'You look the same,' you say now, then take two steps back and run your eyes over me from head to foot. We are at a party to celebrate someone's something – someone we are both only barely connected to. Surrounding party sounds waft in and out of our corner. I signal to one of the servers for

a drink. 'You've grown taller!' you add. There is slight amazement in your voice, betraying a memory of me being small and scrawny, an image so deeply entrenched that you don't realise you're telling a man in his thirties that he's grown taller. I shrug; once upon a time, this would have been a huge compliment. I keep my jaws tightly bound in a smile. My cheeks hurt from the effort.

You turn to your wife and introduce her to me, me to her. She seems nice – pretty, graceful, perfectly-dressed. 'We were in school together.' *Together*. I play along – it is the kind of occasion that calls for meandering banter. We emphasise again and again how *random* and *mental* it is that we've met like this. You exclaim at everything I say – where I live, what I do, the fact that I am here now, in this city, far away from where we went to school *together*. Your surprise seems genuine; like you'd expected lesser of me somehow. *He grew tall and he did well?*

I ask questions about your life in return, but to be honest, my cluelessness isn't genuine. Some time back, Facebook prompted your profile to me as someone I *may* know. I clicked on your photo and saw what you'd shared publicly – banker, wife, children, city, football – a sorted straight man taking care of his beautiful family, a responsible father taking his son to a football game. I navigated away from your profile.

I turn to my partner, making it a foursome. I introduce him as *my partner*, dropping a casual line about how we met, how I followed him to this faraway place, so that there is no doubt about who he is to me, and I to him. You and your wife take a flicker of a second to adjust to this information, but you deal with it well, too polished to let any surprise show. You greet him warmly, and we fall into the kind of tepid conversation couples usually have – job timings, weekend activities, house prices, cooking and driving skills. Your wife calls out to your two children – a shy boy in a neat haircut who looks very much like his mother, a girl decked up in pink who looks nothing like either of you. 'Daddy went to school with him,' she points to me and says in high-pitched kiddie-wonder voice, the kind parents keep up

long after the children have outgrown it. They look at my partner quizzically but get nothing from their mother. I understand; what can she say after all? *And this is Daddy's schoolmate's male partner?* Too much trouble.

At some point, our spouses start a side-conversation of their own. They are laughing and nodding, talking about little things. It is endearing to watch. You and I find ourselves standing side-by-side, our shoulders almost touching. The first time the blades graze, I feel a minuscule current pass through me. I move just a bit closer so they can touch again, expertly feigning inadvertence. You ask about my family, my home, my this, my that. I compliment you on your sharp memory. In return, I ask about yours, but I get the facts all mixed up. Your brother is a doctor? No, engineer. Didn't you stay back for undergrad? No, you left for this place. I am embarrassed by how little I remember. You ask me who I am in touch with, list out people you are still connected to, people who have settled in this faraway place. I shake my head at the mention of everyone – no, I'm not in touch, I have no clue what people are up to, I didn't look anyone up when I moved here. Reunions are for those who have the luxury of looking back at childhood with fondness. 'This is what happens when you've lived in too many places!' I try to explain away my social dislocation.

Some people I know walk up and say hello. I deal with them in a hurry, not wanting to cut into the time I have with you, one-to-one. Our spouses will be done talking, the children will butt in, this party will end. I turn to find you looking at me. I shift my weight from one foot to another. I stop the server and pick up two glasses, then hand you one. Our fingers touch for just a moment. I let it linger there, then raise my glass. You do the same. There is something about us standing here shoulder-to-shoulder, making small talk, discussing house prices and children's schools and immigration, in full knowledge of what is going unsaid – thought bubbles floating like charged particles above us.

The wine is crisp and acidic. It sends a zingy flash up my nose. Suddenly there's water in my eyes. No! Whatever happened to playing it cool? But

my mind is a kaleidoscope, images whirring at full speed. Are you thinking of it too? The awkward boy in your class, how he was laughed at for his odd ways, how he sucked at football and was made to sit out during PE class? How a plan was hatched to test and trap him; how one of the boys was *brave* enough to volunteer for this experiment; how, for days, he ran his fingers sensuously on the boy's thighs, tugged at his arm to make him feel his hardness, whispered words of attraction in the boy's ear? Are you thinking too of how he called the boy to the toilet after class, to which the boy gave in, because he was a blooming newly-pubescent teenager attracted to other boys, because he was overcome by sexual desire, like the rest of you were for the girls from the opposite school and the nude ones in magazines? How the *volunteer* satisfied himself from the boy's stroking, gave the boy nothing in return, zipped up and left?

And the boy? He stood there for a few minutes in that stinky toilet, trying to make sense of it all. Was he not attractive? Had he done something wrong? Was he not good at *sex*? And as he came out of the toilet, flush from the weather and the ignominy, he walked into the whole lot of you – hundreds, schoolboys waiting patiently to catch the *culprit* red-handed. Laughter, slogans, claps, hi-fives resounded in that narrow corridor. More people joined the party – seniors, juniors, support staff, janitors.

I was crying, my vision a blur. I couldn't take a step forward, so fully surrounded was I by the jeering *members of the public*. So I turned around and went back into that stinky place. I bolted the door and ran into one of the cubicles and bolted that door too, hoping that two rickety doors would be enough to save me. The doors danced, bolts creaked, cracks let in images of the crowd outside, raging and swearing and bellowing. I stood transfixed and stared at someone's leftover shit in the pot.

After a while, my breathing returned to normal. A little bored by my imprisonment, I filled water in a mug and poured it into the pot. But old shit is a stubborn thing. It takes many, many attempts to wash away. That one, it held on. Holds on. The tap ran out of water and I ran out of resolve.

So we waited silently, shit and I, until the boys got tired and went home. The heaving doors stopped dancing.

Much later, when a deathly silence descended on the premises, I unlocked myself and walked out. I had never thought of the hot humid air of school corridors as fresh, but a few hours in a toilet can make one feel things. I hadn't ever seen the school at sunset time. It was beautiful, the orange blaze of the sky reflecting off the stone of the stately building. A banner below the emblem celebrated a hundred years of progress and enlightenment. I sat by the field and admired the sight, holding on to the moment, delaying going home for just a little longer. The watchman looked askance but didn't order me to leave even though it was after-hours. I couldn't tell if it was sympathy or disgust I saw in his eyes.

Where were you that afternoon? Were you in the corridor too, flashing your sideways smile at the unfolding entertainment?

* * *

I'm watching your thin lips move, baring your pearly-white teeth. You're saying something about bonuses, how they aren't what they used to be before the financial crisis. 'You moved to this country at the wrong time,' you say. But I didn't come here for the money, I want to tell you. I came here for love and dignity. I'm not sure if I say it out loud, because I'm receding into my head, taking sips of the wine at frequent intervals, my eyes seeking the server for a refill. I'm trying my best to stay attentive. I'm looking around for my partner, but he's chatting with someone else now. He thinks I'm catching up with an old friend. I want to link my arm in his and put my head on his shoulder and close my eyes, no questions asked. But this is a professional party, and there are things people like us can and can't do in places like this.

I know this feeling well. It's happened to me many times before, this sudden encumbrance of darkness, blurring of my peripheral vision, slight

giddiness in my head, the rising bile in my body making me want to throw up. I now know that it's called a *panic attack*. I know what I need to do to address it. But when it happened the first time, that evening as I was leaving school, as I stood on the pavement trying to decide if I should step in front of a hurtling bus and end it right there, as I finally got home and went to bed and didn't wake up until the next morning, I could only taste the gulped-down vomit in my mouth and feel my ears pounding.

The day after, I feigned illness and stayed at home. I knew I couldn't stay away without telling my parents what had happened. And what *had* happened? I imagined trying to tell them, putting it all in words, but even if I glossed over the details, how could I take the shame away from it? How could I stop them from feeling their son was a wimp? My parents were respected and well-liked, my sister was head girl in her school. Then why was I like this? Why had I turned out so wrong, so full of everything no one wants in a son, a brother?

So on the second day, I got myself up and went to school, praying that none of you would get on the bus. Of course you all did, and sat elsewhere, talked about how a 'girl's ass was pear-shaped.' I stared out of the window, the warm breeze caressing my strained face, not twitching, not moving, lest it catch attention, lest it lead to another *episode*. At school, the principal called me into his office and let me off with a warning for the 'unspeakably immoral acts' I had committed. I wept in relief because I'd been so sure he'd call my parents and suspend me. I don't know if the volunteer was called in too, the one that had seduced me to the toilet. But I saw him go around school like a hero. He'd sacrificed his purity for the greater good, he'd exposed the school pervert. I got to know later that in future retellings of the story, of which I'm sure there were many, he made it clear that I hadn't even touched him. He was a *man*, only to be touched by a woman.

Blurred peripheries. Heart pounding. Bile rising. That is how I remember the next few months, years. Is a panic attack an *attack* if it's happening all the time, if it becomes a state of being? I sat away from

everyone else, ostracised, untouchable. I had a full bench, the front one, to myself. I ate my lunch alone. I studied alone. I felt everyone's glances on me, jeers and taunts, muffled giggles, *H O M O* spray-painted on my desk that I stayed back after school to rub away with kerosene and a rag. It never fully came off. Sometimes hands would grab me in empty corridors, pinch my butt, pull my ear, grope my body, taking me by surprise, leaving scratches on my face, once tearing my shirt, once breaking an egg on my head. All in the spirit of fun and games. Teachers mildly lectured the class, the principal threatened action, the priest sermonised. But they all shrugged and left in the end. *Boys will be boys.*

I tell myself now that I should be thankful, that this was before mobile phone cameras and social media, that I was saved from the prying eyes of thousands of viewers, that my abuse didn't go *viral*. But this was also before online support groups and Pride parades and YouTube videos of teary-eyed parents accepting gay children (still very rare where we grew up) – before any of that, there was just me, in my own black hole.

And then, as life began to limp back to *normal*, as some kind souls began sitting next to me, inviting me to birthday parties, asking me if I wanted to go to the movies, one afternoon I was called back to the same toilet by one of your football friends, the star striker, the one with the pretty girlfriend from the next-door school. I can't deny I went willingly. I didn't kick up a fuss. I told myself it's because I'm curious, but the bile inside me knew what was coming. He didn't waste time. He pushed me against the wall, unzipped himself and rubbed his hardness against me, then turned me around and pulled my trousers down. I don't remember much of the rest, but I remember his tongue in my ear as he thrust into me with an animal force, again and again. I remember his sweaty palm over my mouth, in case I decided to scream. But I wasn't planning to anyway. Might I even say I was aroused. From behind his hand, I was smiling, for I could see he wanted me, and he was ashamed, and we were now bound by this dirty secret. The shame wasn't just mine anymore.

There were many others, at school and after, in seedy hotels beside train stations, in darkened park corners, in friends' flats left unoccupied between tenants. Some refused to kiss, because that's not what men do. Men *fuck*. Some kissed so hard that I was left with bruises and bite-marks around my mouth. Some saw porn magazines as I took them in my mouth. Almost everyone left right after they'd climaxed, leaving me to wipe and wash and dry. I stayed back to climax myself first, using the images from a few moments ago to arouse myself. That was the only sex I knew. But sometimes I'd take the liberty to add slight details. Maybe he kissed me, maybe he caressed my neck, maybe he said my name in my ear.

The first time someone stayed back, I wondered if I'd done something wrong. But he put his hand on my shoulder and smiled. 'Shall we meet again sometime?' he asked. I nodded and blushed. He pecked my cheek awkwardly. We even went for a roadside snack later. So sex wasn't just a thing of shame and conquest and leverage, it was also lust and tenderness and love after all, like in the books and movies. I'm trying hard to remember his face now, but can't. I never saw him again, but some people appear in our lives like angels, for a fleeting moment. Then they disappear without a trace.

* * *

My partner and your wife are back at our sides. They're discussing the canapes, how the salmon was fresh and plump, the prawns were chewy. You're looking straight at me, and I at you. Out of habit, I flick my hair off my eyes with a flourish of my fingers. You notice it, and put your hands in your pockets and puff your chest up. There's talk of needing to meet up again, doing this more often, how lovely this was. There's talk of sending Facebook requests to each other. There's phones changing hands and missed calls to save each other's numbers. Your son runs up to you and rubs his nose on your hip. You ruffle his hair and tell your wife it's time

to go home, the children are sleepy. Through it all, you're looking at me, and I at you.

I want to tell you it's okay. We're okay. Look at us, standing here healthy and successful, accompanied by beautiful clever partners. Look at us, good looks even on the verge of forty, you retaining yours, I growing into mine over the years. And hey, I'm now almost as tall as you! Look at us, standing here like equals, like our journeys up until this point were the same, that you and I woke up with the same worries and traumas, that the fights we fought were equal.

I want to tell you it's okay that I know the plan to seduce me into the toilet was hatched at your place, after one of your football matches; it's okay that I know you didn't object, didn't protest, were probably busying yourself with taking off your muddy socks or wiping off the sweat, keeping yourself out of any ugliness, even if to stop it. It's okay. It was long tortuous climb out of that black hole, but I'm okay. You were one of the nicer ones, but your *nice* wasn't good enough for me. I hope you will be even nicer next time, for the sake of a friend, or a brother, or perhaps even your son.

I pass my arm through my partner's and rest my head on his shoulder. I know there will be some furtive glances in our direction. I know we could get beaten up if we did this on the street. I know. But I'm okay.

We're saying goodbyes. Your wife hugs me warmly. She thinks she will see us soon. She's already thinking of a dinner party, a long night of funny stories and childhood reminiscences. You extend your hand for a shake. I clasp it in mine and give it a tight jolt, like I've learnt from the serious men in the office. I take a long last look at you. I know the dinner party won't happen, there will be no Facebook friend requests, that you will probably put your children to sleep tonight and forget about me, maybe you will text a few friends, some Whatsapp groups. *Dude he is gay after all.*

But I also know that the next time I tell this story, it won't be as if it were someone else's. It will be mine, only and all mine.

Highly Commended

Carving

Carla Jenkins



Carla Jenkins is currently completing an MA in Creative Writing at Exeter university and editing her first novel *Fifty Minutes* which was longlisted for the Bridport First Novel Award in 2020 and placed as runner-up in a Curtis Brown competition earlier this year. An ex secondary school teacher, she now runs Creative Writing for Wellbeing classes and is passionate about how writing can be used to make something positive from the painful. Carla also enjoys yoga, walking, birdwatching and volunteering for Read Easy, a charity which helps adults learn to read.

 [@carlajayj](https://twitter.com/carlajayj)

Carving

Carla Jenkins

The trees are black feathery lines against a violet sky and there is no wind. The deer tilts her head, listens. Dad raises the rifle to his shoulder and aims. Fires. The deer falls and her eyes close. An elegant slump, she drops on the spot unaware. Venison for dinner. That's how I pictured it, but when I call Mum she says, your Dad didn't shoot the deer; he used a pitchfork.

Last month, I attended my maternal grandmother's funeral. Aunt Janet stood up and shared some memories. I thought I should get some down about Dad – not to read at his funeral, that was a long time ago – more as a record. If I don't write them, the memories will be lost and disappear like words that slip out of the dictionary without anyone noticing.

'Why did I think he shot it?' I say to Mum.

'He was pulled over a couple of days later for driving without tax; the policeman saw the blood on the back seats of the car and found a sawn-off shotgun in the boot,' she says. The story must have got mixed up in my child brain. Now I wonder if it happened more like this.

June 1973, around ten in the evening. Dad, Uncle Graham and Dougie Sands drive to Bedfords Park in Romford, home to a herd of captive red deer. They make roll-ups from their packs of Golden Virginia and they joke and laugh. Dougie purses his lips and blows smoke through the hole where a front tooth is missing. They park up. Dad opens the boot and takes the pitchfork out; Uncle Graham takes the bolt cutters out, Dougie closes the boot. Teamwork. Eight hundred metres on, they get to the fence that cordons off the Deer Enclosure and throw the tools over, then they climb over. Deer are naturally wary of humans, have a sharp sense of vision, an excellent sense of smell, so I'm not sure how Dad, Uncle

Graham and Dougie manage to close in on one, but they do. Dougie and Uncle Graham drop back behind Dad so they form a triangle. The deer snorts and skitters on thin legs. Fear causes her usual grace to become a sloppy dance – legs buckle and straighten, her head sways. She's backed herself into the corner of the fence. One of them forces the fork into her neck, pulls it out, stabs it in again and in again. Or perhaps the initial blow causes her to drop to the ground where she rolls over like an obedient stiff-legged dog. I don't know the details; I can only imagine. Maybe the adrenaline coursing through her body as the men approached is released through a series of spasms and jerks and foam falls from her tongue to the grass. She tries to get up, but she's struck down with another blow. Easier when she's on the ground to drive the prongs into her. They go for the neck because Dad and Uncle Graham are butchers and they know piercing her stomach, breaking her ribs, will blight the meat, the reason they are here. But they work in a butchers; their mother runs a Post Office and General Store. There is enough meat. This is not about meat. This is about power and control and dominance and adventure and excitement and law-breaking and thrills and enacting something they cannot act out in day-to-day life – three young Essex men in their Starsky and Hutch cardigans, blue jeans and old trainers.

'He just liked killing things,' Mum says.

Dougie uses the bolt cutters to make a hole in the fence and crawls through. They push and pull at the deer until she's the other side of the fence. A thin film begins to form over her blank eyes. One of them takes her front legs, one of them her back legs and they drag her cooling body back to the car. This is how the Deer Keeper works out what's happened the next day; a hole in the fence and an eight hundred metre trail of blood to the car park.

In the damp cellar under the Post Office, in a fug of tobacco smoke, she's cut up, put into carrier bags. The meat will be sold.

With a good set of butcher's knives, you can break down a carcass

into smaller portions. You can strip and split, skin and slice. The cleaver is great for chopping through tough sections and small bones, but when you need to get around the bones or in hard to reach spots, you need a small, flexible blade so best to use a butchers knife or a boning knife. The filleting knife lets you do the precise cutting necessary for delicate meat. In a set of butchers knives, there will also be a saw for cutting through big animal bones. I wonder if Dad had a favourite knife. I'm sure he would have, one that felt warm and fit the contours of his hand – gave a good feeling, like when you pick up a certain pen and it just feels right and you think your writing will be better because of it.

For the deer, the gun, the driving offences, Dad gets five years in Pentonville. He's out in ten months and returns home. He finds work in another butcher's and meets Mum, who, running an errand for her mother, comes in for a pound of back bacon. They spend a Saturday afternoon walking around Bedfords Park. Dad doesn't say anything about the deer.

Mum gets pregnant. She wants an abortion, but Dad disagrees, so Mum gives her Sixth Form *Head Girl* badge back to the headteacher of The Romford County Grammar School. My mum's mother is furious; she expected her daughter to go to university and then marry a doctor. Mum writes a speech for Uncle Graham to read at the wedding. During the speech, Dougie Sands crouches behind Uncle Graham and makes noises like a pheasant.

* * *

One summer night, when Mum starts having contractions, Dad drives her along the country lanes to hospital. She pleads with him to stop as he swerves from side to side, trying to run over the rabbits. The headlights pick out pink almond eyes sunk into sockets. They're easy targets, instincts slowed and dulled by myxomatosis; Mum said they looked like zombies. The baby is in trouble, and the medical staff tell Dad best he doesn't come

in. 'I don't mind blood; I'm a butcher,' he says. Amanda is born feet first with the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck, but she's fine. Mum quickly falls pregnant with the next daughter and her mother says people will think she's simple, having two children so close together. Then I'm born, then another one. Four daughters. We live in a big house in Essex which has wood panelling wallpaper and swinging saloon doors like the ones in cowboy films. I stick my thumbs in my waistband and push with my shoulder to go through them. It's a good feeling to think of *The Golden Garter* from *Calamity Jane* every time you open a door.

There are some woods down the road from our house, and Dad takes us there a lot. On the way there, he'll often tell us that Mum can write a good essay but put her in the middle of a forest and she'd never find her way out. There's a big dip in the ground and Dad challenges my sisters and me to see who can run down and up it the most times. He smokes his roll-up and counts. We have to touch the tree at one side and his hand at the other so there's no cheating. My sisters drop out early, but I won't stop even when I'm so tired I'm running bent over. Dad says that's enough when I get to a hundred. We climb trees and Dad encourages us to jump down. I get winded when I land on my coccyx but it doesn't put me off. Sibling rivalry is powerful. I'll do anything to impress Dad and make him laugh; he throws his head back and slaps his thigh, and suddenly that's all there is.

On Sunday afternoons, we have to be silent when Dad chain-smokes, drinks tea and concentrates on the programme *Out of Town* presented by Jack Hargreaves, who looks like a dirty Grandad, but in a good way. Jack shares his knowledge about aspects of country life in a warm and informative manner. The theme tune is the Max Bygraves song, 'Out of Town.' *Say what you will, the countryside is still, the only place that I will settle down*, and this is what Dad dreams of – more space, more land, more outdoors. Somewhere not overlooked, so he doesn't have to hang sheets on the washing line to hide the cockerel fights from view of the neighbours.

'Why did he choose Norfolk?' I ask Mum.

'A couple of his mates had moved there – Micky Harris and Bill Fisher.'

'What did they do?'

'Mickey was a fence, and it was getting a bit hot in Romford so he wanted a quieter life. Bill Fisher sold birds of prey – he's the one who got your Dad into it.'

'Dad sold birds of prey?'

'Yes, but Bill was up a few notches from your Dad – he wasn't messing around with kestrels – he was doing the huge, endangered ones.'

'What kind?'

'I don't remember exactly, eagle owls, snowy owls. He sold one to an Arab in London and got two thousand pounds for it. That was a lot of money in those days.'

'What else do you remember?'

'When he used to go in the aviary, he'd use a dustbin lid for a shield.'

'One of those round silver ones?'

'Yes, for when they'd fly at him.'

'Where did he get the birds from?' I say.

'Bill knew some dodgy people. He wasn't up a tree taking them like your Dad. He got two years in prison in the end for having these birds because they were a protected species.'

'How do you know Dad took the eggs from the tree?'

'Not the eggs, the chicks – because I'd have to wait with you lot in the car while he went and followed the kestrel.'

'What?'

'When we were driving, if he'd see a kestrel flying over the fields, he'd pull over and go and follow it to see where its nest was. Then he'd go back another day and take the chicks.'

'We'd all just be sitting in the car waiting?'

'Yes.'

'I don't remember it.'

'He'd keep the chicks inside and feed them until they were strong

enough to go outside in the aviary he'd built, then he'd buy these tags that showed they'd been bred in captivity and sell them through the Exchange and Mart for twenty-five pounds each.'

I can't remember the last time Mum and I had such a long conversation. We usually go for months without speaking, but now, we have a lot to say. I'm grateful for the information about Dad which I didn't know. In my phone book contacts, I change her name from 'Susan' to 'Mum'.

Dad buys three and a half acres of land on Walcot Green in Diss. He's going to build a huge house in the centre of the land. He's going to build tree houses on each of the seven oaks that line one side of the land, with a rope bridge so you can travel between each one without having to touch the ground. We'll live in caravans on the land while Dad builds the huge house. We're not even going to have a TV – we'll tell each other stories instead. Mum says that she doesn't want to live in caravans without running water and four young daughters and that Dad has watched *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* too many times. Mum gets a smack for that and has to wear sunglasses when we visit her parents, Grandad Fred and Nanny Alice. Perhaps Dad thought about it and saw her point as with some of the money left from the sale of the house in Essex, he buys a house in a hamlet called Thelveton, a couple of miles from the land. There's no heating apart from an open fire in the living room, but it does have running water. Inside, most of the walls are bare brick and there are no floor coverings except for the stairs where there is an old carpet. At the end of the garden is a walnut tree and Dad ties on balloons for us to take turns to shoot at. He reminds us never to point the rifle towards another person and smokes his roll-up patiently while we take aim.

I'm eight, and my sisters eleven, ten and five. We spend balmy afternoons of the summer holidays getting to know the land by running races and playing 'it'. We get stung by nettles and use flappy dock leaves to soothe the pain. We take it in turns to lie on our stomach on the roof of the car next to Dad while Uncle Graham drives slow laps around the

perimeter. At the end of the turn, Uncle Graham gently brakes and you slide down the windscreen, over the bonnet and land in a heap in front of the car. It never hurts. Dad builds the base platform of the first treehouse around the trunk of the first oak. I get neck ache from looking at it.

Dad gets more lurchers, chickens, a couple of Shetland ponies, and a Pitbull. The Pitbull is kept tied to a post because she bites people who wear dark jeans. Dad wins a beautiful red horse called Flicker in a card game and organises for a woman to teach us to ride. Then Dad loses Flicker in a card game, but we still have the Shetland ponies.

The summer holidays end and I start at Dickleburgh primary school. Two sisters in the class, their father also their uncle, take raw potatoes in their packed lunches. When the dinner ladies ask if they can peel the potatoes or give them apples instead, the sisters shake their heads. 'Our Mum says vegetables are good for us,' they say.

Dad throws his dinner against the wall because you don't have peas and baked beans *on the same fucking plate*. Mum gets her first-ever job at Castle Market Garden Centre because Dad says she's not worth working for. She brings home plants that have crispy beige leaves and tries to revive them. She brings home Claire, a shy young woman new to the garden centre, to have dinner with us. My sisters and I love Claire because she's pretty and French plaits our hair. Dad sets up a landscape gardening business and calls it ABACUS so it'll be the first one in *The Yellow Pages*. Mum says he doesn't know what he's doing, that he knows about meat, not plants. Dad needs someone with knowledge, so pays Claire to work with him at weekends and teach him the names of the different plants.

Dad and Claire have an affair. Mum and Dad go to court twenty-nine times to argue over who will get the house, the land, and the kids. Amanda, my oldest sister, objects to the fact that what is being fought over is always spoken about in this order: the house, the land, the kids. An injunction is put into place, which means that Dad can't come within a hundred yards of the house, but sometimes I or one of my sisters will

look out of the living room window to see a two-litre bottle of lemonade and four Kit-Kats at the end of the drive. Mum is awarded the house, the land and the kids, and Dad goes to live with Uncle Graham to avoid arrest for breaking the injunction again and again. When Dad goes, so does all the fun. I get scratched up throwing brambles into the open fire. I read a book a night as I'm too scared to sleep. My sisters and I fight every single day, punching each other in the arms, the stomach, the legs. Sometimes Amanda will lace up one boot and chase us around the house, then kick us hard with it.

Mum gets a job doing administration for a haulage firm, starts smoking Superkings, and has her hair permed. She buys a TV and puts it in the living room. She gets rid of all the animals, apart from Sally, Dad's best lurcher. Sally gets cancer of the liver but still sits where Dad used to park, gently moving her tail when a car goes past. Mum gets us guinea pigs.

We watch a lot of TV. I walk up and down the lanes looking for good flowers to press in an encyclopaedia. Cow parsley is shit, daffodils are shit, primroses always give a good return, but this is not car-surfing or shooting or eating peas over the fields at dusk while Sally glides along the field's edge. I shout and scream I want to see Dad. Mum tells me I'm mad, that I look like a chicken because I flap my arms and stamp my feet. When I've calmed down, she gives me crisps and chocolate.

I notice silvery lines on the inside of my upper arm. I don't feel unwell and after a few days, when they're still there, I show Mum and her brow creases before she says in disgust, 'I know what they are, they're stretch marks, like women get when they're pregnant!'

Five Christmases are spent with Grandad Fred and Nanny Alice, and Mum makes comments like, 'Isn't it nice to be able to open your Christmas presents without having to take the dogs out first?' and I think I'd rather be taking the dogs out first and feel like I'm slowly suffocating with the central heating, but I like the feeling of carpet under my toes.

* * *

Dad has an argument with Uncle Graham and turns himself in at the police station where there's a warrant for his arrest. He serves his six months in Norwich and comes to see us the first day he's out. I'm fourteen now and I wonder what Dad thinks of me. He hasn't seen me since I was nine. He used to praise me for my stamina, admire the fact I'd never give up before my two older sisters, laugh when I'd dance or turn cartwheels around the garden. Now he'll see an obese teenager who has to buy her school uniform from the men's department of British Home Stores. Mum is at work so Dad comes inside the house. He says come here, tries to get me to come close to him but I'm too shy. Eventually, I follow him into another room. Energy radiates from him and I try and think of something to say. He pulls open one side of his jacket and takes out a stack of twenty-pound notes. He tells me he sued the police for wrongful arrest – the injunction had expired, so there was no right for the warrant for his arrest. I still don't know what to say, but I know he's happy about this, and that makes me feel good.

Dad has been housed in a neighbouring village, Scole, with two other men, both called Steve. To distinguish between them, and because Dad at five foot nine is impressed, they become Six Foot Two and Six Foot Five. The back of Six Foot Two's neck is a finely-pitted light burgundy like it's never been washed. Dad likes him, and they become good mates. They buy stuff from the tip, mainly bits of furniture, chairs, tables, do them up and sell them on.

A new injunction is put in place and we settle into a routine. Dad is waiting in his car every day when I get home from school, one hundred metres from the house. He's always early, always waiting. Roman nose and white ponytail tinged yellow because of his smoking. He's also changed in the five years we've not seen each other. He had a good connection with the English teacher in prison and has come out with a love of

poetry and a habit of writing his own, mainly love poems which he sends (anonymously) to the woman at the photocopy shop. And he now knows how to use lower case letters instead of writing in capitals.

I go inside, change out of my uniform and make cheese sandwiches. I click in the side of my mouth for Candy, Sally's replacement. When I open the back door of the car, she pauses, then jumps. I get in the front and put the sandwiches on the dashboard for him. Patsy Cline yodels on cassette. Dad drives with one hand and puts the sandwich on his knee when he changes gears. It takes twenty minutes to get to Knettishall Country Heath Park. On a school trip, I learned it took shape over four thousand years ago after birch, oak and lime trees were cleared for grazing. The Icknield Way goes through Knettishall and is the oldest road in Britain. I memorised those facts so I could tell Dad if he came back. I knew he'd like the place. Dad and I alternate between two of the walking paths, which are the same distance, three miles, but the heathland walk feels longer than the woodland walk because you can see more, vast expanses of heathland and the sky. I prefer the woodland walk. If we do the other, there's more chance Dad will say, 'I can't walk this slow. I'll fall over,' and push me in the middle of my back. The woodland walk has dips and curves, exposed tree roots, overhanging branches. Near the end, there's an area of around thirty beech trees close together. In Autumn, the ground is soft with leaves, the light muted, a golden underwater. The biggest tree is in the middle, and low, broad branches make it an easy climb, but I'm too fat to think about climbing trees now. I imagine each branch creaking under my weight, cracking off and smacking to the ground as I climb, so all that would be left was the trunk and heaps of branches at the ground around it, and me clinging to the top like a bloated koala bear. This is the point of the walk where Dad goes for a leak. I sit at the base of the tree, and I rest my back against the trunk.

* * *

Mum is angry about something and stands in my bedroom doorway, shouting. I ignore her until she says, 'and I'm going to make sure your Dad goes back to prison and you never see him again.' I tell her to fuck off and slam the door. I stand helpless, making my hands into fists until I get the idea of going to the bathroom and sticking my fingers as far down my throat as they will go. I've found a two in one solution, a place to put the anger and a way to lose weight. I start running in the morning before school. I walk with Dad at Knettishall after school. I binge in the evening, then make myself sick and take laxatives in case I've not managed to get everything up. I use *Sun-In* spray to put blonde streaks in my ginger hair and apply *Watermelon Self-Tanning Lotion* from The Body Shop. I go from size 16 to size 6 in months and now I feel invincible. My sisters know what I'm doing and so does Dad, who says, well, you have to hand it to her, she wanted to lose the weight and she did.

We are underage, but me and my mates can get served in the back bar of the Greyhound pub in Diss. We drink vodka and orange and I smoke Embassy Lights because I want to be different from my sisters who smoke Marlboro Lights. One Friday night I meet Dave, an Estate Agent with a red Renault Megane and we start going out. Dave, the Greyhound and going out with mates take priority over walks at Knettishall with Dad.

* * *

The first one in the family to go to university, I choose Colchester, close enough so I can come back every weekend to see Dave. He works most Saturday mornings, so sometimes I'll go and see Dad. He has his own place now, doesn't shoot stuff anymore and has started growing vegetables. He also grows potatoes and mashes them with value margarine, adds instant gravy and white pepper. Sometimes he'll treat himself to pig hearts which he stuffs with sage and onion and cooks on a low heat in the oven, but he's mostly vegetarian because it's cheaper, and he mainly eats soft

stuff because his teeth aren't great. I save up jokes to tell him – still after that loud laugh that eclipses all else.

Dad, a man walks into a pub and says to the barman, 'I'll have a pint of lager and a steak and kidney pie please. The barman says 'steak and kidney? Don't you mean steak and kidney? And the man says, that's what I said, didleyie?'

We sit at the table, smoking and drinking tea in comfortable silence. Occasionally he'll burst out singing, 'Bless your beautiful hide,' and it makes me jump. There's no heating in the house (except an oil-filled radiator which Dad rarely uses), but the neighbours still come and sit around the table, zipped to the chin, to talk and play cards, have a laugh. Dad doesn't have any animals, not even a lurcher. I want him to get one for the company, but he says there'll never be one as good as Sally.

Dad walks by the river and picks up pieces of wood he thinks look interesting. He does the same in the wooded area near the house, takes Six Foot Two to help carry the wood. Dad will choose a piece of wood that he can see something in, a face, a bird, a gun, and he'll sculpt it to bring it to life. He uses an angle-grinder, and his living room becomes his workroom, sawdust on the floor and the smell of wood. The wood is carved into beautiful shapes and forms and then varnished. Precision, dexterity and coordination are needed; one wrong move and you could ruin a good piece of wood like you could ruin a good piece of meat. My Dad is an artist, no longer a butcher, a wheeler-dealer, but an artist, and he fills his house with the sculptures he's made. He brings the woods indoors, into his little house in Scole. 'Do you know what tree this is from?' I pick up one of the sculptures and ask. He takes it, turns it in his hands. 'Oak'. He hands it back. 'Is it easier to carve than other types of wood?' I ask, and he ignores me. In a charity shop, I see a dog-eared copy of the *Collins Complete Guide to British Trees* and I buy it for a pound and give it to him. A few weeks later, on my next visit, he shows me more sculptures he's made. The book I bought him is on the table, in front of the place he always sits, and I wonder if he's been reading it.

Dad's neck has swollen up. It's cancer, and he has emphysema too. He was allowed home for a couple of days before the treatment, before the two litres of chemotherapy that ended his life. I stay with him, and we sleep in the living room on mattresses bought down from upstairs. He turns the dial on the side of the oil-filled radiator and puts it on a medium setting.

'Fifty-five years old – that's not too bad,' he says. I want to shout at him that it is bad, that people live much longer than that nowadays, but I don't. I look at his hand, the fingers stained orange from all the roll-ups, and I want to reach out and take it, that dry hand with the thumbnail a bit too long, and nicotine stains as bright as orange felt tip, but I don't, because last time I'd tried to put my arm around him, he'd said, get off me you div. Sometimes he has to run upstairs, after taking his medication, to use the toilet. He throws a pot of pills at me and shouts because I can't *get the fucking lid off* quickly enough. The louder he shouts, the harder it is. I know my time with him is limited and I should be using this time in a profound way, talking about significant things, the past, the future, good memories, but I borrow his car to drive to the corner shop and I buy cream and jam-filled pastries, Mars Bars, sausage rolls, Diet Coke, and I eat and drink it all, then go and make myself sick.

The night before he goes back to hospital we all sit around the table, Dad and his four daughters, smoking, having a laugh, flicking ash into a round glass ashtray that Six Foot Two took from the pub. Dad sweeps his arm towards his wooden sculptures. An anglepoise lamp bathes them in its artificial glow.

'I'd rather have all these than not have made them and lived longer.'



Highly Commended

Tromode House

Matt Taylor



Matt Taylor is a relatively new writer; this is not only being his first writing competition, but also his first publication. He was born on Isle of Man, where he grew up in the care system, and learnt writing is the only way he could make sense of it all. At the age of 16, he moved to mainland UK to forge a career in the music industry. Matt is currently a recording engineer, a director of the Music Producer's Guild, and also studying an undergraduate diploma in creative writing: non-fiction at the University of Cambridge.

 [@matttaylor](https://twitter.com/matttaylor)

Tromode House

Matt Taylor

Every child in the care system has one thing in common. A reason for being there. Some are horrific, others are tragic, mine was self-inflicted. Although Social Services disagreed. By the age of thirteen, I had become a burden to my mother. She didn't do unconditional love. Love from her has always been transactional; she loved me most when I didn't interfere with her life. When I did, I would be beaten with her trademark Tony Montana scowl. For most of that year, I practically lived at friends' houses, as staying with my older sister's was like staying at a borstal. I was in awe of how their mothers would be loyal and dependable servants. Allegedly, this is how normal mothers behaved. I would eat regularly, sleep in warm beds, have my clothes cleaned. Staying with them became a drug, I needed more.

This is how it was with my mother. Happily passing the baton on to someone else and wiping her hands of it. Or as she would say 'more fool them, if they want to.' By that August, my friends had anointed me with the nickname 'Harvey Wall-banger', as my clothes had become too small. One of the other mothers must have given me some magic beans, as I had suddenly shot up. I needed new clothes, new shoes, new everything. I couldn't live on the hand-me-downs from friends much longer. I was thirteen, this was embarrassing. On a rare occasion with my mother, I managed to spy her pin code for her debit card. She always kept tabs on the cash in her purse, where my fingers often went fishing, but I was sure she didn't do the same with her bank account.

I was right. On my first attempt, I snuck out in the middle of the night and withdrew some cash from the cash machine, £250. This was more than enough to get what I needed, but the ease of this was compelling. It was

addictive. Over that summer, I found my circle of friends grew. Of course it did. I had money, and everyone wants to be your friend when you have money. For a few weeks, this was the perfect crime. Whenever the money ran out, I'd just stay at home and steal some more. The money just streamed like a fountain. Until August bank holiday, I stuck the card in on a restock mission, and the machine read *insufficient funds*. I had emptied her bank account. All of my blood plummeted like someone had burst an inflatable hot tub. I returned and placed the card back and waited. Needless to say, my mother discovered it pretty quickly. She was strangely calm; I'd never seen her like this before. No shouting. No battering. It's was like she'd been waiting for this moment, the procedure had been rehearsed, and she just needed to follow the steps.

The next day, my brother and I marched behind my mother down Prospect Hill, the main artery of the Isle of Man's capital, Douglas. Struggling to keep up, we loyally trailed behind her. The wild and reckless breeze kept slapping me around the face. Trooping nearer to the enemy trench, this ugly, fortified building began to soar above us. Flashing with each rotation of the door, was a logo, famous for striking fear into the heart of every working-class family. Social Services. But today was different. Today, my mother had the single-minded focus of an Amour tiger, crossing this enemy line without a single flinch. I gulped; I was next. Quickly glancing over my shoulder, I gripped the icy bar in the middle of the door with both hands. Let's see how he likes this, I smirked. My younger brother, eleven years old, still naive, such a goon, lined up after. In one long gasp, every muscle in my body tensed up. I heaved, pushing the door with all my might. Thrusting the floppy runt into its orbit.

'Will you pair pack it in!?' she roared at me, while my brother squirted out the other side. We quickly scurried to the empty seats nervously.

Silence filled the dull, worn windowless, dimly lit waiting room. A great big sliding window was used to separate the absent receptionist from

the feeble families, shielding themselves away. My mother sat with a look on her face that... maybe we didn't belong to her. The way she and us pair had spread out across the seats, anyone walking in would probably believe it was true. My mother usually ignored us, and this time she made a special effort. All of the walls sprouted leaflets – each competing for my attention. All offering help to dysfunctional families. I could be in no doubt we were in the correct place. These leaflets knew it. Peeking over to my brother, we both gave each other that 'can you smell that' eye, as our nose hairs singed with the stench of bleach. It must have been used to conceal the smell of fear and despair of the other families who had come before us.

My brother and I complement each other, like loose pieces of Lego and bare feet. About the only thing we had in common was winding each other up. Naturally, I'm better at it than him. I know this annoys him. Still, he decides to live up to his name Simple Simon. Boredom soon infected us both. Should anything other than breath leave our mouths, she'd flip, and we knew it. Instead, we spoke through squints and squashes of our faces, like some war-time code.

'What are you looking at?' I gestured with my face screwed up.

'Meh,' Simon shook with his tongue stuck beneath his bottom lip.

'Come on then,' my head jerked violently. It turned out the code wasn't that hard to break, as her head began to tremble like a teapot ready to whistle.

'Right, you pair, that's it!' She snaps, towering over us. In a fit of rage, she must've forgotten where she was. Bellows of stale cigarette smoke with hints of sherbet lemons sprayed upon us. I hoped she wouldn't smack us, not here at least. Her whole body catapulted backwards as if she was going for the swing. My neck tensed up, contorting my face into a raisin. Her head snapped from left to right. Something startled her, and her anger frittered away. It was faint knocking from the great window. I thought the puny receptionist had come to save the day. She was not interested in us. Instead, she started waving her Twiglet arms towards the door, unaware she was just impersonating the little sign language guy from late-night TV.

There's no way she's opening that window, I thought. Just like the freaks from the circus, her brittle little fingers somehow managed to shuffle this great window along, allowing us to actually hear what she was saying.

'The duty social worker is ready for you,' she told my mother. And with that, my mother stood tall, her chin high, ruffling her faded denim jacket and left.

She had finally gone in to ask if they could clean up the crushed indicator lights from our car crash of a family. We knew at that moment; she might not return the same. No longer our primary care-giver, a title she only held for the financial benefits. Time fell still as I began to daydream of having my own servant mother. No longer would I have to steal money to buy new clothes. No longer would I have to wonder if I would be eating that night. No longer would I have to share a room with Simon. I'd eat decent food. I'd get regular pocket money. I looked over at Simon and said, 'We might not be going home tonight.' A sudden camaraderie came over us both. We were now in this together.

My mother returned as if she'd opened a variety pack of Walkers crisps and found them empty. Her face was long, and her shoulders drooped down to her knees, it was the same kind of posture I'd have after one of her rollickings. The duty social worker shadowed behind her, keenly analysing the situation. A small smile held back my mother's intolerable anguish. It didn't take Sherlock Holmes to see that she had failed, and we'd be going home with her. The entire room reverberated with her choking sensation, as she spat out the words: 'Come on, boys, time to go home,' from her mouth. Only a lit fag left her lips as we hiked back up the hill to go home. My brother and I knew that going home meant we would be stationed in our cramped bedroom; going to bed meant no food. Disappointment always stole her appetite, but it also made her thirsty. These were the worst nights, no one since Albert Einstein had done more than her to make time standstill.

Morning rose, and my mother was more ferocious than ever. The reality of how much I stole off her, must've really smacked her in the face. The smell of stale fags and booze from the night before radiated from her missing teeth, as she told us,

'Don't even think about stepping foot outside that door today.' I didn't mind this, as the autumn weather was growing into its stormy self.

'Sandra next door will be checking every couple of hours. You won't know when, and if she finds you gone, I swear you won't be coming back!' she snarled. The house shook. She was gone.

Our new-found solidarity made the day pass unusually peacefully, the usual arguing over the TV ceased. Setting up camp in the living room, while the golden flames of the coal fire roasted us, while we desperately ate some food. My brother and I were more in sync with each other than that scene from *Morecambe and Wise*, making breakfast. The phone began to ring. I answered it, after all, I'm the oldest.

'Hi, is it possible to speak to your mum?' this female voice spoke down the phone.

'No, she's at work,' I replied naively. I tilted my head towards the gold carriage clock, which has stopped spinning years ago, on the mantelpiece above my beautiful fire.

'Do you know when she's back?' The voice inquired, with a slightly worrying disposition. My defences shot up. The clock read ten-past-two, and I wanted to tell her the truth.

'Four, I think,' I replied. I knew it would be more like eight, but I'm not a grass. 'Who is this anyway, I'll get her to phone you back if ya like?' I asked.

'It's Terri Wildman from Social Services. Thanks for talking to me, goodbye,' she said before hanging up the phone. Simon could see confusion was written on my face with a huge marker pen.

'Who was that?' he asked.

'Social services. I think this is it,' I replied, kind of excitedly.

Four p.m. had passed, and Terri had not phoned, and we forgot about it. Throughout the summer holiday, I began to obsess about how clean I was. Showering three times a day, brushing my teeth four times, anxious to show my friends I wasn't a tramp. We reconvened back at camp, with just towels as if the front room had transformed into a sauna. Simon offered to make tea. Only being eleven years old, I supervised him cooking something simple like sausage and chips in the deep-fat fryer.

A thump descended upon the door.

'That sounds like Sandra, do you wanna get it,' I said to Simon. He leapt up firmly gripping on to his towel, running to the door.

The rays of heat beat against my bare chest while I dry from my shower. I'd always remove the fireguard, as it steals some of the cleansing warmth away from me. I began to wonder why Simon hadn't come back in yet. Maybe Sandra won't this time, as she can see we're clearly capable of looking after ourselves. Just as I began to scoff my tea, Simon strolled in with the broadest grin upon his face. Two women enthusiastically followed behind him. I shot up gripping my towel in a typical teenage embarrassment. My voice became a foreign object in my mouth.

'Hi...' I said timidly. The first woman was a tallish woman with straight blond hair and looked like she'd just shot out of one of the cringy detective programs my mother liked to watch. The other wore a funny cream puff hat, which gave away she was a police officer. Still, I asked anyway, 'Who are you?'

'I'm Terri,' she replied in a patronising tone. 'You're Matthew, I take it? We spoke on the phone earlier, do you remember?' she said.

'Yeah...' I replied, still shocked with awkwardness. 'Do you mind if I get dressed first?' I asked eagerly as the fold in my towel began to unravel. Terri nodded, dying not to laugh. We both bolted up the stairs, quickly throwing on some trackies in our room. We look at each other with confirmation, that this may be it. We might not see each other again.

We trundled back down the stairs, and they stood waiting to interrogate us.

‘So, do you know when your mum will be back?’ Terri asked.

‘I’m not sure,’ I replied. I did know it would be at least another four hours. Terri was a lot smarter than I gave her credit for as she then replied, ‘I’m pretty sure you said four o’clock on the phone?’ The cream puff lady strolled out to the porch attempting to call my mother to tell her to get home quickly. The police are obviously stupid, as well as silly, I thought. There’s no way she’s gonna leave work early for us. Even if she did decide to come dressed in a funny hat.

‘If you don’t come home now, I’ll have to accommodate the boys tonight.’ I faintly heard through the wafer walls. I assumed my mother’s answer must have been something along the lines of ‘I don’t care, I asked for this yesterday anyway, crack on,’ as the cream puff lady responded, ‘You know this is serious? There will be a police investigation into your neglect of the boys?’ Terri could see I was listening and tried to make conversation with my brother to drown out the noise. I didn’t play ball.

It became apparent the cream puff lady had failed in her mission to make my mother return. This had set Terri off on a game of hokey-cokey between the front room and the porch. Entering each time with a new face. Was she trying to auction us off?

‘When are we going?’ I asked one of them, as Terri was still yo-yoing.

‘What do you mean?’ The cream puff lady replied.

‘We’re going into care, aren’t we? When are we going?’ I said rather brashly. ‘That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?’ I said referencing our visit to Social Services yesterday. It was the first time I had ever asked a question which has made an adult stop in silence. ‘She’s not coming back, is she?’ I asked. Terri shook her head in confirmation. We went back upstairs to pack some things for a few days, although I hoped we wouldn’t return.

We pootled along in the backseat of a little silver Ford Fiesta, trying to find some room for our knees. We eventually ended up in the village of Tromode, driving past endless lines of bungalows. Simon and I grew in excitement, as we’ve never lived in a house with a garden before. We

carried on until we finally reached a driveway, the branches of the trees on either side linked creating a dark tunnel. Meshed in between the trucks were thick bushes, creating a tremendous green barrier scaling high above the streetlights.

'Do they keep the bushes like that on purpose?' I asked. Small grins creased both of their faces. Why is this so hidden away, I wondered? The tyres slowly scrunched over the loose stones, as the cream puff lady struggled to avoid the potholes. Anticipation sprinted around my veins as we turned past the edge of the barrier, and this green sign read 'Tromode House'. This must be our new home, I nudged to Simon. Entering the car park, a colossal building, with more front than Douglas Promenade during TT Week displayed itself in glory. Someone was clearly proud of their floodlight arrangement. It was made up of four elongated square pyramids. Each placed to make a perfect square, with enormous clear church-like windows imprinted into each triangle face. Along the pointed roof, were a series of twinkling rectangles, reflecting back the darkening sky. As we got closer, I could see each one had grown a beard of green moss and wore a steel bar above it.

'They must be the rooms,' I said to Simon.

We stepped out of the car, and the vastness of the place began to loom. This is...what I wanted, I gulped. I assumed we would be shipped off to a foster carer, not a full-on children's home. Terri led the way through one of the triangle faces, bulldozing her way through the heavy fire doors as if we were walking on the back of her hand. The constant sound of clacking, creaking, and chattering of plates and pans and cutlery ricocheted off the walls, turning my excitement into unease.

'We've missed tea then,' Simon joked, enjoying himself. We eventually stopped at an empty foyer, where Terri turned and asked, 'Do you mind sitting there, boys? Won't be long,' as she and the cream puff lady disappeared into the office, leaving us out in the wilderness. Every noise perked my spine up like a meerkat scouting for danger. The room was

bright, blindingly bright. The fluorescent lights and white walls scorched my eyes. But at least it was warm, and not damp. I couldn't help but notice all of the doors had a strip of metal across the bottom.

'Look, all the doors close by themselves,' Simon said in amazement. The other residents began to drip-feed past, firmly sizing us up. This is what it must feel like entering prison.

'Look,' I nudged Simon. The constant walking through, appearing at a random door each time, looked like a Scooby-Doo chase scene. Nonetheless, they were circling us like curious sharks ready to eat their prey. They pretty quickly scattered away as Terri ripped open the office door, and said, 'Right, Boys. This is your new home.'

'New home? It feels more like a detention centre,' I snapped back.

Later, in the solace of my *new* room, my *own* room, I laid there snuggled into my new bed. It felt good. I hadn't smelt sheets this clean in... ever! It felt great, actually! My legs stretched as far as they could. The freshness, and smoothness, and softness had a seductive charm about them. A double knock hit the door, followed by the rustling of a mountain of keys.

'It's Babs, I'm the night staff. Just here to take your phone off you,' she asked politely. She was a small chubby stump of a woman, with grey hair down to her shoulders. I'm sure I recognised her from a shop but was too in shock to ask. They never told me about this rule, I thought. What else are they not telling me about? I wanted to lick the lollipop but swallowed the stick.

Shortlist

Grief Bacon

Sara Doctors



Sara Doctors is a creative producer from north London. A specialist in large scale collaborations, she has curated and produced festivals, events and public programmes for partners including the Horniman Museum, the Old Vic Theatre and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. As a writer and researcher, she specialises in the anthropology of food and plants, telling the stories of migration through the food people grow and eat. In 2019 she was a finalist for both the Young British Foodies (YBFs) award and longlisted for *Sunday Times* AA Gill Prize. She is currently researching a book on Jewish diaspora foodways and writing her first novel.

 [@SaraDoctors](https://twitter.com/SaraDoctors)

Grief Bacon

Sara Doctors

As a small child, I was both a picky eater and a greedy one. Photos show me with a mop of dark curls and giant green eyes, pudgy, happy, brash, bossy, with barbecue sauce or chocolate cake smeared all over my Cabbage Patch Doll face. Me pleased as punch with a spare rib like a little caveman. A pizza the size of a table in an American food court. Eyes lit up with a sundae decorated with sparklers. A watermelon smile bigger than my face.

But there were plenty of things I wouldn't touch. Childhood illness and ENT surgery at the age of five left me assaulted by strong smells. Previous everyday facts of life – the fishmonger, the kosher deli, the butcher – were now a horrorshow of viscera, scales and slime, of foreign and alien weird food my family ate which my school friends clearly didn't: roll mops and onion, cod roe, gefilte fish, taramasalata. And then there was the boke of all things dairy: the thick cream on to the top of the daily kid-sized milk bottles foisted upon us as nursery until Thatcher snatched 'em, for which I was immensely grateful. The suitcase-size tupperware in the kitchen fridge full of cheeses which my father would work his way through on weekend breakfasts. The yogurts and up-chuck which dribbled down the chins of my baby sisters. De-skuzz-ting.

Imagine my indignation, on recovering from whatever tonsillectomy, adenoidectomy, fun-ectomy I had endured, to be carted off – every. single. day. – to school, where lunch was served in in chipped china bowls half-full of slop. Brown stew with boiled potato, white casserole with flicks of carrot. Perfectly good desserts (Cowboy Tart – a piecrust filled with Cornflakes and golden syrup – was a particular favourite) ruined with a bucket of oozing puss-coloured custard with a rubbery skin on top. Fish

fingers and chips ruined by peas which seemed to get everywhere: I was horrified by things which got everywhere. Peas, sweetcorn, baked beans, grated cheese. Wednesdays were Salad Days and Salad Days were the worst. The pervasive sour smell of salad cream, pickled cubes of beetroot, cold potatoes and iceberg lettuce.

When I changed schools at the age of 8 (and where I would stay to the age of 18), I could not believe that such a paradise could be considered a school. We would walk in pairs along the edge of the forest and beside the tennis courts us to a dining hall walled in dark wood. We would carry our own trays and could select what we liked from two long buffets – one for hot food and one for cold. Nothing was compulsory, only offered by kindly dinner ladies (Any beans? No thanks. Chips? Yes please. Help yourself to gravy). Many items we could just help ourselves to. A salad bar. Bread rolls. Fruit. Gravy. Ketchup. A full roast lunch on Wednesdays. Curry on Thursday. Fish and chips every Friday. A hot pudding every day and a Creme Egg the day before the Easter Holidays. The reassuring option of a ham roll and tinned pineapple, always available should everything else go wrong.

The school was a somewhere between Malory Towers and Hogwarts, despite its location somewhere between EastEnders and Birds of a Feather, with batty professors and a Latin school song and more than one library. For us little kids, there was a brand-new building, across an ocean of pristine lawns and cricket squares and a whole coastline of long jump sandpits. There was Cub Scouts for girls and boys alike, and members could wear shorts to school on Wednesdays. In the morning we'd sing modern hymns and in the afternoon do Maths with brand new textbooks full of multicultural cartoons, and after school there was a campfire and marshmallows. I thought it was more like a holiday camp than a school, a holiday camp being the highest compliment I could pay at the time. I was in heaven.

One break time I was walking the corridor at school, and was

approached by one of the teaching assistants. I particularly liked this one, because she always seemed to take an interest in me and my habits, and I thought she was right to do so. I was interesting, and my family ensured I was used to the rapt attention of adults. Her curiosity about the little dance routines I would choreograph alone in the playground was warranted; I also thought they were excellent, and perhaps of a professional standard. The songs and plays I would write and perform to myself were likewise indicative of a precocious and burgeoning talent. I thought so, my parents thought so, my grandparents thought so, and that was that.

On this occasion, she wanted to know about my eating habits.

‘What do you have for tea?’

I didn’t like this question. I could tell something was up. I tentatively offered the honest answer.

‘Erm... crisps? And maybe cake or biscuits’

She was horrified.

‘Just cake or biscuits?’ she gasped.

I smile and nod as apologetically as possible. I think I’ve sussed out the problem, but don’t have the social skills to clarify. There are people around and I’ve been singled out by an almost-teacher out of the blue. I just want the interview to be over before anyone else noticed.

In my house, Tea was afternoon tea, which would consist of, as I rightly said, maybe some cake or biscuits or crisps and a cup of tea or orange squash, and was taken with guests on special occasions. Maybe if someone was coming round after school but not staying for a proper meal, or for a birthday treat, or for a religious festival. Tea was not a frequent occurrence, but it was a pleasurable one. I also enjoyed the variety of teas one would get when visiting other people. At one house we’d have Mr Kipling’s Fondant Fancies. At another, we’d be allowed to make our own horrific confections of peppermint cream and chocolate crispy cakes topped with golden syrup. At one friend’s I tucked into a Marmite sandwich only to discover, for the first time, Nutella. At my cousins’ there

would be honey cake and marble cake. At my grandparents' there would be chicken legs and little fried donuts called bubeles served with homemade jam from the quince tree in the garden.

At home we called the evening meal supper and the midday meal lunch. At school, lunch was called dinner, but I also noticed that most people also called their evening meal dinner. I had never encountered the term tea as a description of an evening meal. I had been fed generously at all sort of tables in all sorts of homes, in council flats and condos and millionaires' mansions, and was a fledgling citizen of the world with friends and relatives from a hundred different countries. But I didn't really know anyone from Up North, and never – ever – had I encountered tea as an evening meal. So when I was asked about tea, I answered about tea as I understood it.

I have had the conversation several million times with friends from up and down the country and the class spectrum, and there really is no consensus, other than you'd have to be a bloody idiot not to realise that different people have different names for meals.

The school took it as a confession that I was subsisting on cake and crisps alone, whether out of child abuse or fussy eating, but it was made clear to me that fat children should not be eating cake and crisps. Fat little girls who liked to dance and sing alone were clearly being bullied – or were asking to be bullied – and needed to be normalised.

I was being called a fat little girl. This hadn't occurred to me before. I was a fat little girl. My eyes welled and reddened. Fat ugly tears spilled over my fat ugly cheeks. Retrospectively, she may have got the wrong idea about me and my eccentricities. In fact I had lots of friends and was naturally very sociable, but every artiste needed time alone with the muse when it struck them, and so I unembarrassedly would take myself off to rehearse or improvise dances or dramatic scenes, the better to show off to my classmates later, over lunch.

But not any more. From then on, lunch was off the table. Food would

have to become my dirty little secret.

A letter was sent home, or a comment made in an otherwise glowing school report. My burgeoning chub needed to be nipped in the bud. Aged 10 I had a doctor's note to get my prepubescent arse into WeightWatchers, and my mother took me to the meeting down the road from the school, as if to guarantee that teachers would also be there. Aged 12 the same doctor thought it appropriate to give me amphetamine diet pills in a little brown envelope. It was like staging a school production of *Requiem for a Dream*, or livening up *Scarface* with Bugsy Malone casting.

In our last term in the junior school, my best friends and I were the last in the changing room after school. I took the opportunity to show them my new set of underwear, of which I was immensely proud. It was an innocent moment. A matching crop top and briefs set, white with back spots on the top and black with spots on the bottom. I was proud of the size 12, which I equated with my not-quite age, rather than the grown-up size. I awkwardly struck a pose, and in one, startling moment, realised that I was more and therefore less than these girls. They were lithe and beautiful, in their itchy gym knickers and *The Simpsons* trainers. I had a sudden startling revelation of what womanhood was and what I was not. I'm sure my friends never batted an eyelid. I asked one of them recently; she's still my best friend. She remembers the trainers. The trainers were awesome.

Meals become a minefield. For the next two years I wouldn't eat in the school dining room, much to the concern of my friends, but the tuck shop lady knew I wasn't starving. And by going to the tuck shop only when the rest of the school was at lunch, I missed the indignity of queuing up for sweets with my fellow students. Because god forbid anyone ever saw me in there. Two bars of chocolate, and a small bag of penny sweets. I'd always pretend that only one was for me, the rest for friends. I might in fact just be running an errand for my friends, and not indulging myself at all. It was very important to have a good cover story. Because fat little girls shouldn't eat sweets. I would sit by my locker, calculating the calories of a Drifter

or a Milky Way, reading Just Seventeen magazine or Marx for Beginners, drawing pictures of dogs, writing angry poetry, and having a good old cry.

* * *

At home it was a bit different. Eating en famille was important. The Friday night table piled with dishes. A slab of brisket, slow cooked all day whilst my parents were at work. Baked potatoes cut in half, scored, and brushed with butter before going back under the grill to crisp up. At least two gravies, one thick and meaty, the other a clear and shiny jus preferred by my middle sister. Tureens of cabbage – dark and bubbly savoy, pale and farty white, flaps of spring greens, bunches of curly kale (my personal favourite), another bowl of two of peas or beans or carrots. Pickles in jars and plastic bags or, on special occasions, decanted into bowls: new green, hamisha, Polish, bread-and-butter, spicy Israeli ones from a tin. A large round spiral of challah, the size of a newborn baby, that we'd cut into fat slices and smear with butter, or just rip hunks of the twisted dough with our hands and dip it in gravy. A choice of desserts: always a big fruit salad, with melon and grapes and whatever looked good in the supermarket. Boxes of ice creams and lollies, straight from the freezer to the table, then anxiously taken back to the freezer before they melted. Maybe a Viennetta, or, if my cousins were in attendance, a Sara Lee chocolate gateaux. A homemade crumble or a shop-bought strudel or pie, with a choice of custard or ice cream or cream. There might even be sweets for after.

But I was getting mixed messages. Even at the heaving family table my abstemiousness would be praised and any divergences always commented upon or policed in someway. One grandmother's warning 'Nisht!' delivered as a hiss and with a smack on the hand, whilst the other piled up my plate. Treats doled out to the other kids and not to me. A smaller easter egg for Sara. The bizarre gifting of Diabetic Chocolate which tastes of shampoo and gives me the shits.

* * *

You could trace both sides of my family through the generations and the continents, and they'd keep on bumping into each other. In both mother's and father's family story the other's pops up like a bad penny. In Hackney, and in Odessa and in Strasbourg, down the centuries, there was the Cohn family, adjusting their profession and the spelling of the name. And there, right next door, were the Levys, owing them money. And so my parents' union was not so much the work of a some sort of malign destiny, but simply the reality of village life. And all diasporas are villages.

Minority groups have developed many modes of preserving themselves and their culture. Up and down the country there are underground networks of Jews and Persians and Ghanaians and Tamils, each providing their own with the right spices and sweets and husbands. A child of the diaspora can walk the length of the British Isles relying entirely on the cooking and hospitality of heretofore unknown aunties and cousins. In London, it's possible to live in a specific cultural enclave, or, as we did, carve out a Jewish village life from the multicultural city, glossing over the bits in between. Although I didn't know it at the time, there was a fully functioning shtetl overlaid on the conventional London geography, hidden in plain site, like Anne Frank in the annex. Indeed we resented the ultra orthodox in their black hats and fecundity for drawing attention to the rest of us. We just wanted access to traditional baked goods, and we didn't want any trouble.

To that end my parents marked out the routes and perimeters of our village. From our family home in Redbridge we'd pile in to the Volvo to see the dentist in Stamford Hill, the optician in Highbury, the tailor in Colindale. We'd eat out in St John's Wood and Kingsland Road and Hendon. There were holidays in Bournemouth and South Beach. There were the jewellers and motor mechanics and baby sitters and charity collectors that we would patronise, and, unspoken, the ones we wouldn't.

The friends and neighbours we could visit, and the ones we couldn't.

Bernie the butcher was a portly East End gentleman with a cloth cap and anorak which he paired with immaculate alligator winkle pickers and blood smeared apron. Beneath the hat was shiny bronze bald patch set about with tight grey curls. He would turn up at the house after dinner on a Thursday, flirt with my mother, discuss medical and legal complaints with my father, be told off for being so fat by grandmother, and be ignored by me and my sisters for whom this was all a bit too ethnic for our liking. He would bring a white polythene bag full of chicken quarters, a slab of brisket, and the occasional meaty horror that splattered by childhood memories like a nicked artery. Whole beef tongues. Aged fowls for the soup pot, complete with gruschitzkah and poopiks and oviducts bursting with tiny unfertilised eggs that were presumably considered a delicacy in Poland in the 1860s.

That our friends and neighbours did not have their meat delivered by an amiable throwback – least of all one in fancy dress – had not escaped my attention. I came to fear that he was being brought to the house as a potential suitor like Lazar Wolf in *Fiddler on the Roof*. It dawned on me, impossibly stupidly slowly, that all these people were Jewish.

* * *

By the time I hit 15 I got more into my stride. I worked out what I liked and what I was like. I was a big girl, sure, but I was fancy and funny and fearless. Punky, gothy, neons, pastels, vintage, glitter, rock'n'roll. Britpop 90s London was a summer of love for indie kids. It was a great time to be fat or queer or alternative. It was a fucking awesome time to be a girl. We would stomp on school uniform regulations with platform boots. I dictated the terms in which other people would describe me. I was never going to be The Fat One. I was going to be The One with Pink Hair, the fairy wings, and memorably once The Green Eyebrows. I was happy,

healthy, with good friends and good grades and some amazing outfits. I did not give a fuck what anyone thought of me.

So pleased was I with my own fabulousness that I didn't notice the way things were going at home, the troubles my parents were having with work and money. I didn't care. My parents were ridiculous and difficult and embarrassing. I didn't need them. I'd been leaving Ilford soon.

* * *

My first time away from home and fending for myself, I was 18 and more than happy to live on sandwiches. I had just finished my A-Levels and headed up to the Edinburgh to work at the festival. I was paid a pittance and given a shared room in a shared flat and had the time of my life. My room mates were older, some as ancient as 25, and all had at least enough of a university education to know how to make pasta and rudimentary Thai green curry.

I returned to Edinburgh to work the festival every summer, perhaps not realising there were easier ways to earn a living. In my second season, I considered myself a sophisticated woman of the world, producing elaborate Italian banquets for my flatmates, and storming out when one of their attempts at making a fish pie blocked the sink. The third year, I was so terrifyingly and desperately poor that I spent two weeks in a flooded basement, living for a fortnight off one packet of Richmond Sausages, a bag of penne, and one bag of Haribo, at which point I admitted defeat and borrowed enough for the long coach back home. I remember the smell of the last of the sausages and sweets slowly turning rancid in my backpack on the 12-hour coach journey back to London. I was only 20, but was convinced that my wandering days were over. I spent the rest of the summer selling medical machinery and having panic attacks every time the phone rang.

* * *

Not until I went to Cambridge would I understand the bullying and harassment meted out to fat girls. The shame and humiliation reserved for those who just wouldn't, couldn't, fit in.

I always thought Uni would be a melting pot, a place where people of all backgrounds are planted together in an intellectual hothouse to cross-pollinate ideas and areas of study, and give each other unfamiliar pests and diseases. In my case, I developed a great love of Eritrean food, an interest in international versions of English, five worthwhile friendships, a great distrust of all posh men, and utter, utter self-loathing. I found myself surrounded with people from across the full gamut of home counties, some from as far afield as Gloucestershire, mainly pink, mainly male, and all with not much more to recommend them than some excellent A-Level results and some charming beaded jewellery they had acquired on their gap year.

The canteen was called a Buttery – a term I was utterly uncharmed by, but whose thick gravy was inexpensive and nourishing. I knew true poverty, but I never knew hunger. The Buttery was subsidised, and for 10 or 20p, I could have a plate of gravy and a bread roll. I could walk across to the other side of town, past the dreaming spires and college libraries and chapels, alongside Parker's Piece and over to the Grafton Centre where there was an Iceland and a Poundshop, where I bought broken biscuits and Cadbury factory rejects. At the meat stall in the market you could buy two turkey legs for £1, and big bags of penny sweets. I'd spend a little more on real ground coffee, which I'd drink by the jugful from the percolator I had rescued from my father's office when it closed down. It made my room smell rich and savoury with the coffee burnt on to the hotplate. I had booze – old, expired obscure – pilfered from my teetotal parents' drinks cabinet, which had been stocked around the time of their wedding in 1979, and a truly awesome collection of books and CDs, so soon my room became the glittering salon I had dreamed it would be.

But it was not an easy place to be poor. In the holidays I would take a job cleaning the dorm rooms as the college transformed into a conference centre. I was not a gifted cleaner, and at one point my professional cleaning colleagues rather indulgently sent me to tidy up my own room such was its disarray. I would often be sent into the rooms of fellow students, who rewarded me by dedicating pages of chat room content to how fat and hideous I was, and how funny it was that I was cleaning their rooms.

I didn't tell my friends. It was too embarrassing, too shaming. I was still hoping they perhaps hadn't noticed that I was fat, so didn't want to point it out to them.

* * *

The day after graduation, I moved in with a man who didn't shop.

That he had clothes on his back and money in his pocket was a happy accident of birth and the occasional gift from a doting aunt. That there was food on his plate was something more of a mystery.

On moving into a flat share, a member of his social circle had taught him how to microwave a potato, and that the correct portion size was four potatoes. When I met him was on a diet, subsisting primarily on Rice Krispies. Every so often, he would enjoy a takeaway pizza or curry. He had never learnt how to use cutlery or lay the table.

I spent the next decade feeding and clothing the Manchild as if I had personally given birth to him, this three-children-in-a trench-coat, this three-monkeys-in-man-suit of a man. My spending was often criticised, and my pleas for assistance in grocery shopping went unheeded. So I linked his credit card to our Ocado and Oddbins delivery accounts. I worked around him.

I love to shop. I put love and thought and curation into every purchase. I know what we need and what we lack and what we have in abundance. The bounty and beauty of a full fridge, the warmth and security of a well-

stocked larder. Sometimes all that stands between me and the abyss is my stockpile of ramen noodles. And then there's the tinned confit canard, jars of morcilla, brined and salted olives of several varieties, and other European delicacies that will get me through the long, cold, hungry gap of our so-called lives in post-Brexit Britain. I also have 20 pats of *Président demi sel beurre* in the freezer, but that's a frivolous and optimistic gesture towards a future where there is still electricity in the walls and a roof over my head.

Stockpiling is something my family takes very seriously. We've been preparing for the worst since a particularly brutal expulsion from Strasbourg in 1349, but I'm pretty sure there are some tinned items in my grandmother's larder that go back to the Exodus, which is estimated by scholars to have taken place in the 13th century BCE.

My maternal grandmother learnt how to cook in the industrial kitchens of the kibbutz where she lived and worked in the 1950s, and where she would have regular fights with Holocaust survivors who had developed very funny ideas about food. The job of the cooks was to consolidate the kibbutzniks' rations, turn them into communal meals. The elderly Hungarian woman who ran the kitchen had known suffering and starvation on an industrial scale, meted out as policy like watered down soup. She had worked in the concentration camp's kitchen too, an unwilling pawn in the systematic starvation of her fellow internees. Day after day she would be forced to dole out the meagre provisions – just enough, barely enough, to keep people alive. Enough to torture people with their own survival. Imagine being given the task of feeding people and always leaving them hungry. And less than a decade later, in another encampment, in another land, one can forgive this woman's transgressions. Her well-intentioned force-feeding of any child that crossed her path. The surreptitious sneaking of meat paste sandwiches to anyone who passed through the kitchen.

My grandmother, then a twenty-two year-old Eastender, learned to make do with less, and how to swear in Hungarian. She learned how to

hide food and feed your love ones whenever and whatever you could. She learned how to feed a camp full of your kinfolk on six tins of food a day.

Now in her 90s and back in East London, she has three industrial freezers full of homemade meals and cakes. Her bedroom cupboards contain jars of jam and gravy, as though Waitrose and Deliveroo did not serve the E18 postcode. As though the supply lines could be cut at any time. As though it could turn out that your money's no good, your papers no longer valid. As though the big shops no longer let you in, and small shop windows had been reduced to a thousand shards of broken glass.

I used to laugh at my grandmother, as I sat plump and privileged and surrounded by plenty. But the call to stockpile awakens an epigenetic twitch and I too am laying down the jam for leaner seasons to come.

Shopping and stockpiling are two sides of the same coin, a mechanism for having your cake and eating it. Shopping was religion to my family, and like religion it was what we did at weekends and weren't to tell anyone at school about.

* * *

It wasn't until I lost a lot of weight that I felt permitted to enjoy food. It felt like coming out of the closet (larder). I try to be defiant. I take my picture eating an ice cream. I try to order what I want and what I need, not what I think I should have. But self-consciousness once attained is hard to shake off. It was years before I felt able to eat in public. It took many more years than that not to be terrified of a friend or stranger joining us at home for a meal, and seeing all our peculiarities and overindulgences close up. And in a way I have never got over my horror of having to eat at someone else's house. The etiquette, the assumptions, the menu. Of being seen as fussy or picky or greedy. Of having my plate and eating habits noticed or scrutinised.

I am always aware of the optics of what I'm eating, where I'm eating,

how I'm eating, and how much I'm eating. I honestly thought this was an experience reserved for fat people, but the more I've embraced food in my life and work, the more I notice the exhausting microbattles raging all around me. A table with four girlfriends can turn into a round of competitive abstinence. Just a starter please. Can I get this without the chips? Can you do a side salad as a main? A Sunday Roast piled high with a Yorkshire the size of a human head can provoke joy in some company and horror in others. One is now a Vegan, one is on Whole30, another is only eating now because she hasn't eaten anything all day. I admire how firmly and fixedly they stick to their regimes, where I will fall, fail at the first sight of the specials. I have taught myself to be disgusted by large portions: I can't possibly eat all that. Desserts might sound lovely but are too rich. Maybe order one with five spoons. We signal our vice or virtue with every menu option. I am vigilant. I know what you ordered, what you ate and how much. I judged you on your choices.

The pride I feel when I spread a banquet before my friends, the menu and lighting just so, is tinged with the shame of the fat girl at the feast. I pick at the dainty dishes I lay before my guests, unappetised, disgusted at all this bounty, all this butter, appalled at the gluttony that conceived of this feeding frenzy. An embarrassment of dishes.

Shortlist

People That Might Be Us

SJ Lyon



SJ Lyon is a London based writer and advocate with both Lebanese and British origins. She has a background in the charity and voluntary sector, frequently working with marginalised groups. Her writing, in fiction and memoir, focuses on the state of ‘otherness’ and exploring the vulnerability and underestimated strength at the heart of it. In fiction and memoir, she navigates the complexities of cultural identity, sexuality, gender, trauma, history and politics with the enduring need to be seen and heard for who we are. She has also been a queer community member, printmaker and gardener.

People That Might Be Us

SJ Lyon

The advantage of never celebrating my birthday is that I don't care when it rains. When my friend S wants to risk sitting outside, I have no preference. If our coffee takes a long time to arrive, I am patient, my expectations manageable. The sun appears and disappears, searching for something better. While I look at the sky I hear a click and a whirr from S's Polaroid camera, which I didn't know she had on her. She doesn't like using her phone to take photos because she doesn't want the moment to be 'disposable.' I'm trying to understand the significance of this moment when she scrawls 'Happy Birthday!' in the white margin. I gradually appear, all forehead and cheeks, a scattering of islands in a grey sea, until I return as a butch dyke in a blue shirt. S has made my birthday happen, despite my best efforts.

It's not that I don't have the same associations with a birthday as everybody else. I like cake, even the cake that somebody made which came out too rich and sweet. I harbour fantasies, these days more than ever, of rowdy, sweaty gatherings and dancing and a room of friends that are the good kind of drunk. I fantasise even though I've attended enough to know better. I know that it's hard to get presents right, it's hard to get people to go home and the risk of being the good kind of drunk is that you keep drinking and become the bad kind. But these aren't the reasons for my hesitation. My problem is being queer. To celebrate I would need to be friends with enough queers to fill a room, at the very least. I would need to be able to handle people looking at me, I couldn't be the first one to leave. What is a birthday if not a very public demand for attention?

I haven't wanted a birthday since I was eight years old, serious with

skinny brown knees, a tomboy that wouldn't grow out of it. My school reports contained the words 'sensitive,' with a silent 'too' in front. The library was the safest place to hide, with pink and yellow floor cushions and a few coveted bean bag chairs. The distant *thunk* of the librarian's stamp as she marked the books the kids were checking out. The places on the wooden shelves where my favourite books stood waiting for me to find them, again and again. I don't know if I would have discovered the joy of reading and writing, the satisfaction of being lost in the world of words, if I hadn't been running away. How many of us became the adults we did because of what we found in our sanctuaries? Between books and birthdays, I know how I would choose.

It was few weeks before my eighth birthday when my parents had allowed me to get my hair cut, not just short but 'short short.' The next morning on the way to school I smiled at my reflection in the bus window, thrilled at my overnight transformation. At lunch time I felt bold enough to join a boy's football game, defying the unspoken rule that girls weren't allowed. I ran around in my shorts and t-shirt, delighting in my androgynous silhouette and failing to kick the ball even once. I took a drink at the water fountain near where my teacher stood with the teacher with the other class, the two of them leaning against the brick wall. I was not out of earshot, close enough to smell their coffee breath, when I heard my teacher say; 'I know what you're thinking. I thought it too.'

The shame of my exposure, that I had wanted hair not just short but 'like a boy,' and that I was weird if not bad, was just one moment of understanding about who I was in the world but it resonates even now. My difference was there for all to see and now I had to deal with it, tame it, control how and when to let it out. I told my mother I didn't want a party that year, without the words to explain how risky it would be. I couldn't have known that queers all over the world were having similar moments and I would later learn that very many of them had much worse moments. I couldn't have known that it would be many birthdays before

being different would start paying off. But this was only one moment, a full three years before I took one of my newly purchased highlighter pens, declared the family dictionary for my own and cut a swathe of green neon across the word 'homosexual.'

I am a butch dyke in a blue shirt. My eight-year-old self has survived, swimming inside a larger, stronger person. To even say the words 'butch' and 'dyke' would be a coming up to the surface of myself, gasping for breath to get them out. Most of the time I drift along underwater, ever since I abandoned my closeted outpost on the shore. I was nineteen, still in the library. I had left home and hadn't told my mother. I hadn't had sex. But I was reading Carson McCullers and came across the phrase 'the we of me.' I literally placed my palm on the page, thought *yes yes yes*. I was flooded with the desire to find my 'us,' my 'we,' what I would later call 'the queer community.' I wanted to be seen by people who had all once had the same thing to hide. I visualised a new tribe of chosen family, waiting and ready step out of the wings. The world would open up for me, the day I was ready to stop encasing myself in brittle solitude, or so I thought.

I learned a less seductive but very human truth instead. I understood soon after coming out that I was identifying with a minority, with countless other grown eight-year-olds who were not ready to stop hiding in the library. I would gather the courage to say 'I'm gay' to people who responded in no particular way. I told my mother and caught the moment where the pain bloomed in her eyes, to be replaced with fear. I learned that meeting other gays for the first time did not mean that I would always like them. I learned what I am still trying to learn now, that finding the people who become your family and having what you want is something that takes many, many years. I came away from sparsely-attended LGBT events discouraged. But it was at one of those I met another butch dyke who eventually became the transman I would be with for four years. Two years after we broke up I went to my first sex party, on the recommendation of a queer I met at a book club organised by my straight landlord. A year

after that I met S, who I now consider to be the 'we of me.' Most of the good things, when spaced far apart, had their origins in awkward, wasted efforts. A Polaroid with just me captures my stubborn cowardice when it comes to my birthday, but also a glimmer of smiling triumph.

A picture of S would capture her as a dyke for me, but as a femme she couldn't guarantee that the world at large would see it. This is despite her colourful leather shoes, piercing, creatively painted nails and the fact that she has managed to flag for anal fisting using a red bandanna to tie her hair to the right. The other people in the café smile nervous encouragement at us, prompted by me, a butch dyke, my very simple blue shirt. In an hour we will be in the cinema across the road, for a screening at the local queer film festival, a crowded lobby full of butch dykes in which the odd acquaintance will brush a hand over my upper arm, saying 'I like your shirt.' They could be flirting, or they could be conveying a general approval of my butch dykeness. I've been craving that approval all my life, but now that I have it all I can think is why, why would you touch my arm when there are so many others like look like me, or look like people that might be me? I also know I shouldn't complain, when I have fallen through the Trapdoor.

The Trapdoor is an object of my imagination. It is also an object of queer mythology. Many people have imagined a Trapdoor, a discrete entrance down a dark alley, or a sympathetic stranger who would take their hand and whisk them away to a secret world full of beautiful people who would be ready to receive them. In this alternate reality, they would be seen they wanted to be seen, with freedom from pain, shame and ridicule. Many people avoided living their queer lives by letting their bodies become vessels for their brains, as neutered intellectuals and 'companions' to those they could not openly love. Who wouldn't want to imagine a Trapdoor to a queer underground cellar, that they might step on one day and fall through when they least expected it? It's easy enough to imagine, at least for those of us who had plenty of practice by reading about Aladdin finding a genie in a lamp, the Pevensie children stepping into Narnia through the back of

a wardrobe, or finding multiple, shifting worlds at the top of the Faraway Tree. Even well into the nineties many of us watched Judy Garland singing about somewhere over the rainbow on videotape six times in one summer, hearing a secret message of encouragement that our siblings and cousins, slouched next to us, did not.

Of course, some people got out. The queer pulp fiction from the fifties and sixties describes the world they might have found, in longing, wistful tones. There is the mysterious stranger waiting around the corner, the life waiting for the reader that will never, ever have anything to do with the one they are living now. Those books were not written for the ones who got out and made it to relative safety in larger cities, but for those who were left behind in their small towns and needed to hear that promise the most. As one of those who got out by way of being born when I was born and live by comparison a life of aristocratic fortune, I still cling to fantasy to help me through disillusionment and heartbreak. The words 'butch dyke' don't come easily because to say them out loud would imply that I've arrived in the world I was hoping to find, and I don't let myself get complacent. I'm not ready to declare myself satisfied, to give up on the idea that the ideal version of my queer life is out there if I'm prepared to keep looking, because that would be admitting defeat. I want to do 'butch dyke' justice, live up to the 'butch dyke' name, to satisfy the itch of eternal disappointment, the never-enoughness that makes me wonder if I will ever grow up.

The real community is more nuanced and contradictory than my fictional one. I am a butch dyke but my lovers over the years, in their luscious transgender, non-binary, genderqueer selves, are not always women. 'Dyke' leaves room for flexibility. It is not a talisman to clutch at for the rest of my life. I've seen others turn it into a symbol of resentment, defending a patch of narrowly defined 'woman's space.' I want the ever-unfolding spectrums, the process of becoming something else by seeing yourself reflected back to you by someone you never thought you'd fall in love with. I embrace the confusion and the joy and the politics

and insecurity now that I'm less interested in answers. I learned from watching S and other femmes that they are queer in the way that I am butch, distinctive and proud. Any human comes to some definition of themselves through experiences with others, with family and community. But queerness is continually searching out for who we are, independent of everyone else, the things growing in the wild overlooked places in our hearts. We smile at each other because of what we are, but also smile in recognition of the bitter road that our sweetness travels to reach us. I am a butch dyke in a blue shirt. That I am most myself when I accept change is a reality that is ironic, counterintuitive, and so very queer. I know how to take the sweetness wherever and whenever I can get it.

We're nearly late to the screening. There's so much to talk about, though we've been talking all day. The screening is of many short films, queer lives playing themselves out all around the globe. People coming out, meeting in beaches, in bars, at the top of Ferris wheels, in cruising spots in urban parks. People falling in and out of love to folksy soundtracks. In one film a guy goes to a farm for his sister's wedding and seduces the best man under a tree. French Canadian teenagers have sexual awakenings. It goes on. I can't imagine how many of these we've already seen, looking for a glimmer of identification here and there. There might be a stereotype or simplification to reject, and in the rejection step a little closer to who we are. In between films I take out the Polaroid, a fully developed image of a queer work in progress, and maybe it's ok to find some pride in that. I look over my shoulder at the rows of people behind me and S, people that aren't us but look like us, or look like people that might be us.

Because it is impossible, I do not imagine everything there is to come. I don't think of the pandemic, the scrap of viral RNA that reached us here in our cities, the deaths. I don't think of how that scrap will shut the cinema we're sitting in, maybe forever. I don't think of how we will all be sent home, how it will soon be impossible to squeeze S's hand the way I'm doing now, lean over and whisper that next year I'm thinking of having a birthday.

Shortlist

White Lines

Lois Warner



Lois Warner is a writer currently working on a volume of poetry, more short stories and a novel. Previous careers include bookseller, farmhand, chambermaid and nurse – including stints in Kenya and Europe, all of which have been rich sources for stories and inspiration. She is an avid collector of books, music records and natural curios and currently lives near Norwich with her much loved dog.

f [LoisWarnerwrites](#)

White Lines

Lois Warner

I turn the key in the lock and push open the door to the cottage. The sklintering cold grinds the marrow in my bones. The door crashes behind me and the sudden movement sucks at the cold air behind me. I hear a dull thud and rattle by the fireplace. Dust motes and soot dance in the sunbeams. Something has been disturbed. I look for the source of the noise. Something crumpled and black is lying in the hearth. I nudge it with my foot. It's crispy and charred, motionless. Crouching down to get a better look, I notice the curled-up feet, the delicate claws and the taut wings that are wrapped around the miniscule body. A small bat. A pipistrelle probably. Shaken from its grave by a gust of air. I scoop it up and wrap it in some tissue paper. I find tears forming. The fragility of everything terrifies me. Life seems suddenly far too much, and somehow, nowhere near enough.

My new home is as cold inside as it is out. I find the thermostat on the bedroom wall and frantically toggle buttons and switches till a light flashes on. The system rumbles uncertainly, whirring a few times, before falling silent once again. I kick the wall. I need warmth. I need light: the shadows are lengthening again. It's unnervingly quiet here, on this middle of nowhere road, surrounded by water meadows and pockets of trees. Only one neighbour behind; hidden behind the treeline and beech hedge.

I don't miss the city traffic or how the windows slowly became sticky with dust and particle fume until the grimy film obscured the outside almost completely. I don't miss the noise, how it invaded my body till I vibrated and skittered on my bed, a pillow over my head, blood rushing in my ears. I don't miss it, but there is just absence here, a silence that seems

to trickle in my ears, broken only by the shivers of trees that talk in the wind. I adore the silence. I hate it. I am gripped by a loneliness so intense I find myself leaning against the wall on the landing, bracing myself, holding on, whilst my legs shake. It all feels desolate, unmanageable.

A car passes by, the beams like searchlights, lighting up the space around me. The feeling of desolation passes as abruptly as it began. I don't need anybody else. It's better this way. Safer. I light the fire. It flickers and fails. Flickers and fails. But it catches eventually. I feed it more newspaper, some pinecones the size of my hand and a few logs that I dragged in from behind the house. They are covered in green moss and lichen, but miraculously they are dry.

I listen to the tide of my breathing. It's shallow now. I am watchful and brittle; churning cells, all skin fire and jitter, waiting for the next disaster to happen. How can a body be feathers and deadweight? How can it feel nothing and yet everything? Every gust of wind slices at my skin. Cold water spreads like ice through my body. A hand on my arm is iron burn. A splinter throbs and flails in my thumb. I pour myself through thickened days: limbs sleep sore, everything tilted, a little askew. The pain is the beat to the beat to the beat of my heart.

I stand in the small living room and breathe out, then in again. I inhale a lungful of new paint, dust, and the residual suggestion of other people that is always ingrained into the very fabric of a house. A home. Home. How do you turn bricks and mortar into a home? I have never stayed anywhere long enough to find out. I have never been allowed to stay. Is home just the consolidation of the stories we weave, the people we let in and the love we make? The stains, the breaks, and the noise. The meals, the moments of joy and sadness, the conversations, the arguments. Perhaps time gathers them all up and lays them down in the walls and foundations. If a home is the sum of the interactions within it, how can you ever make a home on your own?

I feel like I am trespassing. The floorboards creak and sigh in the night.

Sometimes I catch a waft of food cooking. I imagine I hear laughter, the sound of footsteps on boards. In a few minutes, someone will surely come screaming downstairs and demand that I leave. I walk through the rooms, my fingers trailing walls, doorways and cupboards. I love the roughness of the walls, the way stark lines give way to sloping curves. I think about all the layers of paint, piling up on top of each other as the years have accrued. What is underneath it all? Perhaps somewhere there is height chart – pencil marks charting the growth of children, or a special date etched into the stone. The walls are made of plaster and horsehair. The ceiling is beamed and low. Doorways seem to be hewn into walls at bizarre angles so that even I must contort myself to get through them. A sticky fingerprint on the light switch, a coin by the skirting board, a cotton bud behind the sink: the only signs of the previous occupants. But still I shudder. I don't know what is worse, the feeling of being truly alone, or the feeling that I might not be. I imagine I will feel the great loud silence of alone, the anchor weight of a home. The thrill of leaving. The thrill of staying. The thrill of putting down roots. The cottage has bolts on all the doors. I feel warm relief at the extra layer between me and the outside world.

My first winter in the cottage brings five-foot drifts of snow that ground me. I have left it too late to salt my path. I throw out my larder to the birds and watch their delicate forms flicker and flounce in the boundary hedge. I string up balls of fat to tempt them back. I need them to visit. The white world is still, muffled. I tramp across the fields. A tall woman, snow suited and wellied passes by, dragging her stringy dog. She waves, and shouts a muffled hello. She is carrying a bouquet of flowers; the colours pulsate against the white backdrop. My black dog stands sunlit on the horizon, and with one look back at me, tears awestruck and unbound through the snow towards her. For a soft sheen of a moment, I can taste something sweet, before my throat closes and that speck of uninhibited joy disappears. I half smile, turn away, and head back towards the cottage. I feel like I have

no tongue. It has been cut out. Perhaps I cut it out myself? Perhaps I gave him the knife and an encouraging nod? Did he hear me say, 'Take what you want. Take it all.' I try to lick my own wounds, drawing rust into sores. Words do not taste like they once did. I am cold. I am changed.

When the snow crust finally melts away, I drive to the sea and stand with my face turned to the wind, surveying the beach. Mermaids tears shimmer in the low light. An old ship's beam, stripped and smooth lies washed up, festooned with frayed turquoise netting and rope. A rotting gannet carcass spills forth its plastic treasures. Smooth white stones and shells dot the sand, like miniature steps leading down to the sea. I add another few stones to the line. The sand and shingle stretch off into unfathomable distance and the sun shivers liquid low in the sky. The rocky foreshore glints and sparkles in the light. Out at sea, a bell rings.

In one blink I am in a restaurant of low light and warm chatter. All around me there is the sound of clinking of glasses and he is all fizzing smiles and winks. He takes my hands and leads me to the stairs. His hand rests heavily on the shallow of my back.

Spring brings shimmering snow drops and sweet pea shoots that grow through the skirting boards. White and spindly, they search endlessly for the light. I find a brick that wobbles when I push it. It is stuck, but the cement around it has been tampered with. It takes an hour or so, but finally I am able to remove it. Behind the brick, in a small cavity, I find a small tin. It is dented and the lid is rusted shut. I shake it. The rattle sounds like it may contain marbles or pebbles. The initials R.P are scratched into the base.

I see the woman walking slowly past the house again. She glances up once, and I fold myself into the curtains to avoid being seen. She is carrying another bouquet of flowers. Her hair is black and streaked with white, gathered neatly in a plait that hangs down her back. She is younger than I thought – not much older than myself. I forget myself sometimes. Age. Time. Her dog trots meekly behind.

One morning I open the post box and find it perfectly lined with lichen and moss, dog hair and a length of blue thread. As the days go by, the post box fills up with feathers, bits of twine, hessian and shreds of softening plastic. I cut off strands of my own hair. I tear up thin strips of newspaper, balls of cotton wool, and the green moss that tumbles from the roof and place it as an offering on a tray by the hedge. After a few weeks, five startlingly blue eggs appear and I am mama bird, fierce and protective. It feels like a matter of life and death, not just for the fragile flailing life soup in shell, but for me. I need to win. I am darkness. I am nothing. I want him to be nothing, to scratch out eyes and teeth, and burn his house to the ground. I want to smash and smash and sever and crush. I am nothing. I am darkness.

Time is never linear. It fractures and it forks, and so often I am sucked back to then, to that night, and just as I get my bearings, and dare to look around, I am spat back out again, to land like clod on this dirty linoleum floor.

Spring brings me a stone shaped like a heart and a little more strength. I drive to the sea and add two metres to the line. The geese appear like thunderous clouds, honking; part of the vast expanse of sky above me, but separate too, like a moving collage. I spot cirrus wisps of travelling clouds above and beyond. The water is cold, but I sit down. I let it splash my chest and trickle down my back. My mouth slides into gasp, then silent wide.

I gather Jack by the Hedge, Chickweed and Ramsons, and crunch into sweet greenness. I bury my face in early lilacs and violets, breathe in the headiness of ripeness on the verge of death. Mark Twain once said that 'forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.' The word has a sourness that I do not yet wish to taste. I can't make the right shape with my lips.

Now that nightingales sing their gurgles and liquid trills, I feel lighter, most days. Brighter. Some days I am the sun, the wind, the song.

Some days I am the nightingale. I wear my hurt like a suit, and sing a hopeless hopeful lament that cannot possibly speak the real truth. I should have known better. I should not have gone. I should have fought and kicked and roared my No. My injuries have almost healed, but my body is not yet mine. The door still closes to the sound of laughter and an unexpected shock of pain to the side of my face. I could open that door but I would see that part of me on the floor, warped and buckled. The kick of the boot. The unbuckling of belt. The snicker. The certainty that what is stolen tastes better, sweeter. I could open that door but I would see him smiling into the mirror as he withdrew and spat in my face. I would see my body on that floor in that grave of a suite, and watch as I desiccated into chalky bone dust.

Summer saunters in and I feel the creak in bones and throat retreat, just a little. It brings scorching heat and unrelenting skies of blue. The grass turns brown and dies. My butternuts languish in the heat and get fatter, like plump babies. I water them every day and I tell them stories. Some pheasants have taken up residence in the garden. I feed them bird seed and sweetcorn. The spiders continue to move in, claiming the alcoves of loss, but their cobwebs, ashimmer, from a single ray of sun are just gift-wrap, swaddling, a shroud.

Summer brings me a cloud shaped like a ship. The tree rustle is the shush of the ocean, and the thirst for brine and cooler air overwhelms me. I drive to my beach and add four metres to my line. I mend the parts that have shifted. The wind whips at my ears, the air is sea songs and wheeling gulls.

I see the woman again, on my way back from a walk. She has blue eyes, that sparkle, though she doesn't smile when we pass each other by. Her dog cocks its leg and urinates on my boots. I scratch its head, just briefly, and watch as it hurries after his owner. Both the woman and I look behind us, and see the other looking. I feel my cheeks burn. My mouth forms a

careful smile. I hold it in my fist. This gift-like something. I ride the five-bar gate to close it and let it crash me into the post.

My only neighbours seem to spend much of their time inside. When I walk past, I can see the living room is piled high with books and magazine. These columns reach from floor to ceiling. I can't make out any furniture. The house is smaller than my cottage. It can't be bigger than one room on each floor. The front of the house slumps towards the ground. It is held up by a pile of bricks and the wall is covered with plastic sheeting, green with mould. The guttering is broken and water cascades down from the roof and pools around the foundations. They don't answer the door. I leave them salad leaves in newspaper by their back door, a punnet of strawberries. A swaddle of courgettes.

I try and understand myself. The ability to be two opposing things at once. My desire for solitude, my desire for communion. My desire for remission, my desire for the end. I try to understand the world. I come to understand that my body did not fail me. Laying immobile on the floor is the last-ditch response of a defence cascade. When running away or fighting looks impossible, and death or serious injury could be imminent, people go into shock, frozen in fear. A way of coping with profound threat. I think about the difference this makes. A liminal space opens up, where blame shifts and rearranges itself. It has a particular colour. A particular texture. Something loosens.

I am sitting in the garden weeding, when I hear a cough, a soft hello. Behind the gate stand three people. The younger woman is looking at me. I'm wearing a ridiculous frilly apron that holds my secateurs and fork. I have piled my hair on my head and wrapped it in string to keep it from dangling in front of my eyes. I must look half mad. The younger man is holding the arm of a frail old man, and they are looking at the cottage, pointing. I rub the dirt off my hands and head towards them. The old man seems to be sinking back into the ground, knee buckled and swaying. There is a smudge of soil on his forehead. He is all wrinkles and crinkles,

tributaries that all to lead to a wide smile.

They tell me that eighty years ago, he used to live here with his eight brothers and sisters. Before the back was added. They tell me that in those days, it was just one room on a mezzanine floor, where they all slept on two mattresses. His parents, and the nine children. I try to work out how old this man must be. He could be over a hundred. There is something unfathomable about that.

‘I had a dog called Harold who slept in the bed too. It was warmer with him in the bed, you see. In the winter my parents stoked the fire before we went to bed, but a few hours later, the air would be freezing again.’

The old man looks at me for the first time. He is lost in his memories. His chin shakes a little when he talks and his eyes are watery shine.

‘My brother Robert died here, when he was eleven. We used to climb that apple tree before he got ill.’

I stumble over words before politely asking if he would like to see inside. I don’t want to share my space with strangers, but somehow it feels like it belongs to him, more than it ever could me. I hope he will say no.

There is a long pause, but he shakes his head. They say they had better get going. I smile and nod.

‘Does the sweet pea still grow through the walls?’ He asks quietly.

‘Yes. Yes, it does. I haven’t the heart to try and remove it.’

We are both laughing and regard each other for a moment. I hold my hand out and introduce myself. He shakes it, firmly.

‘Mr Pendleton. Vik. Thanks for allowing me this visit.’

A thought knocks the back of my head. I rush inside shouting, ‘Just a minute, just a minute!’ I return a few moments later with the tin. I am breathless. Fluttering.

‘Is this yours? Your brother? R.P? Robert Pendleton?’

He takes the tin from my outstretched hand and cradles it to his chest. His tear-streaked cheeks are bright and pink. I expect him to ask me where I found it. But he doesn’t. I imagine he already knows of the

hiding place in the wall.

'What's in it Mr Pendleton? Is it marbles?' I ask. I feel like I desperately need to know.

'Something like that.' He replies, and turns to go.

The man and woman support him either side, and help him into the car. They get in the front, and shut the doors. I hear the car radio starting up. They don't look back. I go back into the house. It feels different somehow.

In autumn I discover just how much the garden wants to reclaim the house. The tree in the garden rains down seeds in a sycamore spin, tapping against the windows, landing on my head. When it rains, mould blooms across the walls. There are broken shingles and a rushing leak that turns the ceiling brown. I listen to the round drip of buckets of rain. Tinny: a heartbeat of sorts. The old water pipes block and back up, sending sewage spewing up through the outlets, to swirl as if in a moat around the cottage. The brambles grow metres every day, heading resolutely towards the house. They grow through the gap under the door, and through an open window. My dog and I eat blackberries straight from the bush, my hands purple spattered and torn. I gather them in bags and leave them in a box by the gate for people to take. The woman walks by, her hair tied up in a coloured scarf. The dog is wearing a red necktie. She takes a bag of blackberries and looks up at the house. She waves. I wave back.

The days melt earlier. Mornings are dew filled and colder. I find an old wren's nest in the hedge. Someone once told me that finding nature's little gifts and treasures is what makes life extraordinary. He scoured the landscape for artefacts and oddities to admire and covet. It was catching. Our window sills were full of stones and shells, chosen for a unique quality that often only we could see. Yes, for interesting hues, and patterns and whorls, but also for heft, smoothness and texture. Now I have an old printer's box hung on the wall to house my treasures. Sea worn nuggets of

glass. Rusting hunks of metal. Dried beetles. A curl of paper-thin birch bark. There are withering bits of lichen, pinecones, conkers and acorns, and still every time I open a book, desiccating leaves and pressed flowers fall at my feet. Tokens of love, each one.

One day, a bee lands in my hair. Immediately it is stuck and I can't free it. It buzzes furiously and I fear being stung so deeply that I crush it between two stones, and delicately peel its feet away from the tangled strands of hair. I think of how such things happen. To find yourself in the wrong place at the wrong time. One gust of wind to the left, one turn to the right and all would have been different. So many things have felt like bees in my hair.

Autumn brings me rats. The brickwork at the back of the cottage crumbles into dust around the pipework, and reveals a tunnel leading to the kitchen cupboards. For a week I scold the dog for somehow sneaking all the biscuits out from behind a closed door. Upon closer inspection, I find a drawer of frayed tea towels, carefully gathered into a nest, covered in droppings and the remainder of the biscuits. I watch the rats scuttle between the shed and the house, nibbling furtively at peelings and bird seed. Reluctantly I block up the hole. I try to keep everything out, but sometimes I wonder what I am locking in instead.

One night I venture out into the disappearing light of a warm autumn night. Smoke hangs thickly in the air. I loiter in the gloaming, hoping to hear the bark of a fox, the flapping clicks of bats on the wing, the way the leaves rustle and sing in the wind. I can hear my neighbours laughing. There is music playing. I peer through the thinning hedge, scratching my face to catch a glimpse of them. In the middle of the room, surrounded by their spectacular hoard, they are dancing. He holds out his arm to her, and she spins and twirls into it, coming to rest at his chest. Her head rests on his shoulder, and they sway. I retreat into my garden. My skin is on fire, and yet I shiver. The grass is wet. The temperature has dropped.

I harvest the tomatoes and courgettes and squash and simmer them to

pickle and pot. I suck through sweet yew and spit the seeds as far as I can. The hops, now papery and dry, are crushed in my hands. They sing of sleep and evenings in beer gardens. Easier times. The sloes, their almond scented leaves and hazy purple blue remind me of the turning year and Christmas fires and pink heady gin. I scrump apples and find smiles flower on my face. I gather the dog and a flask and I drive once again to the sea. I find crates of oranges, storm surge flotsam and blooms of miniature jellyfish: translucent blobs that catch the light like fairy lights, twinkling in the sun's afterthought. I place another four metres of stone and finally connect them to the finish line: where the sea rolls in and smacks them with a kiss. A skein of geese honks overhead. A celebratory lap. We all know the miles ahead and the miles behind: this great endurance test, off storm and stress. I find some peace in the phirring of wings – the way their air brushes my face like a kiss.

They will be leaving soon. I will remain. The sea laps at my feet. I let it soak through to my socks. It is not him that I so desperately needed to forgive. It is myself. Forgiveness does not condone. It doesn't wipe clean. It does, however, let go. I send what is left of him down to the sea, to be carried away on the diminishing tide.

There is still a crack that runs right down the front of me. I will fill it with cake and things that make me smile. I will fill it with books and music. I will fill it with birdsong, the chirring of bees, the rustling of leaves on warm spring days and bunches of wildflowers. I will pick armfuls of daffodils and hyacinths and sprigs of lavender and rosemary and delicate handfuls of scarlet geraniums and violets and push them deep into the crack, where they will blossom and bloom. All that heartache, and all that joy, mixed up together. Beauty amongst the horror and gore. How can we ever get a measure of that? The trick, I think is to remember that time, much like pain, passes. And that life shakes itself out, much like my sea wet dog, to be beautiful, far more often than tragic.

When I return, I check the post-box to see if the post has arrived.

A hand delivered postcard lies at the bottom. It tells me of a grave, that is visited every week. It tells me of lost opportunities, lost love and a returning desire; for conversation, for friendship. It tells me of the way in which things turn. She invites me for coffee and includes her address and a telephone number.

I pin the card on my noticeboard and think about dialling the number. I think about what I might say if she picks up. I think about it. And then, I feel the exact moment autumn turns into winter, like the pause and click as the record player lines up to play the next song. Something shifts and settles. The cottage is freezing. It has been exactly a year since I first unlocked that door. I am not surprised to see something small and black lying on the hearth. Time is just bending and catching, like it often does. I nudge the bat once again with the edge of my shoe. Gently. This time its wings unfurl and it stands on its tiny feet, trying to fly. I scoop it up once again and go out into the garden. I hold my hands up as high as I can and uncurl my fingers. The bat shudders, rears up, and disappears into the sky.

‘Goodbye.’ I whisper into the dark.

Longlist

By The Wayside

Nic Wilson



Nic Wilson is a writer and mum to two budding naturalists. She writes for *The Guardian* Country Diary and national magazines including *Gardeners' World*, *BBC Wildlife* and *RHS The Garden*. She is a contributor to the forthcoming anthology *Women on Nature* edited by Katharine Norbury, due out in May. Nic enjoys literary research and writes for the *John Clare Society Journal*. She is currently writing a book about the nearby wild.

 [@dogwooddays_nic](https://twitter.com/dogwooddays_nic)

By The Wayside

Nic Wilson

Down! down! down! I was rapidly descending; and I knew that return to Flatland was my doom. One glimpse, one last and never-to-be-forgotten glimpse I had of that dull level wilderness – which was now to become my Universe again – spread out before my eye.

Flatland, Edwin A. Abbott

Tho no hughe rock approach'd my sight

Nor lofty mountain rear'd its head

Enough for wonder and delight

All around my path was spread

'Narrative Verses Written After An Excursion From Helpston To Burghley Park', John Clare

The muse is a fickle Hussey with me she sometimes stilts me up to madness & then leaves me as a beggar by the wayside with no more life than whats mortal & that nearly xtinguished by melancholy forbodings – John Clare to John Taylor, 8 Feb, 1822

Prologue

I find myself in an unfamiliar landscape, soft undulations, seeping mounds where I'd expected mountains. My companion on this inaugural tour, my terse consultant, leads me up & down the blunt inclines & shallow dips. I don't belong here, I try to say.

The native tongue is impenetrable – atrophy, villi, malabsorptive, alpha-gliadin, transglutaminase – the words slide in & finding little purchase, slip silently back out again. But I decode enough to see that the terrain is disappointing, the dimensions unambitious; no peaks here worth scaling. Mine is a flattened landscape & its lack of ambition folds neatly into my life, a physical & emotional symbiosis as the landscape writes me, meekly, across the screen.

I'd passed that way a thousand times without noticing, my route was simply a conduit between home and work – part of the unseen backdrop to my conscious life. It wasn't until I sank to the ground one spring day over a decade ago that the physical details around me came sharply into focus. All the energy leached from my limbs, seeking out the cracks between the paving stones and seeping back into the earth, but the ground rose up to catch me. As I collapsed, I caught sight of the world above from a new angle: the busyness, the routine, all that human energy. It was a life I fell in and out of; long periods caught in the whirl of full-time teaching interspersed with spells of illness, tiredness that dogged me for weeks, then long recuperations. Each absence felt like a dislocation, a falling away, off the prescribed path into the wastelands of an isolated, non-life. This time, as I fell, I sensed solidity beneath me and a strange solidarity around me; I was grounded in a place where life beat to a different rhythm.

Between the low fence and pavement edge, pellitory-of-the-wall had a foothold in the shallow chalk and its insignificant foliage spilled across

the concrete, spreading like liquid between my fingers. Clusters of grape hyacinths poked out from the lumpy subsoil and from my prostrate viewpoint their plump cobalt bells swelled until the sky was filled with a riotous swinging canopy. In this marginal world, where garden escapee met wild self-seeder, a suppressed energy pulsed between the cracks. The noise of traffic had long since receded and in its place the half-imagined clitter of woodlice as they hurried in and out of the hyacinth stems, real life characters as surely as if I'd been surreptitiously sipping from a discarded wayside bottle labelled 'Drink Me'. Magnitude was now an irrelevance and the roar of vegetable and crustacean business was in my head.

I suppose at some point I dragged myself off the pavement and back home. I don't remember. But this brief connection with life between the gaps initiated a process of engagement with my surroundings, an intimacy that slowly gained pace once I gave up teaching when my son was born. I don't think, in those early days, I had any idea of the impact of this subtle refocusing, nor the depths to which my roots would reach once I began to connect with the everyday life of my local area.

Gardens

I am not a memoirist. I may as well lay my cards on the table. They make a nine by five grid: one card for every year of my life. Starting at the very beginning, I turn card after card (feel the expectation, the watching eyes, the silence). Draw a line of blanks, a sequence of absence. The negative space is overwhelming. My life is viscous; more often than not it seals itself behind me. Other people gift me their memories, but it feels like make-believe. Fragments of an ordinary life. Perhaps it is mine, perhaps not.

They tell me I lived in a suburban semi set back from the B4114.

They tell me I went to a Catholic primary school.

They tell me I was good at tap and ballet.

They tell me I was happy.

All I remember is the bombweed.

Maybe it's unsurprising that rosebay willowherb is the only survivor around the edges of my amnesic crater given the plant's infamous reputation for colonising bombsites in the second world war. Looking back through the smoke, I can see the curling puff of wind-borne seeds above a thicket of vegetation, the rigid serried stems, those red-tinged leaves. Bombweed memories so dense that they colonise my childhood garden with their rhizomatous roots; they undercut the apple trees, supplant my dad's veg patch, even infiltrate the house, drifting as seed-memories through each room, filling the gaps with a lick of pink flowers.

Eight blank cards in a row. Turning a bright, slow pink.

My mum tells me about a family holiday near Clovelly in Devon. She brings out old photos of me riding a donkey. I try to remember the cottage we stayed in, try to visualise walking down the steep Main Street to the

beach and building castles in the sand with my brother, but it has all gone. Only the smell of Shasta daisies lingers round the cottage door, a pervasive odour of sweaty feet that gripped me by the throat that week and refused to let go.

My husband recalls our walks in Provence: the gorges, the metal walkways, the water. I've lost sight of the vistas, but something persists underfoot in the crush of garrigue scrub: a warm, resinous rising of thyme, rosemary, sage. There was that visit to the Scilly Isles, he reminds me. We took a walk along the cliffs and explored some of the islands by boat. I search for these memories in vain, but I do remember the tall fuchsia hedges lining the narrow roads, my astonishment at their overt floriferousness, like a jeweller's counter of scarlet and purple drop-earrings stretching across St Mary's Island. Shake me and the past is erased, we joke. Etch-a-sketch me. But not the plants. I remember their scents and flowers, their colours and companionship. I cherish our shared history; it returns to me a little of my forgotten past.

Bird song evokes memories too. I sat in the garden one sunny May afternoon with a light wind blowing, listening to distant children playing, an ice cream van sliding up and down its scales and the collared doves calling. Closing my eyes, I was back in Coventry in the 1980s, looking out of the bedroom window in grandma's small terraced house in Tile Hill. The summer stretched before me in its warm laziness and the narrow garden was filled with deckchairs and nattering relatives. The tall conifers at the end of the lawn created an impenetrable wall within whose secure boundaries my memories played out. I remember grandma's garden for its unforgiving concrete paving slabs, an echoing garage full of cold smells, and the honesty seed heads, each a translucent coin, chocolate seeds within. When the collared doves lulled me into a trance, I awoke in the little front bedroom and traced the leaves on the wallpaper with my eyes, each with the same toothed edges and green veins scored across the raised leaf blade.

Long-forgotten smells can transport us across time and space. I remember being carried from the bus queue one dull morning to my primary school classroom where I found myself sitting on the scratchy carpet inhaling the autumnal perfume that one of my earliest teachers must have worn. Birdsong has the same effect. John Lewis-Stempel writes in *Meadowland* that ‘birds have a Proustian capacity for making remembrance.’ I would agree, but for me the sensation is less visceral than the dislocation brought about by remembered smells, more a gentle immersion in the past. So collared doves pull me to awakenings in that soft-leaved room in Coventry with the summer garden beneath. When herring gulls descant above the slap of the sea, I’m in granny and grandpa’s loft bedroom in Conwy watching the birds circle outside the dormer window from beneath a mountain of woollen blankets. Underneath the pleasure at the gull’s cries, I can feel an eagerness to explore the piles of children’s hardbacks beside the bed – old copies of Robin Hood, Lorna Doone and King Arthur – garish flaking covers outside and unexplored realms within.

The scents, sights and sounds stored in our mental libraries are nature’s treasures, ready to enhance the present with layers of wild remembrance. Even the most elusive cue can provoke ripples of recollections, adding emotional depth to a blackbird’s song or a flash of buttercups. The memories are papery and thin, like honesty seed heads some will blow away, but I can see through the layers to the kernels within. George Eliot acknowledges the transformative power of memory in *Mill On The Floss* when she writes:

our delight in the sunshine on the deep-bladed grass today might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls, if it were not for the sunshine and grass of the far-off years, which still live in us and transform our perception into love.

When I consider the way my children are compiling their nature libraries as we gather cow parsley posies on the way to school or run our hands through the deadnettle leaves, thrilled, waiting for the half-anticipated sting that never comes, as we stop at the railway bridge for the slow trains with their good-natured waving drivers and hear the blackcap, back for another season with its bold proclamation that the scrubland to the north side of the train bridge is gainfully occupied for another year, I'm grateful for these moments, embryonic wild memories for the future.

* * *

A few years ago I was gifted with hundreds of memories from gardeners all over the world. I had just been asked to write a piece exploring the origins of my love of gardening and nature. I began by tracing my passion back to a 'little patch of ground' which grandma mentions in a letter from nearly 40 years ago. In this modest flower and vegetable patch I encountered, first-hand, the magic of plants. As I started to explore the way my enthusiasm had evolved, I became fascinated with other people's experiences, with their memories and motivations. I asked readers of my gardening blog and friends (both local and on social media) to share their stories and the response was overwhelming – more than 200 replies from gardeners across the world. When I collated the material, I had over 25,000 words of personal stories about why we garden. Many of the writers, like me, dug into their childhoods, unearthing tales of Victorian coal cellars, air raid shelters, homelessness, RAF gardens, German prisoners of war, memorial gardens and recoveries from mental illness. Their stories frequently made me smile and, at times, cry, as they documented ordinary lives touched by the extraordinary power of nature.

Over half of the answers began by referring to a parent, grandparent or family friend who played a fundamental role in developing the respondent's interest. Pamela recalled her grandad growing sprouts which,

as an eight-year-old, she pinched to feed to her pet mouse. When she was caught, her grandad taught her how to grow the vegetables herself, initiating a lifelong love of gardening. Jane remembered digging under a large privet hedge with her grandmother's old tablespoon over 60 years ago, while Sandra recreated the excitement of riding in her grandfather's wheelbarrow and eating her grandma's dreamy blue-mouth pie, cooked with blueberries from the allotment.

Some people traced their gardening heritage back several generations, like Jack, who explained that his dad was a head gardener and his grandfather had been a gardener for the council in the same department that his uncle now managed. He believed 'it's ingrained in me. In the blood' even though it was 'a slow process, falling back in love with it, doing a bit here, a bit there'. Mary agreed, saying she was 'kinda born with it.' When she discovered that she came from a long line of Italian gardeners, she decided it had to be hereditary. Like Jack and Mary, I have gardeners going back generations. Like them, I feel an innate connection to the land; a theme which recurred many times in the responses. Mark explained that the need to connect with nature 'has always been there and is, I think, in everybody's subconscious.' Kelly believed that her 'deep love of nature' was an 'innate love' while Phillip described it as 'a calling which was inherited from my mum.'

Rubee shared the precious memory of her father nurturing a weed all summer that was growing in their yard, watering it and protecting it from their dog. Later they moved to a house with a garden where her father was able to grow lots of vegetables, but she explained that she never forgot 'that tiny yard with its little weed that my father looked after'. My lovely friend Cathy wrote about the moment her mother knew she'd be a gardener when she found her two-year-old daughter enthusiastically deadheading every daffodil in the garden. Cathy's grandpa grew runner beans and sweet peas while her grandma favoured roses and scented geraniums. She recalled that she never saw them without 'gardening gloves and rather

dubious cardigans, doing something with twine or secateurs.’ Now when she looks at her garden and thinks ‘grandma would have liked that,’ she feels she has achieved something to be proud of.

There is a tangible sense of heritage as a living process as these gardeners delve into their family histories and examine the way their children and grandchildren connect with the land. My favourite response came from a lady whose love of gardening began:

nearly eighty years ago in 1938 when, as a five-year-old, I first encountered the wondrous kingdom of the allotment, but really took off later when I was befriended by a German prisoner of war who worked on the strawberry field next to the allotment field, who showed me with great patience and knowledge nearly everything I needed to know.

As past moved to present, she described her greatest moment being when ‘my granddaughter brought her son (my great grandson) down to the plot and showed him where she herself had spent so many hours with me.’ She concluded ‘at that moment, life could not have got any better.’

Another response began ‘my grandfather died before I was born, but I know he was a keen gardener because my mum, who also loved gardening, used to tell me about him.’ The writer saw her early knowledge and love of nature as coming ‘indirectly from him’: a man whom she never met. In the same way, my dad remembers his father’s enthusiasm for summer bedding plants and greenhouse tomatoes. He can recall the smell of fertilisers stored in his father’s garage, smells of hoof and horn, superphosphate, sulphate of potash, nitrate of soda, Tonks rose formula and chalk, all listed in my grandfather’s *Fred Streeter Gardeners’ Record Book* of 1970 in notes he took the year before he died. My dad attributes his horticultural exploits to his father’s love of gardening all those years ago which was then passed down to me, from a grandfather who died four years before I was born.

* * *

In my first garden, I learned early on that wildlife was as important as the crops. Perhaps more so. Photographs show me as a cheerful toddler in red wellingtons playing with sticks and mud, pushing an absurdly big wheelbarrow, sitting in a buggy in a shiny yellow anorak, my face entirely obscured by heavy black binoculars. As I peer at my smaller self down the wrong end of the bins, I wonder what the younger me was seeing at that moment. Could I make out the blurry image of my dad to my right, distorted, monstrous, looking back at me through his Praktica L Camera? He would have removed the Vivitar 200mm telephoto lens so he could photograph me rather than a bird, but we were still separated by a series of ocular lenses, symbols of this observation of an observation.

I'm holding the binoculars skew-whiff with my chubby two-year-old hands, no doubt mimicking the adults with no clue what I'm doing. I wonder if the photograph was staged for the family album, but I don't think it matters if it was. Only a few years later I'd be using the same binoculars to observe birds in the garden, my dad's reassuring hands clasping mine to steady the image, a shared closeness that I felt from the other side this morning as I placed my hands over my son's so he could watch redwings feeding in the cotoneaster.

Staged or not, I love the way this photograph makes physical my childhood interest in birds. I often write facing those binoculars, the photograph pinned to my noticeboard along with others of me between the age of two and eight – in the vegetable beds; on Conwy mountain with granny's rucksack and a walking stick as tall as my head; embraced by a snug life jacket on my grandpa's boat. These are my talismans against the negative spaces in my memory. I did exist back then. The images are physical proof of my childhood.

Although I rely on photographs and other people's recollections up to the age of eight when we moved from Warwickshire to Cheshire, I

still have the rosebay willowherb, straggling and tatty after forty years abandoned in my otherwise vacant memory lot. It wasn't until recently that I realised this vigorous perennial was part of a wild area offering shelter and food for birds, small mammals and invertebrates. The willowherb and other supposed 'weeds' that were allowed to grow wild in the garden would have been food plants for moth larvae including the elephant hawk-moth and setaceous Hebrew character moth, two species that appear regularly on dad's wildlife lists from the 1970s.

In the summer of 1977, dad built a garage beside our house out of pre-fabricated concrete blocks set on 17 tonnes of scalplings. When it turned out to be too small to fit the car inside (due in his words to a 'geometrical misunderstanding'), he transformed the wasted space into a natural history lab which he filled with bird and mammal skulls, dissected owl pellets, and moths at every stage of life – tiny eggs stuck to leaves, hanging pupae and newly-hatched adults ready to be released. Within a couple of years, dad had embarked upon a lifelong obsession with lepidoptera that has recently developed a perilous coda. In an idle moment at Birdfair a couple of years ago, I watched with horror as his resolve faltered when faced with a multicoloured array of specialist identification guides. Before I could stop him, dad bought the *Field Guide to the Micro-Moths of Great Britain and Ireland*. I knew there'd be trouble. He'd agreed with mum long ago that micro-moths were a compulsion too far. Not only are there around 1,850 species of micro-moth in the UK, many with wingspans smaller than 20 millimetres, but for a definitive identification it is often necessary to examine the dissected genitalia. Life was too short to peel mushrooms or study micro-moths, mum reasoned.

But back in 1978 when I was only three, my mum's health was at its lowest ebb and the moth trap was still a shiny new purchase. Dad was enchanted by the moths he discovered when emptying the trap each morning. Occasionally he would find eggs laid by fertile females on the underside of the eggboxes placed in the trap to provide shelter. Once

he'd begun rearing moths and studying the different instars, or stages of development, there was no going back. Puss moth caterpillars were his favourite. When I ring to ask him about them, he emails me some of the pictures that he took with his Praktica, the excitement from forty years ago still evident in his voice:

The puss moth has the most phenomenal caterpillar, a large lime green larva with a dark brown saddle over the middle and a hump on its back. Red and yellow rim around the head and white spiracles (part of the respiratory system) ringed in black along the caterpillar's abdomen. It rears its forked black and red tail when threatened, producing a red filament from inside each tail twin which it waves menacingly at you.

I study the caterpillar in the photograph. It is, indeed, a marvel. Dad's second image shows the puss moth at the adult stage which gives the species its common name. It is clothed in soft ermine with creamy white and black swirls that remind me of the patterns on top of a latte. With its feathered antennae, fluffy face and black and white striped legs, it is the embodiment of cuteness in a moth-kitten.

When dad took me to see these beauties – the fantastical caterpillar and its fuzzy future – how could I not have shared his fascination? As I watched the puss moth larvae chew willow and poplar bark, combining it with silk to weave tough cocoons from which they would emerge as adult moths in spring, was I ensnared in the warp and weft of their magical lives? Whatever my feelings as a three-year-old, these tiny creatures held the key to my future happiness, because moths saved my parents' marriage.



Longlist

Commonplace

Laura McDonagh



Laura McDonagh is a writer from Washington, Tyne and Wear – a town her Irish parents ended up in ‘by accident’ – now living near York. She’s interested in memory and the 90s, working class stories, what we mean by ‘home’ and the experience of the Irish in Britain. She has written for Severine and MIRONline and was part of the Penguin WriteNow scheme in 2020.

  [@hey_laura_mc](https://www.instagram.com/hey_laura_mc)

Commonplace

Laura McDonagh

The doctor on duty the night Mam dies is called Laura.

'Me too!' I say, suddenly and absurdly cheerful. 'That'll be easy to remember!'

She's wearing sensible glasses, dark hair scraped back into a ponytail, papery blue scrubs. Her mouth is a tight line. We're in a critical care side room, squashed onto a vinyl sofa. I know that we are on a threshold, almost mutilated but not yet, not quite, not if I can keep the conversation in the realm of inane coincidence.

Then we tip headlong into the after. 'There's nothing more we can do,' she says. My ears fill with roaring and my scalp prickles cold as she keeps talking, telling us that the bleed was 'massive and catastrophic' (when is a brain haemorrhage *not* catastrophic, I want to ask?), that even if they could revive you, you'd no longer be the person we knew. She adds that you would have hardly known what was happening; that when Dad found you wide-eyed on the lino – hair wet, the bath tap still running – you were probably already gone.

BC and AD. The world carved in two.

Holy fuck, I think.

Dad looks like he's been taken hostage. Then he starts to tremble and there are tears rolling down his face and I am embarrassed in front of this doctor, my namesake. Embarrassment is the wrong emotion, but it rises up regardless; shame at our disfigurement, the limb suddenly hacked off. Abruptly, my thoughts segue into another place: a memory of giving birth, the pain deadened by the epidural and feeling like a bad actress in a daytime soap with midwives telling me to push. It didn't feel real, and

frankly neither does this. My mind is a cold, white slice of nothing.

‘Can we see her?’ I ask, because that’s what people say.

She says of course, that they’ll just remove some of the machines and make things look a little more normal. Except that when we’re ushered into the room it isn’t normal, not at all. Your hair is pushed back from your face in a way you’d never wear it and the skin around your mouth has turned purpley-grey. I think of Homer Simpson’s five o’clock shadow, then immediately berate myself for thinking of Homer Simpson’s five o’clock shadow. A decompression mattress massages your body and it almost looks like you’re stirring in your sleep. I rub your shoulders, your arms, your hands. Your unlined cheek is as cool as leaves.

When an auxiliary goes to find the chaplain and we’re left alone, Dad clears his throat.

‘Will we, ah, say a decade of the Rosary? We will.’

We will. We do. Pronoun followed by verb; the ancient speech pattern of Gaelic, a language with no word for ‘yes’, mirrored in English. Rural Ireland is summoned in the strip-lit room as we mumble our prayers. I am oddly calm. Shock playing its tricks, I realise later when the horror really kicks in.

When we leave, a nurse hands me a long white plastic bag, the kind you’d use to line a kitchen bin. Inside is your dress with one long slit of a cut up the front, your slippers, your knickers, folded twice.

* * *

Before *Withnail & I* and Amy Winehouse, before the market that brought goths and hippies and punks decked in mohicans and studs flocking to NW1, Camden Town was an Irish ghetto. Families of six and upwards with musical, rattling surnames like Glynn and Gallagher, Mullaly and McMenamin rented council flats and rooms in tall terraces; they filled the schools, they packed out the churches and the pubs.

In 1968, my father had been in London for three years, digging up roads and laying tarmac like countless other barely-men of his generation. He was the youngest of nine, 'the scrapings of the barrel'. For years, he'd watched his brothers, sisters and friends slip away to England and listened to their stories of cash-in-hand work, dance halls and loose women when they came home for the holidays.

There were other things they didn't mention: the signs in B&B windows or the landladies who pursed their lips at their Sligo accents and rough hands.

Mam spent her childhood pinballing between London and her parents' native West of Ireland. While her father, a pub landlord with a look of James Dean, embarked on affair after affair, her mother had a nervous breakdown, and Mam and her brothers were passed around between relatives in Ireland, London and Leicester. For one brief period of stability, they lived with an uncle near Bunninnadden, County Sligo and went to the local National School. Dad was a few years ahead of Mam, but he remembers the little girl in the pleated kilt who arrived one morning on the back of her brother's red bike. When he met her again years later in her father's Camden Town pub, he bought her a port and lemonade.

They married in Our Lady of Hal RC Church, Camden Town, in December 1971, with a reception afterwards at the London Irish Centre. In the photos taken in Grandma's maisonette that morning, you – Anne Davey, but only just – look thin and dazzled by the flash. Bookended by brothers, you stand uncertainly in your wispy voile gown in the kitchen with the pea-green cupboards.

I flick through the album and scrutinise your face; your high, smooth forehead. I realise I'm looking for signs.

The day looks like a happy one. The bridesmaids wore lilac satin dresses and the guests received books of matches, gold-embossed, as favours. I find pictures of my other grandfather Paddy, hand extended like the Pope mid-blessing and mouth wide in song:

*'... Oh you did, so you did
 so did he and so did I
 And the more I think about it
 sure the nearer I'm to cry
 Oh weren't them the happy days
 when troubles we knew not
 And me mother made colcannon
 in the little skillet pot....'*

Towards the back, there are some professional photos: two halves of a newly-made whole; the top table all brilliant smiles, ashtrays and half-drunk pints. Plates of roast beef and gravy mopped clean with bread rolls, wedges of apple pie devoured. There's the cutting of the cake, a plastic horseshoe dangling from your wrist urging '*good luck!*' in cursive script. Men I've only ever known with jowls and bald heads are frozen in time looking thin and giddy and handsome; the women sport auburn beehives and bold print dresses.

The last picture in the album, glossy under tissue, has the two of you relieved and bleary-eyed, arms contorted to drink cheap champagne out of each other's glasses. *Anne & Michael*.

The night before the funeral, I send Aunty Kath a WhatsApp. 'What was Mam and Dad's wedding like?' Three dots ripple in anticipation of her reply.

...
 it was grand
 it really was
 we didn't know what to make of a london wedding or a winter wedding
 for that matter
 but now it was lovely.

* * *

Was it the move North, where the skies were bigger but everything else felt smaller?

Was it the 'pint after work' that always skittled into two, five, ten?

Was it the thin bungalow walls; the neighbours who wouldn't meet Mam's eye?

Or was it the day we dropped my sister off at Cambridge – the first in our family to go to university – and Mam said to tell anyone who asked that Dad was an engineer, not a labourer?

* * *

Of course, you didn't divorce. Irish Catholics don't divorce, even in England. This is how the story goes: Dad got sober, Mam got resentful and, most of the time, they tolerated each other. We'd stay up on Friday nights to watch *Father Ted*, all of us roaring with laughter at Tom and Mary, the couple in the local shop beating seven shades of shite out of each other.

'It's funny because it's true!' Mam would say without a shred of irony.

We knew of many Irish marriages in a far worse state: men and women living in different houses, seven or eight counties between them, who'd snipe at each other on the public occasions where they were forced to appear together. At my own wedding, I received two cards – and two separate cheques – from an aunt and uncle still keeping up a pretence of unity. It would be an insult to return them, Mam said; I agreed, and cashed them both.

This was the 90s: Tony Blair's era of *Things-Can-Only-Get-Better* and education, education, education. And so Mam went to night school and, bold with qualifications, registered with a local secretarial agency. They liked her and her no-nonsense attitude and her accent, neutralised after time in too many places. Offered a two-week temp job answering phones at Nissan, she's delighted: everyone in our town respects the plant and its

efficiency, the production line that never stops, day or night.

Two weeks turn into a month, then a year, and then a permanent job in the Purchasing Department. She spends her days booking hotel rooms for Japanese businessmen, typing up minutes and ordering printer cartridges. She knows the starting salaries of the graduates, and what they go on to earn. It lights the touch paper of ambition inside her; not so much for her, but for us.

And Dad? Dad has soft eyes and rough skin. He has hands as big as shovels. He's a tall man, a grand-looking man, I think, with a fine head of hair and good strong teeth. He calls his sisters back in Sligo on Sundays when the rates are cheaper and finds out who's selling land and who's died. He goes to AA meetings in parish halls three or four times a week, and annual conventions in nowhere towns like Dumfries. He's not a reader, but he keeps his fellowship books on a shelf in his wardrobe, as bare and carefully-ordered as a priest's. They have simple mantras, reassuring and religious. They talk of serenity, acceptance. One day at a time, they say.

Dad does hard, physical jobs; the precarious kind that don't come with sick pay or benefits. Mining in Selby; digging tunnels for the Metro in Newcastle. He's laid hundreds of miles of pipes; poured, spread and smoothed acres of tarmac on roads and in lay-bys. 'I go where the work is,' he says. Once, he met Jack Charlton in a car park and got him to sign his high-vis vest. Another time, he painted the Tyne Bridge green: a marvellous two-fingered salute to anyone who'd ever called him Paddy with mockery in their voice.

Every summer we head back to Ireland for three, four, five week stretches. Mam complains about how provincial it all is, how much everyone drinks and eats, the untidiness of the houses. We don't belong in Ireland, not any more, is her message. We are her hope, her ambition.

But here's the problem: we don't belong in England, either.

* * *

Questions:

What kind of coffin: wooden or wicker?

Does the undertaker need shoes? Tights? Lipstick?

What did that headache – which even the cool, impartial language of the NHS website describes as ‘unlike anything you’ve ever experienced before’ – feel like?

Does resurrection depend on the body being intact?

Why does aspiration mean being somewhere else?

Why do I feel ashamed of a past I should be proud of?

Where is my home?

* * *

Another photograph, another memory: my First Holy Communion. My hair hangs in ringlets and there’s a band of artificial flowers around my head. I’m all polyester frills and flounces in my sister’s dress from seven years earlier; an impressive feat of thrift, even by Mam’s standards. I can still feel how the hair grips nipped; a pleasurable, sacrificial kind of pain.

Mrs Kehoe walks up and down the line outside the hall inspecting us. ‘You’ll have to take them off before you *receive*,’ she tells me, pointing at my white fishnet gloves. Finally, she pulls the orange velour curtains back with all the solemn pageantry of Fr O’Sullivan at the tabernacle and, one by one, we file in to climb up onto the vaulting box and pose in front of the photographer’s blue and white sponge-effect background. When it’s my turn I smile, but not too much. Big grins are not holy, says Mrs Kehoe; plus, I’m missing half my front teeth.

The man behind the camera peers at me through a glassy green eye. ‘That’s it, pet, chin up a little bit. That’s lovely.’ He presses a button and there’s a click, then the umbrella behind him lights up. ‘One more – *click!* – You’re all done. Big day for you, eh?’

I know it’s a big day because Dad is wearing a shirt and tie and Mam

has been doing something called the Cabbage Soup Diet for two weeks. It gives her terrible wind, she says, but she's lost eight pounds. Well worth it, she reckons. Mam is a big believer in deferred gratification.

I don't remember the walk to church, but the wobbly video footage taken on an enormous video camera borrowed from Nissan immortalises the day as unremarkable, a little cloudy. It tracks us – fourteen tiny, tight-lipped brides paired with fourteen little grooms in white shirts and red sashes – as we pick our way across the school car park and past the corner shop with its striped awning. The wedding imagery is not lost on us, and there has been plenty of playtime consternation over the couplings. My partner, Michael Craister, is one of the 'nice boys' – distinguishing features: a Biblical first name; a less severe haircut – which means I'm better off than most. And at least there's no holding hands, only fingers superglued straight in prayer. After the service, we clutch our certificates in thick creamy envelopes and Katherine Lamb finds a hedgehog in the long grass.

The photo hangs in our hallway for years, and smaller versions in grey cardboard surrounds are sent to Grandma in Camden Town, to Aunties Aileen and Kath and Frances and Mary, to Dad's parents back in Ireland. It's the equivalent of a flare going up to say that we're still who we say we are, even though we've ended up here in North East of England, a long way from Bunninnadden and Kilterra and Camden Town. If anything, we're more devout and rigorous, with our Irish dancing lessons and our Stations of the Cross and our bacon and cabbage on Saturdays; the discipline of the uprooted native.

It's a memory or it's a piece of evidence, depending which way you look at it.

* * *

According to my mother, the world is split into two groups: things that are proper and things that are common. Her cataloguing system is obscure

and complex, but her judgement is absolute. Things that are common include (although certainly are not limited to) *Just Seventeen*, anklets, ITV, tattoos (real or fake), earrings on boys and Media Studies. Getting a coloured hair wrap on holiday is common. So are tampons. Lipstick is common, but keeping it (Rimmel, Fudge Brownie) in a school blazer pocket? Sweet Jesus. *Common*.

The list continues, new examples appearing from nowhere. Shaving your legs, apparently, is the *height* (pronounced with a ‘th’ at the end instead of a crisp English ‘t’) of common. She shaved her own aged 11 – she told me one night as I watched her deft, quick strokes with the razor in the bath. I remind her and she pounces on it.

Exactly, she says. And you have the benefit of my experience to learn from. She smiles.

* * *

I open my laptop and go searching for ghosts. I look the Camden Town maisonette up on RightMove and find a badly-fitted Ikea kitchen in place of the pea-green cupboards. The same net curtains hang in the window, although someone has replaced the dark, oily-looking interior doors for more modern, white ones. The swirling black, gold and red Axminster carpet is gone, as is the print of the crying girl and the collie dog in its gilt frame, but the sideboard is same one where Grandma kept her knickknacks and, later, when her mind was going, hid her pension money. Upstairs, the rooms are all unmade student beds and gap year clutter. I wonder if teenagers still smoke crack on the scrubby patch of communal grass out the back.

Next, I tap Bickerton Road into the search bar and find Auntie Aileen’s terraced house in Archway, just a few minutes away on the 134 bus. There’s an old For Sale listing, and I instantly recognise the stairs we’d canter up and down – me, my cousins – the crucifixes and icons in every bedroom,

the peach Cindy doll bedspread. A whole wall of framed portraits – Aileen wrapped in white tulle sipping from a champagne flute, crepey cleavage on show; Aileen wearing a leather pilot's jacket, gripping the upturned collar with red nails – taken in a photographer's studio up town. I think of the time we found a video in a stack of VHSs – *The Joy of Sex* – and convinced Amy, the youngest of us, to push it into the machine and press 'play' while the grown-ups gossiped and laughed and tinkled their ice cubes in the next room. 'Don't disturb the lodgers!' Aileen would call out periodically as we tottered about in the hallway in her ballroom dancing shoes.

I search for *The Black Cap*, Grandad's (the philanderer, not the singer's) pub before it became a famous drag bar and discover it's closed, with talk of converting it into luxury flats. Our Lady of Hal Church is praying for holy souls throughout November; a website pop-up asks parishioners to pick up a 'dead list and an envelope' from the back of church.

I open Google Maps in a new tab, type in an NW1 postcode and drop the little man onto the places I know, yellow legs swinging in midair as he falls to the ground. I set off on a virtual pilgrimage, noting the familiar signs and old haunts among the changed shop fronts. Woolworths is now a Sports Direct, with signs screaming *This Week's Offers!* I pass the hospice; does it still smell of boiled sweets and piss? Then the big houses on Alan Bennett's old street where Mam and I would walk in winter, arm in arm, picking the hour when living room lights were switched on and curtains were still open, looking through a magic portal to the lives of rich, educated people with bookcases and wine glasses and table lamps. The Greek Orthodox Church, its familiar dark wood pews and gilt icons. The little Italian on the corner of Arlington Road with the red and white tablecloths.

I travel further, head for Ireland. The satellite map is skeletal in comparison to North West London's complicated arterial network of A roads and streets, and when I drop into Street View everything is lush and green, white houses peeping over the hedgerows and stacked bales

wrapped in black plastic. But the school where Mam and Dad met is long-abandoned, the narrow single-storey building covered in splotches of lichen, roof tiles missing and windows broken. I move over to Facebook and discover that Kennedy's Bar and Lounge, where we played endless games of pool and drank illicit Cokes that were never allowed 'in England', closed down in 2018, finally killed off by the crackdown on drink driving in the countryside. Even the teetotalers were aghast: 'Arra, the Guards have it ruined.'

Finally, I head for Clonnamehan cemetery. There, my grandparents' grave – Dad's parents – lies amongst the nettles and untidy sprawl of monuments set around the ruins of the old church. I could find my way up the uneven hillside even in pitch black, up the path that peters out after 50 feet or so, then right at the stone blackmailing mourners in faultless aabb rhyme: 'Remember friend as you pass by / As you are now so once was I / I am now as you will be / So kneel and say a prayer for me.' Then their grave, Paddy and Mae, the pale white slab indicating a mere eight weeks between their deaths.

'Daddy came back for Mammy,' Dad says. 'To show her the way.' Superstitions – the covering of mirrors, the stopping of clocks – like accents and speech patterns, run deep.

* * *

I go for long walks.

I go running.

I drink whiskey and Diet Cokes and watch episode after episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

Sometimes my children come home from school and I suffocate them with love and snacks. Sometimes I flick on the TV and let them watch cartoons for hours.

I have days where I eat nothing but crackers slathered in salty butter and

cheese and others where I vow to starve myself until I'm thin and perfect.

I read countless books, becoming deeply familiar with a niche genre of memoirs written by People Who Have Experienced Tough Things. Amazon senses my weakness and throws up tome after tome of misery: Hi Laura, Recommended for you...

At night, I think about the ticking time bomb that lived in your head and worry that it's in mine, too. Then I feel guilty for making it about me. I Google subarachnoid haemorrhages in the early hours, examining shadowy brain scans until they all merge together, looking like slice after slice of cantaloupe melon.

I wonder what it felt like to die. I think about dying myself. I think about my children. I feel guilty about the cartoons and the snacks.

Sometimes I dream about you. Not as much as I'd like, and the dreams themselves aren't always to my liking. In one, I discovered a death loophole, realising that if only I talked to you out loud you could hear me. Not only that, but you could reply. How did I not know?

Others are more disturbing. I see the paramedic leaving a trail of muddy footprints on the stair carpet, your clothes thrown aside. I see red welts from the defibrillator on your breasts. In one, the doctor announces your death and leads us into a room to say our goodbyes. You lie twitching in a bed, face blackening, eyes rolling. 'It's a side effect of the drugs,' the doctor says. 'She looks alive, but she isn't.'

My phone is a shrine to your voice: 'Hiya, me. I'm on the Metro. Call me when you finish work.' 'That bloody dog next door is driving me mad.'

I look at photos of myself from years ago, henna-dyed hair in my eyes and a can of Red Stripe in my hand, an eiderdown of festival tents behind me. It all feels so long ago, like it all slipped out of my hands without me even realising.

You're my first thought in the morning, my last at night. I was always good at pressing the bruise of unrequited love, and this feels unrequited because – well, how can it be returned?

The first year unfurls in front of us. The slow, painful unwinding of a clock.

* * *

It's September, and Dad is cutting back the shrubs and trees in our garden to bald, bewildered stumps. I watch him through the kitchen window. His back rises and dips, white belly hanging over his trousers. He likes things neat, spick and span. Every so often he pauses, pulls a comb from his back pocket with two fingers, sweeps his hair across his head. His shirt hangs from a fence post, fluttering lightly in the breeze.

He's been going to more AA meetings since Mam died. All on Zoom, of course, with the pandemic. Living together during lockdown, the mantras and the epithets bleed through the walls.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.

He's inherited the same shape as all of the men in our family: thin legs, a great swell of a stomach, absolutely no arse at all. But watching him, I see that his shear-wielding arms, once brown and muscular, have taken on the look of an older man. As he raises them to clip, the flesh hangs loose from the bones, trembling like water balloons. He's clipping the roses too far back, I think, and I rap on the glass sharply with a knuckle to protest. He looks towards the house, shielding his eyes from the bright sky. When I shake my finger, mouthing 'Too much!' he waves my complaint away.

'They've two choices,' he says, lifting the shears again.


Longlist

How To Watch Your Mother Die

Penny Kiley



In another life, Penny Kiley was a music journalist, starting out as the Melody Maker's Liverpool correspondent and token punk rocker in the late 1970s. She also wrote for Smash Hits during the early 80's, and later became pop columnist for the Liverpool Echo. She now works as a freelance writer and editor. She blogs intermittently, and has completed a memoir. She is #ActuallyAutistic and, after a late diagnosis, is still recovering from 60 years of masking. The mask didn't work very well anyway.

 [@pennykiley](https://twitter.com/pennykiley)

How To Watch Your Mother Die

Penny Kiley

My mother died last year. Or it might have been the year before. I don't remember. That's the problem with living in a pandemic. You lose sight of what month or year it is, and it's hard to know where you are. I like to know where I am, for reasons I'll come to later.

Anyway, it can't have been last year. I know it was before lockdown, because I spent a lot of time on the motorway. And I know it was before Brexit, because I spent a lot of time on the motorway. Mum lived in Kent.

When I'm not making bad jokes, I have bad dreams.

This much is what I remember: the day I got back from my father-in-law's funeral, I found out that my mother might have cancer. I'd expected my father-in-law's death. I'd expected my mother to live for ever.

Afterwards, I wished I'd known then what I know now. This is what I would have told myself.

Grief happens before death

You might not cry, or not much. It will be worse than that.

You will feel dreadful while your mother has tests, and waits for the results. You will have a sinking feeling in your stomach that won't go away. You will tell yourself all kinds of sensible things, but you will realise that there is something primal going on that is beyond reason. The deep-down need for a mother, always.

When you find out it is worse than you expected, you won't know what to say except: fuck.

The other word you will use is 'stunned'. There aren't any other words.

The next day you will try to phone your mother and will keep getting

the engaged signal. Your sister will text you: 'Mum is in organising mode.' You will be, too. You won't lie awake grieving, you will lie awake worrying about the funeral, and when to clear the loft.

You will try to read some useful websites, but your brain will seize up and you will have to have a nap (you will be glad you work at home). Your body will do weird things. Making you very hungry. Making you very tired. Making you feel faint. It will think there has been a trauma. Because there has.

Over the next few days, you will think of another word: 'devastated'. You will learn a new word: dissociation. It's what it's called when you feel like you're not really there. You will learn that it's an anxiety symptom and a defence mechanism. Don't worry about it. It's normal.

Not everyone loves information

It will happen the year you find out you're autistic. Autism has been your 'special interest' (that's a thing that autistic people have) ever since you started to suspect it meant you. You've searched the library catalogue for 'autism', ordered a lot of books, and made notes. You've talked to people on Twitter who are #ActuallyAutistic and they have welcomed you into their tribe. You've learnt a lot of useful facts about masking, sensory overload and depression.

You will learn that you don't deal with information in the same way as your siblings. You are logical, and you don't mind talking about death. You describe things as you see them. You deal with facts, and you don't see why planning a funeral in advance would be upsetting. You believe what people tell you, and don't recognise what is between the lines. You will realise there is a reason that you've always felt like an outsider in your own family.

Knowing you're autistic will change the way you look at yourself, and the way you look at your family, and your understanding of how they all communicate (or not). You will need this information later. You won't remember all of it in time.

You will realise that you're not very good at recognising emotions: you feel them, but you can't describe them. You will find out there is a name for this: alexithymia. You will realise that your mother is like this too. You will start to forgive her for all the times she failed to show empathy, because she didn't understand what you were feeling.

Some things you won't have learnt yet. That you don't recognise when you need to change your plans. That you feel uncomfortable when people break rules, even ones they don't know about. Why noise hurts you. That it hurts when you make mistakes.

You will say the wrong thing without realising. After struggling with your father-in-law's sketchy eulogy, you will email your mother and suggest you sit down together some time and talk through her life story. 'Just thinking ahead,' you will say. You will know she won't mind, because she started a box file called 'Death' the year she turned 80; you both like being organised. A week later you will find out she is getting tested for cancer.

You will learn that you need to know where you are with things. You will discover that it isn't possible, because things keep changing.

You will get a new 'special interest'. You will order books and leaflets from Macmillan and Marie Curie and Pancreatic Cancer UK. When you read them you will find out what T4N1M1 means. It's as bad as it can get.

You will buy a book called *Dealing with Death, Funerals, Wills and Bereavement* and you will bookmark lots of pages. You will spend the evenings, while your mother sleeps, reading the Death and Bereavement section of the gov.uk website, and practising filling in probate forms. You will get a book out of the library called *With The End In Mind* by a palliative care doctor called Kathryn Mannix. It will be full of true stories about death, and it will make it less scary.

You will read the information pack that the consultant gave your mother. She won't. She will say: 'It's all about pancreatic cancer, I don't need to read it.' You will ask if she has read the booklet called 'How are you feeling?' She will say she doesn't need it, because her feelings are fine.

Notice the signs

In the spring before it happens, you will visit your mother for her 84th birthday. You will take her for a meal at the local gastropub, as you've been doing for the last three years. She prefers visits to presents, and she likes good food. She's the sort of person who on an afternoon out always looks for the tea-room.

You will say you've been thinking a lot about mortality since your last birthday. She will say it isn't something she thinks about: 'There's no point.'

She will also tell you about the state of her joints (not good, but she won't complain), and she will add proudly: 'My doctor says I am organically fine.' Later, you will wish you had asked whether this was based on any actual evidence. You will also remember that your mother's stomach was changing shape and you didn't take any notice because you were used to her being fat. You will remember, too, that she didn't seem to enjoy her special lunch as much as usual.

In the summer, your mother will send you and your two sisters a chirpy email: 'I'm having some tests at the moment. Hard to believe but for about a month I've been eating less.' You will only worry a little, because she hasn't said anything about being worried.

She will keep downplaying things, and you will take this at face value. One day she will say 'I'm losing weight but I don't know where from, because it's not from round my middle.' Later, you will wish you had listened to the alarm bells, and told her to call the doctor. You will know it wouldn't have made any difference to the outcome. But it might have made a difference to you: you could have had more time to say goodbye.

A few months later, the palliative care nurse will tell you what to look out for, so that you don't leave it too late to go to the hospice. One of the signs is that the person will stop being able to swallow.

A few weeks after that, you will visit your mother in the hospice. She will be sleepy and it will hard to hear what she's trying to say to you. 'Is it because you haven't got your teeth in?' you will ask. 'No,' she will say,

'It's because I can't swallow.' You will spend the morning with her and then leave, because she keeps falling asleep and because you had the day planned out. In the afternoon, your youngest sister will stay at the hospice. Your mother will keep saying: 'I'm glad you're here.' She will know what you didn't remember: it is nearly the end. You will wish you had stayed.

You will comfort yourself with the special things that happened that morning. The serendipity of the Salvation Army band's monthly visit, and their offer to play a request. The smile on your mother's face when she hears them play her tune. The knowledge that 'I love you' was the last thing you said to your mother, and it was the last thing she said to you.

One day will not be like the next

Don't assume that today will be like yesterday. Don't make plans. Be open to change.

You will go to visit your mother as soon as you get the news, and it will be weird how normal everything feels. The house will be the same as always: the one you grew up in, but grannified beyond recognition in the decades since your father died. You still think of it as a new build, because it's the same age as you, and you'll be surprised in a few months' time to hear an estate agent use the phrase 'an older property'.

Your mother will be just the same as she always is. She will wind you up like she always does, because she is bossy and because she hides her feelings, and that doesn't change (you will remind yourself) just because someone is ill.

Except it does. Over the next weeks, you will notice your mother changing, and the things that you always found difficult will drop away. You can't be a control freak when you are dying, and you have to be honest about your emotions because otherwise it will be too late.

Your mother will suggest a weekend away at a hotel. You and your sisters will call this 'Mum's last fling', and act as if you are having fun. The time will pass quickly in quizzes and spa treatments, and meals that your

mother can't eat. Someone will say: 'We keep running out of time.' You will try to learn to push a wheelchair. Your sister will order a walker and baby monitors. You will realise that you've suddenly started a new phase: you are all going to be carers. You won't like the idea.

You will drive your mother home, and after you get there you will post on Twitter: 'Finding out what it's like being a carer. I'm knackered from fetching and carrying, and mum's full of beans cos she's just had her morphine.' Over the next few weeks, being on Twitter will help. Your invisible friends will understand.

You will learn how to help your mother dress, and what goes on her breakfast tray: glass of water, food supplement drink, morphine. You will notice the tray has poppies on.

Your mother will carry on with her usual social activities for a few days, and then stop. You will learn the signs that show she is in pain. She will only say she is 'uncomfortable'. You will work out a rota with your sisters for staying with your mother. You will have WhatsApp conversations about opiates, vomiting and poo. Then one day the palliative care nurse will say that there are two weeks left, and after that everything will change again. You will all stay there, until the end.

All the time your mother is at home, you and your sisters will look for clues. You will go over the earmarked pages in the cancer booklets. You will look for signs of swollen legs ('fluid'), or twitchy hands ('terminal restlessness'). But in the end – at the end – you won't need any clues, because it will be obvious when it's time to go to the hospice. Your mother will be weak, and will want to feel safe. You will feel unsettled because someone else is looking after her, and you will feel in limbo because she seems stable. You will be afraid they will send her home if she doesn't die quickly enough.

Some days will be very intense. You will treasure the memory of your mother's eyes lighting up when she sees you come in. The times when the family are together, playing games and talking. And how proud you feel

of the way she responds to the people around her. Everyone says what a lovely woman your mother is. You will finally start to believe them.

Then suddenly things will get flat. One day, your mother will look bored and will send you away. You will say to yourself: maybe she is going to die of boredom. You will forget that one of the signs was being detached from other people.

The next day, your mother will look as if she's fading away, and it will feel like another new step. The day after that, she will happily sit and do a crossword with you, and your husband (who you've begged to come) will be surprised by how well she looks.

Then the next day, she won't want to get dressed, and she'll keep falling asleep, and she won't be able to swallow, and you won't realise why.

For the next two days, she will be actively dying. You'll all be there, but she won't know it. You will hear a nurse say, 'It won't be long, my darling,' and it will sound like a blessing.

Things don't work out the way you might like

There might not be a happy ending. There may be conflict. This is normal.

In the final weeks, you and your sisters will all stay in the family home with your mother. Your sisters will do the personal care, because they've had children and you haven't. In return, you will promise to organise the funeral, because you're good at organising. You will be in charge of lists, and cooking. Lists will make you feel safe, and cooking will make you feel nurturing. You will realise you are taking on your mother's role.

The grandchildren will come, a day at a time, to say goodbye. It will be heartbreaking to watch. You will say to your mother: 'I'm not going to say goodbye.'

Your mother will start to say 'I love you' every night, just in case. You will learn to do spontaneous hugs, and tell her how brave she is.

It will feel good being in this family bubble. Your mother will say that it is a joy having you here, and how pleased she is that you are

all getting on together. You will tell yourself that you will treasure the memory of these weeks.

At the end, there will be misunderstandings and anger. You will realise later that you made a mistake asking your husband to join you, because you didn't read between the lines of what people were telling you. You will think that your sisters made a mistake too, because they expected you to hear the things they didn't say.

You will know that deathbed anger is common, because you've read about it, but it will still make you feel bad. You will feel sad, too, because the togetherness that made your mother happy is broken. You will feel an outsider again. You will miss seeing your mother's final breath.

Hospices are not as peaceful as you expect

The hospice will be small and friendly, but more like a hospital than you expected. Your mother will be in a room with four beds. They will be in 'bays', which means they have curtains, but the curtains won't be drawn even though someone is dying in the bed opposite.

You will learn to recognise this process later, but this time all you can see is a bald, skeletal, unconscious woman who is lying with her mouth open while people play music on their phones. Breaking the rules, because there is a notice on the wall saying that phones should be on silent. Later, you will notice people say, 'Hearing is the last thing to go.' They will say this a lot. Then you will remember, and understand.

But on this first day, you will be overwhelmed by what's around you. You won't know where to go that's quiet, so you will sit in reception and cry properly for the first time. Someone will come over and ask if you're OK and you will say you're autistic and can't cope with the environment. They will fetch the family support social worker, who will take you to the Quiet Room. She will say she understands, because she has worked with autistic children, and that 'the universe' made sure she was on duty today. When you go back you will find that they have moved your mother's bed

so she is by the window. But it will still look like a hospital.

You will spend the next day in the house while your sisters are at the hospice, because you will need time on your own to process this latest change. You didn't believe, before, that you were actually going to lose your mother, and now you can't stop crying.

After that you will get used to the new routine. Sign in, take a visitor's badge, sit next to your mother's bed, and wait for what will happen.

Your mother's day will be interrupted by people coming to do things. People in green uniforms and people in blue uniforms, and people with badges and no uniforms which means they are either a doctor or a volunteer. They will ask whether she wants food, or painkillers, or a massage or a haircut. Some people will ask her to get out of bed and do exercises. She will reply politely that there's no point because she is terminally ill.

People will come and go in the other three beds. Some will die, and a candle will be lit at the nurses' station in the corridor. Some will be sent to nursing homes. In the second week, a new person will arrive who has her television on all the time, with the volume turned up. You will spend a lot of time in the Quiet Room.

Don't believe what people say about how long you've got

The consultant will say 'months rather than weeks.' He will be right, but it will only be two months. The palliative care nurse will say 'two weeks.' It will be three.

The doctor at the hospice will say you are in 'the last few days.' It will be the last week. The nurse will say, 'It could be today.' It will be two days.

Your sister will say: 'Come now if you want to see her alive.' It will be 12 hours.

Faith helps. It doesn't have to be your own

At the hospice, your mother's bed will be wheeled into the chapel for the weekly communion service. It will feel very holy. The vicar will say that

the hospice is a 'thin place,' and you will believe her. After the service, the vicar will ask your mother what her favourite hymn is. She will reply: 'The one I'm having at my funeral, "There is a Redeemer."' The vicar will ask the pianist to play it and you will sing it together. Your mother will look very happy. You will feel proud of her.

When she dies, she will still be holding the small wooden cross that her friend gave her. You will tell the undertakers she must continue holding it.

It's not over when it's over

Death is not sad, but it is hard. Loss is sad. It will take time to know how sad.

Don't expect things to go back to normal. Expect to be tired. Very tired.

The day after your mother dies, you will put on a mask and make phone calls. After that you will start filling in forms. You will be glad you are organised and logical, because someone has to be.

You will go home for the first time in weeks, and it won't feel like home. You will miss your mother, because you will want to tell her about the changes in your garden while you've been away, and about all the nice things people are saying about her.

You will cry in the funeral service, but not before and not for a long time afterwards, because you will be too busy to grieve. You will do all the things that need doing, and afterwards you will remember only the things you wish you hadn't done.

You will think about the plans you should have changed, the mistakes you made, the signs you didn't notice. You will be haunted by the things in your mother's house that you didn't keep, because you ran out of space and time.

You might have done things differently if you'd known. You will tell yourself that's true of death, but it's true of life as well.

Regret is part of grieving. You will know this because you've read the books. You will read more books.


Longlist

Taken and Left

Imogen Phillips



Imogen Phillips lives in Brighton and has just started saying ‘writer’ when people ask her what she does. She writes short stories which dive deep into the mess and murk of womanhood. ‘Taken and Left’, her submission to this year’s Spread the Word prize, is her first foray into life writing. Imogen has written fiction, poetry and journalism for various online and print magazines, and has an MA in Creative & Life Writing from Goldsmith’s.

 [@noopvonsnoop](https://twitter.com/noopvonsnoop)

Taken and Left

Imogen Phillips

There are many ways to call a kettle a spade; many ways to call a rape a stain. The language around it is inherently awkward. How to own the thing? *My* rape sounds territorial and a bit gushy, *the* rape like a painful scene from a film. The *my* risks you sounding like an opera-singer signing off an email; *in rehearsal darling, must dash, we're doing The Rape at the Wigmore next week!* If you're going to write about it, you should really get the semantics locked down.

Sort out the lingo, for them if not for you. For those who've recently watched *Saturday Night Fever* and don't know how to talk about what happens in the boot of the car, as it dawns that something similar happened to them. For the ones who enjoy casual sex, but don't know how to say when something doesn't feel safe anymore. For the men who think clothing or demeanour might have anything to do with it, ever. For parents who can't work out how to sell the world as a good place to their violated child, who believe surely they must be in some way to blame. For the dads who didn't think they needed to teach their sons about consent. But most of all, for the soft-eyed girls, women, boys and men, in bad clubs, loud cities, dark corners in small towns, childhood bedrooms, bus stops, having their innocence pinched suddenly, from right under their sweet noses.

* * *

A dream visits every once in a while. Characters change, as does the location and colour, but the theme is consistent. People, persons, animals, spiritual bodies, whoever they are, do not believe you. They think that

whatever issue you are pressing is total bullshit. It doesn't make any sense, and why should they trust anything you say anyway? You do not discover why you are an unreliable source; you spend those dream-hours screaming, urging, crying out to no avail, until your voice is hoarse and stringy.

You wake up very tired. At odds with the world, more than before, and angry at someone. Nothing is in focus and you can't work out what to blame, as the veil of frustration draws over everything you touch, see, hear. It doesn't occur to you, until maybe four or five in the afternoon, what the dream was, what subliminal chemistry was happening in the sleep lab.

The day *it* happened will happen again, every year, and you will be there every time, in the same body, getting further from it, and closer to you.

* * *

You are outside. Lying crooked on sandy stone. Half of you on the pavement, the other on the street. Two halves wedged between two cars. At first, you feel as though you might *be* the pavement. It's very warm, although you sense it is not yet eight in the morning.

You are not the pavement, you're you, but squashed and indented somehow, out of body into stone. You worry about being found before you have worked out why you are there. Standing slowly reunites your limbs, a small purse and lime-green phone from beneath you.

The houses are fortresses hulking together like great pieces of chalk. They are the same except for one which you recognise for its slightly blacker gate and lack of car in the driveway. Like toy soldiers next to each other stand the girls you came here with. On steps, inside, hands on hips in pyjama shorts.

A neon-white, leather sofa. A blanket over your head, trying to steady the breath and use the phone to call someone who might help. Knotted pants, the redness of your inner thigh, and the memory of faces looming somewhere above you.

* * *

Your flight is at 1pm, and although your parents suggest that you stay behind until they can get there, you pack your bag and go.

Groups of two at the very least, and no going home with strangers.

Just six days before; intrepid travellers, half-way up a mountain, you promised each other – nobody goes on alone. Those same others who, on your return to the house that morning, scattered like cockroaches across a stone floor, away from the direct result of a vow broken.

Taxis take you to the airport. The girls inside the car sigh and tut, like disapproving mothers. It is an inconvenience, and they do not believe you.

By the time you reach check-in, you have been shouted at and slapped by an eighteen-year-old palm. You have lost the ability to create breath for your lungs, and drawn up all bile from your digestive system. Your bloodstream is fighting alcohol poisoning and the effects of something that you will never know the name of.

* * *

On the floor of a toilet cubicle by the gate. On the floor with a third of one cheek pressed against the stainless steel, cooling and hard. You gave the girl going to Spain all your money, which was only forty euros, which she took gratefully, which makes you wish she could have stayed instead of going to Spain. You mention this not because of some particular closeness, she was a lifeless person, dulled by her epilepsy medication, but because it was the first kindness of the day. She had looked at you that morning with real pain in her eyes, registering, if briefly, the state you were in. She knew, and she went, to a language course t, and to never speak to you again.

You are lying on a bathroom floor, but you're going home. You are reliable and strong. Old for your years, babies even sometimes think you are their mother.

* * *

The girls on the plane refuse to sit next to you, lest you hurl your rape juice on their sunburnt thighs. One in particular does not want Mum and Dad smelling anything *suspect* on her, as she glides back from her first unaccompanied holiday. She who had behaved the worst all week long. She, the reason why the No One Walks Alone bill was passed in the first place. She, who disappeared into the harbour with two scorched men one night, had to be escorted home by two of you after she deigned to return a concerned call.

You move, to the mercifully empty back row, bin bag rustling behind. It's all they have, no cabin-issue sick bags available. Stretching across three more seats than were allotted you is inherently luxurious, and the back four seats on any plane feel sofa-like if you lie across them; even on a Ryanair craft.

The nausea settles in your system, fangs sunk in for a good feed. Infiltration of the system by something foreign. Nothing like a hangover is, as it sits and stirs the pot of your innards with inconsistent strokes, like a child grown tired of scrambling eggs. At some point you buy crisps from the trolley to anchor your stomach. They come in a little cardboard tray, sheathed in plastic. Uncovered, they are lovely; quaint, un-ridged and ready-salted.

* * *

When you go to a hospital, you go too late. The drug has been flushed out, absorbed by your stomach acid, churned up in the churning system down there, and out into the rivers of London.

The doctor at the hospital is young, looks like your ex-boyfriends might in fifteen years except they won't be doctors. He tells you that you're not pregnant, and that he has been unable to trace anything in your system

which could be attributed to date-rape. Now, he also says, that could be for a number of reasons. It could be that it has already passed through your system, and out the other side, as it were, or that it was never there at all, *or* that it is untraceable. This seems a somewhat wishy-washy conclusion. As you say, he could have been one of your boyfriends in fifteen years' time.

You do not say how vague you find his prognosis. You care what he thinks, despite the fact that you've just been raped and he's clearly mortified to be found working the walk-in shift and not triple-bypass surgery on the eminent and powerful.

It deserves mentioning that your boyfriend of the time was there. Well, as soon as he could get to you in London, when you had returned from France, through the first ring of hell. You won't dwell on him too much, because you know it is not his tale, and that you may misrepresent him entirely. He was a classical music enthusiast, an eighteen-year-old, and you were his very first girlfriend.

Your mother comes with you to the bus station to pick him up. You wear some pilates-pants and a pale mauve t-shirt. You wonder if you look assaulted.

How do you love a woman who has, just as she became a woman, been raped? Gently, or not at all, as it turns out. The first night, you sleep in separate beds, but can feel his desire to comfort and not knowing how, make its way across the floorboards.

You were not able to refuse him, even though your limbs were heavy with loss. Still you made good noises for him, still let him come in between your legs, stinging your skin and blinding you with hazy, half flashbacks. You have been eighteen years in training for pleasing men, why stop now?

* * *

The trauma of a rape trial gets said so much over the next week, it begins to take on the quiet resonance of a seminal album title. Your dad really

just wants to bring his twenty-plus years of law practice to the table here. Because as much as it might seem insensitive or pushy for right now, *it's your Now Decisions that will pay forward to your Future Results*. You get the sense that *they*, your family, don't want you to have to go through that. *You* couldn't *possibly* imagine what it would *really* be like, but they would *obviously* support you if *despite* all that, you chose that *exact route*.

* * *

Four months later, you sink into a complacent state of stability, without therapy or acknowledgement of the violation experienced by your body and mind. The guilt over not remembering exactly, not doing more, speaking out, turning it into something which might propel you or someone else forward.

You are unable to use public transport. This does not happen suddenly, you fight the feeling as long as you can, taking the bus to your childcare job. Take the bus, only to jump off it somewhere along the journey. Under your breath you chant: bombers won't target the 94. They probably don't know of its existence, and even if they did, there is no one of import to make it a target today.

You are getting stuck. You cancel plans with a friend from school, who you haven't seen for nearly three years, who's friendship you could really do with, to be honest. But you can't leave the doorstep of your home, because you cannot confirm with certainty that a bomb won't go off on the central line tube that would take you to her at Tottenham Court Road.

The trauma has attached its tick-body to you and made you fearful of brown men. The knowledge of it makes you feel rancid on the inside. The last face that you saw, by your drink and in that car, was a brown face, on a man's body. But there are brown people in your family, in your life, in your world, who mean you no harm. And yet, here you are, no choice. Ashamed by your convoluted fear.

For a long time, you don't ring the crisis helpline. When eventually you do, the voice is gentle but its questions consume you, and you find yourself needing to slow down, to take-your time-in-case-it-gets-too-much because it very suddenly is, too much. The first time, you hang up, make excuses to your mother, confirm you understand how helpful it might be, promise to try again soon.

* * *

They offer seven free counselling sessions, which take place in an unmarked safe-house in Ealing. Your counsellor is a woman called Laila. In the sixth session, she breaks down and tells you about her abuser. Laila was held captive for many months, and her overwhelming feeling shortly after was that the women around her were jealous. *Might the same be true of those girls who did not help you?*

Your story seems a bit anaemic in comparison now. Some sob story of date rape in an expensive coastal holiday town in Southern France. You do not return for the final session. Back out you go, away from help and healing.

* * *

At university, with big girl baggage; by the end of the first term you are existing each day at the disposal of a shorn-headed techno DJ who has both a lazy eye and a penchant for self-harm. Textbook stuff, this; ketamine, Snakebites, love bites, very little actually said.

Before long, you have your own crawling scars on both arms. A friend passes you the name of a nearby CBT practice, and goes with you for an initial consultation. The therapist listens to your woes and worries. You are clearly blinded by this boy, unable to see his blatant lack of care for you. After forty-eight minutes she inhales, re-folds her legs, and says 'I'm not sure I'm what you're looking for, but please do pass my details onto your boyfriend'.

Perhaps one is meant to stay sad and lost and slowly scarring when at university. Perhaps you are *supposed* to hang around the turntable each time he is behind it, hopeful for crumbs, even just a hello. You leave therapy behind again.

It is the summertime, and you insist on staying in your house completely alone, fresh back from a music festival, nursing a comedown from the depths of hell. It is stifling in its pain and confusion. Ursula drags you down to her shadowy depths, with no tongue and a botched pair of human legs trailing behind you. You drink wine in the bath, in the morning, in the middle of the night. You keep it by your bed, in a smart little jacket that would keep it cold if it hadn't been there for three days.

This, until day five or six, which finds you, close to midnight, with your right arm cut to bits. This one is not pain by way of processing; this one was about the end of life.

You move back in with your mother, you go back to your old nanny job, you join a gym. No more drugs, alcohol, smoking, socialising, or walking sideways out into the road hoping for a speeding car to come and snip at your mortal coil. You convince yourself you have fallen back in love with your ex-boyfriend, the trombone-player, and you send him videos of hedgehogs snuffling around to try and remind him of when you used to do the same, in his single bed.

That doesn't work, (thank god (for him)); you do a juice fast instead. You do not eat before seven pm and spend hours in the gym before walking to get your kid from school. She doesn't ask you about the suspiciously long and ever-present stretchy bandage that covers your entire arm. You are safe in her nine-year-old hands.

There is a one-night-only relapse. It involves ketamine and a club in Dalston which doesn't exist anymore. By the time the nightmares stop, you're taking baths again, and going to therapy twice a week.

* * *

You probably should not give her name, but would like the record to show that **** changed your life. Twice a week, not far from where you grew up, in the upstairs study of her own parents' house, you see your new therapist. **** wears a tiny, modest cross around her neck, and has a couple of Christian self-help books on the shelves that line the wall behind her. You notice this in the first session, as you prepare for it not to work out, like the others before. Au contraire, sweet hurting bud! This woman, in all her mauve v-neck glory, is the woman of your dreams. The shaman through your nightmares, into the certainty that light brings.

Talking therapy, and occasional attempts at hypnosis for memory recall. She calls it *accessing*, which sounds like boardroom jargon, but removes your fear of entering a vulnerable state over which you have no control. *Accessing* allows you to remember the car, the more than one face, some of the smells, and some of the words aimed your way by the girls in the house. These details, at very least, are something focused among the blur.

It is in ****'s small room, with its sofa sagging like the skin of a peach, that you realise how much everything can matter. Everything is relevant, each moment of loud, quiet, kindness, violence, or the ones with no distinctive adjective at all. To recognise the fibres from which the tapestry is woven, to really know its silks and yarns, you must step back far enough to see it end to end. **** teaches you this, doing no more or less than her position requires of her.

* * *

A few years after it happens, your parents inevitably separate (marriage-long misdemeanours on both sides). So you go on holiday with your mother and brothers. Your father has escaped to his new life. He finds happiness, you try to find yourselves on a yoga retreat.

Whilst there, you see a kinesiologist, who tells you that the reason you are *somewhat over-weight, can't find the will to exercise regularly, and hate your body*, is because you don't want to make yourself more attractive, in case it also makes you more susceptible to being preyed upon. Kinesiologists ask your body questions, and feel for responses from your muscles. Beneath-the-skin CBT. You probably weighed about ten stone then, and stood at nearly six feet tall.

You have accumulated the opinions of others, allowing them to define you before you were able to. They told you what you needed to be but weren't yet. The girl who remarked on the size of your thirteen-year-old arse in skinny jeans as you bent over a desk at school. The first boyfriend who remarked what a shame it was that your breasts weren't bigger, and if they were, you'd be in better proportion.

As your body absorbs the words it creates its own treatment plan, so that by the time you enter your twenties, the comments have changed. Your mother tells you how hard your face looks now, how sharply angled. Your friend asks simply, as you shimmy out of your dress to jump into a lake, *where* the rest of you has gone.

* * *

You shed friends like skin, just in case and before they do it themselves. Frequently, you start again. It's hard to develop a rich portfolio of friends as a young child, which is why so many invent their own. Like Cecelia, named after a Simon & Garfunkel song, who lived in Wandsworth and holidayed in Portugal. Places you knew but were just out of reach, became part of her.

Cecelia hovered somewhere over, and just apart from you, like a portrait from a locket; in profile but likely to fade if you didn't give pay attention. She was older, maybe by ten years. She could have been a friend of your brother instead, deciding you were the better sibling. Except she wasn't, she was your friend alone, not there to spend time with the rest of

the family. It is your belief, your post-match prognosis, that you have been searching for a life-flesh Cecelia ever since.

* * *

You reach your mid-twenties, and you are truly, finally, flanked by women who clad your life with the strength of iron. Together you pool your traumas, some with more to give than others, some having not realised theirs yet. It makes you fiercer in your defence of one another, quicker to judge your oppressors, more able to love yourselves. It is not just you who has been raped, or had their drink spiked, or gone through an unpleasant parental separation.

Some of the women in this group are more militant than others. They take one view and hold it, with both hands, expecting you to do the same. You are sisters after all, you have suffered enough

You are not as strong as this and know it. Before you could seal yourself off, make a tough shell, the world got to you. You believe wholeheartedly in second chances, in the damage of toxic masculinity, and in your own desperate need to be needed. Why, they ask, is the love of friends not enough? Why, along with creative output, good food and music, is that not enough for you?

The need to be needed speaks only from a large crater where your own self-worth should lie, lapping contentedly at the smooth surfaces of itself. For many years you will continue to take on relationships like social work, running yourself deep into the ground, at a slightly different angle each time.

* * *

Seven years after it happens, when you fall out of the bath at your mother's house, and she has to put your underwear on for you, you are reminded of the frailty of adulthood. How quickly it is whipped from under us, like a

tablecloth trick done right. Her eyes linger for a fraction on the tattoos on your thigh, and the scars on the other side. She pulls the white thong over your flesh, once again choosing to swallow down whatever was coming up for her.

Or, also seven years later, you will sit after lunch, with a glass of tepid wine by your empty plate, as you smoke thin, rolled cigarettes and get to know the little sister of your brother's girlfriend. She is beautiful, engaging, and conversationally confident. Which is why you sit in this way, happy to be carried along by her verbal flow. That is until she speaks for a long time about the culture of drink-spiking within the Newcastle nightlife scene; going into detail about at least four instances involving her and her friends. She continues in a bright tone about how lucky she was to realise *so quickly*, to be able to throw the *horrible stuff* up, and to be looked after by her girlfriends all the while. She even went out again afterwards, how *insane* is that?

You have to leave the table, because to say nothing would be to make a statement, and to say something would be to say everything. It's self-preservation, you tell yourself, as you lie face down on your bed, throwing up tears. One of many silences kept to protect the swift curdle that rape inflicts upon a conversation.

Yet the more you don't talk about it, the more you gloss over, the more you hack away at your own progression. Like doing yoga with socks on; it's fine, but harder to get a grip.

* * *

Sexual assault is everywhere. Happening to people, being remembered in dreams, causing panic attacks. In alleyways, kitchens, living rooms, shelters, nightclubs, and on television screens. Triggering nations at home on their sofas, as they sit in front of the latest instalment of a crime drama. We can't escape it even if we don't know it's happening. When are you allowed to

take issue with it? When is the right moment to flag up a trigger? At first sighting? Or when you've made it through to the bitter end of whatever eighties film or Jacqueline Wilson book you happen to be reading?

Just a couple of years after it happens, maybe less than that, you motor through the first season of *Broadchurch*, merrily absorbing the rapport between Tennant and Coleman, and the beautifully moody cliffs a bit further down the coast from your mother's house. It only takes you a couple of days to polish the eight episodes off, then another week to get series two done. By the third week you think you'll move straight onto series three. Five minutes in, rape kit just off-camera, a *serious sexual assault*. Will she, won't she, did he, didn't he, can we even believe her, Guv?

Is there a name, you wonder, used by police, for rape victims who doesn't press charges or do a rape kit? Uncooperative, unhelpful, scared of hard evidence. You watch *Broadchurch* right until the bitter end. *You* didn't have the courage to do the rape kit, and you should not be allowed to forget it.

* * *

It's not surprising you have started to think that the only clean way forward is the way which involves only you. Everyone else seems to be bringing something complicated to the table, even those who have no idea of what you carry, what is tattooed on your soul. You long for the day when it doesn't feel etched there, rather printed gently, with vegetable dye and a pattern carved on wood. The kind of thing you might do of a weekend, when no one is coming over and there is excess beetroot juice lying around.

You love that juice, how it stains and slips between your fingers to lodge in the webbed parts. The bits that would grow and fuse, if you stayed in baths for any longer than when your skin starts pruning. The hand that would turn to fin, if you had the courage to follow your urge and walk into the sea forever.

The sea.

You grow unhealthily attached to it. Feel scrubbed and raw without a flecking of salt crystals on your skin from a morning swim. Your dreams grow greener, like they've been filmed through the glass of a dirty fish tank. You want to be down there. How does the hierarchy of the sea work? You wonder whether for your first week there you'd have algae status, or because of your human size, you'd be assigned to something dolphin-sized from the start. A shark would be ideal; people really stay clear of sharks.

* * *

There is so much anger inside of you, it feels as though it could heat all the power plants in the north of England. A truly sustainable source of energy, diverted towards occasional successful creative projects or drunken kissing.

The anger was nice and quiet when you started starving yourself; nothing in the tank to power itself with, you had no choice but to succumb, to be dulled and silenced. I am so angry, you think, that I could slash the front of both my thighs like a pillow. Blood feathers pouring out and confirming the thing you know to be true; you are still alive, and thus, must keep going.

* * *

Imagine being helped, imagine being healed. Imagine being able to wholeheartedly engage in real love. Isn't the most painful thing that you *know* it's not just you, that more people are going internally gangrenous with untended wounds than are not. Knowing of your lack of individuality, of the greater pain that exists in far-flung places and near; that's where real agony lies. Maybe, in fact, that's what stops you from ever really dealing with it. Or maybe it's just the fear of no longer having craggy, warm places of sadness to hide away in, to place your feet when the rock-face becomes too slippery to climb.

* * *

Pray tell, how inextricably fucked up are you? Just how tightly do the weeds bind themselves around your organs? Do they wind upwards from the inside, snaking up your throat and onto the soft bed of the tongue? A snake's tail of rattling trauma, unleashed on the loveliest, on the least suspecting. Lying in wait, just out of sight, silhouette visible to you alone. On the sunniest of days, where hope seems to be winning, there is a shadow of its outline on the streets you walk down, and in the eyes of your loved ones.

It happened again of course, more than once. In light that was murkier still; with a friend, at a party, in the darkness of an unknown bedroom. You scold yourself for not speaking out; if not for you then for whoever must deal next with no lesson being learned.

How much are you allowed to blame on trauma anyway? Where's the universally-recognised measuring system, like a gram or yard? Without it, guilt is autonomous; letting itself in the front door without a key, and staying there beyond any conceivable welcome. Guilt does not pick up on the subtle signal of shuffling feet, or soft hints that its host is tiring. Guilt does not listen, as the need for space grows large and looming. Guilt takes another biscuit, the last one in fact, and asks for more tea.

As you sit to write, in the emptied shed at the end of your mother's garden, you know in some small way, from a corner of yourself, that it might get better now. You may finally watch rape on screen without wishing you could unzip from neck to pelvis and spill out. You might be ready to question the men who touch you as you walk past them, no longer angry, but full of pity at their misunderstanding.

So maybe it isn't that you think the whole world is a bad place. In fact, maybe you still have great faith in the human race. Despite what's happened to you, despite rape culture, despite systemic racism, despite arms smuggling, despite Priti Patel, direct provision, and the rising levels of plastic in the oceans.

You know the truth of these evils, not deep down but very close to the surface of yourself, and still go around the world with your arms outstretched, hoping someone will be shiny enough to reflect back at you the value you cannot conjure on your own.

You're fine, it'll work for a while.

Longlist

The Secret

Susan Daniels



Susan Daniels lives in Warwickshire and has two grown up children with families of their own. She has a BA in Business and a professional qualification in Finance. For fun, she enjoys travelling, writing and reading. From a child, she has been an avid reader of books of any genre. She started writing after her children left home, discovering there was a latent writer in her soul. Currently, she practices her writing in the early mornings before the day job and plans for a future with more time at home, when she will have the opportunity to write whenever she likes.

The Secret

Susan Daniels

You wake, and there is a moment which lasts for a few seconds - that comfortable, warm and drowsy feeling when coming round from a deep sleep and the oblivion of night. Then, suddenly and violently, a realisation of deep-rooted pain wakes you into consciousness. You have a secret. A dark secret. A dark secret, so intense, so monumental and so heavy and sharp, it has a physical presence of its own. It's a huge weight lodged in your core, squashing and cramping, twisting and turning, curled up inside, controlling all your actions and thoughts.

But this morning, just as reality begins to take hold and overwhelm you; just as the new morning brings its inevitable fear, a lighter thought seeps through into your conscious mind. It's your birthday. You are no longer a child; you are sixteen. Sixteen is nearly an adult. You can leave home. You can do what you want. You can be free! It's at that moment, that juncture, when you contemplate freedom. That small taste is just enough to ease the pain a little and calm the cramping in your belly.

As you lift the duvet and come out of hiding, you go to the window and look out into the garden from behind the curtains. It's been raining and silvery water is dripping from the drenched trees which surround the back garden. The wet leaves glisten in the sunshine and everything looks clean and brighter, somehow. You can see your little brother in the garden, fair hair hanging over his face as he bends over, young and eager; he's probably digging for worms in the soft muddy soil. Your dog is sniffing around the puddles, trying to assist in the exploration, his black snub nose pushing down into the earth between the plants and stones. It looks so normal and familiar.

As you stand there, silently watching, the pungent aroma of bacon drifts from the kitchen, which is just below your bedroom and you realise that your mother is cooking Sunday breakfast. You suddenly feel hungry.

You slowly enter the kitchen, relieved to find your mother alone. She smiles and gives you a hug. She has placed a large box wrapped in pink shiny paper on the kitchen table and several birthday cards are propped up against it. The previous week you had been shopping together, and she'd bought you a pair of shoes for your birthday. Black and shiny, thin ankle strap, with a heel. You can't wait to try them on and show your friends. As you carefully unwrap the present, your mother lays out four plates and pours the tea.

Your brother comes in from the garden, rubbing his dirty hands against his jumper and your mother tells him off and shakes her head at him in despair, telling him to go and wash his hands. She asks you to go and give your father a shout and tell him that breakfast is ready. You go to the bottom of the stairs and monotonely shout, *breakfast is ready*, to the landing upstairs. You listen and hope that he's not heard you, so that you can have a few more minutes in the sanctum of your family; your mother and brother. The three of you have a close relationship. Your mother had been married before and after her husband left, she had brought us up single handedly, until you were eight years old. You have very little memory of your real father, your biological father. There is just a hazy vision of standing by the heat of a fire burning in a grate and a man yelling angrily at your mother from across the room. Your mother holds your baby brother in her arms and you remember feeling frightened and pushing closer against your mother's legs, for protection. Her head is bent over the baby and she is weeping. Then the man is gone. That is your one and only memory of your real father.

Quickly, you return to the warm comfort of the kitchen and your unwrapped present and unopened birthday cards. Your brother is being his usual idiot self, trying to poke a sausage up his nose and making you laugh,

whilst your mother tries to be angry with him but then, she is laughing too. The dog wags his tail and seeks attention and he starts yapping and gently strokes his paw against your brother's leg. It's just like the old days, before you started to feel sick every day, before, when life was fun, before your brother was made to cry, before your mother had bruises, before things were smashed, before the shouting, before things changed.

He comes in. The laughing stops. He sits down heavily at the end of the table. He is unshaven, which emphasises his sagging cheeks and double chin. He turns towards you and looks at your new shoes. He says, *very nice, put them on then, let's have a look at you in them*, and your mother agrees, not realising what she's saying. You start to feel sick. The walls are closing in. You feel dirty. You do not want his eyes on you, looking at your legs, leering at your walk. You start to panic and stand up. You are holding back hot tears but they are escaping and start to run down your face and you are picking up your shoes and the paper and your cards, and you want to run away, to be safe from the guilt and the shame. To be a little girl again. You run out of the kitchen and you can hear your mother calling after you.

Later, you hear a knock on the bedroom door and it's your mother asking if you're alright now and would you stay in and look after your little brother, until she is back. She is going out to visit an aunt. You know that she will be out for a couple of hours and your heart sinks, until she tells you that he is going too. You sit on your bed, with the door closed. Alone in your room of memories. Trying not to think of those times when you were younger, when he would climb the stairs and walk along the landing to your room at bedtime, to say goodnight.

He would heave himself onto your bed and tell you to be a good girl. As he lowered his weight onto your body, you would lift yourself up and rise high above, floating to the ceiling. You would look down at yourself, at him. If you stayed up there you could almost feel nothing, as if it wasn't happening. You didn't even have to think about it. You could see the purple and lilac walls and the crack in the ceiling above the doorway and the

little fly trapped and suspended in a cobweb in a corner, waiting to be devoured by the big fat, hairy spider. Your mother never climbed those stairs at bedtime.

As you grew older, you tried to avoid him. So, you stayed away from the house as much as possible. You came home late. But he found other places, other times. Assignations. Ultimatums. If you were not a good girl, he would hit your mother, kick the dog and bully your brother. Psychologically, he beat you into submission. So eventually, you would go out in the car for a drive with him or to the workshop at the back of the garage. A little pawn in his dirty game. You feel ashamed, but how can you tell anyone what you have been doing. *Do not tell your mother, it will destroy her.* It will destroy her. He has said it so many times you believe it. He has been telling you this since you were eight. You know that you might lose your mother. She will hate you when she knows what you've been doing. You will lose your home, and your little brother. But you are an adult now and this is the sacrifice you will have to make. To get him away from you.

The following day you arrive home from school expecting to find your mother and brother at home. But they have gone to the shops and he is there alone, waiting for you. He tells you he hasn't been to work today. You want to go and change out of your school uniform, but not when you are alone in the house with him. You go into the kitchen to get a drink and he comes up behind you and puts his hand on your breast. His breath stinks, noxious and repulsive. He wants you to go upstairs with him. You shrug him off and he grabs at you. You move away and say *No, I'm going out.* His voice is soft and coaxing at first but because you are not compliant, he becomes aggressive, threatening. You scream at him *NO!* and run to the door and make your escape. You go to a friend's house and are invited to stay for dinner. Your friend's mother phones your house to say that you will be back later, after you've eaten.

Your friend's father drops you off at the door, because it is now dark

outside. You go inside and it is quiet. Your mother is in the kitchen. She has been crying and her face is swollen and blotchy; a red rash of emotion spread across her cheeks and throat. She says she is alright. He is nowhere to be seen and there is an atmosphere of heavy, oppressive silence, like the aftermath of a ferocious storm which has left devastation in its wake. She is sweeping up broken glass off the floor. You walk to the foot of the stairs. Then, as you glance in the mirror on the wall, he comes out of the sitting room behind you. He stands just two feet away, staring back at you accusingly through the reflection. *This is your fault.* His hostility is almost tangible and a vein in his temple pulses angrily, sweat beading on his face. Not a word is spoken and you stare back at him, challenging him, until he releases his gaze and turns away. Your guilt weighs rock-heavy, but you are not going to give in this time. You look in on your little brother and he is sleeping. Then you go to your bedroom. There is no visitor to your room tonight.

You cannot sleep. You toss and turn, the shadowy dark thoughts going over and over and there's no escape. The night appears to go on forever, until the dawn light begins to drift slowly and grudgingly into the room. Eventually, you get up and quietly go into your brother's room to see if he's alright. As you enter, you can hear him crying in his sleep, his arms are thrashing around, and he is mumbling incoherently. You wrap your arms around him and he begins to quieten down, to be calmer, and he drifts back into a gentle sleep. You lie down next to him and listen to his breathing, until daylight enters the room and chases away the dark shadows.

You go to school and listen to the teachers and make notes and talk to your friends in the break. You go through the routine of being normal. Not wanting to attract attention just in case someone sees something different about you, something dirty, a label saying *unclean*. You know you are not the same anymore and everyone is going to know and you will lose your friends. How will you be able to come back to school after everyone knows? After lunch, you ask to see the headmistress. The secretary raises

an eyebrow at your request and asks the reason. You say, *it's personal* and look down at the floor. The secretary says to come back after lessons at three o'clock and the headmistress will see you then.

You go to the toilets and vomit. Someone overhears you being sick and the next minute a teacher is banging on the toilet door asking if you're alright. You open the door and see a teacher you do not recognise and burst into tears. She tells you to go home as clearly you are unwell. You tell her your name and collect your bag and walk out the front door into the fresh air. It's raining gently and you lift your face upwards, breathing in gulps of air and letting the raindrops trickle down your cheeks, to wash away the tears. You sit down against a wall out of sight. What to do? Who to talk to? You walk to the bus stop and wait for the next bus.

You sit on the upper deck of the bus, letting the wind from the open window blow through your hair and your mind. You want it to blow you away into nothing. The bus reaches the city and as it turns a corner, you see a large solid looking building, stately and secure as if anchored to the ground, its large glass panes reflecting the sky with its dark and thunderous clouds building up before the storm. Vehicles are lined up neatly outside in the car park, as if your brother has been playing with his Corgi cars. You get off the bus at the next stop, and walk back along the road. As you cross the busy street and negotiate the heavy traffic, you reason to yourself that if you are not supposed to tell, the next car will hit you, and silence you forever. But fate decides in your favour and you reach the other side of the road with limbs intact and only the sound of a car hooting at your irresponsible action.

The sky is growing dark and the ground is trembling. You reach the entrance of the glass-fronted building and climb the steps. The main door opens into a wide spacious area with white walls and a large desk up front. The room is empty and you walk up to the uniformed officer behind the desk. When the blue-shirted police officer looks up from his paperwork, you quietly say, *I need to talk to somebody please. I need help.*

Longlist

The Strawbs

Pete Williams



Pete Williams lives with his wife and son in south-east London. He works as a librarian at Birkbeck. A late starter, he became interested in life writing after reading Karl Ove Knausgaard. ‘The Strawbs’ is part of a longer work about growing up in Kent and his failed attempts to make it as a musician in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

 [@petewilliams68](https://twitter.com/petewilliams68)

The Strawbs

Pete Williams

It was my sister who first wanted to learn the guitar. I don't know what prompted this: she would not show any great passion for music as she grew older. However, she must have expressed some interest because for her eleventh birthday she was given a small nylon-stringed classical with a glossy body of light wood and plastic tuning pegs, along with a beginner's book.

We all admired it. It rested against a wall in the living room for some time, occasionally picked up by one of us and inexpertly plucked before being put down again sheepishly. The book, which of course came without a CD, seemed daunting. In the end, it was decided that, to get her started, Claire needed a teacher and the classified adverts in the local paper were consulted by my parents.

The guitar teacher they found was a man called Dave Lambert. He had been in a band in the seventies, The Strawbs, and lived a few villages away. The Strawbs had had a big hit called 'Part of the Union,' a sort of novelty song, but their moment had long passed and my parents didn't remember very much about them. We all imagined Dave, rather fancifully, as a retired or resting millionaire, who must live in a great mansion.

One autumn afternoon, we watched through the kitchen window as Dave drew up outside the farmhouse in a Hillman Imp and removed from the boot a battered guitar case. Ducking in through the front door, he stood for a while talking to my mother while Claire and I regarded him with curiosity. He had a big, friendly face framed by girlish brown hair which sat on the shoulders of a corduroy jacket. Around his neck, he wore a spotted silk scarf. His faded jeans were flared and one leg was patched at

the knee. He beamed over at us from time to time as he spoke. We warmed to him immediately.

The next day, during my lunch break, I visited the public library which was near my school in the centre of Sittingbourne. I retrieved the rock music encyclopaedia that I had consulted several times previously and sat down with it at a table. I was pleased to find that The Strawbs had an entry of their own and read that they had been a folksy, progressive rock band who released several albums. In the final paragraph, the various group members were listed with letters in brackets after their names, indicating what instrument they played. Dave was there and could also be discerned in the low resolution black and white photograph which accompanied the text.

I was impressed. Dave was the first famous musician I had ever encountered. However, his fame, such as it was, seemed rather abstract and hard to connect with the man who had been standing in our doorway just the day before.

Dave's visits quickly became part of our weekly routine and we got used to his presence. He would chat with my mother for a few moments when he arrived, and I noticed that he was able to do this easily and with charm, often about matters of little interest to me, such as our garden or the local traffic. The exchange would always end with her pressing into his hand some notes, which he would look at with momentary surprise, as if she was giving him a spontaneous gift, before slipping them into his jacket pocket and bending down to pick up the guitar case that had been resting at his feet like a faithful dog. Sometimes, after he and Claire had disappeared into the old dining room next to the kitchen where the lessons took place, I would linger for a few moments, listening to the low murmur of his voice and the muffled tones of their guitars through the wall.

One afternoon, alone in the house after returning early from school, I wandered aimlessly, restless but unwilling to begin my homework. Finding myself in the dining room, I noticed Claire's guitar lying supine

on the rug in front of the hearth and bent to pick it up. It felt light and looked small in my hands. Sitting down with it in an armchair I reached over for the instruction book which had been similarly discarded and began flicking through it.

I read about chords. They were named after the first letters of the alphabet. There were diagrams with lines representing the six strings and small black circles indicating where your fingers should be placed. This was all logical to me.

The easiest looking chord was E minor. Following the instructions, I carefully placed my middle finger just beyond the second fret of the second string and my ring finger on the one below it. I pressed them both down. This hurt a little but I was able to hold them in place.

Shifting my position slightly, I let my right hand brush very gently over the strings above the sound hole. The effect of this simple action was quite magical. The sound of the chord was rich and warm. It was vaguely familiar, too, mysterious and haunting. But, because I had conjured it myself, it also seemed as if it was, in some way, an expression of my own emotions.

I ran my thumb over the strings like this several times in succession until I could hold them down no longer. Examining my fingers, I found that they had deep indentations in their soft tops and felt slightly sore. But I searched through the book until I found another chord which only required two fingers, A minor seven. Then I remained where I was, alternating haltingly between the two shapes, until the light outside had faded and Claire and my mother came into the room to ask me what I was doing sitting there in the dark.

It was agreed that Dave would now teach both of us, separately. Claire, who was rather put out by this development, insisted on going first and I waited nervously outside until it was my turn. Finally called in, I stood around while she gathered up her things. Dave was telling her that she had done well. As he spoke, my eyes were drawn to one of his legs which was

showing what seemed to be a fresh rip at the knee. Following my line of sight, Dave noticed it too.

'Oh dear,' he said, holding his leg up off the ground so he could inspect the tear. 'I think my jeans are going home.'

I looked back at Claire who had made it to the door. She smirked and hurried away.

Left alone with him, I sat across from Dave, closer to him than I had been before. His guitar rested snugly on his thigh, stray wires sprouting from its head. I noticed that he exuded a peculiar male smell which I would detect in certain other men throughout my life, a sort of musk, which contains cigarette smoke and aftershave along with some other essence I can never quite identify.

I balanced the nylon-stringed classical insecurely on my own leg.

'So, Pete. It is Pete, isn't it? Tell me a bit about yourself. What's made you decide to learn the guitar?'

'I don't know really. I suppose that one day I might want to be in a group,' I offered.

'Good answer!' said Dave.

'You were in a band, weren't you?' I asked, shyly.

'Ha! Yes, I was indeed,' he said. 'A long time ago now, though.' The fingers of his left hand bounced gently on the strings as we talked.

'And what sort of music do you listen to, Pete?'

'Sort of indie music,' I said. 'And some punk bands.'

Dave nodded encouragingly but said nothing, so I went on. 'Like The Stranglers and The Jam. I really like The Smiths. The Jesus and Mary Chain. And Creation Records. They're a new label.'

Dave continued to nod without giving any indication of whether he approved of the groups that I had listed or had even heard of them. Then his expression became more serious.

'There's one thing I need to warn you about, Pete,' he said. 'When you start learning the guitar, it will change things. You'll never be able to listen

to music the same way again.'

I smiled blankly, realising that Dave was attempting to impart an important piece of knowledge, without quite understanding what it was.

'I promise you. You'll see what I mean when we get going.'

'Ok,' I said.

He did not elaborate further.

'I thought we'd start with some basics,' he said.

I would puzzle over Dave's statement in the coming months. In time, I came to understand that he meant that my ear would start to separate out the different instruments being played on the records I listened to, and that I would notice the way they were arranged. And indeed, I did start to do this, to some extent. But it is also true to say that I would never completely lose my habit of hearing music as an undivided totality, only really apprehending the main melody line of recorded songs, and only dimly noting the other constituent parts.

However, I proved a diligent student, more so than Claire who began to lose interest in her new hobby, perhaps resenting the way I had shouldered in on it. I started to hog the guitar in the evenings. I found that I was adept at fingerpicking and was soon able to perform, with only the occasional mistake, a simple classical piece called 'Romanza', which to my ears sounded wonderfully evocative as I played it, and more complex than it really was. Dave said that I had a good feel for the instrument.

Quite early on, I managed to convey to Dave my desire to learn to play pop music. He was receptive. He showed me some chords and taught me a few simple busking numbers. He also offered advice about buying an electric guitar and gave me one of his plectrums. One night, as I strummed 'Streets of London' in my bedroom with increasing confidence, I was struck by the simplicity of what I was doing, and amazed at how such an apparently famous song (even if it was one that I didn't much care for) could be built on such flimsy foundations that even a beginner could

recreate it: six strings stretched taut over a hole, one hand brushing them, the other pressing some of them down.

During a pause in a lesson, I brought up the subject of The Strawbs again. 'What was it like being in a famous band, then?' I asked.

Dave regarded me with amusement. 'Well, I wouldn't say we were famous. We enjoyed a bit of success.' He leant down to pick up the mug of tea my mother had left and sipped it.

'Did you ever play Top of the Pops?'

Dave placed the mug back on the floor but didn't reply immediately, as if he was trying to remember. 'We did, yes. A few times, actually,' he said, at length.

'That must have been good,' I said, blandly.

'There was a lot of waiting around,' he said.

When I said nothing, he continued. 'That's what it's like being in a band, really. A lot of waiting around. At airports. In changing rooms. In studios. It's quite boring, really.'

I couldn't think of anything to say. Of course, waiting around in airports and studios sounded very glamorous to me.

'I can see you don't believe me.'

'Well, some of it must have been fun,' I said.

'Oh, of course,' he said, 'I'm not saying it wasn't.'

He was silent again and it occurred to me that I might have upset him somehow.

'I suppose what I'm trying to say is that it's hard work,' he said, eventually. 'Being in a successful band is bloody hard work. People don't always seem to understand that. They think it's all parties and girls.'

I blushed slightly but nodded to show that I was listening.

'The thing is, if you're really serious, you have to study it,' he said. Then he smiled. 'Sorry.'

'No, that's ok. It's interesting,' I said.

'I'm not trying to put you off,' he said. He looked down at his guitar and strummed a minor chord slowly, so that each string rang out.

'But isn't it more important to be inspired or have something to say?' I asked, tentatively.

'How do you mean.'

'Well, apparently some of the punk bands formed straight away after seeing the Sex Pistols and they'd never played a note before.'

Dave didn't reply but raised his eyebrows as if to concede that I may have a point.

'They taught themselves to play and that's why their music doesn't sound like anything else,' I went on.

Dave was thoughtful again. He spoke softly, reasonably. 'Well, maybe these guys you're talking about have come up with something good,' he said. 'I'm sure it is good. But if you want to make serious music, music that will stand the test of time and still be listened to in twenty, thirty years' time, you need to have a foundation.'

He looked around and gestured at the notepad where he'd written down for me the details of what we'd been learning. 'Like the song we're doing today. These chords. They're the basis of rock 'n' roll.'

We'd been learning a song by Status Quo, a sort of good time band who wore denim and were always in the charts. It was called 'Caroline'. I was finding the technique, which involved pressing down four or five strings with my forefinger, and then intermittently touching one of them further up the fretboard with my ring finger, hard to master. The strings made a buzzing sound when I tried to do it. Also, I didn't really like the song.

'Do you listen to the blues, Pete?'

'No, not really.'

'You should. It's the root of everything,' he said. 'If you really want to understand music, you've got to listen to the blues.'

'Ok,' I said, 'I will.'

I didn't listen to the blues. But as Dave had predicted, I was starting to hear music a little differently now. The band I liked called Joy Division, for example. I had already spent many hours in my bedroom listening to their dark and gloomy first album, 'Unknown Pleasures', but now I was beginning to notice new things about it. That chiming guitar in the first song, for example. Could it really be only two notes? Yes, I was pretty certain it was. And the sonorous bass line which began another favourite track turned out to be a simple, descending sequence which I could easily reproduce on the bottom string of my own guitar.

It was around this time that it first occurred to me that writing songs might be within my reach. My motives for learning the guitar had been that I was going to play in a band at some indefinable point in the future. I could picture myself onstage and often pretended I was, alone in my bedroom, miming along to records in the time-honoured way, feeling both foolish and exhilarated as I did so. And although I would sometimes 'sing', I would usually be the guitarist, strumming my pocket.

But until now I had not seriously considered the question of creativity. As I had said to Dave, the punk and indie bands that I revered so much, and the journalists who wrote about them, were quite clear that lack of musical proficiency should not be a barrier to making great pop music. I had absorbed all this and thoroughly believed it, but I had not necessarily applied the insight to myself yet. I was still unsure how to start.

One day when I returned home after school, I spotted Dave standing outside the farmhouse, leaning on his Imp. He was smoking a cigarette and watching a tractor tip its load into a container. As I approached, he looked up. I waved and he nodded.

I stopped alongside him.

'I'm a bit early,' he shouted above the noise, holding up his cigarette.

We both stared at the farmyard. There was a barn and two silos where corn was kept. An oval patch of grass in the middle of the yard

acted as a roundabout.

The tractor finished tipping and the noise of the engine suddenly cut out. We watched the driver get out of the cab. He ignored us.

'Enjoying the scenery?' I said, to fill the silence.

Dave regarded me briefly and exhaled a lungful of smoke which smelt wonderful to my teenage senses. 'Must be nice living here, Pete.'

'Yes, I suppose so. It's miles from anywhere though.' Recently the impossibility of ever attending a gig in London had dawned on me.

'Do you think you'll be a farmer yourself?' he asked, gesturing towards the tractor driver who was climbing back into his cab.

'God, no,' I said with feeling. 'I mean, I want to go to university in London.'

He laughed. 'There's something to be said for the countryside,' he said. 'Far from the madding crowd. You'll appreciate it as you get older.'

The driver restarted the engine and pulled away in a cloud of dust. Dave took a final drag on his cigarette and flung it across the yard with a force that surprised me.

The noise receded. Dave continued to stare at the spot where the tractor had been and we were silent again. It occurred to me that now might be the time to share an idea I had been hatching. I felt nervous about suggesting it and had chickened out the week before.

'Dave?'

'Yes?'

'I don't suppose that if I played you a record I liked, you'd be able to work it out and teach me how to play it?'

'Sure, I could do that.'

'Great. Maybe we could do it next week?'

'Ok.'

Dave patted his jacket pockets and took out his crumpled pack of cigarettes. He nodded towards the door. 'I'll see you in a few minutes.'

The following week, I brought to the lesson my radio-cassette player, a recent birthday present, which consisted of a chunky plastic central unit with a handle and two detachable speakers. Looking around for somewhere to put it, I eventually opted for the hearth and plugged it in.

'Are you ready, then?' I asked.

'Go for it,' he said.

I released the pause button and sat back on the edge of my chair; we both stared at the player. At first, nothing happened. I glanced at Dave and he smiled back at me briefly before resuming concentration on the inert and silent box. Then, just as I was about to check that the volume was turned up, a brief bump of static noise and a familiar crepitation, the sound of a stylus landing on vinyl, signalled the beginning of the music.

A thick and resonating note struck on the string of a distorted electric guitar was allowed to hang for a few moments. It was then superseded by a sort of melodic riff, played and repeated on the same instrument. There was another brief pause. Finally, some roughly strummed chords, soon underpinned by a rudimentary drumbeat, launched the song into its first verse and the music became, to me, a chaotic and rumbling roar from which I could no longer discern any details at all except the hoarse and shouted voice of the singer. It was a punk record I had recently borrowed and taped from my friend, Steve: 'Alternative Ulster' by Stiff Little Fingers.

At first, I was unable to look at Dave. As we listened, I felt a mixture of excitement and embarrassment. I desperately wanted him to like the song as much as I did.

I snuck a look over at him. He remained poised over his guitar, entirely still and impassive and, for a moment, the thought crossed my mind that he might have fallen asleep. But then I saw his left hand twitch slightly. It began to move in an exploratory way, cautiously up and down the fretboard. His fingers paused to rest on individual strings before wandering on. Gradually, they started to form themselves into chord shapes, folding and unfolding tentatively. All the time, Dave continued to

stare at the source of the music as if in a trance. Now, his right hand joined in. It made scratchy interventions which quickly became more rhythmic. And then suddenly, in the song's middle eight, Dave was, miraculously and thrillingly, strumming along.

And so it was that our lessons would now begin with Dave carefully listening to whatever cheaply recorded indie song I was enamoured of at that time. The first Primal Scream single. 'Painted Word' by The Television Personalities. The Loft. A more tricky song by The Smiths. Dave showed me how to play them all.

Dave accepted the new format of the lessons with equanimity. Perhaps he had found the regular ones rather boring. Sometimes he would chuckle to himself about a particular flourish but he never expressed an opinion about the music. Only the song by The Smiths seemed to interest him and he took longer than usual to solve it.

This went on for weeks rather than months, but it was an intense and productive time for me. I gave much thought to the choice of song to bring to the lessons. I quickly realised that I could work out the music of some bands, The Buzzcocks, for example, myself. Their songs used barre chords which were the same shape simply shifted up and down the fretboard. By first finding the right starting chord and then following the rise and fall of the bass line I was able, by a process of elimination, to discover which one came next.

But other tracks, especially those that departed from basic strumming and included jangly motifs or fingerpicking, were less straightforward and harder to figure. It was these I brought to Dave. I did not always completely master their playing once he had showed them to me. Rather, I approached them as a puzzle that once revealed meant I was ready to move on to another.

Sometimes, when I was practising, I would turn off the tape recorder and simply play two chords that I liked over and over again, until the

change between them became almost seamless. As I did this, vague feelings and emotions would arise within me, suggested by the music. And I would start to murmur words over the top, melodically. These would be nonsensical phrases, not even proper words, and would imitate the style of singers that I liked, but the tentative melodies, which seemed to sit naturally over the chords, appeared to come out of the air, or rather from somewhere inside me, already mysteriously formed, like a long forgotten memory I was unearthing. Often, these little tunes would come back to me during the day, in a lesson at school or on the bus back home, and I would be able to return to them later in my room. Thus, I began to write my own songs.

In 1973, Dave appeared on *Top of The Pops*. You can watch it on YouTube. The band wore spangled jackets and the audience danced and cheered. He looked handsome and happy. At that moment, the future must have appeared quite certain. New albums, perhaps other hits, and more critical acclaim lay ahead. And yet, within three or four years, he would be a cultural laughing stock.

At first, he was sure that the new music was nothing more than a fad. The world would soon come back round to his way of thinking. He and the rest of The Strawbs even attended a punk concert, dressed down a little, standing at the back, nursing their beers. They saw nothing to fear. A lot of energy but no substance. Wasn't Twickenham in the sixties a bit like this?

There was a nasty, unpleasant vibe, though. Towards the end of the evening a girl threw a drink over Dave's jacket. Words were exchanged. The situation was diffused but they left quickly. Later, back at his flat, Dave felt depressed. Everything he valued – community, gentleness, the earning and bestowing of respect – was being trashed.

His record label signed up some of the new bands. Their records were played on the radio along with another form of music that Dave didn't

like, disco. The Strawbs began to be viewed as old hat. They had difficulty getting the ear of the company people who two years ago had given them their undivided attention. The music papers were snide and derisory about their new album when it eventually came out. By 1978, the writing was on the wall for Dave and his band.

Still he was unperturbed. The Strawbs split but Dave had a new project. The guys he was playing with now were a bit younger but they were really into it and they respected him. He felt that his songwriting was better than ever. They played a few small gigs to some diehard fans. He was optimistic about the coming decade.

It wasn't to be. Punk was over but now there was another confusing development: synthesizers. Records sounded computerised and sterile. The essence of the music that Dave so loved, which was organic, and was connected to the past through the physicality of its playing, was missing. It sounded all wrong to Dave's ears.

But it wasn't just that; it was the general attitude he sensed around him. It was as if all the kindness and optimism of those early years had gone. Some of Dave's contemporaries had jumped ship, as he saw it. Incorporated the new sounds and reinvented themselves with some success. He regarded them with disappointment. He moved out of London to Kent with what money he had left.

When Dave told me, at our first meeting, that I would start to hear music differently, I believe that he meant something more than simply that I would be able to distinguish different instruments. He was, I can see now, suggesting that, as I became more proficient on the guitar, I would begin to see things as he did. I would learn to value craft and musicianship. I would start to appreciate and choose the type of music he made, above the punk and indie bands I said I liked.

Instead, I made him hunch over my tape recorder every week figuring out how to play songs he must have hated and found insultingly basic. Like a Chinese professor of literature forced to recite passages from Mao's

little red book, or to sweep the school room floor, it strikes me now that my guitar lessons with Dave may have been a personal and professional low for him in a way that I could never have imagined at the time.

I was oblivious to all this, of course. The lessons petered out after a while. Claire decided she didn't want to play any longer and perhaps it was not worth Dave's while to travel over to our house for only half an hour. I wasn't too bothered. I felt as if I'd learned all I needed to. I knew a few chords; I could strum and pick. Most importantly, I had acquired some knowledge of how music was put together, a glimpse of the secret structure of things. It seemed to me that even the most evocative songs were, at root, quite simple. The creative impulse within me was suddenly irresistible.

I kept Dave's plectrum and took it with me when I moved up to London. It was made of marbled brown plastic. Although I was no fan of The Strawbs, it had a sort of talismanic property, a link to the world of musical success and fame that I increasingly aspired to. It was also a useful anecdote. By now, I had begun to grasp something of the irony of making Dave teach me those songs. But the story never quite hit the right note. Part of the problem was that The Strawbs were, by this time, so obscure that no-one could remember them at all. And anyway, I soon learned that plectrums come and go and Dave would have possessed hundreds. Eventually, I lost the plectrum and with it, for a few years at least, my memory of him.

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