



**CITY**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON  
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# City Voice

**Anthology 2020**

**MA Creative Writing & Publishing  
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# Introduction

To the bravest writers I have ever had the pleasure of mentoring.

I say this because Covid happened to you in the second term of your degree. I remember telling you at the beginning of the course writing was tough. I remember telling you writing was a solitary profession, but I don't remember telling you how to survive being a writer during a global pandemic. That didn't come up.

"And when the plague comes..." Shakespeare might have told you but I am not Shakespeare. In the end you didn't need to be told. You showed *me* how to survive a pandemic.

You won short story prizes, you created websites, you got jobs, you invested further in your writing and your education.

At the end of your MA every CWP student produced a memorable and creative work of fiction as evidenced in this anthology. At the exam board Patrick and I felt a surge of pride. Every one of you met your deadline. You were writers. It was a joy to read your work and if it wasn't illegal I'd have hugged everyone of you.

I am wishing all of you the best in life. I want to thank you for your hard work, for your courage, and I want to thank you for these wonderful stories.

Lisa O'Donnell  
May 2021

# Ahgia Marisa Washington



Marisa hails from Chicago, Illinois and has made her way across the pond to London after listening to The Beatles once. Earning a BA in English Literature, Film Studies, and Urban Studies from Manhattan College in the lovely Bronx, New York, she immediately continued on to a master's in Creative Writing and Publishing at City, University of London. Her passion has always been writing and film. She is heavily influenced by her older sister, Maya. The first novel that had a tremendous impact on her life was *Fahrenheit 451*.

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## My genres

Romance, speculative fantasy, melodrama.

*A young man who takes the same train route to work every day, but the only thing not often in his schedule is the frequent appearance of a young woman. He has seen her before and often wonders what she is like based on what she carries in her tote bag or is reading. While imagining a life with her, he must first muster up the courage to talk to her before it's too late...*

## *Short story*

# 8:34 AM

Her legs are crossed and she's reading the same book I saw her with last week. It's called *Go with the Flow* and from a quick Wikipedia search that I did, I know that it's an autobiography about Edie Jones, the youngest Black female to swim across the Atlantic Ocean. *Go with the Flow* is 458 pages, I discovered after buying the book online, and although the lighting on the train keeps flickering, I can see that she is towards the end of the book. Her hair curtains around her face and I watch as she tucks some of it behind her left ear. It has six piercings in it and the right has four.

I pull down on my navy dress pants and feel a flood of regret vibrating through my entire body. My decision to wear this ugly ass green tie today was definitely a mistake. I knew that I would see her again. When I looked in my drawer this morning, five ties mixed in with some boxers and socks, I thought to myself, *hm this tie matches her eyes*. Though, after almost stepping in dog shit, nearly bumping into a man yelling at himself, and nearly missing the train; I sit here, staring at her, when it hits me. Her eyes are the shade of olives. They're what stands out on her heart shaped face and above her pierced button nose.

I hate having to take the train almost every day for work. I miss my car. I miss the control that I had with it and being able to go wherever I wanted, whenever I wanted. Taking the train means being on other people's time. If they're late, then so am I, and lateness was never an attractive quality to me. As of lately, I've been more interested in taking the train. In fact, I'm starting to love it. I have to hide my smile every time I swipe my card at the turnstile, and when I'm standing at the platform waiting for the next train. The last few weeks and today are different than all of the other times.

She laughs at a sentence that she just read, and I wonder if it's the part in which Edie talked about her embarrassing experience with skinny dipping or when she described the process of how she would relieve herself in the ocean: "*When there's nowhere else but the Atlantic...*" Or maybe she's reading the part when Edie talked about how she missed being at home with her family, how the ocean made her feel at peace yet so alone. It's not particularly a funny part, but maybe this woman has a dark taste in humour. Either way, I find the way she laughs, refreshing. She doesn't care about being that one weird person that laughs too loudly in public. She turns the page with a chipped black nail and sighs. I even love the way she sighs. She fills her mouth with air, holds it in for approximately 3 seconds and lets it out. Like a swimmer.

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The first time I saw her, about two weeks ago, was through the closed doors of the train. She had just missed it and stood outside them with a frown on her face. She slammed a small fist against the doors, and as if they could retaliate, they opened again. She jumped inside with a grin on her face as if to say *take that* and took a seat across from me. She popped her wireless headphones over her ears and shut out the rest of the world.

I was on my way to work, an accounting office I was hired at just two months ago. I didn't talk to anyone there unless I had to, and my co-workers returned the gesture. I've only been living in New York for a few years. The loud, busy streets were nothing like the middle-of-nowhere, rural roads of Kansas. Back home, everyone knew each other and there was no such thing as being a "nobody". I could never be invisible, because everyone saw and judged me. Now, I am in a place where I can exist without anyone ever seeing me. I would never try to flirt with this



beautiful woman in front of me then. Things are too different here. Though I still couldn't help myself.

I kept glancing between her and my phone, as I read an article about the upcoming election. I noticed that she was one of those types of people that didn't like to make eye contact with other riders. She kept her headphones in and her head down. She only glanced up a few times to peer over someone's shoulder to look outside the window across the aisle. She didn't care about what was happening around her, while I sat there, caring a little too much about her and what was happening in the present. Some time passed and I had to get off at my stop. I looked through the train's windows as they passed and saw her head bobbing to the music playing in her ears. I still wonder what she was listening to.

I saw her again three days later. She made it on time. Her hair was pulled up in a high bun and I could tell her neck was long despite the copious amount of necklaces and chains she wore. This was when I saw her with *Go with the Flow* and wondered if she got headaches from reading on a moving train. There was a pregnant woman sitting next to her, gently pushing back and forth a stroller with a toddler inside. The toddler's hand was reaching out towards her and I saw her smile. The pregnant woman whispered something to her and giggled. This prompted her to lean inside the stroller and grasp onto the toddler's hand. I watched as she communicated with the baby without even speaking. It was as if they were teleporting messages to each other. The pregnant woman said goodbye to her and left the train when it arrived at her stop. The woman across from me continued to read her book that she had briefly bookmarked.

Between trying to figure out what the book was about and absently reading tweets on my phone, I thought about what type of person this woman might be. She looked young and cool, the type to go to every protest and help people come up with a funny, yet bold pun for their cardboard sign. The type to own a French press coffee maker. The type to ironically get a tattoo. The type to get chronic hangovers. The type that I could see myself falling for. If only I would just talk to her.

Luckily, she didn't look like the other girls in Kansas. I'm sure she didn't act like them either. I'm sure she used social media to spread awareness and occasionally post a sarcastic, melodramatic tweet about how liking a "certain terrible song" has determined that she, along with others, are the

scum of the earth. Of course, I didn't know if this was true or not, but I sure hoped so. More than that, she was the opposite of the last girl that I dated. My longest relationship, that shouldn't have gone on for as long as it did. I feel as though I could finally use the voice that I have kept shut in my throat for so long. The voice that is hoarse whenever I do use it. I could talk to this woman and we could have a conversation that was enjoyable for the both of us. I could take her to a restaurant, hold her hand, make corny jokes, and finally tell her all of the things I have wanted for all of these days.

At that point, I would see her only on Mondays and Thursdays and I figured those were the days that she worked at her office. Or the days that she taught yoga. Or the days that she saw her therapist. Was she the type to go visit a therapist? Either way, she would travel for a while to get to wherever she was going. On one particular Monday, I stayed on the train to see what stop she got off at. I pretended to find the articles on my phone more interesting than they already were. Just the same old boring tweets about what this celebrity wore, and what that politician said. Luckily, I didn't have to pretend for too long because she got off at the stop after my usual one. I got off along with her, I'm sure she noticed and thought I missed my stop, hopefully not thinking that I was following her. I was still too nervous and already late for work, to follow after her, so I let her go as she walked down the stairs of the platform to the street.

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After watching her for nearly two weeks, I sit here and try to muster up the courage to cross over to her side of the train car and introduce myself. I would ask her, *who are you?* She sits across from me every Monday and Thursday and doesn't notice me. Did she see that I wore a tie today that resembles the colour of her eyes? Does she know that she's the only person that I think about, when I close my eyes at night and when I open them back up in the morning? Does she know that I've stopped hating my new life in New York? Does she know that this is all because of her? *Notice me, I think, please notice me.*

I glance at her and notice that she is already looking at me. This is the first time her beautiful olive shaded eyes have intentionally laid on me. It makes me wonder if I accidentally said anything aloud. If not, then I swear

she has more powers than I thought she did. She dog-ears the page she is reading in her book and smirks at me. I smile back and she looks away to put her book back in her tote bag. The loss of connection does not rest easy on my faint heart. I tell myself to keep breathing. I feel smaller than my five foot eleven frame and have a slight shiver of unease.

I snap out of my hypnosis and finally introduce myself to her and ask her my long-awaited question.

"I'm Rose," she says with a smile. My heart stops.

*Rose.* Beautiful, intricate, wild, and rare.

She crosses over and sits in the empty space next to me.

"I don't know you, but I've seen you on the train. First car. Every Monday and Thursday. You get off at the stop *before* mine..." she adds with a chuckle, "except for that one day."

"Yes. You're right," I tell her.

"I can't believe we're only just now talking to each other," she tells me this, though in my head, I have had this conversation many times before.

We are close to arriving at our destination and I can't help the wide smile I have on my face. The same smile that has been stitched to my face since the day I saw her. She asks if I mind going for a coffee later and offers me her number. I hand her my phone, glancing at the time it shows.

8:34 AM on the 4th of April. My life has changed.

My phone is handed back to me and our hands touch as the train rumbles uncontrollably. The last thing I see before it all goes black, is the smile on Rose's face.

# Anastasia Chatzidima



Anastasia is an aspiring writer from Athens, Greece. Born into a military family, she has already lived in four different countries, with her most recent home, London. A true fanatic of travel and exploration, she loves to blend her experiences of other cultures with her own. She enjoys experimenting in various forms of storytelling and has recently published a poem called “Home” in *The Bard* Literary Magazine. Her writing genres include fantasy, contemporary fiction and science fiction, tangling with themes of family, societal alienation and searching for identity. Her friends call her Stacy.

Inspired by works such as *His Dark Materials*, *Lord of the Rings* and *The Inheritance Cycle*, she wishes to appeal to young adults with her first fantasy novel series, *Breaking the Cycle*.

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## My genres

Fantasy, contemporary fiction, science fiction.

*The world of Lithia was healing. The conquered Onthropo race was finally integrating with Lithians, a race mystical and strange that existed for eons across the world. Eneida grew up as an orphan in the northern parts of Tan'hee, the land of Onthropo, and had a difficult childhood. Why? Because her eyes were cursed to witness how people die. As a young woman, she travels as a luthier to try and discover her identity. When her only friend sends her a letter with shocking news, she decides she must return to Wark, the town closest to the orphanage she grew up in.*

*Novel extract*

# Butchered Lady in the Dungeon

## Chapter One

I let myself be showed into Wark by wanderers. People who sought the enchantment of Lithian festivals with all the strange and unfamiliar that came with them. I stepped on the traces of peculiar sandals and entertained myself by watching their long garments dance with the wind. Seven years had passed since I had last seen this town's mountainous, earthy houses.

In those years of absence, nothing in Wark had really changed. With carefully planted glances, the only true changes I witnessed were the once young faces who had grown and wrinkled. Faces replaced by similar, younger versions.

Baked, meat pastries filled the air with a gamey smell. The colourful

clothing of the people illuminated the grey and brown stalls of the market, like sparks of a fire fluttering in the sky. To the sound of the lute and the rare drum, my chest felt heavy.

I paced through the crowd not sure if anyone will recognise me. With such chaos, sliding between people was easy. I was, for once, grateful that humans had adopted Lithian customs. Nonetheless, to be safe, I kept my eyes pointed on the dirt, looking around only to orient myself. There was something in the air, as if eyes were nailed on me from the moment I entered the market. I was used to attracting attention, but this time felt eerie and impossible to escape.

A small girl, tied to her mother's hand, noticed me. To the sight of my eyes, she gasped and pointed towards me, yanking her mother's hand. She gawked, as if she was seeing a rare creature. Before her mother could turn her attention on me, I fled, waking up from my slumber. I had not the luxury of dwelling in nostalgia. I scattered between the people like a spark leaving its torch to reach the dark sky.

The wide path of the market led to the largest tavern in Wark, Hik's Hog, my destination. On the rare occasion we were allowed to travel to Wark, my friend used to say that Hik loved butchering pigs a little too much. I never visited the tavern long enough to find out if that were true.

It was that friend I intended to meet. Nana. A once fearless, spunky girl with red pigtails and a love for song. My only letter recipient these past years. Though rare, those letters helped more as a way of keeping track of my life. Probably knowing that, she never wrote back.

Until recently.

*When I spotted him at the clearing, I thought time had gone back to when I first met you.*

Nana's words echoed in my head as I pushed the wooden door and entered the tavern. The smell of charred meat and dry ale made my nose twitch. A gigantic room spread in front of me with tables covering the entirety of the grey stone floor. That night, every table was full all the way to the far end.

Not knowing what Nana looked like after so many years, I searched for her curly red pigtails. It was difficult to search for her while also being cut off by servers holding jugs of ale and beer. The gentle sound of the lute sounded and drew all attention to a tiny space close to the bar, dedicated

to bards. And there she stood.

*He was quiet, still as a doll, even as I approached him.*

Her pigtails had transformed to fiery waves, washing her all the way down to her waist. It was all untamed but for a gold barrette, with emerald stones, pushing the waves safely behind her left ear. I reached the far end of the tavern, and leaned against the mouldy, stone wall when she started singing.

The thin voice of the girl who sang in the orphanage's cellar had been remade. Now velvety and powerful, her sound pervaded the stuffed air. The little girl who used to splash her way across the cold river, in search of snowy pebbles, danced rhythmically upon the grey stones. Whether drunk or sane, people cheered and accompanied her performance with thumps on the tables.

He did not have eyes like yours, but something about his skin...

"What is wrong with her?"

"Black eyes?"

"Do you reckon she's Lithian? They have weird eyes, don't they?"

"Never seen one this north before."

Whispers. My eternal company. I rolled my eyes and turned my head away from them. No human in Wark had ever seen a Lithian. The few that resided in Tan'hee stayed within the capital, their aim to achieve a full immersion of the Onthropo race to Lithian ways. That is what a forty-year-long war and utter defeat had brought. Having been raised as Onthropian, I thought answers about my nature lay with the Lithians. I had almost reached the capital when Nana's letter had reached me.

By sheer luck, a man began puking his way to the entrance. Stinky vomit or more whispers about my eyes? It wasn't hard to choose. I followed his reeking path and reached the door once again. After mere moments, the music stopped, and Nana was showered with breadcrumbs and wilted flower petals. She searched the crowd wearing a bright smile and I lifted the object she was looking for.

A glossy river pebble, whiter than snow.

Suddenly, I was there in the middle of a vast, green valley. The wind blew ruthlessly making me shiver. Seagulls sang around me, and the wind tasted like salt. Across the valley, a horizon. Waves splashing. I walked towards their monotonous sound, tasting the fresh air, each breath leaving me

hungry for more.

There loomed a steep cliff. Worn by the water, the rocks underneath were smooth and deadly. Lulled from the waves, all I needed to meet the foamy waters was one more step.

A hand seized mine.

“What are you doing?”

Nana’s voice rang so clearly in my ears. Crystal clear. For a while, Nana was a beautiful sound to me. My association of her as a person, with a body and a face, came much later. I turned slowly out of curiosity. Hints of her scarlet curls and a splatter of freckles surrounded me. But, as if an infant unknowing, I gazed deep within her green-flecked eyes.

Immediately, she melted from my view. Everything around me merged with the world being washed away and with new colours being dipped in it.

*Within a mouldy dungeon, a woman sat up on the stone floor leaning against an ugly iron chair. Her brown tunic was torn and its rips revealed her torso’s deep gashes. Her hands were bruised from the tightness and weight of their chains. Her legs spread forward, surrendered. My insides twisted and I knew that my utmost effort not to vomit at the sight would fail. Yet when I hunched over, nothing came out of me.*

*The girl’s head was leaning backwards, resting on the surface of the chair. Her face was bludgeoned and swollen. Her dislocated jaw bore slashed lips and patches of dry blood. What had been most gruesome was her missing right eye, which laid, partly squashed, right next to her left leg. The air reeked of mud, and ceaseless waterdrops fell on the dirt one after the other.*

*My skin crawled at the sound of coarse laughter. The shivers on my spine overwhelmed me as I spotted a figure take shape behind the iron chair. Clothed in black, its long hands bore talons that stretched to my direction. Holding my breath, I clenched my fists only to discover an iron ring, firmly placed on my index finger. Before the darkness-wrapped figure began to move closer, I glimpsed at the woman and her oily hair whose waves fell soulless around her like remnants of a wildfire.*

When I came to, I was still screaming my lungs out, bruising Nana’s hand within my clutch. Without being able to realise the minutes passing, Nana escaped and with a last scream, I caught a glimpse of her head disappearing into the forest. Panting, I could feel something within me had changed, and I thought my chest would explode. It took an eternity to



breathe through it. Focusing on the edge of the forest, my eyes relished in the sun blended within the trees and the wind quietly brushed my face. One breath and then another, I eventually calmed down.

I shivered once again by the cold touch of the iron ring still placed on my finger. I stood and trailed on the footsteps of Nana, heading towards the orphanage.

Nana had always been overly expressive.

She hugged me tightly for some time, while babbling about how she couldn't believe I was in Wark. Buried in the forest of her hair, I waited for her to calm down. We had created a hazy atmosphere of excitement and sadness, and when we finally separated, everyone in the tavern was staring. We stepped out, breathed the fresh air, and we decided to head up to the northern part of Wark. To the most prominent hill, which was at that time deserted, where the Five Guilds overlooked the entire town.

On the way, she avoided talking. I did not enjoy conversing amidst crowds and she remembered. A lot of townsfolk greeted her, and a couple of children came close to give her flowers. While Nana glowed like a rare, volcanic gem, I formed behind her an obsidian shadow. Further and further from the colourful crowd, appeared the hill, and it slowly grew upon us as we climbed it in silence.

"Your eyes are still mesmerising!" said Nana, having sat on the grass. Away from the red torches, she appeared less fiery and more like a wisp. Muted by the moonlit streams, her red hair turned into a deep, wine colour. She sat there like a dark red rose, stumbled upon a nocturnal walk in the forest.

I gave her a soft smile, trying to be friendly. Nana always felt more comfortable around me if I softly smiled at her. I had gotten good at reading others over the last two years.

"Your voice, it's powerful now."

"A praise? Seven years away and you can praise people now," she said, punching me playfully in the arm and giggling. She noticed the bump my harp created underneath my cloak.

"Do you still play?"

"Yes, it still helps."

"Happy to hear that."

We let silence fill our minds with memories of the past. But the silence

also brought forth a strangeness, as if we were both shells of what we used to be. I felt Nana's eyes on me and saw her hand tremble. She was nervous.

"Are they treating you well? In the Guild?" We were never girls that talked a lot, even before I left Wark for my journey. I didn't know how to help her feel comfortable to tell me about the letter.

"Oh yes!" she said, taking in a big breath, "Alan, the Guild Meister, is determined to make me the best bard in Tan'hee. He had me learning to play the lute, the harp, anything I could get my hands on, really. It proved difficult but I am proficient now."

"Maybe we could play together sometime," I suggested, knowing too well I hadn't touched my harp in over two years.

"That would be lovely," murmured Nana, her voice soft and distant. Her trail of thought felt dishevelled. I tried to look up as far as I could. Her smile disappeared. I shed mine as well.

"Tell me about what happened," I asked firmly.

Nana sighed and looked away from me and towards the forest that spread behind the enormous buildings of the Guilds. I knew at which direction her eyes were pointed. Far away and on the other side of the mountain, there was our old home, the orphanage.

"I go there from time to time. Not as much as I would like, but often enough. The Matron is kind and lets me stay over if I help care for the children. We play, we sing, I tell them about Wark and what I know of the world."

She scoffed. Nana used to dream of travelling far away from Tan'hee. Back then, however, people were still afraid since the war had only been over a few years. Travelling was usually done by the merchants. If you had no reason to leave, you were taught to stay still and safe, away from the unknown Lithians.

"In my last visit, we were all outside. The children had scattered across the clearing, and I sat against the entrance of the cellar, reading. I looked up for the briefest moment and there he was. Still quite far away, but lingering like a lost spirit. It shook me to my very core."

She faced me and without the faintest of hints, looked straight into my eyes.

"He looked lost and vacant, just like you did back then," she whispered.

Nana was the only person that looked straight into my eyes without

being afraid. No vision ever occurred twice. It didn't need to do either way; it still lived deep within my mind. I had never told Nana about what I had seen. Something within me forbade this conversation. She simply knew that when I gazed into people's eyes, it wasn't good for me. So, in order to prevent other children from doing it, she always avoided my eyes and let me avoid hers. Spotting her green flecks, shining gold in the night, I half expected to see her broken by that chair, in a mouldy dungeon.

"He didn't have your eyes. But he carried himself as you did when young. A strange, iridescent mole pattern covered half of his face and disappeared underneath his ragged shirt. It sparkled iridescent. He was half-naked, bruised, and bony..."

Nana paused as she hugged her torso, shaking.

"What happened after?" I urged her, not knowing what to feel. All I wished for was to learn as much as I could. Her lips parted slowly, and her eyes were watery. As if filled with horror and guilt, she avoided my look.

"I touched him. He started shouting and slapped my hand away. He fell on his knees and held his head tightly. He screamed my name, again and again. That is when the Matron ran outside with all three carers and he started banging his head on the ground, bleeding everywhere."

I nodded as her words trailed off. She felt guilty. A million thoughts must have rushed into her head after she had touched him. After our first meeting, her friendship with me did not bloom overnight. It took work and years before she could understand my behaviours. After all she had been through with me, she must have felt naïve of how she handled the boy.

"I'm sorry," she said finally.

"Don't fret over it, Nana. You couldn't have assumed he was like me."

I stood and she followed my example. The market shone like a makeshift sun, hypnotising me. I started heading back without really caring if Nana was coming after me.

"What are you planning to do?"

"I will head to the orphanage."

"Right now?" she asked, worried, "It is a two-day journey on foot. It's dangerous to leave at night."

I pondered over it. The idea of staying in Wark overnight, and on such important occasion, overwhelmed me. When you are a traveller, people murmur but keep their distance. The longer I stayed, the more chance I would be recognised by others who had not been as kind as Nana.

I offered an apologetic smile. She frowned in disapproval, determined to not give up.

“I can arrange passage with a merchant that will head up there tomorrow. That way you will arrive faster.”

One moment of hesitation on my side was enough for Nana to start making her way towards the market. I followed. I had been selfish to think of running away. Nana did not have long. She had already started to look like the butchered woman in the dungeon.

I owed her one night.

In the middle of the market road its square was steeped in festivity. A large, wooden stage had been built, decorated with vine leaves and colourful blossoms. On it, a small stool. People looked at nothing but the bard on the stage. If the ballads would be to their liking, they would fill the stage by throwing flowers or handkerchiefs. Later on, some would take it further and provide gifts to the Guild. Such supporters received all kinds of attention. Bards would later accompany them to the tavern of their choice or would take requests and sing once more.

Nana urged me to stay and enjoy the current performance while she headed back towards the tavern, to find the beforementioned merchant and to arrange my passage. It was then that I felt it once more. The entrapment within the gaze of an inescapable pair of eyes.

Trying to recollect my thoughts, I realised the feeling had never really gone away. But now, it was stronger than a gaze. A sensation resembling an aura slowly flowed to my direction. Not quite a person yet something that felt similar. I gasped for air, feeling I was truly being submerged underwater.

Everyone was still facing the stage. Between claps and cheers, I tried to focus on the source of it all. Dizziness overpowered me, and the aura became an intoxicating poison filling my mind and body.

A hand upon my shoulder and a sharp turn shook the world around me. Blond hair upon the wind, and a radiation of strength.

The world disappeared, and I was gone with it.



# Andrea Holck



Andrea Holck is a writer, teacher and researcher based in London. She comes from the Midwest of America, an area considered by the rest of the world to be “flyover country.” Like any good Midwesterner, she knows this is ridiculous, but would never tell you so to your face. Wouldn’t want to be unpleasant. Her writing has most appeared in *Popshot*, *Like the Wind*, and various online literary magazines. *Litro* magazine recently published her story, “The Lover,” which took second place in the 2020 Orwell Dystopian Fiction competition.

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## My genres

Lit fic, short story.

*"The Haircut" is one of twelve stories in the collection, Flyover. Flyover tells the stories of people in middle America.*

## *Short story*

# The Haircut

Annie strides through the door of the salon. "Hi!"

The receptionist turns her head away from the computer to assess Annie. Her hand rests on the mouse, one finger hovering, interrupted mid-click.

"I have an appointment with Luca?" Annie says.

"Name."

"Annie?"

"Time."

"Now?"

She squints at the screen. "Anne Louise Mitchell." She speaks in monotone.

"Well, yes," Annie says. "But I prefer Annie?"

"That's great, have a seat."

Poor thing. She must be so bored. Annie has always thought this about salon receptionists. She wonders if this one has ambitions of doing hair. Or saving up to go West to LA or East to New York. She herself dreamed about this once, years ago. Though she didn't really know why. Simple as somewhere different, she supposes. That's all. The receptionist isn't pretty enough for either city. Interesting geometry in her face, maybe. She might play a role in a sci-fi film.

"Have a seat," the receptionist repeats. Her eyes are large and outlined in rough navy blue pencil. It looks like crayon.

She isn't that pretty. Just young.

Annie smiles and sits. She reminds herself you're only as old as you feel.

She summons a youthful feeling, strokes her purple fingernails. She's soothed by the smooth, glossy feel of them. She feels fine.

The salon is one narrow L-shaped room, and from her seat in the corner, she can see every part of it. Along the long edge are three hydraulic-pump chairs and some metallic sinks for washing at the far-end. Beyond that is a door to a room Annie has never been inside, a room where the staff relax and store their personal items. It is from here that Luca now appears. Annie snatches up a magazine from the table and smooths the pages on her lap, slouching a bit and crossing her leg. Her legs do not drape one over the other as easily as they once did, but rather than uncross or adjust her position, Annie clenches her thighs together and tries to appear relaxed. The magazine is for men. Fashionable, edgy men. Men who have never appeared in this town. One model wears a thin collar with stumpy silver spikes. She flips the page. Nipple piercings. Little silver hoops with coloured beads and bars.

"Anne Louise?" *Luca*. That voice. That *accent*. She freezes, poised over the nipples, feels the ballooning behind her throat and chest, swallows. "Are you here for a cut or a piercing?" His voice is soft, so *sotto voce*.

"Ummmm..." she draws it out, high-pitched and playful, as though she just can't make up her mind. She knows the salon doesn't offer piercings. She knows he's flirting with her. "A cut." She snaps the magazine shut, tosses it on the table and smiles widely, showing all her teeth.

Luca waves for her to follow him. He's as slim a fifteen-year-old boy, his gold-brown hair, longish on top, is swept messily to one side. His dark blue shirt is buttoned all the way to the top, the sleeves rolled up neatly to the elbows.

Annie sits as he whips the black cape from behind like a toreador. He lifts her long hair to fasten the velcro tight at her nape. The cape drapes over the arms of the chair leaving her amorphous. He works the pedal with his foot. Their eyes meet in the mirror as she is pumped upwards little by little.

"So," he says. "What are we thinking today?" He runs his fingers through her hair, tousling it at the top. A shiver scurries up her spine.

"Annie," she says.

He tilts his head at her in the mirror.

"Annie," she says again. "Not Anne Louise." He's grown out his facial hair, trimmed it into a neat little strap from one ear to the other.



Luca looks puzzled. "Just a trim?"

"My name is Annie," she says again, laughing a little. "Remember?"

"Okay, yes. But you are Anne Louise? This is your appointment?"

"Yes, but please call me Annie."

"Yes, okay, you are Annie." He is nodding, as though he remembers.

Annie relaxes back into the chair. "So a trim?"

His skin does look nice with that dark strip of facial hair. Luca was never the kind of man to grow stubble a few hours after shaving, though she's always thought those men were the most attractive. He has lovely skin though. She can't imagine it ever gets blotchy or overly porous.

"Ma'am?"

Her hands clench the metallic armrests. For a moment, they make eye contact in the mirror. She squints at him, mole-like. She steadies, unclenches.

Breezy. "What do you think?"

"I think it looks quite good as it is," he says. "Yes, maybe just a trim" He holds up a section of hair between his second and third fingers. "Some split ends, but it seems fine, otherwise. Healthy."

Healthy. "I might want to change things up a bit, though, you know. Be a bit adventurous? What do you think of that?"

He pouts his lips. "Do you have a picture of what you want to do?"

"How about a wash to start off?" she says.

"Sure." He spins the chair around. "In the back."

"Yeah, I know," she says. The words come out snotty, but he is cool, doesn't raise an eyebrow. He leads her to the back of the salon. The sinks glitter in line.

The last time she saw him, he was clean-shaven and wore a salmon button-up, the top four buttons undone with nothing underneath but pure, clean skin stretched over bone.

She had come in for the same old service, a trim and that time, a colour to cover the few grays that had begun to sprout. They'd engaged in simple chit-chat, talked about the weather, of course. It was winter then. Annie told him winter just wasn't what it used to be. That she remembered snowbanks seven-feet tall on the edge of every parking lot. That driving down Hwy 35 at night, the whole countryside was blue-lit, everything covered in a thick layer of snow.

Luca had seen snow only in the mountains of Italy. He told her about winter in Rome. Rome, unbelievably, was his home town. Where the white-stone streets were washed clean nearly every day from the winter rains.

Annie had never met a Roman. She hadn't even considered such people still existed until she met Luca. To her, Romans were a part of history class and Hollywood movies about gladiators. People in white sheets and leather sandals. Of course, it made sense that a person from Rome would be called a Roman. It seemed silly that this information felt new. But even now, when she thought of Luca, her mind put him in a toga, a thick golden belt, a crimson cape. It put a sword in his hand.

The gush of the water. On the ceiling, a poster of a poinsettia. "Tell me if the temperature is okay," he says. The water is so tepid, she barely feels it, though the pressure is strong.

He rubs shampoo into her scalp. She closes her eyes. "So, what do you like most about doing hair?" she asks.

"Doing hair?"

"Yeah." She raises her eyebrows, looks at the part of the ceiling closest to him.

"I guess the art of it," he says. "I don't know. What do you like about your job?"

She suppresses a smile. "Oh, I can't really say."

"Ooh, mysterious." Yes, she is mysterious. His hands in her hair, the little circles, the suds. It smells like...

"What's that smell?" she says.

"Jasmine."

She's tried jasmine tea before, hates it. Too perfumy. "My sense of smell has really improved," she says after a brief period of silence.

"Oh?"

Last time, as soon as she'd sat down, he commented on her skin. He said her "complexion" was radiant. Immediately, she saw what he was talking about. She was rosier in the cheeks, and her eyes sparkled in the mirror. It must have been the cigarettes, dulling her natural gleam. She was thrilled he'd noticed such a subtle change. She told him she'd quit, two weeks before. He confessed that he, too, had been a smoker, that his partner had asked him to quit.

"I didn't want to do it," he'd explained. "I had just moved all the way here from Rome, and then I'm supposed to quit smoking too?" He'd laughed, his white teeth perfect.

"Why'd you do it?" she asked.

"For love," he'd said, and laughed again. "No, no. Not for love. For money. Cigarettes are too expensive here."

Annie wanted to know more about his partner, why they'd settled here instead of Rome. She didn't know why anyone would want to settle here. Maybe his partner didn't speak Italian. A safe bet, probably. She wondered if the resentment had yet mounted between them.

She gazes up at the poinsettia, focuses on his fingertips moving in slow circles from her temples, over and over. "Do you ever feel tempted?" she asks.

"Hm?"

"Tempted. You know. To have a cigarette." He isn't following.

"Remember, I quit?"

"Oh, congratulations!" he said. "That's marvellous news!" He claps his sudsy hands together a few times in applause. "I also quit, some time ago. I did it for love, you know." He whispers this close enough to her ear that she can feel his breath. His tone is conspiratorial. Annie is annoyed.

"No," she says straining her gaze upwards trying to see his face. "You did it for money, you said. Remember, it's too expensive?"

Luca says nothing.

"You did it for money," she says louder.

Gary didn't notice when she quit smoking. He had never smoked himself. He said, "A good Lutheran would never smoke," which was ridiculous. He made a joke about his body, the temple he filled with bacon every morning and beer every night. She'd removed the ashtrays from the house, hadn't even stored them away. She threw them in the garbage can right before she rolled it to the curb. She'd placed potpourri on the end tables in their place, little bowls of red and brown bark, cinnamon sticks and wheels of dried orange. "What's this?" he'd asked, picking up a piece and holding it to his nose.

"Don't eat that," she snapped.

Someone had told her to freeze grapes and eat them every time she

wanted a cigarette. She

sat crunching on them while they watched the nightly news, each in their own armchair.

“What’s that?” he’d asked.

“Frozen grapes,” she’d answered. He only nodded, his gaze on the screen unbroken. “They’re loud.”

Annie imagined launching one at the side of his fat head, but didn’t want him to think she was being playful. She thought of the ashtrays in the bin at the end of the driveway. The heavy one, the dark amber glass.

Luca and Annie again consider her appearance in the mirror. “You still feeling adventurous?”

“What?”

“You want to do something adventurous?”

“Oh, yes.” During the wash, she’d decided to go dark, something purple-y. Dyed hair required more maintenance, more frequent trips to the salon.

“Maybe something shorter?” he says.

She hasn’t thought of that. “I hadn’t thought of that,” she says. “But yes, maybe.” A short style would also require frequent upkeep.

“Maybe something a little angled, like this?” With his finger, he draws a line from high on the back of her neck down to her chin.

“Really? Do you think that jives with my personality?” She studies him. “Maybe I need to break out of my shell?”

“I don’t want to push, but I think something like this would complement your face shape, make you look younger, bring out your beautiful complexion.”

She looks at him in the mirror. He must remember then.

“Can I get you a coffee or a tea?” he asks. “You want a magazine to look at for inspiration?”

“No, no I’m fine...I just don’t know if...I mean, what do you think about something darker? In colour, I mean?”

“I can do what you want,” he says with what she thinks is a sigh. Boredom. She hears it. “But for colour we should not wash the hair beforehand. I suggest a cut today, and make another appointment for colour.”

He stands behind her, arms crossed. She feels a familiar strain in her

chest. "Yeah, okay, let's just go for the cut then. I know you wouldn't make me look bad. I trust you. Be an artist." She lifts her hand to kiss her fingertips in the way she thinks of as Italian, but the cape comes up with it. She abandons the gesture.

"Are you sure?" he asks.

"Yeah, fuck it." He raises his eyebrows. He is impressed. She bites her lip to keep from smiling.

"Okay then. It will be a *sorpresa*."

He has spun her around, away from the mirror. She feels the tug of the comb stretching her hair up, high above her head, the single crisp snip. The cool air on her neck. She feels hot and sticks her tongue out the corner of her mouth. Salty, sweaty upper lip. They are silent as it happens, and she mostly keeps her eyes closed.

A wet clump of hair hangs over her face, the tips of a few stray strands tickling the inside of her nostril. She sneezes, her hands flying up to catch the spray, but again the cape is in the way and she winds up holding the fabric to her nose. A large wet glob of yellow mucus sticks to it. Seeing this, she flies up out of the chair and bundles the fabric in her hands, pieces of hair thrown up around them, glinting like confetti. Luca stands back frozen, a silver scissors open and held up high in the air. "Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yes, sneeze, so sorry!" she shouts. "Bathroom?" He points with the scissors. She has used the bathroom many times before. "Oh yes, I know!" She tiptoe-runs through the hair to the door. Inside, alone, she looks in the mirror, her hair a mess of angles and clips. She looks terrible and wishes she'd brought her purse in. A bit of lipstick, maybe a reapplication of concealer. The bright lights around the mirror make her look wan and older than she is. She wipes the mucus off the cape with a bit of toilet paper and flushes.

He is sweeping up the hair around the chair when she emerges.

"Please," he says to her, a calm hand held out to the chair. "You are okay?"

"Yes, yes. Just a little cold, maybe. Carry on. Continue." She doesn't meet his eye.

The receptionist has approached. She stands behind Annie, staring, her lower lip lax and droopy. Annie shifts and adjusts her posture. "Luca," the receptionist says, "Alex is here."

"Okay, just a moment." He turns to Annie. "You okay here just one

moment?”

“Yes, yes,” she says. “Go ahead, I’ll wait right here.”

Luca strides off to the waiting area. From Annie’s position, she can’t quite see what’s going on, but she hears voices. She thinks she hears Luca exclaim, “Yahtzee!” She squirms to try to see who this Alex is. She hears the voices, the kind murmuring, the word “*amore*,” multiple times. Then the door tinkles brightly, closes, and Alex is gone. Luca returns with a glass container filled with colourful food.

“Look what *amore mio* brought to me,” he says, holding it up. “Lunch.” He places it on the shelf by the mirror and picks up the scissors. He is luminous.

“Lucky you,” Annie says.

“Yes, you are all so nice here,” he says. “In Rome, nobody brings me fresh lunch, nobody thinks of this. This is why I love this place.”

Annie mumbles he must be joking. This Alex was the one who forced him to come here, who forced him to quit smoking. Alex was a trap, and this, colourful bait.

“Tell me more about Rome,” she says. “I’d just love to go there.”

He tells her Rome is not like any other city in Europe, that the ruins are everywhere, so many ruins they’re not even marked in some places, jutting out here and there in public places, lying flat under the rail tracks. He tells her how the Spanish steps are always crowded with tourists and men hawking long-stemmed red roses.

“You told me this the last time,” she snaps.

“Americans are everywhere. They buy the roses, they eat the terrible pizza in the centre of the city and rave about how delicious Italian food is. It is so easy for them to be happy.”

Annie folds her hands over her belly beneath the cape and does not respond. For a while they don’t speak.

“I think it is done,” he says. He has removed the heavy clips from her head, tousled and re-tousled the wet hair. He has pulled the strands on either side of her face to meet beneath her chin, his face so close to hers she could smell mint on his breath. He blow-dries her hair, asking her to change positions often, to stand up and bend over, so he can get some volume in her waves, he says. Then, she sits, still facing away from the mirror. “One more little thing.” He rustles through a drawer behind her. Then, she thinks she hears him say: “What do you miss about home?”

She isn't sure she's heard him right. She doesn't understand the question. She has lived here her whole life. Maybe he is asking about the house she grew up in? Her parents still live in that house, she could walk there this instant in less than ten minutes. She can name all the streets, the numbered ones running west to east, the others, mostly named for trees, running north to south in a small grid, cut through by Main Street. Is anyone here from elsewhere? Anyone besides Luca? Some people brought in through marriage, some students at the little university famous for agricultural studies and nothing else, students who quickly leave after graduation.

"Home?" she asks, but an electric hair clipper turns on, its wild buzz loud and close to her ear. At first she is annoyed by his lack of manners, the way he did not wait for her answer, like he didn't even want to know. Then he delicately applies it to her neck. She has never felt such a sensation, has always had long hair. He runs the clipper up and down so gently, she has an urge to slap at her neck, to bat it away. Instead, she presses both hands between her knees and squeezes. It's like someone else's breath on the skin, the tip of a tongue in the ear, a cold hand in a warm place, "Don't stop," she whispers, and then he does.

He spins her around and she is so startled she lurches forward, gasping and gripping the armrests.

"What do you think?" He is still tousling, always tousling. It is her face, but not her. She looks ridiculous, she thinks, a fake. Luca stands back, beaming. He is beautiful and proud. He expects her approval. He thinks this is what she wanted from him.

"It's different," she says. She swallows. "I love it."

# Angelica Sokolovskaya



Angelica Sokolovskaya is a Bristol based writer and musician. She spent her childhood between Russia and Hungary. She is inspired by folk songs and folk tales of various cultures and has an interest in science, especially in physics and astronomy. Her writing explores alienation within society and its roots, which she presents in tales with fantastic and sci-fi elements. Her work has previously been published in Brooklyn based feminist magazine *Quail Bell* and in literary magazine *The Bard*.

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## My genres

Science fiction, magical realism, fantasy.



*Partonia is a happy place. Every member of its society is useful and appreciated according to their abilities. Of course, their abilities and, ultimately, their destinies, are given to them at birth by the Gods and at the age of sixteen, revealed to them during The Ceremony; a celebration that lasts for one day and one night in the Padoga Garden. Here, they will search for their Destiny hidden within an Iridescent Egg.*

*On the day of Zee's Ceremony his excitement is tempered by sadness at his brother's absence on this most important of days.*

*Lissian's mysterious disappearance three years ago left Zee searching for answers. He is sure his brother knew things. Secrets. And Zee is determined to discover the truth.*

### *Short story excerpt*

## **The Iridescent Egg**

It's the morning of Zee's Ceremony. In about ten hours he will enter the Padoga Garden where he will find his Iridescent Egg and within it, his Destiny.

Just like every Partonian, he has been training for this all his life – sixteen years in all. But in reality, it is something no one is ever ready for. The Ceremony marks the transition from a child into an adult, an invisible line that inevitably must be crossed in order to continue existing. A certain level of fear is understandable for everyone, but Zee's family isn't like other families. A tragedy has touched them, and in doing so has marked them. Not for sympathy or extra help, but marked them out as different,

somehow broken. And this difference is there, no matter how hard they try to pretend it isn't.

Zee can't help thinking about his older brother, and he knows his parents too are thinking of Lissian today.

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'What are you hoping to find in your Egg?' Zee had asked his brother all those years ago, the night before Lissian's Ceremony.

'I'm not hoping for anything. I know exactly what I'll find there. I just can't wait for the Egg to officially confirm what I already know.'

The air had been fresh that night as they lay in their beds, dreaming about the future. They opened the window to let some cool air blow in and, in the distance, they could hear the unmistakable cry of an Icebird.

'That could be the one that just laid your Egg.' Zee was so excited his voice was breaking.

'I very much doubt it.' Lissian chuckled. 'My Egg was laid a few days ago and has been brewing under the Suns since.'

All this was such a long time ago, he was still a kid then, only twelve. Today, he'll become a man. Soon his relatives and friends will arrive, and the thirty-two-hour celebration will begin.

The first time Zee spent the night alone in their bedroom was the night when Lissian was in the Garden in search of his Egg. Zee couldn't sleep. Of course not. How could he when the anticipation to talk to Lissian, to hear everything about his adventures in the Garden of Adulthood was so immense? Zee was the first to get up in the morning and was ready to leave for the Greeting Ceremony before the rest of the household was even awake. He wished he could be the first one to talk to Lissian when he emerged from the Garden, but Zee knew such an opportunity wouldn't present itself until the evening, when they would be alone in their bedroom again.

When a worn-out Lissian came out from the garden, he smiled at the crowd. All eyes were on him, and according to tradition he announced the Gods' decision out loud for everyone to hear:

'I'm a CREATOR!'

If he said anything further no-one heard it, for the crowd's roar of joy had masked it. Admiration was burning in Zee's eyes. Father was beaming

with pride, and Mother was crying. Lissian, on the other hand, just looked tired. Zee decided not to disturb him with questions that night.

Lissian had always known he would become a Creator, a designer and builder of things. From a young age he had been constantly building, improving and mending things. He worked confidently and without effort and over the years he became known in his Quatrium as something of a prodigy. Therefore, when the time came to become a professional Creator, a useful member of the society, his family were pleased, but not at all surprised. Having a Creator in the family was a blessing and the envy of everyone around them. Had their pride permitted it, his parents would have noticed that Lissian no longer shared their enthusiasm after the Ceremony. Something had changed. Lissian had changed.

Of course, the first day of his new life was exciting enough – he was shown to a small office he would share with a fellow-Creator and everyone seemed very nice. Lissian did the rounds, politely introducing himself and getting to know the people he was to spend his working life with.

When Lissian got home from work that first night, he went straight to his room and went to bed without a word to anyone. The next day he did the same, and again the day after. Soon it became routine. If anyone tried talking to him, he would say that he was fine, just a bit tired. His parents accepted this as a valid excuse. Zee, however, knew better and was determined to find out the truth.

‘Tell me about the Garden,’ he asked Lissian one evening, when he judged he had waited long enough.

‘It’s just how they teach us: you go in, wander around a bit, smell the flowers, look at the animals, then you find your Egg, open it, and puff! – there’s your Destiny, in the shape of a symbol that you can’t miss. Because it’s obvious, and also because you’ve been drilled about it for years and years until it all started pouring out of your ears, because there’s no room for it in your head anymore.’

‘But what was it like for *you*? What did *you* feel? How did *you* find the Egg?’

‘I told you already how I found it, don’t know what else you want me to say.’

‘I want you to tell me the truth.’

The silence that followed was filled with unspoken words. Lissian could keep his thoughts hidden from his parents, but he could not conceal them from his brother.

‘Lissian?’

‘It’s not right, Zee,’ he replied after a long pause.

‘What isn’t?’

‘All of it. Our lives, our existence.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Let me ask you this: How do you know there isn’t something better out there?’

‘Out where?’

‘Anywhere. What if we didn’t go to the Garden? What if we just lived our lives as we saw fit? What if we were allowed to do things our own way? Make monstrous mistakes and fail, and others would congratulate us for even trying and then encourage us to try again or do something else. Imagine that!’

‘What kind of things?’

‘I don’t know, things no one else has done before. What if we tried going to the Moons, for example?’

‘I don’t like where this is going. People don’t come back from there, you know that. When they go to the Moons. They never...’

‘I don’t mean like that, all the pious lies we tell ourselves. Like when someone’s body is gone and they are not coming back and we say that they’re with the Gods on the Moons now, so that we ease the pain of their absence. No. I mean really going to the Moons. More like... I don’t know... okay, imagine this: what if I could build something, a vessel of some sort, that could take our physical bodies to the Moons.’

‘Oh, I don’t know about that, Liss. It sounds very unlikely. And risky too!’

‘No one has ever tried. Not in our time. Not with what we know today. Can’t you see? I’m supposed to be a Creator but all I’m creating is something that has been created by someone else first. I just continue their work. I’m not a Creator. Not really. I’m a... I’m... a *Replicator*. I want to create something truly new!’

‘In school we’re told that everything there is to know is already known.’

‘They lie to us, Zee! In school. Not out of malice but out of sheer ignorance. They lie, because they don’t know the truth and are too scared

to go in search of it and so they lie to us, so that we are scared too; not even aware of what they're doing, just lying, one lie after another...'

'But the Gods...'

'TRALSCH THE GODS!'

This time the silence was real. There were no soundless words spoken. Zee was shocked to hear his brother use such language. Fat tears were rolling down his face and it broke his brother's heart knowing that he'd caused it.

'It's alright, Zee. I'm sorry. Please, forget everything I said. I was being stupid.'

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'If only your brother could be here... what a shame, what a shame,' says uncle Bronnan as a means of greeting. He never misses the opportunity to talk about Lissian. As if Zee wasn't carrying his brother's memory in his chest every waking hour.

'He's with the Gods now. On the Moons.'

'That's true, that's true. And I'm sure he can see you and is proud of you. So, what do you expect to find in your Egg, son?'

'I was thinking, a Goodwiller or maybe a Sophist.' Zee knows what the adults want to hear. He isn't lying either, he thinks if he can become a Goodwiller maybe one day, he will be able to help someone like his brother.

'Helping people get better is honourable indeed. So is giving them knowledge. But then, you know, it's not up to you. It has been decided by the Gods of the Moons,' says uncle Bronnan pointing a fat index finger at the ceiling. 'So just relax and enjoy the journey. You'll find out soon enough what Destiny the Gods have in mind for you.'

He pats Zee on the shoulder before disappearing into the other room where they have just brought out the food.

Uncle Bronnan is one of the true believers. Like the majority of his generation, and the generations that came before him, he believes everyone's Destiny is determined by the Gods, and that when the time is right, the Gods' messengers – the Icebirds – bring the good news to the children of Partonia. The fact that, more often than not, their Destiny turns out to be something that was expected anyway only goes to show

that the Gods gave this ability to Partonians at birth, and that their Destiny is inevitable.

However, a different approach has been gaining popularity in the past decades, that suggests that one's Destiny is not set in ice but created from the individual's own desire. An argument against this theory points out that, had this been the case, it would render the whole Ceremony, and the laying of the Eggs, and consequently the Gods themselves – useless. One could just simply decide what to do with one's life and then proceed to do it without the traditions of the Ceremony and the approval of the Gods! And that is obviously unheard of and ridiculous and, in any case, would be simply impossible. What would they do without the central event in any Partonian's life?

The Ceremony has always been. The Ceremony is. The Ceremony shall always exist.

So Zee's celebration is loud and cheerful and he plays his part well, telling everyone that, in spite of being excited and slightly nervous, he knows what he has to do and that no one should be worried about him. He thanks everyone for the presents and the good advice – in the manner of the usual pre-Ceremony customs – and when the time finally arrives, they all leave the house in a procession, singing traditional songs and waving Zarnons. Other Partonians they meet on the way join in and wish Zee good luck in the Garden. Shy children offer him flowers and handmade replicas of Iridescent Eggs and Icebirds, and every time he accepts their offerings their faces light up with joy and pride. Zee is the hero of the day.

When they get to the gates of the Garden the crowd calms down and Zee is expected to say a few words he has prepared. The gist of his speech should be that he is honoured and exuberant to be going in to find his Egg, and that he thanks the Gods for sending his Destiny from the frozen Moon of Glacierum. Regardless of his true belief this is what he's going to say. Speaking your mind is not part of ceremonial speeches. And even though occasionally a rebellious young Partonian chooses to express their personal belief, it is considered to be social suicide and is fiercely frowned upon. Zee knows better than this and he gives the crowd what they want, after which he enters the Garden leaving the crowd to celebrate.

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As soon as the Garden gate closes behind him the outside world stops existing. No sounds get through the gate. The Garden has its own sound, and that's all Zee can hear now. He can hear every plant growing and every animal digesting its food, as if he suddenly has supernatural hearing. But he knows it's the Garden that is truly magical. The scent of the flowers in the Garden is like no scent he's ever experienced. Yet, it feels reassuring, familiar, like finally arriving home after a long, long journey spent in a foreign land. Not only does he feel each and every living creature's presence, but he also feels the presence of everyone who's walked these Gardens before him: his ancestors, his parents, and Lissian. The Garden is a pulsating living organism and he's been offered to be a part of it for a night.

Zee has always felt a strong connection with his brother, now he feels it even more. Lissian had told Zee things he wouldn't have told anybody else. Crazy things, some might say, but Zee knows better than to betray his brother's trust.

He knows that behind the crazy words there was truth. He was sure of that the last time they had met too, when Zee visited his brother at the Resort. Had he known this would be the last time they would meet, he would have told someone, asked someone for help, someone more responsible than him, an adult, a Goodwiller.

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'I want you to have this,' said Lissian. He took off the chain and pendant he had been wearing around his neck and handed it to Zee. 'Think of it as a talisman, something to protect you. As long as you wear it, it's like I'm with you. Promise you will never take it off.'

'I promise,' said Zee, though he didn't really understand what he was promising. Why would he need protection and who from? Zee noticed that adults sometimes said things that meant nothing and he developed a habit of not asking them questions as they never answered the right way anyway. But Lissian wasn't an adult, not completely, not yet, so Zee liked asking him questions even though recently, Lissian started to answer more often like adults do. As if Zee was stupid, rather than just young. Sometimes. Not always.

'Why are you giving this to me?' Zee asked Lissian.

‘I don’t need it... I want you to have it.’

It sounded like a good enough explanation, so Zee pulled the chain over his head and let the cold green metal dangle on his chest. The pendant was a perfect sphere with a delicate filigree design and it was made from Grion, one of the most affordable precious metals in Partonia. Zee never had anything precious before, and even though Grion was quite common he had always liked its bright green colour and preferred it to the much more valuable and rare metals that adults were so obsessed with.

‘Why are you saying you don’t need it anymore?’

‘Well, I can’t tame birds at the Resort, so I might as well give it to you.’

Training birds was one of Lissian’s obsessions. He believed if he could tame birds and in particular Icebirds, he could learn more about flying and could eventually fly to the Moons and come back from there. It was, of course, a completely crazy idea and had it not been Lissian telling him about it, Zee would definitely think it was a joke. But he saw his brother with smaller birds and he seemed to have a way with them. Of course, it is much harder to tame an Icebird, and as far as Zee was concerned no one has ever managed to achieved that. Icebirds are wild creatures and can be dangerous if they feel threatened. They wouldn’t harm anyone, however, unless provoked.

‘What does this pendant have to do with birds?’

‘It helps. To tame them, I mean. If you ever need to tame a bird, use this pendant.’

Zee could not think of a scenario where he would need to tame a bird but the pendant was nonetheless precious to him for it had belonged to his brother.

‘Thank you,’ said Zee.

‘One more thing, don’t tell Mum and Dad about the pendant and what I was working on. They wouldn’t understand and it would lead to unnecessary conflict. Do you understand what I’m saying?’

Zee understood.

This was the last time they met. The next day they received a call from the Resort. Lissian had disappeared overnight despite of the Resort’s strict security. A search party has been assembled to find him. They searched the whole territory of the Resort and found Lissian’s boots and heavy fur coat by the lake. After a few days the search was called off. A joint report issued by the Resort and the Regulators stated that Lissian had gone for a



swim, and not realising the lake was colder than usual for the time of year, had drowned in the icy water. The report concluded that the drowning was an accident as assuming anything else would have shed a bad light on the Resort, whose primary aim is to provide therapy and help to troubled minds. This was an explanation that Lissian's family accepted too, as the shame of the alternative was too great.

Zee knew, however, that it was all lies. Why would Lissian go for a swim in the middle of the night in freezing water? It just didn't make any sense. For months afterwards, whenever he entered his room, Zee expected Lissian to be there waiting for him. But with time he had to accept what everyone else had accepted a long time ago: Lissian was gone.

He refused, however, to believe that it was an accident.

# Carlene Fraser-Harris



Carlene is a Trinidadian-born American that has been navigating her identity, belonging and womanhood through her stories. Finding herself in London longterm, she undertook a Creative Writing MA, buffing her talent to produce pieces around the topics she is passionate about. And to polish her retelling of the experiences she's had as an immigrant of colour in New York City, to which a book manuscript is currently underway. She is an activist for BAME representation and hopes to be a catalyst for the faster and farther progression of coloured stories and authors in the publishing arena.

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## My genres

Nonfiction, creative nonfiction, memoir.

*Me. Them. Brooklyn. is a nonfiction narrative based on the true experiences of a young immigrant, Mara, as she wades her way into womanhood. With an unpretended view of New York City and an emotional dive into how families adjust and readjust to migration, marginalisation and money, her story travels across blood ties and relationships, race and religion, and the lies we tell ourselves.*

*Novel extract*

# Me. Them. Brooklyn.

## Chapter One

### Empty Vessels...

You could always hear Aunt Cheryl coming a mile away. She was loud on purpose, her voice and attitude were bold, intimidating. It never sat well with grandma that she was so outspoken. Over-spoken. Once, after one of her heated debates, usually over some trite issue, my grandpa turned to me and warned, his chin angled in her direction, “empty vessels make the most noise.” I didn’t get it, then. My grandpa, despite his reservoir of wisdom, had left it at that and left me wanting. Particularly wanting to never be like my aunt. The phrase greeted me again four years later in Physics class, though not quite so poetic. Near empty containers made more noise than full ones. Water and sand filled the containers in class that day and I wondered what didn’t fill Aunt Cheryl.

When I moved to New York, I moved into Genevieve’s room and her voice

became my own. My Brooklyn was the attic room that we shared, and it was an education. She taught me how to choke my island drawl in favour of a more minted way of speaking. Stressing the right syllables in words like character – not ‘ker-rahk-tuh’. The street cred I’d get for using “word” as both a question and agreement. The slang was an easy assimilation. The only easy one. If my father knew what I was being exposed to, he’d have shat himself. Boys and miniskirts, block parties and drag races, were all like acid to the alkali upbringing I’d had til then. Mass each Sunday morning before family lunch, pristinely pressed uniforms for school each day, and serving up respectful salutations to everyone we passed: “good morning, sir” ... “good evening, ma’am.”

Genevieve was my introduction to facials and shaven legs. She laughed at my archaic use of pads each month while she brandished her box of Tampax Pearl. Our cycles quickly synchronised, our delicate lady pheromones must have hit it off well. We’d Haagen Dazs and sex-talk the night away, cursing our menstrual cramps and the bloat, and the easy life I thought boys had, and everything else unfair to womankind. We watched rated-R movies and Genevieve would explain to me that movie sex was so unlike the real thing. I’d never heard “clitoris” or “cum” before then. She went on about Rich and how good sex with him was. How in love she’d been and how they were doing it the right way. “Bridal shower, then baby shower,” she’d drone. And I wondered how many partners she’d had before him. What a break-up was like.

“Mara, don’t you want a boyfriend?”

“Yeah,” I was wide open to the idea, “but I’ve never been someone’s girlfriend before. What if I’m no good at it?”

“You’re 17. It’s not that hard. Hold hands, call each other often and make out.” It sounded like a line of instructions straight out of Dating for Dummies. Basic. Impossible to screw up. She never mentioned the feelings you’ll have. Get. Want.

We made it work, the whole roommates thing. I did her hair and she’d do my chores. Well, she’d help. I did her term papers and she bought me things. Hair clips. Perfume. Takeout. When Rich worked overtime, Genevieve and I played strip poker on the weekends with her ex and his bestie. We’d layer up on clothes before they arrived so that we’d have more to take off. And giggled uncontrollably when they were down to their boxers. “Do you like what you see?” the best friend asked me, proudly

bearing his chiselled bits. It was the first time I'd touched a man's bare chest.

Genevieve tried to hook us up, me and Mr. Chiselled Bits. "Hello? He's so into you. Why would a guy give up his Saturday nights just to come over here and play our lame ass version of strip poker when we've never gotten out of our jeans?" her voice of reason was tall, unquestionable. Aunt Cheryl. So instead of strip poker, we did a horror movie night the next time they came around. Chiselled Bits wanted to cuddle close, but I was preoccupied with how tightly Genevieve was nestled in with her ex. I thought I saw them kiss but maybe I was heady from the newness of being held... romantically.

"You didn't mind being hugged up with Everett like that? For the movie?" was the only way I could ask the question. I stared at the ceiling, half holding my breath for the answer.

"Everett knows about Rich, Mara. But, I mean, we're still friends." After a pause, more of her words filled the dark bedroom. "I love Rich. I do." They floated past me on the top bunk and quietly popped like bubbles hitting the ceiling. "This was all about the fun, though, right?"

"Yeah, you're right," I loosed, willing away the pin pricks of my intuition like I often did.

She'd say, more to flash him like a piece of fine jewellery to her girlfriends, "Isn't my Richie a tall drink of mocha swagger latte?" and curl up on him like dough around a rolling pin. But when he wasn't there, she'd pros-and-cons her way in and out of her three-year relationship with him. "I don't want a man I can control," she'd say about his doting tendencies, "that'll get old real quick and I'll hate it." It was old already, I knew, thinking she was completely unhinged to play down any man who took the time to grease her scalp. Grease. Her. Scalp! That's like a walk-in closet and a lifetime supply of chocolate. Her arguments seemed so hollow. Untethered. Like she didn't know what she wanted, what she had. And I often thought of Aunt Cheryl in those moments. Of the many words she had, loud and prominent and empty. Genevieve was loud and empty. Her love for Rich – for herself. Empty. And I felt warned.

Then summer came, and a herd of Genevieve's insecurities grazed on our green relationship. It explained the dull, rusty razor she assured me was "still good for a few more shaves" after she caught Rich gawking at my

legs. “Wanna grab some Jin Wok,” he asked, while eyeing my too-short shorts on the couch across from them, “I’m starving.” She followed his eyes and fumed. “Yeah, let’s get you some leg and thigh.” It explained the sudden restriction on items in her wardrobe that she herself claimed to be more “fly as hell” on me than on her. So I starved my new appetite for all her fancy things and reverted to the Target brands June bought me. This sudden division between us that she had seen – created – left me wanting less of her and more of her things.

## Fifty Shades

I should have seen it.

Genevieve wrote, read and spelled it out for me.

During one of our menstrual monster mash-ups – ice cream and rom-coms and sex talk – Genevieve devolved into a vulnerable place I didn’t know existed for her. A place of shades and shadows that I soon learned affected most people. Damn! All people.

We were watching the *The Brothers* on BET and a half naked Morris Chestnut was the image I’d tuck behind my eyelids for bed later that night. “I’d lay down under that,” my lips parted at the screen as his dark, dexterous fingers peeled the buttons through the holes on his baby blue shirt.

“That’s all you. I want me some Shemar Moore,” she proclaimed.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s ‘cause you already have a Morris that does your laundry and oils that dry scalp of yours.” The giggle in her throat didn’t hide the look of unwanted truth on her face.

“Yeah, but Rich is no Shemar. That man is the perfect shade,” she too earnestly explained, watching said perfect man get up close and personal with *not* his fiancée.

Genevieve had parked her opinion of male beauty – all beauty – at the foot of this light-skinned actor and his ambiguous Afro-Latino-white melee of features. “If I could change one thing on Rich, it would be his nose. The dude can sniff out fresh beef patties all the way down Flatbush at Beula’s with that spread.” She quickly diverted from reality, “but if I had me a Shemar? Oooo, chile!” A covetous little snicker followed, guarding her

truth.

It hadn't occurred to me then that underneath all of her wit and confidence, there was a minus value she readily attached to the very skin she was in. But for the first time since my arrival, I really saw Genevieve. I saw her real reasons for questioning her love for Rich, with his complexion the shade of ebony. Like the black keys on a piano, the wooden pieces on a chess board. I saw her, worried about giving her mother dark-skinned grandkids. Black babies.

Genevieve and I weren't roomies for very long. After a year of sharing clothes and inside jokes, the novelty of her own space returned. She reclaimed her privacy and I got some of my own, not realising til then how much of me was her. Her shoes, her cardigans, her speech and even her makeup. And though I was about four shades unsunned than she was, we wore the same tones. Same foundation, concealer, lip colours. It wasn't til I moved out of her room that I noticed it. The top of her dresser was crowned with face washes and deep cleansing masks that all had "brightening" or "bleaching" in their slogan, boasting high quantities of hydroquinone or kojic acid. SPF 80 was her saviour, as if natural vitamin D was the devil. Genevieve would often ask about my mom and grandma and where all my not-Foster features came from. My soft hair, pink lips. But my grandma was adopted so I never knew anything about my lineage beyond her. I blanketed it with the conclusion that because of colonialism, the exact racial make-up of our family would probably remain unknown. I mean slave owners didn't exactly go around documenting the birth places of their chattel, right? And there must have been a handsy massa or two – or three – along the line. My dad's grey eyes, my mother's pale skin, are evidence.

On their fourth anniversary of whatever sparkling relationship Rich thought they had, he proposed. He slipped the ring inside her bowling ball and handed it to her as she stepped onto the lane. "Genevieve Diana Pantin," he awkwardly knelt, his nerves on show for the other bowlers, "I love you so much. Wanna make me the happiest guy in this alley, tonight, and say yes? Please?"

So she said yes to Rich.

And then met Craig.

Soft hair, light-skinned Craig. It was April. The month of light jackets and precarious romance. I was 19 and their engagement was two months young. Vieve would pocket her new diamond ring and spend the weekends with Craig. She said it was simply to make sure that Rich was her one and only, and that she wasn't inclined to cheat. But she was already cheating. Mostly on herself.

"Vieve's spending the weekend at Shara's," June lied one Friday night. I was undoing her braids, my fingers busy at the back of her head, my eyes on Rich.

"But Shara said she's with her guy in Florida for Spring break." The defeat in Rich's voice widened the soft spot I was growing for him. "So where's Vieve?"

"Then I really don't know, Richie."

June's words were as fake – coarse – as the weave I was unraveling from her head.

"Why would June lie to me like that? What? Just to cover her daughter's ass? When really she should be teaching her not to sneak around. I mean we're supposed to be planning a wedding, Mayr," he vented to me later that night in Genevieve's room.

"I know! I'm so sorry, Rich," I wanted to tell him that I knew – I knew why she was spending time with Craig – but I couldn't. Besides, Rich was too good for Genevieve. I watched his head shake nonstop, like the dashboard bobbleheads in his Corolla. Bobbing like the hurt was an overload for his brain. *Cannot compute. Cannot compute.* I bit back the words and shook my head with him. *Cannot compute Colourism.*

It's like a recovering alcoholic, colourism. You never see the drink in their hand, but you can smell the liquor coming off their pores when they sweat. And you know the liquor has already done permanent damage to the liver, the kidneys, the Black Race. Decades in AA but that bigot whiskey is still on their breath. Derisive. Divisive. Someone breathed on Genevieve with that breath. And she all but bag-tested Rich. The bag test – brown paper bag test – was used by plantation owners to determine who was light-skinned enough for house work and special treatment, while consigning the rest to toil under the sun. And Rich did toil; my scalp itched every time I thought about his labours.



And the special privileges went to Craig; Genevieve got pregnant and was beside herself to confirm that it was in fact Craig's boat she was setting parenthood sail on.

\*\*\*

"Craig? You hope its Craig's?" I couldn't hide my disbelief as we drove to the clinic.

"Yes. I love him," Genevieve waved her declaration like a cheap red bandana with Cupid's ass on it. I sat in the back seat holding my hands in my lap, trying not to gag on my own judgment of her, and my pity for Rich.

June drove in silence, eyeing me in the rear view mirror, taking in my face. She must have heard about my journal. Maybe even read it. "I'm so glad you figured it all out," she said coolly, "instead of marrying Rich. Who knows what coulda happen?" I laughed to myself, willing my best poker face for her next glance in the mirror. "And I get a grand baby."

There was a lull in the conversation where I knew they expected me to "yay" or "aww" at the whole thing. The whole farce.

"I was going to break it off with Rich, either way," Genevieve swivelled in the passenger seat and hugged the headrest. "But Mar, if it's Craig's, I can just use that to make a clean break. Because you know he's gonna hit me with the whole 'we can still make it work' drama."

I found myself praying hard that it was Rich's, then immediately hoping that it wasn't. For his sake. "Yeah, I can see Rich wanting to make it work," I must have said it with more sympathy than I realised, making her add, "But wait til you meet Craig. It's been the best 3 months of my life." She sighed like every teenage girl in all the rom-coms we'd watch, "and he's so handsome."

I climbed into bed that night feeling oddly grateful for my light skin in a way that I didn't quite understand. Not then. But maybe someone had breathed on me, too. I did marry a white man. And now, I see it. The natural undercurrents of respect my husband gets. While I war with my second-class citizenship. The routine assumptions that come with his male whiteness. The organic superiority. The unconscious freedoms he has. I sweat for. The beauty. Like the immediate beauty they see in my first daughter, who is a shade and a half lighter than her sister. The fact that

three out of five times, people confidently assume that my kids are not my own. Not biologically. “Those are your girls?” I can see the *cannot compute* behind their eyes.

We’re all still sipping that whiskey.

## Me, Three

I comforted Rich.

One night, not long after Genevieve let him go, I comforted him.

A little too well.

“What if it was my baby?” His sunken, bloodshot eyes oozed pain as vivid as the steam off a geyser. Hopelessness and sulphur. He sat on my bedroom floor, drying what must have been his third round of tears for the night.

“I’m sorry, Richie. You so don’t deserve this. You’re a great guy, really you are,” my genuine sympathy stayed trapped behind my generic words. I made us grilled cheese sandwiches and must have said sorry a hundred more times before we finally finished them.

“I’m nothin’ to her. I was nothin’ to her. All this time.” Men didn’t cry. Black men definitely didn’t cry. And this one was taking a stake to my heart. “Don’t say that,” I didn’t resist the urge to rub his back, squeeze his shoulders, cradle his face. Just hold him. Help soften the attack of his feelings.

...soften...

Before long, I replaced the empty plate that straddled his lap and his tears drained down my cleavage. Then, he was choking on mouthfuls of my tear-soaked breasts as I grappled with the boundaries of *giving comfort*. A shoulder to cry on became inner thighs for his warm, skilful fingers. I held on to his shoulders, bracing myself for a ride I wasn’t sure I wanted. I’d never had.

“Richie? We shouldn’t,” my ears were as tout as my nipples, waiting for Genevieve’s footsteps outside my door. That’s when you hear them. In the movies, that’s always when you hear them. The footsteps. Just as pulses raced.

“Please, Mayr. Be with me, tonight.”

"I am, Richie," suffocating on the warped angle of a man's desire for me, "I already am."

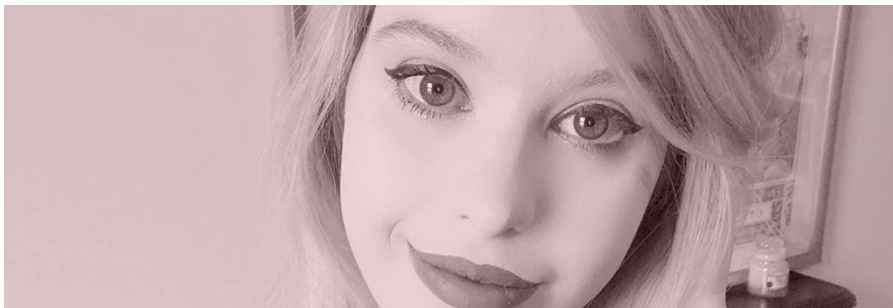
"Please," an eager whisper as his lips grazed my ear, and my thoughts fled to the 'sweet nothings' every maiden in Danielle Steele's novels heard before their oversized brute ravished them. "Be with me," his expert tongue dulled my senses enough to mute any further protests. And "Mayr" was all he said before I felt his dick mining through me. The feeling was a chaos of hurt and thrill, arrival and loss. An uninvited newness. I whimpered under the sweet regret that came, even while he finished. It was a long and horrible niceness.

He clung to me, to my pity for him. Comforted. His skin on mine, his hurt on mine. And nothing but short breaths followed.

"You're always so nice, Mayr."

And I thought about the rusty razor Genevieve gave me. *Still good for a few more shaves.*

# Eleonora Pilastro



Eleonora is a shy girl with a stubborn love for writing. More a character-builder than a plot-thinker, she often lets her characters lead the story. Her writing is inspired by Western classics and Eastern literature, by pop culture and classics from all over the world. She doesn't shy away from trying new narratives and experimenting with new genres: that made her want to play with turns of phrases, punctuation and character archetypes. You may not find a classic structure or perfect Western storytelling in her works, no relentless crescendo of events before the fall of action, no battle between heroes and villains. What you will find, however, are imperfect words that last. Her prose aims not for technical perfection, but to strike a chord in the reader's soul.

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## My genres

Historical fiction, ghost story, urban fantasy.

*At only seventeen, Okita Soujiro is a force to be reckoned with. He's a sword prodigy, a brother, a son. His destiny is to die in grass and blood.*

*Lady Ariko inhabits the Bathhouse. She is knowledge, power and time. She was a ghost before the word ghost was invented.*

*Their existences collide when a corpse appears on the doorsteps of Soujiro's dojo. As he finds himself involved in an apparently unsolvable murder case, Soujiro learns that three kinds of ghosts haunt his world: the ones in his head, the ones of his past and the one that will offer him a glimpse of his future.*

## *Novel extract*

# Into Darkness, Flowers and Water

Death pitied Lady Ariko.

She knew nothing of the human world: her body could be seen but not reached, her voice heard but not answered to. She could be found, but she'd never be understood. She was a pale imitation of everything and nothing, an idle existence confined in the Bathhouse.

Unlike Death, Lady Ariko was a prisoner. When she peeked out of the window, her eyes wandered only as far as the Lake of Blood.

There, she saw spirits: women howling and washing the remains of cursed labours. Lady Ariko knew they died in childbirth, yet she'd never understood how *life* could kill.

When they didn't haunt the human world, the spirits crowded the shores of the Lake of Blood, washing the same bedsheets that saw them die. Blood coloured their hands and feet and the lake and the sand, its rusty stench hovering in the air. It soaked the bridge that led to the

Bathhouse.

The women would come and go, backs bent and burdened by the cold infants tied to them, but Lady Ariko had nothing to offer for their attention. They ignored her, as Lady Ariko couldn't cross the bridge that separated the Bathhouse from the Lake of Blood.

She didn't know what kind of horrible scenery existed past the lake.

All she *knew* was that she would have traded her non-existence for a minute in the company of those weeping souls. Surely, though, she was in no way presentable enough to join the group even if she could: what would the women think of her bare feet and silk white underdress? Would they be scared by her long, wet hair?

Lady Ariko remained a lurking shadow, watching them. Wishing to be them.

Lady Ariko had always been confined inside the Bathhouse, though she didn't remember why, or by whom. From the smooth stones of its bathtubs to the delicate patterns of its doors, that space was the beginning and the end of her existence.

They were one and the same. The Bathhouse had always been, just like Lady Ariko had always been.

From the outside, the bathhouse might have reminded visitors of a dollhouse: each of its pavilions capped with a green roof while the walls and pillars shared the same ruby red. Lacquered wood, shining like fresh blood. The bridge, too, had been painted red.

The house talked with Lady Ariko's voice and breathed with every rise and fall of her bony chest.

The pungent fragrance of herbal drugs – ginseng and ginger, together with the cypress wood that composed the house itself – rose from the baths in plumes of steam. Everywhere, she saw nothing but steam and damp wood.

Whistles of flutes and chords being plucked by ghostly fingers ghosted in the air.

Lady Ariko would roll her head back and lay against a pillar, comforted by the music, rocking back and forth with the melody. Occasionally, the cries from the women in the Lake of Blood crawled through the windows. They mixed with the music, yet they remained remarkably different from

the music born from the Bathhouse – high-pitched, darker, hysterical. Sounds unfathomable that made Lady Ariko shiver with feelings unknown.

She wished to ask those women what they were crying about.

She, too, longed for her soul to thaw as theirs did, for the sound they made was beautiful.

Death was one honest guest of the Bathhouse.

She harvested indiscriminately, warrior or farmer or emperor. It changed masks with the toss of dices.

Death was not a picky lover: she embraced humans regardless, for all they were equal to her eyes. Until, one day, it wasn't a samurai who caught her eyes: it was a band of boys. The youngest had yet to turn seventeen. His voice silenced the songs and the cries and the flutes in the Bathhouse.

In that bottomless silence, Death stopped and listened. Lady Ariko did the same.

The soldier's laughter rang hearty but shaky. His body was caught in a bizarre balance between thin and strong, weak and resilient.

Soon, Lady Ariko's interest spiralled around the boy. Sulking in the mist, the mistress of the bathhouse pondered how her old guest might claim this new life.

*"Why," Lady Ariko told herself, "it must be something special. It can only be something special for the boy who shares the stage with Death."*

For the first time in her existence, Lady Ariko tasted blood on her tongue: she had been gnawing on her lips, she realised. Impatient. Ravenous. Human. Obsession tasted bitter, like disease and hunger and a joy too wild to be appreciated.

That day, Death spoke to her:

*"Do you know what men do, ghost?"*

Lady Ariko hummed, trying to grasp a whiff of smoke with her bony fingers.

*"They die. Some sooner than others."*

*"Before that."*

*"They make each other bleed," she answered. "Isn't that what they always do? Leave me be, Death. The things you so desire mean nothing to me."*

That young soldier was the only one Lady Ariko saw and heard. His

humanity intoxicated her, he tethered Lady Ariko to the outside world. The Bathhouse belonged to him, though he would never know it.

Death asked:

*"What do you care for, then?"*

Lady Ariko's fingers itched under her long, white sleeves and her mind spun, whirling with the rising pace of a shamisen. The women screamed. The water stood still.

The flute pierced the silence.

*"That soldier boy,"* Lady Ariko said. *"I want him."*

## The Tiger, The Sword and the Ghost

I

The spring of 1861 was a cold one.

The snow had been painted red during the winter months, in a chain of hatred and political instability. Samurai, civilians and barbarians alike were killed along the road that separated the foreign settlements. Rogue swords settled mundane disputes, for men wanted to fight only to feel alive and free from the sense of doom that gripped their guts.

Imperial emissaries disappeared with their entourages only to be found dead, tossed in paddy fields with faces swollen and disfigured by water. Sometimes they were never found at all.

Shōgun sympathizers laid with their bellies open on the side of country paths, their rotting bodies fertilising the rice fields. The rebel Domains, led by the Chōshū noblemen, and the crowded Yokohama foreign settlement up North, unbalanced the ever so fragile stability of the Country. Meanwhile, the dojos and samurai households quivered, buzzing like beehives, impatient to embrace their swords and show their worth.

At seventeen, Okita Soujiro was the young promise of the Shieikan dojo.

The only son of a foot soldier, a genius swordsman; a bad brother, an orphan, a sword teacher. With contempt, he had watched the cherry trees



blossom yet another year.

*Hanami.*

The traditional cherry blossom viewing had a name that rolled on the tongue like water. One might have called those petals brave: the spring was cold and blood-stained and, yet, along the Sumida River, the cherry trees kept blossoming.

Because of the festival season, in the past few weeks securing the company of a decent-looking lady had been the only goal of most of the people gravitating around the Shieikan dojo. Soujiro had lost count of the times he had been asked to join the hanami: that day, it had been Harada's turn to pester him.

They had been eating together on the engawa that overlooked the backyard of the Shieikan dojo. It was a nice place to idle around, and in the last few weeks, tender grass had replaced the earth of the backyard, and the trees close to the wooden fence – the same ones Soujiro remembered climbing when he was a child – had sprouted in green leaves.

Part of him missed the quietness of the backyard, and another was grateful for Harada's loud chattering. His promises of liquor, women and songs made Soujiro smile, but his answer wasn't going to change.

"No."

"What!?! Souji, why! It's for the ladies!"

Soujiro scoffed, hugging his knees. "Then I suggest you save your strengths for them."

"Not even the time for a drink? Please?"

Harada wasn't a student at the Shieikan dojo – although, sometimes, Soujiro wished he was. However, someone might have called him a *friend* of the dojo, and of most of the people in there.

Sharp cheekbones and thin lips always quick with a smile were Harada's trademarks, together with his yari spear and the thick seppuku scar that crossed his belly. They attracted people to him like moths to a flame. If he was in a good mood, when asked about his scar Harada would open his kimono to uncover the long, white line that crossed his stomach.

*"You are all quite wise, learning the way of the sword,"* he would shout, unashamed of the suicide attempt forever marked on his skin, *"this is how being good with the sword served me!"*

He had a good nature, yet no one dared to make fun of the yari spear in Harada's fist.

Soujiro tilted his head to meet the midday sun. “The cherry trees blossom every year.”

“So they do,” Harada said with a nod. “But girls love them, and we love girls.”

Soujiro went silent for a moment.

“I know nothing of such things.”

“Oi, don’t be so serious now. It’s never a good look,” Harada said, taking another bite. Some rice grains remained stuck to his chin, darkened by a veil of beard.

Soujiro didn’t envy that sign of manhood, but he did feel something off about himself whenever he was next to Harada: the man *owned* his skin, not only inhabited it. He ate with a genuine appetite and the spring sunrays seemed to embrace him, painting blue shades in his dark hair.

“Well, I’m *sorry*,” Soujiro said, with a smirk. “Guess that desperate must be a much better look, huh?”

Harada rolled his eyes and laid on his back while Soujiro stayed still, legs rocking down the engawa’s edge. The tips of his sandals brushed the grass.

“You don’t want to spend time with your friends?”

*Ah.*

Soujiro cocked his head to the side.

“Didn’t someone say, ‘I make my mind my friend’?”

Harada barked out a laugh.

“Ungrateful little bastard,” he said.

It sounded somehow abrasive, like sand rubbed against Soujiro’s ear. In there, he could almost see the questions dancing in Harada’s mind, too personal to be uttered out loud: what’s wrong with you?

What is your problem?

*...I don’t know.*

*I wish I knew.*

Taking a deep breath, Harada closed his eyes and raised his hands, using them as a pillow under his head to make the wooden floor more comfortable.

“Well, you’re going to regret it.”

“I’m sure I will,” Soujiro said. If the other *heard* the light edge of sarcasm in his voice, he didn’t comment.

To be honest, Soujiro couldn't care less.

His fingers had been twitching; his lunch had been offered to Harada in exchange for cheap saké, and now restlessness twisted his empty belly. His hands ached to hold a sword, his nose had started picking up the frail scent of sweat and his ears heard the screams coming from the gym at the other side of the compound.

The training hall, after a while, always called him back.

"Shall we go back?" Soujiro asked, expectation vibrating in his voice. "I'm bored."

Harada rolled on his side to face him.

"Why? It's a nice day; stay. Didn't your sisters teach you to enjoy the pleasures of life?"

"As expected from an old man such as yourself, *Sano-san*," Soujiro purred.

Harada blinked, letting the accusation and the nickname sink in. Twenty-three was not an age to be ashamed of, and if nothing it made him a *senior* of the man grinning down at him, but Harada's throat bobbed visibly.

"You little—"

"You coming or not, *old man*?" Soujiro interrupted him, knowing that mentioning his age had nudged Harada's pride.

Although he laughed at his impatience, Harada propped himself up on his elbow, using it as leverage to lift his upper body. Soujiro's heart raced a little faster, sensing the shift in the air. He got up first and stretched a helping hand towards Harada.

*Hanami.*

The word that sounded like a drop of water rolling on the tongue meant nothing to soldiers.

\*\*\*

Soujiro followed Harada in the dojo, breathing in the familiar scent of wood and sweat as soon as he stepped past the shoji door. His whole body relaxed. His heart seemed to slow down at the rhythm of the yells and the swings cutting the air.

"Souji! Good, you're back."

Soujiro spun to face the voice, happiness making his heart flutter.

*'If you were a dog, you'd be sweeping the floor with your stupid tail every time Kondou-san enters the door,'* an older student once told him and, in his heart, Soujiro never considered it an insult.

Kondou-san had raised him. Mentor and brother, *guide*. Friend.

However, the smile already curling his lips vanished when he saw the familiar face, his gaze stopping on the wound. A black circle covered the right side of Kondou's browbone: a bruise about the size of an apricot quickly turning purple. His eyebrow was swollen, too, a mass of battered skin and dry blood that reached the hairline.

"Kondou-san!" Soujiro called, rushing forward.

With a raspy laugh, Kondou scratched his nape. He opened in an apologetic smile, soft fine lines cutting the pale skin around his mouth.

"Ah, this? No need to worry, really."

"It looks bad!"

"What happened?" Harada asked. Soujiro noticed how his hand grasped the spear until his knuckles went white. His concern was met with another chuckle. Kondou had always laughed louder than most.

"Boys, I appreciate it, but it's fine. I walked right into one of the students practising swings, it's nothing. See, it doesn't even *hurt*."

"But—" Soujiro tried, blocked by a hand firmly raised to silence him.

"I'm fine, Souji." Kondou's eyes softened. "Go check on the juniors, please? See if they need help."

Soujiro bit the inside of his cheek as Harada chimed in to ask if someone was fetching water for the bruise. He felt nothing close to relief when Kondou shrugged the matter away.

Of course, such a wound must hurt; it hurt Soujiro just to *see* that person injured and disrespected as if he was a normal man, and not the best of them.

*An accident.*

As if there was anything as simple as "just an accident" when it concerned Kondou-san.

Soujiro clenched his jaw, scanning the room in search of a culprit. His eyes met the juniors on the other side of the training hall, practising swings in neat rows of four. One boy stood far away from the others.

Every now and then, the dojo would have to deal with one trainee uncommonly versed in the art of doing the wrong thing: names Soujiro couldn't forget and students he not so secretly despised. Taro was only the

most recent one of a long line of failures.

His face was screwed up in concentration, sweat ran in streams down his forehead and strands of hair were glued to his scarlet cheeks and chin; still, he remained slow and painfully inaccurate.

"Taro-kun."

The boy's head perked up, and he smiled and bowed from the hips.

"Okita-sensei."

Soujiro looked at him for a long moment, head tilting towards the boy's gear that was lying abandoned in a corner. His technique was below average, his face forgettable.

*Good for nothing, idiot.*

"Come on. I want to check your progress."

Taro nodded, blushing.

Everybody knew that a single fight with Okita Soujiro was worth weeks of training and meditation: people would get hurt and grown men would tear up, but a bruise didn't mean a thing if a man wasn't ready to learn from it.

That day, though, the demon teacher wasn't in a rush. He grinned, head tilting towards the boy's gear that was lying abandoned in a corner.

"By the way, Taro-kun, did you see what happened to Kondou-san?" he asked, looking over Taro's shoulder.

Taro's neck stiffened for a second, his chubby hands freezing mid-gesture as he reached for the gear. Soujiro waited as the student squirmed inside his protections, adjusting the plaques around his hips.

"...It was an accident."

Soujiro's head whipped up. A chuckle crawled up his throat.

"*You* hit Kondou-san?"

Taro closed in his shoulders. "I'm so terribly sorry. I will never apologize enough, sir."

"True that."

As he grabbed one of the wooden swords from the reel on the wall, Soujiro could see Taro whimper. A little man, so defenceless and pathetic, who could only hurt someone when he didn't mean to.

Soujiro took his place in the middle of the room, gesturing for the couples already training to get out of the way. Taro's heavy breathing echoed behind him, his tabi socks swooping on the floor as if the kid was forcing himself to walk.

“Be ready,” he said without turning.

Taro choked on his own breath. Kondou’s face fluttered in Soujiro’s memory – his wound, his smile. The pain he didn’t dare to show. With that image in mind, he spun and dashed towards Taro, lowering the bamboo sword as the boy raised his above his head.

Shivering, pathetic.

Then, Soujiro blinked – a second, just a flutter of eyelashes – and the whole world flickered. The dojo disappeared. He breathed in damp air, his senses slapped by the piercing smell of ginger and cedar.

Suddenly, he wasn’t seeing Taro’s pitiful face, but a pale woman. No eyebrows, only big black eyes piercing through him from beyond a curtain of steam.

“AH!”

Taro’s yell brought Soujiro’s attention back to the dojo and the fight.

He knew the kid had spotted the opening on the left side: a perfectly unguarded patch of skin waiting to be hit, covered by nothing but rough cotton. Surely, the poor boy couldn’t believe his luck.

Soujiro waited for his prey to rush to him with a belligerent cry – too slow and, yet, too rushed. Pulling back, he switched the balance to his left foot and turned, swinging the bamboo sword with both his hands.

The next thing he heard was the hardwood ricocheting against Taro’s ribs. It hit hard and true, in between protections. The sound of bones cracking and the whistling breath curled Soujiro’s lips.

The child bounced back like a broken toy.

*Does this count as an accident?*

He charged another blow to the boy’s shoulder, and another and *another*, hitting blindly since there was nothing – no guard, no willpower, no *fight* – to keep him from doing so. Taro fell on his knees and *curled* on himself, seeking protection from the hits.

*You’re useless, you’re useless, you’re useless, you’re—*

His sword sang with every blow.

Taro's cry died when Soujiro hit his sternum, stealing the air from his lungs.

*Avenge Kondou-san. Kill.*

He had a debt to pay to the man who had brought him up, believed in him, turned him into someone with a purpose.

*Don't be useless.*

Soujiro's sword was already mid-air, ready to aim for the head, when a hand grasped his wrist. He had enough time a glimpse at Taro shielding his face, tears streaming down his cheeks, before Harada dragged him away.

"That's enough, Souji."

His voice was a clap of thunder, although he didn't yell.

Suddenly, Soujiro was breathing again, surrounded by eerily pale faces. Taro rolled on the ground, his laments breaking the silence. Harada's short nails sank in the flesh of Soujiro's wrist as if he was trying to scratch the bone.

"Are you crazy?"

"You saw what the kid has done, Harada," Soujiro said, hissing when Harada shook him violently. He sneered at Taro, still gasping for air. "A dog that hurts his master has no right to cry. Rise, farm boy. We're not done."

"Enough," Harada cut him off. "Kondou-san wants to see you."

Soujiro pressed his lips together.

He shook his head, trying to keep at bay the feeling of being in two places at the same time: a dojo and a bathhouse. Somewhere where he could spill blood, and somewhere where water would wash it off.

In the deaf silence, he freed himself from Harada's grip and stalked out.

*'What is wrong with you, little soldier boy?'*

*'I don't know. I wish I knew.'*

# Georgina Beasley



Georgina is a New Zealander who has put down her roots in London. She loves how alive the city makes her feel when she's biking through the streets at night, but misses walking barefoot along the warm pavements at home. Georgina's writing is inspired by the emergence of the 'Me Too' movement and the way it has gained momentum within many workplaces but failed to reach others. Her work examines the often unspoken long term effects of being privy to a predator in action. Political 'would you rather's' keep her awake at night, while inspiring leadership (think Jacinda Ardern) gives her hope and inspiration in her day to day life.

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## My genres

#MeToo, women's fiction.



*That Naked Video is a multiple viewpoint novel telling the story of a lawyer and now nationally beloved politician with numerous sex scandals waiting to break, the journalist wanting to break them, and the women he manipulates along the way. It explores what we are willing to look away from in order to maintain and justify our world view, decisions and purpose. Although it includes seemingly charming predators, leaked nudes, sexual assault, and glass ceilings, it is also packed with self-discovery and recovery, unity and hope.*

## *Novel extract*

# That Naked Video

## Arthur

“Sir Arthur Pearse?”

She’s looking at me. Me. Arty. Arthur Pearse. Sir Arthur Pearse QC MP. Leader of the Opposition. Leader of the Labour Party. It just happened, and even though it’s madness, ridiculous even, it somehow feels more normal than any other aspect of my life ever has.

A woman who used to work for me back at my law firm – Frances –, she told me that no matter where we are, at any given point in time, it is predetermined. We are there for a reason, we are there because it is our path. She talked a bit of bollocks from time to time, but I think there’s something to be said for that destiny chat of hers. I slid out of my mother’s womb, all covered in shit and blood, and the shit clung on for year after year, but I kept on going. I made it here powered by something so strong it could only have been destiny. And my God am I going to bring my Party

back into leadership so I can make a change for those people that come into the world like me, but who aren't backed by destiny. Not just people like me, but anyone who is treading water, who needs to be taught to swim, or better yet, given a life raft. I am going to be that life raft.

"I can take you through whenever you're ready."

The girl standing in front of me is smiling at me eagerly. She looks young, she must be smart to be working here at this age. My little girl will be like her, I'm sure of it. This one's put a great deal of effort into getting ready. I want her to relax, to know we aren't so dissimilar.

"None of that Sir business! I'm Arty, always have been, always will be. And you?"

"Me? My name?"

I smile and nod encouragingly. She's blushing and holding her wrists with opposite hands. I'm thinking she must be a fan – the young ones so often are. But then again, perhaps my head has got too big for my own good just one week into the job. Maybe she's just nervous – these media agencies can be as ruthless as law firms.

"I'm Emmeline, it's really good to meet you, Sir, sorry, Arty. I got told not to mention it, but I'm a big supporter. All my friends are!" Knew it. "Your proposed Uni tuition reform is like amazing. I so wish you had been in Office when I started my undergrad. Sorry, I'm talking too much. I just hope you get elected. I mean, of course you will. You've got my vote. But anyway, I just had to say that. I should take you through."

"I've got plenty of time, Emmeline, no rush. Do you mind if I ask the damage... of your loan?"

She pauses and looks upwards. "29. But I've got it down to 27 in two years."

This girl is about to lead me to my first official interview as Leader, she's one I want to remember. I want her to remember me.

"Emmeline, do you give me permission to ask your boss for your bank details? I'd like to tidy something up for you."

Those cheeks of hers may be polished in foundation and defined by highlighter, but red screams through, a stutter starts to emerge. I didn't intend for this reaction. I just wanted to reward her bravery to open up to me. I don't like this version of her as much as the chatty one I just met. I want that version back. So, I give her the smile. The one that tells her she's okay, she's got this. Because she does.

“Well, I’m going to take your silence as a yes. Now I think you should take me through. It’s been a pleasure.”

I need to focus. I park Emmeline and her loan (I’ll put it through the system as a campaign expense) and start to come inward. We walk down the dimmed corridor in front of us, through some double doors, and into a studio bathed in light. The headline is prepped on a teleprompter: ‘Live with the Labour Party’s Leader and Saviour: Sir Arthur Pearse. Feminist, father, hero.’

I navigate the questions as a politician, a feminist, a father and, yes, a hero. I get laughs, I get eager nods, I even get little taps on the elbow.

We’ve been talking for forty minutes, so I need to drop polling in and start to close this conversation down.

“Shakira says hips don’t lie, but I say the polls don’t lie. We’ve gone from 21% to 42% in the month since my appointment was announced. Now I’ve officially left the Marvel Chess and Lug partnership, I can only expect us to rise further as we approach election year. We are on a trajectory that is looking—”

Tap! The interviewer interrupts me to gush, “—Sorry you mean *you’ve* risen in the polls, *you’re* at 42%!”

“No, no. We. I am a sum of my parts, and a part of me is my community. Any of my achievements are the achievements of a collective. As you touched on earlier, I come from a broken home. I see this country as one big broken home. I want to bring it back together, I want to be the father figure for our nation, the father figure I never had.”

This should be the place we end. I’ve given them their sound bite, their headline. But I know this isn’t possible, because they haven’t mentioned the Video. And they will mention the Video, no matter how much they want to support me. Because they also want viewers and viewers love this stuff. It’s a way of life, sex and politics.

“Now, Arty. I don’t want to detract from your vision and ambitions, but before we close, I have one last question. The Video. What do you have to say about it? Obviously, because of the pornographic content, we can’t insert a clip for our viewers. But to those of you watching, just think one of Arty’s senior team members at his law firm MCL, sexually compromising positions, numerous men – you get the drift.

“Janine, really? We are going there?”

“Arty, we are. I know it must have been an exceptionally stressful time

for you, but I feel like we have to get your take on it. She was your 2IC! The Twitter handles *#goodgirlgoesbad @MarvelChess&Lug* and *#MCLsexscandal*, well, they're still trending, and it's been a month since the Video hit the public."

She's creative, bringing up the Twitter handles. Although she missed out *#hotterthanpornhub*, which was my personal favourite. I give her a cheeky smile, which I know she will love, and get to it. Although it's tiresome, I know how to navigate this. I go over it with my wife while we sit over breakfast, when we are in the bath, on a walk, or tending to our baby girl. It's sensitive, it's personal, it's dangerous. My response needs to be perfect every time. I've said variations of what I'm about to say more times than I can count but, each time, it's with more empathy, more compassion, more conviction than the time before. It's genuine though, I promise.

"Look, the woman who was in the Video was an exceptional lawyer. No images or videos can detract from the impressive work she did for my team. I'm not sure why the Video emerged or why it was made in the first place. But what I would say is that everyone has their own story. You know that. And we need to respect that. You have no idea, I have no idea, what was going on for her. Unfortunately, we couldn't keep her at the firm, as you can understand. We simply had to crack down on that sort of behaviour, especially coming from senior staff. We had to ensure we could remain focused on delivering world-class advice. But her work was gravely missed when I was still at MCL, and I'm sure it still is."

I look into the camera. Frances will be watching. I need to look her dead in the eye. It's destiny. We are here, at this point and time, for a reason, Frances.

\* IS PEARSE SET TO RESIGN  
ELEVEN MONTHS INTO THE JOB? \*

\* MARVEL CHESS AND LUG CAUGHT UP  
IN SECOND SEX SCANDAL THIS YEAR! \*

\* ANONYMOUS SOURCE COMES FORWARD  
WITH STORY OF AFFAIR \*

\*ARTY'S ESCAPADES AT MCL COME TO LIGHT –  
THE NAUGHTY BOY WAS MENTORING INTERN  
IN MORE THAN THE LAW! \*

\* ARE THE TORIES BEHIND PEARSE SCANDAL?  
STRANGER THINGS HAVE HAPPENED! \*

\* FROM MINX TO MODEST – INTERN REFUSES TO SPEAK \*

\* MCL CLAIM NOT TO HAVE KNOWN OF AFFAIR \*

\* LABOUR CONFIRMS THAT RUMOURS  
WILL NOT AFFECT LEADERSHIP \*

## Rosa

Rosa cannot believe she is about to undergo a heated power vinyasa session. The only physical pursuits she partakes in are outdoor 'bitch boxing' and 'strong woman bootcamps'. She does not own fancy tights and does not want to tap into her inner child, as a quote on the wall in front of her suggests she will be doing.

She better get a promotion after she breaks the story. She better break the story.

Rosa stands before the reception desk, breathes out and looks up at Frances who is signing people into class. The look that Frances gives Rosa in return makes her feel like her soul is being ruthlessly analysed. Not that Rosa really believes in souls and all that.

Frances softens her gaze and smiles at Rosa before speaking.  
"Welcome. I'm Frances, the owner here, and I'm also guiding this morning's session."

"Right. Frances. Good to meet you. I'm Rosa. I'm not really a yoga person, you know? Just thought I'd give it a shot! You won't make me do the splits, will you?"

"No splits, I promise. It's not so much about flexibility of your body, it's more a suppleness of the mind thing. You'll be great. Drop your things on

your left, studio is down the hall to the right. Class begins in a couple of minutes, so we'll sort the starter forms later."

Rosa nods, then accidentally gives Frances a once over with her eyes before turning towards the studio.

Frances calls after her as she walks away, as if trying to neutralise the up and down she just received, "And Rosa? Good to have you here."

Just over 90 minutes later, Rosa is lying flat on her back, eyes shut. Frances is plucking at a guitar and singing to the class. Rosa would usually judge this situation in a major way, but despite all the wanky spiritual rhetoric she's just been subjected to, it feels like it's worked, whatever 'it' may be.

She's exhausted, but feels all chilled and mellow. She's definitely sweated out the Chinese takeaways she devoured last night while prepping today's pitch. Her shoulders feel all soft and loose, and her hips – well they haven't felt this open since pre-puberty. When the singing stops, she peeks out of one eye in time to see Frances bang a little bowl with a metal stick. Her job really does take her to some weird and wonderful places.

"Shanti, namaste." Frances savours the words before bowing her head dramatically. "Incredible work today everyone – you are looking so powerful! Try and keep that power throughout the day. Remember to drink lots of water and go gentle on the old bod. I'll be out the front if you have any questions. Namaste!"

The class namastes right on back to Frances. They all look like they want to have one-on-ones with her, get a little bit of her love. Not today, Rosa thinks, no, Frances is all hers. She leaps up from her mat. She needs to give Frances a quick pitch and then wait until everyone has left before interviewing her properly.

"Frances, that class— you are seriously talented! I can't believe you spent so long as a corporate, such a waste."

Frances retracts her neck back but then steps forward.

"Sorry Frances, I don't want to sound like I've been looking into you— like prying or anything. It's not about the Video."

Frances sighs. "Rosa, I'm going to have to ask you to leave the studio now. And please don't come back. I can recommend some other yoga teachers in the area who will look after you." There is very little intonation in Frances' voice, which moments ago was so full of life. She obviously gets a lot of people coming to the studio to see their favourite porno live.

“No, no Frances, I’m not here to— I’m a journalist. I want to help. I know there’s something more to the Pearse story. I know MCL has been in discussions with C&Q, I’ve done the due diligence. C&Q specialise in ruthless NDAs. Please just talk to me. I’m here to help.”

## Frances

I always try and take a couple breaths before everyone comes over for their farewell chat, but today I don’t get the chance. One of the new students appears before me. She has pushed her way out of the studio and is standing right up in my face. She’s saying stuff about the Video.

I mean she has gumption, I’ll give her that much. She attacked the class. She was tight as hell but strong. That strength is present in her voice now. She’s talking about her suspicions like she is one of us. Like Arty’s mind has fucked her mind. I could tell there was something up with her from the moment she arrived. The way her eyes flickered as she scanned her surroundings upon entry, and how she looked at me, rather than herself, in the mirror as she practised. It was all off.

I’m not going to let her intimidate me. I never let stuff slide when I worked at MCL, why would I now? I’m also not going to rush to reply to her. I breathe in for six, out for seven, and repeat. I honestly think she could implode if I keep this up. She is exceptionally pink in the cheeks from the practice and my breathing seems to be making it worse. I know that this rage within me, this bitterness, makes me a living, breathing, contradiction. I get it. But I do try and fight it. I put Rosa out of her misery, I speak.

“Rosa. So you’re a journalist yes? Like an actual qualified, practising journalist?”

“Yes.” She nods twice, quickly.

I lower my voice – this space is meant to be free from corporate and legal bullshit.

“Okay, so you’ve done your DD. I’ll add to your evidence or whatever. Take what you need from this: a video of me, which was sexual in nature, was made public on 14 June of last year. The person who released the

Video was never identified. The Video undermined the integrity of my performance and my reputation as a fit and proper employee. The continuation of my employment jeopardised my former employer's client relationships. For this reason, I could not continue my employment with them."

I'm waiting for Rosa to nod or wink, just like the other journalists do. They all scribble down some notes, then move on, thinking the big discovery is that I've signed an NDA to stop me from embarrassing MCL any more than I already have. Not Rosa.

"No. Frances, I'm not here for your NDA spiel. I'm here about whatever Arthur has to do with it all. Your video has to be linked to his affair or whatever they're calling it. Were you, you know, romantic with him too?"

Normally everyone is too focused on my bare ass in the Video to read between the lines. In the same way I was when I signed a document that gave MCL the all clear to fire me. Rosa is reading between the lines. It's terrifying. It's also so very exciting.

"Was there penetration, Frances. With the intern, with you? With the other girl— Clare? What happened with the three of you? Just tell me. They'll never know."

The excitement disappears with that word. I don't know what to say, what I can say, what I want to say. I go on autopilot. I whisper the exact words I used to confidently belt out to difficult clients on MCL conference calls.

"Rosa, call me, in an hour or so. I'll be all ready for you by then."

## Toby

Toby and Frances lie in silence on his sofa. It's not a heavy silence, more a unifying one. Toby notices they're breathing in time. He knows Frances will have already clocked it and it will have some symbolic meaning to her. She looks at him and lets out a tired smile.

"That Rosa woman brought it all back up and I thought it already was up." Frances wipes her eyes with the heels of her hands. "Anyway, where's *your* head at?" She slings her calf over Toby's lap and nestles into his side.



“Just what approach we should take. What we can do with you to make it better. God, it’s these moments where I miss her.”

Toby is only ever referring to one person. He gives Frances’ shin a little tap and then frees himself from beneath it, heading to the kitchen in search of anything with a kick in it. He pulls out a bottle of red from next to some hygienically debatable homebrew kombucha. By the time he’s poured two glasses, Frances has already lit a candle and is lying on her back with her legs up the wall, a couple of books propped under the base of her spine.

“My parasympathetic nervous system is crying out today.”

Toby nods and passes her a glass. He never thought he’d be the kind of guy who knew that meant she needs her hips above her heart to calm her down. He thinks he likes it.

She gets to work on the wine from where she is, tilting her head to the side and trying to pour it into her mouth. Toby doesn’t tell her it’s an expensive bottle and she should probably not let it gush down her chin and onto the floorboards. He would do anything to protect the face she pulls when she finds herself funny, it’s one of the links to pre-video times, when things were fun and easy. He sits on the floor beside her, tries to kiss her as she laughs, and then continues to attempt to start a conversation about their old friend.

“I know it sounds bad, but she just made me feel so much more chill – like I was so aware of the contrast between her and us – she was just so bloody uptight.”

Frances is gargling the wine now. “I think sommeliers should do this – how funny would it be if people did this at fancy restaurants? The taste *is* way stronger than swirling it in your mouth upright”.

He presses on, gently, fighting the urge to shout or shake her, to do anything that might make her listen. “Francey, we need to get into the habit of talking about her, even if she can’t be here. We can’t just erase all our memories of her. That’d be a hell of a lot of my life.”

Toby moves away from Frances. He knows it’ll hurt her, but he’s done tonight. She’s not even trying to see where he’s coming from. She hasn’t for a long time.

He leans against the door frame and rubs his head. “It’s not like she’s dead.”

Frances sits up abruptly and swallows her mouthful. Her eyes tell him

she's about to lose control.

“Well, actually, she may as well be dead. They killed her in my eyes. Who the fuck does that? We were the only ones there after it all happened and we can't even talk about it. Who writes a clause forbidding someone from seeing their best friend? That is not a standard NDA, it isn't.” Frances puts down her glass, so that the base is immersed in the puddle of spilt liquid. “And who the fuck signs a clause like that, Tobes, seriously, how could she do that?”



# Jessica Ornelas



Jessica S. Ornelas is a writer from Funchal, Madeira. She first moved to London to study Digital Film Production, where she focused her interests on creative writing. Her work incorporates elements of isolation, old age and domestic horror, often within a setting of magical realism. Jessica is currently waiting out the pandemic in Portugal with her family and cat.

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## My genres

Magical realism, high fantasy, dark fantasy.

*On an island with no outside contact, a family commits an unforgivable crime: killing a sacred bird. What comes after is the divine punishment of each family member, as their inability to communicate and connect with one another becomes unsustainable.*

*Novel extract*

# Death of the Crane Flowers

**Mirtila**

**or**

**The Killing of the Bird**

In the morning of Joana's wedding, Mirtila saw her grandmother emerge, fully naked, from the chicken coop, blood and feathers stuck to the folds of her leathery body. The day had begun with clear skies and a cool dryness that prickled the hairs on Mirtila's arms. The coop was out in the back of the house, by the avocado tree and the granary.

Mirtila Comodor had been ten years old for a very long time and did not expect to grow any older. As far as her grandmother was concerned, that was more than acceptable. Girls older than ten have a tendency to round out with the gravity of their inner complexities, eating up the world around them in a crunch of too much attention. That was how Joanna, Mirtila's older sister, had found herself rounding out around the belly and pulling António Alegre into her orbit.

Such was the way Leonor described it to Mirtila, who, at her chosen age, had not the propensity for metaphors of her own. Leonor was their grandmother, and she used to say she had lived all her life in the pursuit of

the perfect simile. She told the girls, similes are the truest form of magic; once you know what things are like other things, you find the missing links. The rest was just nonsense, she said, but she still performed all sorts of magic rituals with the same certainty as she did everything else.

Leonor sat on a stool and began to wash herself with a bucketful of water and soap. "Go tell Aida and the others to clean it up, and tell the cooks none of those chickens are for eating," she told Mirtila. "I'm seeing good omens for today." She splashed water on her neck and chest, and the chickens' blood ran pink and diluted between her legs. "Very good omens."

Aida and the other servants picked up the slashed heads, wings and feet off the floor, folding their aprons around bundles of reddened feathers. Mirtila observed them from her swing. It was held by two ropes tied to an acacia branch. Yellow petals fell all around her, sticking to the ground and to the sole of her shoes.

Aunt Alice was shouting Mirtila's name from the porch in the same strident manner she always did. Servants moved behind her, some carrying flowers and others carrying baskets that seemed to be brought from Aníbal's bakery. She was already dressed in her finest black. Looking from afar, the lace all over her dress made her look like she had been attacked by an army of clothing moths. Alice was Leonor's sister and Mirtila and Joana's great-aunt. Mirtila gave herself a few more swings and with the impetus of a grasshopper, she threw herself out between the falling petals, onto the firm grass. Alice was still yelling for her.

Mirtila ran, navigating the familiar obstacle trail of rocks and dried mud to the porch and almost tripped on the last step going up to her aunt. Alice wet her tobacco-stained thumb with her tongue and rubbed Mirtila's nose.

Aunt Alice always had a little red velvet pouch of snuff tied around her wrist. She would often stop whatever she was saying to take a pinch of snuff between her thumb and index finger and stick it up her nose. It used to be that she let her little fingernail grow longer than the others, so she could use it to scoop up the snuff with it and sniff it from there. With time, the nail grew rotten and fell off, taking the top bit of her little finger with it. Grandma Leonor said her nose would eventually follow if she didn't stop the nasty habit. Alice took offense at that and said Leonor's nose would be the one to fall off first, if she didn't stop shoving it in other people's business.

Mirtila dodged another wet thumb attack and her aunt asked her why

she hadn't bathed yet.

"No one told me to," Mirtila said.

"And do you only bathe when others tell you to? Are you a pig? Should we prepare a bed for you in the pigsty so you can sleep there from now on?"

"Maybe I should sleep in your room instead." Mirtila ran away before Alice could strike her.

Aida found Mirtila dropping pebbles into the well, Aida's apron still smelling of the chickens' last bowel movements. Mirtila was then taken to her bedroom and plunged into a bathtub filled with lukewarm water. Her bedroom was mostly white but the pink and yellow dresses on her porcelain dolls gave it some colour. She wanted to ask Aida about the chickens, but Aida snapped at her for not being quiet.

The oldest servant in the house, Aida had been raising Mirtila for years and never seemed to get tired of it. Aida once told the story of how her mother had worked there too and had given birth to her on a table at the kitchens. Before she had the chance to hold Aida in her arms, she had scrubbed the blood and natal fluids off the table and taken it outside to dry under the sun. That night, Aida's mother cooked the best chicken soup the household had ever tasted, and sucked on the leftover bones for better, stronger breastmilk. That's why Aida was so strong and could not stand idleness, she said so of herself.

The preparations for Joana's marriage, however, seemed to be putting some strain on Aida's nerves.

Mirtila was told to go to her mother, clean and perfumed. She was wearing the blue dress with the ribbon that Alice had bought her for her First Communion, but which Leonor had never let happen. The house had many rooms, and the corridors were long, but kept cosy with flower pots, credenzas and random piles of books. Mirtila had scraped her knees many times on the green carpet that ran down the wooden floor.

Mercedes had her back to the door, working on something Mirtila could not see. She was wearing a white lace shirt tucked under a long lilac skirt, with Leonor's old brooch under her chin. Mirtila once had her fingers caned for stealing that brooch for a day and a half. Her mother never shared her clothes and trinkets, not even with Joana.

Mercedes kissed her daughter's curls and sat down on a chair. She had the best room in the house. It got most of the sunlight, which she kept

away with thick, red velvet curtains.

“Let’s go over your role,” she said.

Mirtila was made to demonstrate the carrying of the flowers. She and José Miguel, her three-year-old cousin, were the respective flower girl and ring bearer. José Miguel didn’t have to put in the effort like she did. He had run down the aisle the previous practice in a display of absolute buffoonery and all the women had simply laughed. When Mirtila didn’t smile once during her walk, Alice asked her who she hated more: her mother or her sister.

“You just wanted to embarrass me in front of those women, didn’t you?” she said as she pinched Mirtila’s arm. “Embarrass me, your sister, your mother, your father... Is that what you want?” she pinched harder.

Mercedes was pleased with the way Mirtila walked – pausing at the heels, and how she gracefully held the basket with one hand and spread phantom flowers down the imaginary aisle with the other.

“I just wish your smile wouldn’t seem so forced, dear,” she said. The way her mother said it, so gentle and kind, made Mirtila swear to herself she would smile with pleasure when the time came to make her proud. “Now go to your father, I hear he has been looking for you,” Mercedes turned back to what she had been working on before. Mirtila noticed she was trimming the bride’s veil almost in half, trying to fix a rip across the middle.

She found her father in the library. His hand was buried in one of the baskets from Aníbal’s bakery, rummaging for pastries. In his other hand, he held a cigarette that he took to and from his mouth like he was throwing kisses. Some of her uncles and aunts were there too, with their respective spouses and children.

“Hello Fernando!” She spotted her cousin standing away from his parents, looking at the books on the shelves. Of all her cousins, Mirtila liked him the best, even though he was already twenty years old. She had told her mother they would be married when she was older. Her mother had laughed and said that would be fine, indeed.

José Fernando smiled at her and gave her a small pat on the head. She wanted to stay there with him and talk about the spinning wheels at the quarry where he worked. He had told her he’d take her in one of the baskets one day.

The spinning wheels were giant constructions of wicker that spun down



the hills to the coast. In the hollow of the wheels there were baskets filled with stone, people and other things that remained immobile as the outside of the structure rolled at high speeds. Fernando's job was to drive these wheels. His mother was not happy at all that he had a job, much less that one.

Before she had the chance to initiate a conversation with him, her father became aware of her presence.

"Daughter!" he called her. "My beautiful, perfect, sweet daughter." Mirtila thought that sometimes he lengthened sentences so he'd hear his own voice for longer. "Did your mother tell you I wanted to see you? Father has a favour he wants to ask of you." He had powdered sugar all around his lips and she recoiled from the cigarette-stained fingers trying to wrap themselves around her arm. "I want you to go to grandma, yes? Father wants you to go to grandma and tell her to make you an anti-sickness spell, all right? Tell her you feel sick and if you don't have the anti-sickness spell before the wedding, you won't be able to walk the ring down the aisle, all right?"

"I'm the flower girl," she said.

"Right, remember what I'm asking you. Anti-sickness spell. And don't tell her I sent you!" he sent her off with a pat on her lower back.

She looked over at José Fernando on her way out. He pursed his lips in a pitying half smile.

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Mirtila did not plan on going straight to her grandma, she decided she had better things to do. Her father had asked her for similar favours before. Her mother and grandmother were not fond of her father's eating habits, which were closer to that of a pig than a person. Leonor would know what the spell was for and not give it to him.

Leaving the library, Mirtila made for the swing. Instead of walking back through the corridor, she left the main house and walked through the herb garden at the back. The wedding was to start at four o'clock; she still had some time left.

No one ever went to that part of the villa and no one ever asked her about the swing. When it rained, they asked her about her wet dress. In Midsummer, they asked her about the sunburns on her ears and shoulders. When her tutor complained about her long absences to the privy, they asked her about her unwillingness to learn. But the swing

remained a right, an entitlement that had become so essential to her person that neither herself or others would separate the two in their minds.

Mirtila looked south, to the horizon over the fields of wheat. The little waves of heat trembling in the distance made her more aware of the sound of crickets, and of the soft wind breathing through the grass.

The bustling of the servants between the main house and the patio was at an enough distance to have a calming effect on her. Lulled by the separation of the here and there, by the comfort of life happening somewhere else, Mirtila closed her eyes and leaned back towards the ground. Her long brown hair brushed the grass in an act of love as her face relaxed into a smile. It smelled like spring.

"Aida and Alice are going to give you a whipping if they have to wash your hair again today." José Fernando was standing near the swing, hands in his pockets.

Mirtila sat back straight.

"Sorry, did I startle you?" he asked.

"No." Mirtila was happy to see him there.

"You've never told me who made you this swing," he said.

"Father did, when I was born. Mother told me. Do you want to see how high I can go?" she asked.

"Sure," he said, even though he didn't look very excited.

Mirtila pushed harder and harder with her feet until both her dress and hair were flying wild. José Fernando stood there with an unaffected smile.

She stopped the swing, pressing her white slippers against the dusty ground.

"Did you see?" she asked.

"Yes, very impressive," he said, "listen..."

She listened.

"Where's your sister?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"How is she? Have you seen her today?"

"I don't know." Mirtila shrugged her shoulders. "She's always in her room now, I never see her." She did not like it when José Fernando talked about Joana.

When he was ten, like Mirtila, they would play together whenever his parents visited and brought him along. Mirtila counted the days he was

gone and learned to look for him in the dusty trail on the horizon, as his father drove the carriage towards the house on every other Sunday.

José Fernando used to like to play girl games with her. They would go from hopscotch, to puppet shows and play make-believe with her dolls. He used to let her dress him up, paint beards and moustaches on his face, so he could pretend to be a prince in her enactments of plays and love stories. He did this until the year of his twelfth birthday. Joana was twelve too, but she never played with them. Sometimes she'd approach them with her own dolls, but soon lost interest when Mirtila and José Fernando's methods got too wild for her. She preferred playing on her own.

That was until José Fernando stopped wanting to play dress up, or hopscotch. His interests focused on Joana instead, and on the books she carried with her everywhere. They would sit for hours under the grove and read until it got too dark to read outside. Then, they'd read indoors by the hearth until José Fernando's parents, loud and befuddled by brown liquor, drove him away in a disappearing trail of dust into the night.

One evening, when José Fernando and Joana were sixteen, Mirtila, feeling betrayed by José Fernando's abandonment, decided to make her displeasure known. The entire thing culminated in Mirtila pulling Joana's hair and kicking José Fernando in the shins. Their mother had Aida drag Mirtila to bed, to the sound of their father and José Fernando's parent's laughter and the clinking of empty bottles falling and rolling down the floor.

One day, she made a point of following him and her sister on one of their retreats to the orchard. When she saw them there, kissing, she realised how much they had grown together and learned to let them go. Mirtila never bothered them again after that day, and she never felt jealous either. Because even back then, she knew Joana would never marry him.

José Fernando stood by the swing and Mirtila scratched her nails against the twisting of the ropes.

"Have you met António?" He tried to grab one of the swing ropes.

Mirtila pushed the swing back from him. "Yes, he comes to the house sometimes," she said.

"Do you like him?" he asked.

"I don't know." She shrugged her shoulders again. "I think he's

handsome.”

“Is he nice to Joana? Does your mother like him?”

Before Mirtila had the chance to shrug her shoulders again Aida called them from the porch.

“Mirtila! José! Your grandmother is asking for you! Both of you! Come now!”

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Leonor was waiting in her bedroom. She told José Fernando to wait outside while she talked to Mirtila. The room was cluttered to no end. Birds in cages made a ruckus of cawing, cooing, singing, chirping, tweeting, hooting, shrieking and crying. Fluttering feathers everywhere. A very frail-looking raven sat on a wooden beam and shat on the floor, missing Mirtila’s hair by an inch.

“That one is vengeful,” Leonor said.

“Why?” Mirtila asked.

Leonor had been sitting by a desk, its pale wood engraved with a variety of symbols and letters that Mirtila could not read. Leonor closed the heavy tome she was writing on and threw the pen over it. She got up with some difficulty, her upper body too large for her skinny legs. Mirtila knew those legs very well, with their age spots and their thick blue veins.

Mirtila watched as Leonor walked over to a shelf full of jars, pots and books, and took a small glass horse from within the clutter. She brought it over and held it in front of Mirtila’s eyes. There seemed to be nothing special about it.

“He’s been angry since I took his voice,” the old woman said, her long nails scratching the glass, “I was going to make you a miniature crystal carousel when you were born, filled with the music of birds.” She held the horse tighter in her palm, bringing it closer to her chest. “But once the sounds were trapped inside the glass, there was no way to hear them but by breaking them,” she threw the horse against the wall and a sonorous caw filled the room.

*(to be continued)*



# Kelly Jeanne Karl



Kelly Jeanne Karl came to writing later in life, after having spent sixteen years working in a corporate career. She has a deep interest in the impacts of trauma on the human experience and loves to explore this in her writing. She lives in London with her two cats and in her free time enjoys random walkabouts discovering neighbourhoods and exploring in nature.

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## My genres

Life-writing, literary fiction, romance.

*Minnesota, the collection, consists of three short stories which follow Ben through the decades, illustrating childhood trauma's impact on his life and relationships. It showcases his awakening journey, the peaks and troughs, and lessons learned, whilst the messiness of healing transforms him. 'Minnesota', the first story in the collection, is where it all began. It is a pared and truncated version of the original.*

## *Short story extract*

# Minnesota

Ben was nine the summer they spent at Woman Lake. He, his mother and his little sister, Carrie, were traveling in their brown 1981 Cutlass Supreme. It was a long drive from Saint Cloud where they lived. During the long drive, Ben thought about Billy. Billy was his best friend who had moved in next door mid-way through the year, and Billy and Ben bonded immediately over their love for catching unsuspecting creatures in the yard. They kept them for a day or two and ended up letting them go because they were both too soft hearted to watch them suffer in a plastic bucket.

Billy had an older brother named Jeff, who played football. Ben was relieved to be getting away from Jeff; but fretted that Billy would get closer to the other kids in the neighbourhood and not like him anymore by the time he got back.

Billy had been acting strange towards Ben ever since that day six weeks ago when Jeff made him 'suck it'. The boys were watching TV at Billy's house after school. He couldn't forget the horror as Jeff eyed them both up before he pushed Ben onto his knees and stuck it in his face. Billy watched with wide eyes, holding a bag of potato chips, and scarcely breathing as his brother shook his cock in his friend's tearstained face.

Jeff laughed and said, "Come on, don't be a pussy! Do it like you like it!"

Ben repeatedly tried to forget the salty taste and the way he gagged and had to try hard not to bite. He should have just bitten it, but he was too scared of what Jeff would do. He was most scared that he would tell everyone that Ben was a pussy.

That memory, which made him bow his head and want to disappear, would pop into his mind out of nowhere and he would suck in his breath and try to shake it away. But it would rear up at unexpected times, like when he was watching TV, or just walking to class from the playground. Most of the car ride to Woman Lake he spent shoving that memory into his belly every other minute.

Ben and Billy had never talked about it, but something shifted between them that day. Tears pricked behind Ben's eyelids. He fought them off but was not able to shake the feeling of insecurity about Billy and his other friends giving him the silent treatment in the school playground next to the orange merry-go-round a few days later. Their small arms were flexed as they gripped the spinning apparatus while Ben approached, anxious because Billy hadn't waited for him and was already playing with other kids.

"It's Friday! Italian dunkers for lunch!" Ben shouted after he had been standing there for a few moments, trying to get their attention. The spinning came to halt and the boys retreated, not acknowledging Ben.

"Did you hear something?" Billy said to the yellow haired boy who was wearing a shirt that looked like the one that Charlie Brown always wore.

"No. I didn't hear anything. It must be the wind," the boy answered. "Come on, let's go! Italian Dunkers for lunch!"

Just then, Carrie pelted Ben in the arm shouting, "Slug bug! What colour?"

Ben rubbed his arm and glared at his little sister. Her curly blonde hair was in pigtails and she was wearing a pink tee-shirt printed with Sleeping Beauty. She laughed and hit him again, so he pinched her side and she shrieked,

"Mom! Ben's picking on me again!"

Their mother turned on the radio and Blondie came on, although she had to fiddle with the dial to get it to play without too much static. Seventy miles later they pulled into the driveway of the lake home that their mother had inherited. Ben had only been there once before because his mother had rarely taken the kids to visit, especially after the divorce. Ben's



dad had been the one who had tried to get her to cultivate a relationship between her parents and the kids. But he was remarried now with a new family and Ben and Carrie didn't see much of them.

Tall pines lined the asphalt drive which wound through the woods for a quarter of a mile before ending in front of a large log cabin, circa 1934. It had an a-frame roof and shutters around the windows that were painted green, but in need of a few new coats. There was a fire pit to the left of the cabin and Ben remembered the raging inferno they had created the last time they were there. Carrie was probably too little to recall, but Ben remembered his grandfather burning masses of brush from a tree that had come down in a storm the previous year and had been drying in the shed until then. He told Ben he'd been saving it just for him. His grandfather put lighter fluid on it to make it roar, and then stoked it with cardboard from beer and soda pop cases. As the evening went on, the voracity of the flames died down, but the heat was still intense in the centre of the ring. They put empty cans into the coals and Ben was amazed to watch them turn brown, warp and wither into nothing. Then they dropped in glass bottles which didn't seem to change at first, but Ben was excited remembering how the next morning, amongst the ashes which were still warm when he poked them with a stick, he found blobs of glass which no longer resembled bottles.

Ben and Carrie hopped out of the car as soon as their mother cut the engine and ran down to the lake. She called after them to be careful, but they barely heard her. The beach at their stretch of lakeshore was not sandy like it was just a short distance down the way. There was a mix of different sized rocks at the threshold where water met land, and the ones under the surface of the water were slippery.

The sun was low on the opposite side of the lake, making the clouds on the horizon turn a dark shade of pink, and there were fishing boats dotting the surface. What had previously been a calm evening, with only the sound of softly spoken voices carrying across the lake and the slosh of water lapping against the sides of boats, was overwhelmed by the voices of two children hollering as they leapt across the sparse lawn and over the rocks into the water.

\* \* \*

The summer was hot. Some days the pine needles and birch leaves would crunch, and dust would fly up around Ben's feet as he looked for fort building materials. Other days, they were matted down and had an earthy smell. When Ben wasn't scouring every inch of the dense woodland between their cabin and the neighbour's, he was splashing around on the shore and building contraptions to catch frogs. Carrie spent most of her time trying to get Ben to play with her. But the only time he enjoyed playing with Carrie was when they built forts together.

One morning when Ben walked his careful step through the woods, he noticed a section of brush that was more densely packed than the rest. Within the dense patch, there was a spot that was thinner than the rest that looked like a portal. He crouched down to crawl through and once on the other side, he stood and brushed some twigs off his knees and noted the indents and redness that crawling among them had made. He looked up and gaped as he saw what appeared to be a fort created by nature herself.

The space he was standing in was a small clearing approximately four feet in diameter. The brush around the clearing was thickest on the side where he had burrowed through but the remainder, although not as thick as the rest, made it feel like a secret space that was especially put there for him to find. There were two spots where the brush was thinner, and when Ben examined them further, he found that they were, although a bit overgrown, corridors that lead several feet back to two additional, although less defined, clearings.

He paced back and forth on the ground of the main space, which was so bare it was simply hard dirt with a slight sheen to it, and some cracks laced with ant hills. He started to assemble in his mind the work he needed to do to get the place polished up.

He could hear Carrie on the edge of the woods calling him, and at first, he ignored her. She was persistent and eventually found her way through the thick wall and into his exciting new space.

"Ooh," she said. "It's neat in here! We could build a fort!"

"It already *is* a fort," he said. "But it needs some work."

He dismissed her and started stomping down the thorny weeds that obscured the pathways leading to one of the rooms. The weeds continued to pop back up and after giving it a couple more attempts, he went to the shed and retrieved his grandmother's garden gloves and rose pruners. The

gloves had been white with pink roses but now were dingy brown and slightly hard.

After clearing the pathway to the first room, he decided it would be cool if there was a shelter to sleep in. He remembered from school how the Indians had made teepees from wooden poles and animal hides. He thought, maybe, he could make something similar from branches and one of the old musty bedspreads, that were plentiful in the linen closet in the cabin. But after further consideration, he realized it wouldn't be a good solution for rainy days. So, he decided to make the shelter entirely out of sticks and build an a-frame roof that he could bind together using the garden wire he saw next to the gloves and pruners in the shed. A couple of layers on top of each other might keep at least light rain at bay.

Back in the woods, he went about gathering a variety of different size branches and collected them in an old red plastic sled. The sled was strung with some yellow rope that was fraying in places but would work fine for his needs. Once he filled the sled with as many sticks as would fit without falling off, he shimmied through the hole into the fort and pulled the sled and branches in behind him. He was surprised to find Carrie there, with a beach pail she had filled with rocks of varying sizes, and he saw she had already gathered several piles of rocks which she had begun to use to line the edge of the main clearing.

"Wow," he said. "Great idea."

"I'm making it look prettier," she said.

They worked silently together for several hours and Carrie continued to add little touches. After distributing the rocks around the circumference of the large clearing, she then placed sticks, alternating short and long, and bits of moss, along the sides of the corridor that lead to the 'room' where Ben was working.

Meanwhile, Ben had managed to bind sticks into two planes that he was about to prop up to create the shelter. His hands were streaked with dried blood and his fingers were worn from working repetitively with the wire, and he took a moment to try to rub some of the dried blood off. He had learned not to lick it off as he couldn't stand the rusty taste of blood on his tongue.

He decided to wash them off in the lake and when he went to exit the fort, Carrie was deep in concentration on her sticks and moss. A chipmunk was crouching three feet away, watching her intently with shiny black eyes.

She had a special way of connecting with nature that even Ben at his young age was aware of. He was even slightly jealous of how animals and birds would hover near her as if they could sense that she was the most gentle of souls and they didn't seem bothered by her exuberance. This was the first time Ben had seen her so focused and thoughtful, and he suddenly saw her in a different light. It seemed strange that this was the annoying little girl who had bugged him all summer.

When they finished the fort the next afternoon, they played Go Fish. They sat on the branch in the main space and Carrie wiggled away, excited to have Ben's full attention. She told him about her friends she missed back in St Cloud, and how Celia's dad bought her a dog for her birthday and that she hoped that their mom would let them get a dog too, but she knew that Ben was allergic and that she forgave him but hoped that one day they could still get a dog. She talked about how she was planning to dress up as a fairy for Halloween, and that their mom was going to do her hair, and she was going to be the most beautiful but also the most kind fairy ever, and she wanted to know what Ben was going to go as, and said that he should go as Batman because he was always so grumpy and quiet lately and it must be because he had a lot of important things on his mind, like saving the world... Ben humoured her for a while, but he was already thinking about the next fort. It turned out that all the fun was in creating and once it was finished, he was antsy to begin anew.

The day it happened it was still, and there was a scent of algae in the air. Ben sat on a rock with his feet in the water and stuck his fingers a couple of inches into the sand. The water was cold, and the sand felt gritty for a layer before becoming soft muck. His fingers were coated with a sheen of black when he pulled them out.

Just then Carrie came running down the hill shrieking, "Ben! Mom said it's time for lunch in fifteen minutes!"

They were going to town after lunch, which would inevitably be peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on Wonder Bread and little bags of Cheetos, just like it was most other days. He would eat, not because he was hungry, but because he knew that his mom wouldn't take them to town until they did. The local gas station and bait shop was his favourite place to visit, with the tanks of different sorts of fish, and all the colourful fishing lures. He especially loved the jelly-like worms in different colours with glitter in them. They were fun to touch and he loved how some of them were

slightly sticky and squishy and some of them were shiny and hard.

He remembered watching particles in the tank water illuminated by the sunshine coming in through the store window, and the crack the porcelain 'haunted house', resting on the almost glowing green rocks at the bottom of the tank. The fish in that tank were tiny and although the crack was not part of the design, the fish were using it as if it were so. Of course, they didn't know the difference, he thought. They didn't even know they were in a tank.

Ben put his nose against the glass and noticed that everything looked bigger like that. He looked towards the top of the water and from his vantage point he observed the ripples caused from the vent in the ceiling, which was blowing cold air down. The ripples looked magical as they stirred the surface and they looked smooth and big from below but were small and jagged from the top. The fish were oblivious to the ripples, just like they were to being in a tank, and Ben wondered if they felt pain when they were put onto a fishing hook to be used as bait. The only way to get out of the tank and into the real lake required them to die, unless they somehow were able to get unhooked and live happily ever after in the lake. Ben hoped that happened to some of them. He imagined a small school of bait fish, hiding out under rocks to avoid being eaten by the larger fish that they had originally been meant to be food for.

Carrie informed Ben that they still had fifteen minutes to play before lunch, but he was feeling that nagging in his belly and it was consuming all his focus.

"Let's play hide and seek," Carrie said.

"No," said Ben.

"Bet you can't catch me," she said, and took off running along the shore and into the woods. When he didn't chase after her, she came back and started walking circles around him and wiping out the patterns he was drawing in the sand with a branch. Rather than heading up the hill to the cabin for lunch, he went into the woods and began to climb a tree. Carrie ran after him.

"Leave me alone, Carrie," he said.

"But Ben, come on! Let's play hide and seek!" she said.

"No. Go up for lunch. Tell Mom I'll be there in a bit."

The panicky feeling crept into his chest and his breath quickened. He stuffed it down and kept climbing.

“I’m gonna catch up with you. You can’t get away from me!”

“Knock it off, Carrie. You’re too small. Just leave me alone and go get lunch.”

The tree was shaking as Ben ascended higher and he was approximately twelve feet up and was losing his battle against the visceral memory when he heard her shriek, and a crack as she fell to the ground. His breath stopped and his heart pounded. He froze for a few moments, praying to God what he thought had happened hadn’t just happened and he panicked when he didn’t hear her crying. He scrambled down and found her lying still in a twisted position, her head facing up and a pool of blood forming underneath it before soaking into the ground.

Ben’s heart fluttered and his pulse was loud in his ears. He stood at the bottom of the tree, staring, shaking his head, and fighting the urge to run deeper into the woods. She should have known better than to follow him up the tree. He had told her before that she needed to take her time and be careful where she put her feet. She should have known not to be so careless. How could this be happening? It couldn’t be. She would start to move soon. She would be okay. But he continued to watch her still body in horror and tears leaked silently down his face before his chest shook and he started screaming, “Mom! Mom! Mommeeee!”



# Leah Francis



Leah writes literary fiction, short stories and plays. During her undergraduate degree she self-published *Watermarks*, a collection of vignettes based on her year studying in Venice. She has co-written a true crime play, *Who Put Bella in the Wych Elm*, which was performed in London in 2018. She is about to embark on a new adventure in Munich, where she will be working in Foreign Rights and finishing her novel, *The Undertow*.

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## My genres

Literary fiction, horror, fantasy.



*Called back to the grey seaside town she grew up in, Steph has to face what she's been running from for the past two years, her sister's apparent suicide. Haunted by memories, Steph begins to unravel her sister's life and must decide whether or not she really wants to know the truth.*

## *Novel extract*

# The Undertow

The sky had turned purple. A bruise swollen with rain. Steph watched the first drop pucker the page of her book and closed it. The whole beach had turned grey, and a wind whipped a hat from someone's head and tumbled it along the shoreline. Gerri was still in the water. Steph called to her, but Gerri didn't hear, or pretended not to.

By the time Steph was ankle deep the first crack of thunder boomed across the bay and the raindrops were falling heavily. Frenzied ripples on the water's surface cascaded into one another. Gerri waved. She was wearing their mum's old bracelet. The one Steph had noticed was missing that morning. The one Gerri had promised not to wear, because it was too big for her. It happened slowly. As Gerri dropped her arm back down to her side, the bracelet was caught by a swell of water, pulled off as if by the fingers of a delicate thief. 'No.' Steph ran forwards, but she was too far away, and the water swirled round her legs, weighed them down and pulled her off balance. Gerri turned, unbearably slowly, and stared at the bracelet floating directly in front of her, within reach. She didn't even stretch out a hand, just watched the band of silver lit up by a flash of lightening, before being taken by the current, pulled under, out of sight.

'What are you doing?' Steph shouted, when she finally reached her sister. She plunged her hands deep, desperate to feel the smooth metal, the little chip along one edge where the bracelet had been dropped on the slate kitchen floor. But she felt only icy liquid slipping through her fingers.

The water was thick with silt, churned up by the ever-strengthening pull of the tide.

‘It was an accident.’

‘We have to find it.’

But it was gone. The thunder was above them now and the beach had emptied. Their towels, the pile of clothes and their books were all soaked, wet sand scuffed over them by the wind and hurried feet.

‘We have to go,’ Gerri said.

Steph was too angry to look at her. She didn’t speak to her as they struggled into their wet clothes, teeth chattering, or as they walked over the pebble ridge, through the now empty car park and to the bus stop. The rain got heavier. The smell of cooling tarmac rose up from the road.

‘Let’s just walk,’ Gerri said, when they’d waited half an hour and the bus still hadn’t come.

‘We agreed to share that bracelet,’ Steph said, halfway up the first hill. It was easier to talk to Gerri when they were walking side by side, and she didn’t have to look at her.

‘She always let me borrow her things.’

‘And lose them,’ Steph muttered.

‘Maybe she wanted it back.’

Steph clenched her jaw. It was true then, just as she’d thought, Gerri had done it on purpose.

It took Gerri a while to notice that Steph had stopped walking. When she turned around Steph took Gerri’s book, towel and wet swimsuit from the rucksack and threw them into the road. A car honked but didn’t slow down as it ground them into the wet tarmac. They stared at each other and Steph felt another surge of rage as Gerri’s face remained blank, like always. She started walking again and Gerri waited for the road to clear, then picked up her things and bundled them over her arm. The book was wrecked. She stayed a few paces behind all the way home, and Steph didn’t look back at her. She didn’t think she had ever hated her older sister more.

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Gerri had been dead for almost two years. Her friends were planning a memorial to mark the date and though Steph had put off replying to the invite for as long as she could, she knew she had to go back. Her train from

Paddington was booked for the next morning. She had finally emptied her rucksack from the trip to Rome a few weeks ago and laid it on her bed ready to be packed. But it would have to wait until later; she was late for work, again.

She struggled into her jacket whilst locking the front door and walked straight into the path of a woman and a tiny dog. It was gasping in the morning sun, struggling frantically to keep up. Steph ignored the angry noise the woman directed at her, wondering if there was a story there, about the cruelty of breeding tiny dogs as accessories. She was sure it had been done, but maybe not from a London-centric angle. She pushed the thought from her mind and dialled Moira's number whilst power walking towards the station.

'Hi, it's Steph,' she said, as soon as Moira picked up. 'I'm supposed to be meeting Trish this morning for our final interview. Could you let her know I'm running a little late?' The line was silent and for a moment Steph thought she might have been talking to the voicemail. Then Moira replied.

'Trish isn't here, Steph. I'm afraid she hasn't shown up for her placement all week. I was about to call you myself and tell you not to bother coming down.'

'Oh.' Steph stopped just outside the entrance to the tube, said goodbye to Moira and tried to decide what to do. Her feature about the Into Work programme run by the council was almost finished. She had interviewed five participants, first as a group and then individually, about how the programme had helped them find jobs and proper housing. The individual interview with Trish was the last piece she needed to complete the article. If she didn't get it today, she wouldn't be able to work on it when she was back home, she'd miss the deadline.

Steph knew she should probably just get to the office. Maybe she could finish the article without the final interview or cut Trish from it altogether. But there was something about her. Steph hadn't wanted to admit it to herself that first day, but Trish reminded her of Gerri, at least how she was at Trish's age.

Her phone buzzed and she checked it quickly, thinking it might be Moira, telling her Trish had arrived after all, but it was Matthew:

*Sorry about this morning. I'll make it up to you later, okay? X*

She stuffed the phone back in her pocket. She couldn't think about that right now. It was a warm morning and sweat prickled at her hairline. Her

black pencil skirt felt too tight, and she knew the white blouse underneath her jacket would have those awful, see-through sweat patches when she took it off. That was another thing she wanted to pitch, the restrictive nature of women's work clothes, the cost of decent material, the effect the dress code had on inclusivity in the workplace. But she wasn't sure her boss Janine, who herself wore 5-inch heels to the office every day and tutted at anyone in flats, would go for it. Especially if Steph didn't deliver her current article on time.

She made a decision and started walking.

She dodged past other harried office workers running for buses and soon reached the grey tower block Trish had mentioned in the group interview. She could see someone who might be Trish, bundled in the doorway. She hurried towards her then stopped a few feet away. Someone had just exited the building and scuttled away from the person on the floor. Something was wrong. She forced herself to move forward, hand stretched out till she touched the dirty, grey sleeping bag and pulled it back from the face. Her lips were chapped, slightly parted, skin of her closed eyelids purple black as if bruised, the rest of her face tinged blue. She was dead, Steph was sure of it. She was touching a dead body. But then, something almost worse happened. As she pressed Trish's shoulder a low rattling, sucking noise came from the girl. A shuddering breath and Trish opened her eyes, then leant forward, spluttering up reddish sick.

'Shit,' Steph heard herself say, as she jumped back, the acid smell of bile rising up towards her. She thought about just running away, pretending she was never here, but she had stumbled backwards into a man who'd been peering over her shoulder, and knew she couldn't just leave. He had called an ambulance and was now crouched beside Trish, so Steph leant against a nearby wall and closed her eyes as the sirens came closer. It just brought Trish's face back into focus. There had been a second of confusion as she'd opened her eyes, before a painful realisation. Steph could tell from that look; this was no accidental overdose. She took a deep breath trying to push the thought away, but then Trish became Gerri the last time Steph had seen her. The coffin open, the paint unable to hide the mottled skin underneath.

She reached for her phone, thinking she should call Moira, or Janine, but it slipped through her fingers and fell into the road. She picked it up, grazing her hand on the remains of a broken bottle, but didn't feel any

pain. The screen was cracked. The photo of her, Matthew, and her best friend Lara now criss-crossed with spiderweb lines.

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Janine waited until that afternoon to speak to Steph, who had spent most of the day locked in the bathroom, in the cubicle at the end of the row. After holding it together until she got to the office, she'd found she couldn't stop crying. And she never cried in front of people. At one point Kate came in and knocked on the door.

'Janine wants to see you in her office. When you're ready,' she said.

Steph waited for her to leave, then got up from the closed toilet seat and forced herself out into the main bathroom. She ran the tap and washed the dried blood from her hand. The water was numbingly cold, and she let it run for as long as she could bear, concentrating on it, the dull throb, and the sound as it swirled down the plughole. She rested both hands on the sink, and tilted her head back, trying to relieve the tension in her shoulders, then caught her own eye in the mirror.

*Pull it together.*

The bathroom door banged open again and she turned quickly towards the hand dryer, letting the sound fill the room for a few moments before she slipped out, and knocked on Janine's door.

'Steph, take a seat.' Janine directed her to the green upholstered chair opposite her desk. 'Why have you been hiding all morning?'

Steph's jaw was quivering, and she could feel fresh tears pricking her already red rimmed eyes, but she held them back and tried hard not to blink. The image of Trish in the doorway seemed burned into her retinas.

'It was just a shock, seeing her like that.'

Janine raised an eyebrow. 'But she's alive, right? Do I need to take you off the story? You seem upset, and Kate has already offered to pick up where you left off.'

'I'm fine, honestly,' Steph said. She found herself clenching her fists at the thought of Kate taking the story from her. This one was meant to be different, and maybe even get her her next promotion. Lead feature writer. She had been sure, just that morning, that once the final interview was in place it was going to be perfect. Balanced, but moving, the voices of all the interviewees shining through, the little flourishes in style reminding

the reader that the author of the piece, Steph, knew her way around words.

Janine shook her head, apparently disappointed. 'It's not just today though is it, Steph? You've not been yourself recently. Why were you there in the first place?' More than a hint of frustration came through Janine's usually careful tone.

It was true. Steph knew she had been off for weeks. Since she'd got the invitation. She had been doing her best, but she'd snapped at her colleagues more than usual, been late to work, lost track of time during her lunch break so she ended up back at her desk much later than everyone else, particularly as most didn't even bother to take a lunch break. Just ate Pret salads, or Boots meal deals, at their desks. That's what she usually did too, but since receiving the invite she hadn't been able to focus for more than a couple of hours at a time.

'I just wanted the final interview for the piece,' Steph said.

'Speaking of.' Janine sighed and leant back in her swivel chair. 'I've read what you've written so far, and it's just...' She looked around the room as if the right word would come to her, then clicked her fingers. 'Not snappy enough, where's the usual zing. What's going on, Steph?'

'I'm telling you, I'm fine.' Steph could hear the desperation in her own voice. 'Please, just let me finish the story.'

'Well, I suppose this new development will probably help.'

'Sorry?' Steph wasn't sure how a young girl almost dying on a doorstep was a good thing.

'This is a government led programme Steph, taxpayers' money goes towards subsidising that girl's wages. Don't you think the public will want to know that their well-earned money is fuelling dangerous drug addictions? When you first came to me you would have spotted this angle the moment you set eyes on her.' She surveyed Steph critically.

She was probably right. Steph remembered when she'd been an intern, making copies, filing paperwork, spending endless hours setting up the online archiving system. Janine hadn't even seemed to notice she was there, hadn't so much as said hello when they passed in the kitchen. Until Steph had written that story about home.

She had somehow found the courage to knock on Janine's door, a printed copy quivering in her hands. Janine had looked bored skimming the first few sentences, but then something changed. She put down her

coffee and laid the paper on the desk, leaning over it, a smile cracking her face as her eyes reached the halfway point.

‘This is savage,’ she said gleefully, glancing up at Steph. ‘Brutal stuff. What would you call this?’

‘An opinion piece, I guess.’ Steph felt queasy, she had never expected such a good reaction from Janine. ‘About the hidden undercurrents of a picturesque seaside town.’

Janine nodded, clearly impressed. She straightened the paper and looked Steph in the eye. Her gaze was penetrating, as if she could see everything Steph was feeling as she stood there, waiting.

‘If we print this, everyone you know will read it.’

‘So what?’ Steph shrugged. ‘It’s the truth.’

Janine grinned, getting to her feet. ‘You’ve got guts, that’s for sure. You know, I think a new position has opened up, a permanent one. The pay’s not great, but better than your intern expense allowance.’ She held out her hand and Steph took it without hesitation, unable to believe her luck. ‘I was actually thinking I could run the piece without her,’ Steph said, and Janine’s face darkened. ‘Stick to the original story; a good programme helping those in need.’ For a while now Steph had been trying to move away from her usual articles; overly critical reviews, savage takedowns of social media influencers. She’d thought this piece could be different, serious, something that made readers really think, instead of momentarily shocking them, before they forgot every word she had written.

Janine was shaking her head. ‘What is it you always say you’re going for, Steph?’

‘The truth?’ Steph said uncertainly.

‘Exactly.’ Janine got to her feet. Their time was up. ‘I want *that* truth, the one where money is being thrown down the drain, the one where young people waste government hand-outs on avocado toast, and lattes, and in this case, hard drugs. Like I said, if you’re not up to the challenge I can always ask Kate to step in.’

Steph shook her head. ‘I just need a little more time, to figure out how to include... what happened.’

‘Fine, a few days and then I want something with spark, with that Steph sassiness I’m used to, alright? And no using your holiday as an excuse.’

Steph cringed at the word. It wasn’t a holiday. Not really.

On the sofa in their one bed flat, Matthew listened without interrupting, glad that the argument from that morning had been forgotten.

Steph drained her glass and went over to the kitchenette behind the sofa, towards the half full bottle. Matthew followed her and they stood in the small space between the oven and the sink.

'I'm sorry you had such a bad day,' he said. 'I can't imagine.'

She topped up his glass and refilled hers to the brim, then slipped her arms around his waist, breathing in the smell of the white musk shower gel he always used.

'I don't get it though,' he went on, talking into her hair. 'Gerri wasn't a junkie.'

She jerked away, reaching for her glass again. 'Trish isn't a *junkie*, she's alone, and she needs help.' She took a breath, trying to hold the tears back. Twice in one day, after two years.

'Maybe now she'll get it.' He started to reach for her again, but she shook her head.

'Not from the Into Work programme, seeing as Janine wants me to take them down in my article.' Steph took another gulp of wine. 'And Gerri could have been,' she added, folding her arms, daring him to argue.

'You would have known.'

She shrugged. 'Maybe. There were a lot of things I didn't know though.'

'And isn't Janine right, you love writing those articles, pointing out all the flaws in everything.'

'It doesn't feel right this time though. The programme is a good one, this was just a horrible mistake.'

He shook his head. 'It's the memorial, isn't it? Causing all this stress. And what else?' He stroked her cheek, as if hoping his touch would open her up.

She didn't know whether or not to tell him. It hadn't just been Trish, who reminded her of Gerri, there had been another girl on the tube two mornings ago, swinging from the handrail by her neck, skin death-blue, eyes bulging, until Steph had blinked.

And the dream.

They had started the night she got the invite. Steph woke up to find Gerri, soaked and dripping, standing at the foot of their bed. Matthew had



been asleep beside her. She couldn't move, knew she couldn't wake him if she tried. Gerri had stood there watching her for what felt like hours, trying to communicate something through the look in her eyes.

She had woken the next morning with a coldness in her stomach, a certainty that the nightmares were going to start again, and never stop. But she forced the thought away as the bedroom filled with pale London light, told herself she was different now. It was one nightmare; it didn't mean anything.

'Just, not sleeping well.'

Matthew sighed, apparently relieved. 'Come here.' He took the glass from her hand and set it down, then pulled her back towards the sofa. 'You're obviously tired. Maybe going home to see your gran will actually make you feel better. With a bit of space, you'll get this article written in no time, and Janine will love it, like she always does.'

She shifted to look at him. In the four years that they had been together he had never suggested going home might make her feel better.

'I don't want to go back there,' she said. 'Will you come with me?' It was his turn to look surprised. He had never visited her hometown. She had never asked him to come, not even for Gerri's funeral. Had, in fact, told him he couldn't.

# Pia Schumacher



Pia is a jolly little German who enjoys writing, reading and all things to do with words. When she doesn't bury her nose in books, she can mostly be found outside with her dog or wrapped in a blanket on the sofa, re-watching *Grey's Anatomy* for the fifty-thousandth time in a row. Pia works in marketing and has written for a variety of German magazines and blogs before, covering everything from leaving home for the first time to making the perfect vegan dumpling.

## Contact / Social media

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## My genres

Literary fiction, coming-of-age, bildungsroman.

*When Lucy first meets Florence, she is certain she is everything she's ever needed in her life to be happy. Growing up together, the two girls' lives become so tightly interwoven that when Florence announces she is leaving town to go to university, Lucy knows that she has to come.*

*But as the two are out of their familiar spaces, their personalities slowly start to grow independent of each other and soon Lucy has to learn that the people who shaped her life are not necessarily the ones she might want to keep in it.*

## *Novel extract*

# Do It

I can't tell whether it's the train rattling below my feet or if it's her daring blue eyes piercing right through me that is making my hand shake as I lift it from my lap. It is reaching towards the dead insect that is lying on the windowsill. I think I can see her grin from the corner of my eyes, but when I look over, she's gone. My hand drops, lands on my thigh like the dead fly must have dropped down to the sill a while ago, dead on its back, its wings snapped in half from the impact. I close my eyes and try to convince myself that I am alone in the carriage. That she isn't with me anymore. For the rest of the way, I keep staring out of the window, my eyes flickering as the landscape around me turns into tiny houses.

I know that if I looked, she would be back on the seat opposite me, her eyes mocking me like they always secretly have.

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I was ten when her family moved into the house opposite ours. It had been one of those days where even our neighbour's dog, who was normally jumping around the garden catching imaginary mice burrowing through the ground, was too tired to lift his head from his spot on Miss Gardener's doormat. I was the only person watching as the black Mercedes pulled up in front of the painted white gate, followed by multiple moving trucks.

I watched as they got out of the car, first the dad, then the three daughters followed by their mother. Even from the distance I could tell they were flawless; their shiny porcelain skin, their fluttering hair, the way they stood next to each other, eyeing the big house in front of them. Two of the girls had their father's features, dark, brown hair, round faces with cheeks that made you want to squeeze them, but the youngest one of them looked like her mother, slender, tall for her age, her wavy strawberry blonde hair reaching down to the bottom of her spine.

I leant forward to catch a better look at her, the window in front of me fogging up from my breath, a soundless whisper on my open lips. I wanted her to turn around and look at me, wanted her to catch me absorbing her arrival with every inch of my body, wanted her to wave me down to come and join her flawless family. But she didn't do any of those things. All she did was grab one of her sister's arms, dragging her up the driveway to their new home.

I was still standing by the window when the keys in the door behind me turned and my brother's pubescent smell filled the room. I heard his heavy steps go straight through the kitchen, his greasy fingers pulling open the fridge door, rummaging through it.

"Why do we not ever have anything to eat in this house?" he muffled into the fridge. I felt him come up behind me when I failed to come for his rescue. For a moment we both just stood there by the window, quietly, united in our motionlessness. Then he grunted in my ear.

"You're ugly," he pushed past me in such a violent movement my forehead knocked against the window, then the kitchen door shut behind him.

I returned to my maths homework that had been waiting for me on the kitchen table, but not even my favourite numbers could pull my thoughts away from the girl that I knew was now roaming the rooms in the house opposite me.

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Dad is waiting for me in his car. As always, he has kept the engine running whilst waiting, poisoning the air with his Diesel motor that we have had since we were little. The smell of fresh bread from the bakery down the road lies in the air. The familiar scent makes my stomach turn. Dad is on the phone when I approach him, not looking up until I open the back door to lift my bag onto the seat, before sliding in next to him. His eyes look as watery and tired as I remember them.

“Welcome home.” His rusty voice matches the bonnet of his VW Golf 2. We both smile sadly, still aching from the last conversation we had. He clears his throat and turns his head away, making the engine stutter as he turns the key and squeakily puts it into first gear.

Car journeys with him have always been reticent, but this time it feels like we both have lost our ability to form words on our tongues. The accustomed silence presses down on me so heavily I think my chest might burst. I wind down the car window, but the air that comes in is thick and humid and only increases my discomfort.

As dad pulls up in front of our small terrace house at the end of a long road of similar looking houses, I focus my gaze on the once white, now grey walls of the small terrace house I grew up in. I don't turn my head as I get out of the car and grab my bag. I don't want to see the white house on the other side of the road, which I know will still look like it was freshly painted yesterday. I don't want to think about the family inside, don't want to think about the empty room that is exactly opposite mine on the first floor and that is now going to remain empty forever.

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The year before her family moved to town the art gallery in the neighbouring town was hosting an exhibit by one of my school's art teachers. The whole school was invited to come, and I begged dad to take me. He sighed when he saw me bobbing with excitement and told me he would try to leave work early on the opening night.

The exhibition started at 6:30pm. I was ready by 5:45, sitting on the doorstep, tapping my foot on the ground, waiting for dad to show up. I was wearing the only skirt I had, which was normally reserved for Christmas

and New Year's, and I had tucked one of Phil's white shirts in, convinced that the oversized look would make me seem arty. Dad told me he'd leave work at six.

When I heard the church's bell tower toll 6:15 I started getting nervous. The restaurant dad worked at was a ten-minute drive away from our house, he should have been home already. At 6:25 I went inside and dialled the restaurant's number. No one picked up. I waited another five minutes, pacing around the kitchen, checking if dad had turned up every time I heard a car enter our road, then I called again. This time Lisa answered. She was one of the waitresses I knew from when I was too young to stay at home by myself and dad used to take me to the restaurant with him. I would sit at a table in the corner and Lisa would give me as much Coca Cola as I asked for.

"Hi honey," she said when she recognised my voice, and then, "no sorry, your dad is still in the kitchen." I heard him swear in the background. "Do you want me to go get him? Is it something urgent?"

I rolled the cord around my finger, watching the digital clock above our oven jump to 6:40. "No don't worry," I finally said. "It's not urgent."

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We first encountered each other three weeks after her family's move. I was walking home from school when I suddenly heard voices behind me. Some girls from school had followed me through the underpass that separated the part of the town I lived in from the centre. As I emerged from it, they started calling me, their voices echoing from the graffiti sprayed walls. It was a windy autumn day, and my hair was tossing around my head. Nervous, I sped up, but my head started spinning and turned the rows of grey houses into a never-ending labyrinth. I kept looking over my shoulder, but although their voices were coming closer, fright was blurring my view and I couldn't make out who was following me.

Of course, I had noticed the stares at school, the resistance of some children to sit next to me in class, the conversations that ended abruptly when I came into a room. Of course, there had been little incidents that made clear I wasn't one of the popular kids.

One time my running shorts had disappeared from my bag whilst I was in the toilet. I had to endure Miss Adams yell at me in front of the entire

class for losing my stuff before making me run laps in my jeans.

Once, this girl called Megan put on a show of distributing her birthday invitations and stood at the front of the class calling out everyone's name. When I was the only one to not have one, she walked past my desk and put a tissue down in front of me. Sorry, my mum won't let me invite girls that dress like boys.

I knew they made fun of me for looking like Phil, for having the same haircut as him, for wearing his discarded clothes. He was growing like bamboo and needed new trousers every other week, and dad had neither the time nor the money to get me the clothes I wanted, the jeans with sparkly dots and funny patches on them, like the other girls had. I knew the other kids thought I was odd because I never brought cake to school when it was my birthday or threw a party.

Sometimes I thought they could smell the absence of a mother on me, of someone who took care of me and shaped me into a dress-up-doll the way their mothers did with them. But usually the mocking was confined to school. The school gate an invisible border that kept them from following me home. Up until that day.

Their voices got louder, reached into my ear and settled in my pinna, where they turned into a steady hum inside my head. Lame-ass Lucy. You're not getting away this time. Desperate to escape I turned the corner, before realising that I was one road too early and now had to go round the other way, prolonging the distance to our house. Panicking, I turned another corner and again I was wrong, and I couldn't see where I was going now, I was like a young bird that had fallen out of its nest, stumbling around the streets, turning left and right without knowing where they lead.

They were getting closer, their steps now hammering in my ears, echoing in my head. It felt empty, filled with a void that took over whenever I found myself in moments where I didn't know what to do. When the numbers in my maths book started dancing on the pages. When dad got angry with me because I had forgotten to empty the dishwasher although he reminded me to do it three times before leaving for work. When my brother mocked me because my school report was much worse than his.

I wanted to drop to the ground and wrap my arms around my head, hold it together so that the forces around me wouldn't break it apart. But I

didn't. I kept going to get home, to get back to safety, where I could shut the door in their faces.

I turned another corner and all of a sudden there she was. Her strawberry blonde hair scourging in the wind. Fierce, her eyes glistening with anger. I heard her shout at the kids behind me, making them split up and abort their mission. Then I felt her take my hand, guiding me back the right way, her grip firm and strong, her hand as cold as my heart felt. With every step the void in my head became smaller, until finally I could think clearly again. My vision was no longer blurred, and the houses didn't look the same anymore. I could make out the high wall that kept Mrs Burns' lavender garden from the nosy looks of bypassers, recognised the blue shutters of the Rupert's house. She didn't stop until we reached our street. When we got to her house, she turned around to me.

"Are you going to be okay?" Her voice was deeper than I had imagined it would be. I nodded. She furrowed her eyebrows.

"Does this happen a lot?"

I shrugged, then shook my head.

"Not like this." My face still felt numb. She crossed her arms in front of her chest.

"Children are cruel." She sounded so much like an old, wise lady and not like a ten-year-old that I couldn't help but laugh.

"Right," I said. "They normally leave me alone after school though." We were both quiet for a bit, and I noticed that she didn't have a backpack with her.

"Why aren't you in school?"

"My parents had to sort out some stuff first. We're starting next week." She looked over her shoulder and I suddenly felt panicked that I was boring her.

"What's your name?" I asked, desperate to not let the conversation end. She looked at me again, and for the first time I noticed the bright blue of her eyes, both eerie and compelling.

"Florence."

I repeated it in my head, let it bounce back and forth, roll over my tongue.

"That's the prettiest name I've ever heard."

She didn't blush, but looked to the ground, almost bashfully, and a smile played around the corners of her mouth. After a pause she said, "We



should hang out sometime.”

I felt warmth rise inside me, but I tried to stay calm and replied, “Yeah, sure.” When she didn’t say anything, I added, “I’m free tomorrow. I can come over if you like,” but she interrupted me.

“Let’s do Saturday. At yours.”

I nodded, intimidated by her sharpness, and then she finally pushed open the gate and walked through it. As it had already snapped shut, I heard her voice a final time. “I’ll see you then.”

The rest of the day I moved around with a fuzzy buzz inside of me. I felt vibrant, like someone had woken me up from a long slumber and I was finally seeing the world with my own eyes.

# Pratiti Bhadra



A science student turned storyteller with a secret love for languages, I finally realised, even that tiny mushroom growing in the backyard of my house had a story to tell! Wouldn't you agree? Having spent five years learning the Japanese language, I love mixing cultures in my narratives and creating unique concepts out of it. I feel the best stories come from people, whoever they are and from wherever they come. To add to my stash of those, I have gone around collecting ideas on the streets at home, through the lanes of London until I finally came around to possessing a diary full of such tales. From this point forward, it shall be kept for posterity.

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## My genres

Historical Fiction, literary fiction, bildungsroman.

*Life unfolds in seven stages for the migrant Mukherjee family from East Pakistan as they journey through decades seeking freedom, respect and a home. There is always a price for crossing lines, but are they willing to pay it? A tale of love, loss and struggle, the runaway Mukherjees look for acceptance in a land they can't call their own.*

## *Novel extract*

# Agantuk

## Prologue

*“At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom.”*

That’s what Nehru had promised. He kept his promise alright. India did get its freedom. But, at the stroke of midnight, along with millions of others, Birendranath Mukherjee had lost both of what was promised to him – the life he had in his own land and the freedom in the one he was heading to.

## 1947

*Dacca, East Pakistan*

It wasn’t until Birendranath felt a tug at his sleeves when he looked down at Paritosh pointing towards Anupama walking behind them. The bullock cart which had carried them had only managed to come till Manikganj, stopping short of six more hours on foot until Goalundo Ghat. Birendranath slowed down, balancing the small aluminium trunk on his

head to see what his son had to say. The fatigue from the three-hour toil had started to show on the little boy's face. His frail shoulders had distinct carmine lines running across them on the right side. The coarse jute straps of the bag had cut through his soft skin, leaving the gashes bare in the afternoon sun. —

Birendranath looked at his three-year-old following his tiny index finger towards Anupama. She was a few steps behind hobbling slowly towards them. Behind her, masses of people walked on the dirt paths with cloth bundles scantily filled with whatever they could have grabbed from their homes. A few fortunate ones who could afford not letting their feet touch the ground rode away on bullock carts, carrying bigger bundles with them. Apart from a few wheels amidst the people, feet covered in dust and sweat was all that he could see. The grassy patches on the sides lay trampled under the weight of thousands of people dragging themselves towards the river bank. The vast land looked as parched as the people who trudged on them.

Birendranath's eyes went down to Anupama's feet and eventually to her bloodied slippers. Her feet left a faint crimson outline of her footprint in the dirt. His mind went back to the day that she had entered his house for the first time as his bride, her feet dyed red with bright *alta*. She had looked nothing less than a goddess. His mother, along with other elderly women of the family, had waited eagerly for the newlyweds to arrive home. They had then made Anupama dip her feet in *alta* again and walk all the way inside from the entrance, leaving bright red footprints behind her as she made her way in — signs of a goddess entering the house. But now, her divine glow was gone. The butter-coloured cotton sari that she wore was torn at her knee on one of the inner pleats, which she had hidden with another one over it. The sweat made her sari stick to her body, giving away her heavily pregnant belly underneath it.

Anupama was nine months pregnant. This would have been their third child, had the first one's heartbeat not stopped in her womb. The local astrologer had predicted that she was to deliver this child today and that it would be a boy. Birendranath was there with her when they had first visited him. The man had taken a handsome fee and given her one of those red stones in return saying that it would protect her and her unborn. Mounted on a silver ring on her right ring finger, she wore the stone on her at all times. Each time she prayed, she would touch the ring and hover her

fingers over it. Now, her left hand clutched the ring as tightly as she could.

She was still a few steps behind and slowed down to take a breath.

Paritosh left his father's side and went running to her. As he came to a halt right before her belly, she stopped for a moment, stunned, as she looked at the marks of dried blood on the boy's shoulders, the brown shade of it mixing smoothly with the brown of his skin. Her eyes met Birendranath's, closing the distance between them and inflicting him with a pain that she was not able to voice out loud.

A bunch of men on swift feet moved past her like a herd of scared animals looking for shelter. She quickly pulled Paritosh out of their way towards herself. Nobody had the time to care if a child was trampled under the feet of rushing men and women while crossing countries. It would just become another unfortunate casualty reported alongside thousands of other unknown people the next day. Anupama was scared, and her face gave it away as the dust rose around her in small eddies from the feet of all those running people. As the crowd advanced towards Birendranath, he stepped aside, making room for the sprinters. They moved to the side where their pace matched that of the other tired travellers. He squinted his eyes to find Anupama covering her mouth and that of their son, waiting for the crowd to pass. Her eyes looked morose under her dripping brows which she quickly dabbed at.

But Birendranath had traced the single teardrop that had run down her cheek. He watched her pull herself together and resume walking towards him, holding the boy close to her. He sensed the immense amount of strength she was putting into her movements, in each step and each breath. He looked straight into her eyes, aching to reduce himself to ashes just to be worthy enough to hand her some of his strength.

*Yes, you are almost here, just a few more steps, Anu.*

Even with the masses of people rushing past him, his gaze remained fixed on Anupama. Seeing her walk towards him carrying one of his children inside her while holding the other one outside, a momentary fear gripped him. What if she went into labour now? What if everybody started running? He vehemently brushed aside the voice in his head, which kept saying that she would die before they even made it past the border. He prayed to the ten-handed Goddess Durga in the back of his head. *Ma, Calcutta is not that far away. It is not. Don't take her away from me before our feet touch its soil.*

He put the aluminium trunk on the ground as he waited. Anupama's weight was slowing her down by each minute and tiring her more by each. As she reached him, he engulfed her in a warm embrace. She let her body fall freely in his arms, letting go of all her weight at once. He managed to catch her just in time, one hand shooting right under her belly to provide support while he held her with another.

"Anu, are you alright? Tell me, do you feel fine?" asked Birendranath, his voice ridden with panic as he let the cloth bundles slide from his shoulders to put all his strength into her. Her face had become pale, a slight grey, like the colour of the moon on nights when he would sneak up behind her and put his arms around her waist as she put their infant son to sleep. She nodded a tired yes to his questions. He pulled out a water container from one of the bundles and clunked the lid open, handing it to Anupama. As she took small sips of the warm water, Birendranath noticed that it was almost noon. They had left their house the previous night, and now their shadows lay pooled around their feet. He took the water container from her hands and slowly made her sit on the trunk. He hoped that a few minutes of rest should give them some strength to keep going on. But, the moment Anupama sat down, she winced and tried to stand up immediately, failing in her attempt to do so. The metal trunk had become hot. Birendranath instantly picked up one of the cloth bundles off the ground and smoothed it out over the trunk to create a buffer for the heat. Even though she sat, there was still no escaping it.

Birendranath took her face in his hands, looking at her fluttering eyelids. "We are not going to die in a land that has chosen to abandon us, Anu, do you understand me?" said Birendranath, a sudden ferocity taking over his demeanour. He didn't know if he would survive this journey. He didn't even know if they would find shelter once they reached Calcutta or how their child was going to come into this world. But he longed for a chance.

He thought about Faisal, the bearded man with a white skullcap knocking on his door a few days ago. Faisal with his wife and his four children had come to East Pakistan from Calcutta. Their clothes were torn in places and mouths dryer than cracked ground in the middle of a drought. Birendranath wouldn't have guessed in the world that the man was a reputed school headmaster back in Calcutta had he not told him. Seeing their dilapidated condition, the Mukherjees had taken them in, fed

them and clothed them. With a will to repay this debt, Faisal had promised his own house in Calcutta to the Mukherjees. With a broken heart, Birendranath had accepted. Faisal had written their address on a blank sheet of paper signed with his declaration which now lay folded inside Birendranath's pocket. Faisal had given only one thing to Birendranath and nothing else – his word. And, he wondered if the weight of it was enough to balance the scale on which he walked to reach to the other side.

"They will kill us if we wait for too long, Anu. We have to go now," Birendranath whispered after a few moments as he noticed one of the uniform-clad men patrolling nearby with a *lathi* in his hands.

"Can you walk, Anu?" he asked again, his voice apprehensive at seeing her distress. Anupama looked at his face, catching the slight glimmer of hope even amidst the dreariness around. It promised her a life full of dreams and freedom on the other side of the invisible line that now separated East Pakistan from India.

"Yes...I just need a few minutes. I am—I am not able to walk much faster with my weight," replied Anupama taking in short breaths and holding her belly.

Birendranath knelt in front of her and took her feet in his hands. His eyes became moist at the sight of them. He battled the dilemma of blaming himself for putting her in this position while he also tried to defend himself by blaming their fate for putting them in this. Her skin had cracked around the heels exposing the inner layers to the prickly dust slowly making its way inside the gaping wounds. It had become a slightly reddish shade of brown upon mixing with blood. They, in turn, had a fresh layer of earth neatly covering her whole foot inch by inch. Birendranath took off her thin slipper and slowly wiped her feet with his loose shirt, staining it with scattered patches of red around the hem.

"Anu, half an hour more. Just half an hour. We have almost reached the Padma."

Birendranath kept repeating the lines as he cleaned Anupama's feet as if he were reassuring himself instead of her. He knew that the river wasn't going to be visible for another three hours on foot, yet, he didn't stop himself from believing that thirty minutes was all that they needed. He took out a piece of cloth from the bundle lying on the ground, tore it in half and tied them on each of her feet. By the time he had finished, a thousand more people had already crossed them.

Birendranath helped Anupama back on her feet, looking more reluctant than her to see her walk again. He then looked at Paritosh who had been standing patiently beside them all this while, watching his father tend to his mother. He smiled at the boy and said, "Make a strong fist and hold the corner of my shirt in it. Make it tight and don't let go." Birendranath made a fist himself to show him. Paritosh made a fist back at his father, a broad smile emerging on his dust-ridden face.

"Where are we going, Baba?" asked Paritosh.

"Far away from here. A land where you will be free to dream about anything you want," replied Birendranath, still smiling.

"But I don't want to go. Why can't we stay here and dream?" came another question.

"Because, here, your dreams won't always be yours," Birendranath said meekly, patting Paritosh's head.

After he had slung the two cloth bundles on each shoulder, Birendranath picked up the trunk on his head again. Swarms of people rested on the side of the pathway gulping water or fanning themselves with their clothes. He eased his steps this time to walk beside Anupama. The heated metal of the trunk over his head was separated only by a thin *gamcha* tied closely till his temples and, it didn't do much to lull the dizzying swelter. Once a man of repute himself, he was now reduced to being a mule carrying the weights of his worries towards a destination that he knew nothing about. He walked straight without looking behind. He didn't want to look behind himself anymore. He didn't want to see the masses of people who were walking behind him, going towards the same destination as dark as the decision that the government had made for them. A decision about their lives that they had no say in.

The corner of Birendranath's shirt was neatly tucked inside Paritosh's tiny fist, his little feet tip-tapping beside his father's giant strides. He was carrying the jute bag on his left shoulder now for the right one made him let out little winces. Birendranath glanced down on his right to his son, wishing he could pick up the little boy in his arms and kiss his wounds. Another wave of sprinters had already passed, and people walked wearily again. As they carried on, he wondered if his son understood what he was going through. He wanted to explain to him why everybody was so desperate to get on the train and why they had left their houses to walk in the heat. Birendranath knew that the boy probably didn't understand just



yet.

Now and then, a few men and women continued to rush past everyone as if running ahead guaranteed them some unspoken treasure in the land of happiness. A few bodies lay scattered on the parched ground, abandoned in the selection between survival and respect. Parents closed the eyes of young children as they passed the corpses, making attempts to save them from a lifetime of scarring memories. But Birendranath couldn't save his son from witnessing that. With this lack of censoring, Paritosh kept his eyes on one of the bodies lying in the dirt. The man's limbs lay stuck to his torso, stiff and graceless, his face half-buried in the dust that still rose from the feet of others. Flies hovered over his dried lips and crawled up the nostrils looking for moisture. His dead fingers lay locked with each other as if begging the earth to swallow him up. Even in death, respect had eluded him. Birendranath looked ahead, not wanting to cloud his hopes with disfigured faces strewn across his path. But Paritosh's curious eyes never left the bodies even after he had walked ahead.

# Sakshi Mehta



Sakshi Mehta is an amateur writer and a professional dreamer. She did a short stint as an editor before getting a master's degree in creative writing and publishing from City, University of London. She was born in Mumbai but brought up in several fantastical worlds created by her favourite authors. When she's not writing or reading or thinking about writing and reading, she's busy watching movies, cooking (really badly), taking long walks along the Thames and petting every dog she can get her hands on. She loves writing about characters who take on challenges, go on adventures and maybe even save the world but personally, she'd much rather stay at home, chill in her pyjamas, eat cereal and hang out with her family and friends. She currently lives in London.

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## My genres

Supernatural, young adult, urban fantasy.

*Dalia was born with powers. Powers that she doesn't understand and can't control. One day, she snaps and almost kills the woman who's been abusing her for years. She takes off, straight into the clutches of two people who might just be more insane than she is. She knows she has to get away – away from her psychotic kidnappers, away from her demonic aunt and away from the supernatural destiny. But what she doesn't know is that there's someone far more sinister hunting her – hunting them – and he won't stop until he has them all.*

*Novel extract*

# The Six

## Chapter One

Dalia felt the sharp sting against her cheek as she was flung to the ground, her palms outstretched to try and break her fall. Claire didn't give her a moment to recover before she kicked her in the stomach, the sharp end of her pointy shoes jabbing against Dalia's torso.

Dalia felt the rage exuding from her aunt and, not for the first time in the last three years, she wondered if this was her karma. It had to be, right? She had to pay for— for what she had done.

Maybe she's decided not to let me attend school for the rest of the week, Dalia thought when Claire landed another blow on her face, not holding back in the slightest. It was always easier to hide bruises on the stomach or back. But on her face? Dalia would have to stay home until the discolourations faded away. The thought of that alone was more torture than anything else Claire could dole out. Her only escape from all the

anguish, stolen from her for the foreseeable future.

Viciously grabbing her hair and twisting it around her palm, Claire pulled her up and shoved her face closer to Dalia's. "Do you know how much that sodding machine costs? More than your worthless existence!"

Dalia remained silent, knowing that the beating would get worse if she mouthed off. Dalia had to focus on keeping her temper in check by tuning the other woman's voice out. She couldn't lose control now. She had to fight it back. *It'll be over soon*, she chanted in her head.

Claire twisted her head back, forcing the girl to meet her eyes. "Look at me when I speak to you!"

The sight of her face would just make everything worse. Dalia squeezed her eyes shut, trying to focus on her breathing as she counted each inhale in her head.

In and out.

In and out.

*In and out.*

Claire grabbed hold of her shoulders and shook them, knocking Dalia's teeth together. Dalia balled her fists and fought the tremors back as Claire yelled at her to open her eyes and stop disrespecting her.

"Who's gonna pay for a new one, huh?"

"You gonna pay for it?"

"Now you wanna keep your trap shut? Answer me!"

Claire's voice grew louder, screeching as Dalia lost count of her breaths and gritted her teeth, biting down hard on her tongue. The pain only offered a momentary distraction.

*No, no, please no.*

The tingling in the back of her neck was getting stronger as fury seeped into every inch of her body, flowing through her veins.

Claire slammed her head on the ground, the blow softened slightly by the thick carpet, and aimed a few more kicks at her gut. Dalia raised her arms, trying to push the other woman's leg away from her stomach.

Just as Claire let out another string of curses, there was a loud crash and she was flung away from Dalia, towards the wall right next to the couch. The chair, that had flown through the air, taking the older woman with it, landed next to Claire's legs.

The only sound that could be heard in the deafening silence that followed was Dalia's rapid breathing. Her head snapped up, eyes blazing,

and she got to her feet, never letting her gaze leave the shocked form of the other woman.

Claire's eyes were wide as she stared back at her, her blonde mop of hair ruffled from the force of the crash. Claire stole a glance at the chair and looked back at Dalia's furious face.

"Bloody hell," she breathed, trying to hide her shivering hands behind her back and failing. She didn't stay down for too long, watching as Dalia slowly advanced on her. Claire got to her feet unsteadily, using the arm of the couch to haul herself up.

Claire's face blanched as the cabinet behind Dalia opened, seemingly on its own. Dalia clenched her fists, letting the power surge through her body, as it fed on her blinding rage. It was almost as if the air itself began flinging the stones from the cabinet in Claire's direction. The woman gasped and ducked down, a large blue coral narrowly missing her head as it cracked against the wall behind her. Dalia couldn't help but smile, it had taken Claire *years* to find that gem.

"What?" Claire couldn't believe her eyes. She didn't miss the twisted grin on Dalia's face and raised a hand to her mouth. "How? Are you do—"

Her voice was cut off as one of the larger stones, a crystallised sherry pink topaz, lifted up from the ground and pinned her to the wall, pressing against her neck. She choked and clawed at it, her legs flailing as the stone dragged up, lifting her feet off the ground. Her face was starting to turn blue and her eyes rolled back into her head.

*"Dalia, stop!"*

The unfamiliar voice made Dalia gasp as she snapped her head back, wildly looking around for the source. Was someone else in the house? The man's voice was echoing in her ears, almost as if it was in her head. Had she imagined that?

Claire dropped to the floor, as the stone lay immobile at her feet. She didn't get back up.

Dalia's anger began melting away, replaced by panic. She had just attempted to kill her aunt.

*Blasted hell.*

She would've done it too, if the voice hadn't snapped her out of it. She only felt a fleeting sense of relief when she noticed Claire's chest moving slightly. The woman was still breathing.

*What do I do now?* Dalia was staring down at her hands, as the tingling

receded, travelling down to her fingertips and out. She waited for the wave of dizziness to pass, feeling like she had just run a marathon. Clutching the back of the couch in front of her, she was hit by a horrible realisation.

Claire was going to tell. She would tell the police. She would tell *everyone*. Dalia knew she had to leave, she had to get out.

*"Pack a bag. Come with us."*

Dalia's already racing pulse jumped wildly. She moved her head from side to side and backed up against the wall. "What the hell?" she muttered under her breath. "I've lost my bloody mind." Her body was already moving when the voice echoed in her head again.

*"Dalia, you need help. Pack a bag and come outside."*

*Like hell*, she thought before she ran to her room, taking the stairs two at a time. The adrenaline pumping through her veins was allowing her to momentarily ignore her fatigue and her pain. Pulling a few clothes out of her closet, she stuffed them in a backpack before grabbing her wallet. She rushed into Claire's room across the hall and without hesitation, pulled down the brown purse that was hanging on the hook behind her door. She took whatever money she could find and grabbed the pepper spray she had seen her aunt stuff in the side pocket.

Shoving the money in her wallet and the spray in her bag, she ran down to the kitchen and yanked out a large knife from the kitchen drawer. Wrapping a small cloth around the hilt, she put the knife in the pocket of her jumper. She noticed some cash in the key bowl, next to the coat rack and stuffed it in her bra. With her coat wrapped around her, she moved back into the kitchen, putting on a pair of gloves as she walked.

Instead of going to the front porch, she had decided to take the door leading out of the kitchen and into the garden. She had only taken one step into the kitchen when she froze, her feet glued to the tiled floor. She brought her hand up to her mouth as her breathing grew louder and out of control. She felt the tears building up and couldn't hold back as her head snapped down and the bag slipped out of her hands.

*What have I done?*

She'd never felt fear like this before.

*What do I do now?*

Her body shook with sobs as she slid to the ground, landing on her knees. She'd been lonely for a long time, but it wasn't until that moment that she truly felt like she was alone. She only allowed another moment to

feel sorry for herself before she took a deep breath.

She was breathing loudly and slowly, closing her eyes as she felt her racing heart slow down. Determinedly, she wiped the tears off her face and rose to her feet. She grabbed the backpack and tugged it on her shoulder.

Shaken at first, then steadier, she walked ahead and refused to take a last look at what she was leaving behind. She might never see her home again. But she had to keep going. She had wasted enough time being weak.

Stepping outside, she heard some noises coming from the Thompsons' deck and knew she couldn't risk drawing attention there. She could scale the wall on her left and jump into Mrs. Bennet's garden. The lady lived alone and usually took a pill to help her sleep at night, she wouldn't notice Dalia loitering behind her house.

Dalia made her way to wall and tossed her bag on the other side before placing her hands on the edge to lift herself off the ground. Before she could jump up, she felt a sharp prick against her neck and her legs gave out from under her, strong hands catching her from behind before she fell on her face.

She glimpsed a shadow moving towards her before her head rolled down and she passed out.

## **Chapter Two**

"She's going to be difficult." Weston noted.

He stole a glance at the unconscious girl lying in the backseat before focusing on the road, his hands loosely gripping the steering wheel. They'd been driving for a couple of hours now.

"And you weren't?" Harper chose to speak out loud, arching one perfectly-shaped eyebrow.

He rolled his eyes.

"I may not have been on my best behaviour in the beginning, but I never doubted you. I always knew you were telling me the truth," he told her, pointedly.

She turned her face away, sighing as she thought about the task that lay

ahead. She wasn't one to shy away from challenges, Harper reminded herself. And what choice did she have? She hadn't foreseen that things would turn out this way. She'd had a plan. She always had a plan.

But she couldn't have allowed the girl to kill her aunt, no matter how much the woman deserved it. It was obvious the girl hadn't learnt how to control her gift yet. If she killed someone, there would be no coming back. She'd never embrace her power, never embrace her fate. She would have been a lost cause, easy pickings.

And Harper couldn't lose this one. Her gift was too powerful, she was too important.

If Vito got his hands on her...

Harper leaned her head against the car window, closing her eyes and listening to the sound of the rain hitting the glass. It was sheer luck that they'd already been driving back to the girl's house when Harper saw what was going to happen. They'd been watching her for weeks, trying to figure out the best way to approach her. Deep down, Harper knew they'd waited so long because Wes wasn't completely sure about the girl. She didn't blame him. In the weeks that preceded tonight, Dalia hadn't displayed a single hint that she was gifted in any way. If Harper didn't know it beyond a shadow of doubt, she would have been apprehensive, too.

She couldn't ponder on what had already happened. She had to focus on the future. She took a long look at the girl, her body rocking slightly with the movement of the car. Harper turned her gaze ahead, to the road and settled in for the ride.

\*\*\*

Dalia was shaking. No, that wasn't right. Her bed was shaking.

When the memories from last night flooded back, she realised she wasn't in her bed. She wasn't in her house. She had no fucking clue where she was.

Her head was pounding. And the rocking motion of the surface underneath her was only making it worse, forcing bile to rise up in her throat. She swallowed it down, which was wise because there was something covering her mouth at that moment.

When she opened her eyes, it took a few seconds for them to focus, for everything to stop spinning. She blinked, trying to take in her surroundings.



She was in a car, lying down on the backseat and she could see the profile of the driver from her vantage point. Even sitting down, she could tell he was tall. She couldn't get a very good look at him, but she knew one thing – he was a stranger.

Trying to quell her panic so she didn't alert that man to her conscious state, she shifted slightly and instantly froze. Not only was her mouth taped up, her arms and legs were tied with some kind of plastic straps, probably zip ties.

Dalia knew she had to stay calm and find a way to escape, she couldn't draw attention to herself in that moment or they'd knock her out again. But she couldn't help the fear that was ruling her emotions, forcing her breaths to come out in a pant. She could hear her own heartbeats, the sound growing louder in her head. She'd been bloody kidnapped! Who was that man? And what was he planning to do with her?

She began hyperventilating, imagining horrible scenarios in her head as tears filled her eyes. Just then, the man turned slightly, his dark eyes meeting her wide terrified ones.

*"Calm down,"* she heard the slightly familiar voice say. *"No one's going to hurt you."* She knew he was the one speaking but his lips hadn't moved. Once again, the voice was in her head.

She couldn't hold back the terrified shriek, muffled against the tape as she scrambled to sit up in the seat. She tried to squeeze herself against the door behind the passenger seat, putting as much distance as she could between herself and the man.

*"Wes, stop terrifying the poor girl!"* she heard a female voice snap, and Dalia realised there was another person in the car with them. She shifted her wide-eyed look to the woman in the passenger seat who had turned around in her chair to look at Dalia. Dalia didn't relax in the slightest, her gaze rapidly moving between the two individuals. Who the hell were these two?

The woman looked calm, strangely calm, which amplified Dalia's distress. Noting her reaction, the woman spoke in a soothing tone.

*"Don't be afraid. You're safe now. We don't want to harm you."*

Dalia tried to scream at her, yell profanities but the sound that came out of her mouth was incomprehensible.

*"I'll take off that tape if you stop yelling and calm down,"* the older woman responded, and Dalia realised she had an American accent.

Disbelief replacing the fear in her eyes, Dalia continued yelling as she struggled against the ties that were binding her limbs. She grunted as the plastic began digging into her skin but didn't stop in her pursuit to free herself.

"Dalia," the woman said. "Stop. You'll only hurt yourself."

She froze, her gaze fixated on the woman. She narrowed her eyes while trying not to heave her chest with each breath. *How do you know my name?* she wanted to ask but only managed a muted grumble.

"I know a lot more about you than your name. If you calm down, I'll explain," the woman said after a brief pause.

Dalia began shrieking again, her mind churning. She had no idea how the two of them were doing this. Maybe it was her, she was bonkers. Yeah, all those years of abuse had finally taken their toll and she'd officially lost her marbles.

The man drew her attention as he let out a soft laugh and muttered, "Gotta admit, this is more fun than I thought it was going to be."

Dalia changed her mind. Maybe *they* had lost their marbles. She was in a car with two nutjobs and she had to get out, now.

The woman shot the man – actually, compared to the older woman, he looked more like a *boy* – a nasty look. "You're not helping!"

Dalia closed her eyes and did something she'd vowed never to voluntarily do again. She called out to that tingle inside of her, willing it spread the familiar warmth throughout her body. Desperate times called for desperate measures. She felt the sweat rolling down her back as she grunted with effort, tuning out the woman's voice. Slowly but surely, she pulled the tape off her mouth and left it hanging from the corner of her lip.

"—Don't have to do this! Stop, just stop, we don't mean you any harm!" The woman had brought her hands up, palms towards Dalia as she attempted to look harmless.

Dalia was panting with effort, still focused on freeing her hands while she shouted, "Who the hell are you people? What do you want from me?!"

The hands were proving to be harder than she'd anticipated, and she was already low on energy. She paused for a moment, trying to regain her strength as she waited for one of them to answer her question.

"We want to help you."



# Suyin Tung



Suyin Tung has been writing fiction since before she could introduce herself without feeling uncomfortable. She first realized that writing came naturally to her when she won multiple prizes throughout her High School life in Malaysia. She attended college in Kent, Tokyo and London, each of the places teaching her a little more than the last. When in low spirits, she turns to writing articles on [Medium](#). She currently lives in Kuala Lumpur with her family, and their sausage dog, Olive.

## Contact / Social media

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## My genres

Comedy, romance, new adult.

*On paper, Morgan has everything a millennial could want. She doesn't pay rent, doesn't stress over bills, and had a job at a reputable company handed to her without so much as an interview. But what she wants isn't comfort or to be spoon-fed – it's independence. She not only wants to live alone, but also to get a job herself and most importantly, stop relying on her family. Thrown into the deep end at work, Morgan has to learn to cope in the real world. She then learns that no amount of support from her family can prepare her enough for it.*

*Novel extract*

# I've Got This

## Chapter One

The one perk about working in advertising is that nobody really cares if we come in at ten, or even ten-thirty. Eleven is kind of where they draw the line. Sharon, my boss, is the only one on my team who is seated at her desk before nine and never forgets to water our dying office plant. I'm not sure how she manages to do it. I asked her about it once, and she responded with a 'You know, early bird!' and made a wriggly worm gesture with her index finger. Also, someone has to tell her one of these days that misting the leaves of plants just isn't going to cut it. I've always wondered why our plant still seems to be dying, even after her consistent boasting about how often she waters it.

She doesn't seem to mind that everyone else comes in late, though. Probably because she takes significant cigarette breaks pretty much every twenty minutes. This includes walking thirty feet away from our building to

the nearest smoking area and back. She doesn't even bother trying to hide the fact that she's always off smoking. Not that she'd be able to, since her curly hair that looks like uncooked instant noodles traps all of the cigarette smoke. We're usually able to pick up the smell of smoke before she even walks by. No-one really says anything about it, though. Sharon's brother is on the board of directors, so nobody wants to rub her the wrong way. She's pretty much allowed to smoke all she wants. She also takes significantly long toilet breaks sometimes, especially after lunch.

We also know that she has a lot on her plate. Moving over to Los Angeles from Toronto with full custody of her kid couldn't have been easy. Though, despite being a mom to a seven-year-old boy, she's always making the clumsiest mistakes.

Once, she brought her dead laptop to a meeting and left her charger at home. Another time, she dropped her son off at school but brought his backpack to work with her. I've always expected single moms to have their shit together. Not anymore. Sometimes I wonder how bad her ex-husband must've been for her to have gotten full custody. Maybe he ran back to Cancun or got deported? None of us ever asked. Most of the time at work it's fine, since she usually manages to clean up her messes. But one time, I had to explain a project to her three times for about an hour because she was playing Candy Crush during the client briefing. She had an hour of infinite lives and *absolutely could not* waste it.

'So, guys.' Sharon looks up and stops chewing on her already-chipped nails as soon as everyone's arrived and seated. Zoey the last, as usual, stepping through the heavy glass doors at exactly 10:53 AM. Her big, bug-eyes are glued to her phone, probably editing a picture of herself on Instagram with ten different filters on it. I'm constantly in awe at how she manages to churn out any amount of work at all. She spends most of her time at work looking at makeup looks with too much blush and outfits with too much pink. It's pretty obvious that she thinks nobody knows what she's doing. But her huge, round glasses reflect everything she looks at on her full-brightness phone. She also seems to always have a piece of gum in her mouth. I've yet to go a single day without seeing her chew gum, but never once caught her putting it in her mouth. It's always just there.

Sharon stands at her desk and claps her palms together, and it looks like she's about to make some big announcement. Nobody likes making a big deal out of nothing more than Sharon. If she had a glass or mug on her

desk, there would not be a doubt in anyone's mind that she'd start smacking it with her pen. She's on a juice cleanse now, though, so no coffee mug in sight. I know this because she walks in every day with four plastic bottles of different coloured juices and takes up an entire row of the communal fridge. She gets them delivered at around 11.30 each morning and has to go downstairs to get them. I'm not even sure anyone's supposed to drink four bottles a day.

We turn from our desks but she brings up both her hands as if she's hugging air, signalling for us to gather around hers. I hear Gary sigh from the seat in front of me and resist letting out a laugh. In my mind, I can already picture him pushing his overgrown hair back in annoyance. We're the same age, but he's been around for about three months longer than I have, and is next-in-line to be promoted to Senior Executive.

'As you all may or may not have heard, someone has filled up the Product Manager spot over at Summit!' She looks around the room, probably expecting some sort of dramatic response. Gary turns to look at me and squints his hooded eyes at me while shrugging a little. I know immediately that he wants to say 'Who cares?', because it's pretty much all he says to anything anyone ever tells him. Sometimes it's 'Who fucking cares?', depending on his mood. If I had a dollar for every time Gary said any of those phrases I wouldn't be stuck at this shitty job. I still can't get used to someone like him cursing so much, especially since his voice sounds like those voiceovers for insurance ads. Or like the movie theatres with those ads telling people to keep their cellphones on mute.

'And they will be introducing him to us in next week's WIP meeting!' She adds in a weirdly pitchy singsong voice after it starts to get uncomfortable. They say that four seconds is how long it takes for a moment of silence to turn awkward.

'I've heard pretty great things about him,' Lucas, our Senior Copywriter, says while bringing his right hand up to his chest, mimicking a Southern accent. Nobody knows why he does that. He's the type who never shuts up about his boyfriend who works in the bank. He's always delivering the clients' 'hot goss' to us. Lucas is great at what he does, though. He's creative, quick on his feet, and rational. But ever since I told him that I'd wanted to gain experience in copywriting while working accounts, he's become a lot more reserved. Once, I saw him minimize a tab in panic the moment I'd gone over to his desk to talk to him about a project. God forbid

I learn anything from him. He's also the guy I will never again go to for life advice, because he had me sat there for forty minutes while I could only focus on my bladder threatening to explode.

'Great things? Really?' Sharon says, her obviously tattooed eyebrows arching up so high I think they'd touch her hairline.

'Yeah. He's a cutie apparently,' Lucas says without hiding the smugness in his voice.

'Can't fucking stand him,' Gary whispers from next to me. We have a piece of paper pinned up on our desks, on which we add a stamp every time we feel like we want to stab Lucas. Then, the next time we go for drinks, we put it to good use. It used to be one shot per stamp, but after we got completely shit-faced the first time and almost hooked up, we came to a mutual agreement to reduce it to one shot per three stamps. He really isn't my type, and looks too much like a white version of Noah for me to go there, even drunk.

'This totally deserves two stamps,' I manage to say before Sharon shoots me a look.

'Well, cute or not,' she says after clearing her throat, signalling for me to shut up. 'I hope we can all work together without too much flirting?' She's looking at Zoey now, who has the tendency to openly flirt with clients who clearly aren't interested. It's both amusing and painful to watch. Her go-to strategy is to flip her strawberry-blonde bob from side-to-side. I've yet to see it work on anyone, so either she's been successful elsewhere and is super confident in her technique, or is still trying it out. Either way, it's something that keeps us entertained. Once, Gary caught her 'accidentally dropping' her glasses so that some manager would pick them up for her. He almost stepped on them, but at least that got his attention.

'I am so psyched for you guys!' Lucas says while fishing his phone out of his skin-tight jeans with only his thumb and index finger. We know immediately that he's about to text his boyfriend.





# Zarah Goraine



Zarah Goraine is an enthusiastic writer and qualified therapeutic radiographer who enjoys using and adapting real-life experiences to create interesting, often comedic, works of fiction for the young adult audience. She has an MA in Creative Writing and Publishing from City, University of London and has published feature articles discussing a wide variety of topics with *Quench Magazine*. Inspired by the array of fantasy and supernatural series that have become popular of late, she is currently working on her book, *Torn*.

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## My genres

Supernatural, young adult, fantasy.

*My best friend's name is the latest on a growing missing list. The church caught fire. I've brushed death's door three times this past week alone and witnessed frightening and impossible things that made me doubt my sanity. I mean, Basil can talk!*

*Sky says I'm in danger. That our past association has put me in the fray. I don't rightly know about that; know only that while she might be the key to uniting entire worlds together, when we last parted, it was after her actions tore the two sides of mine apart.*

*Novel extract*

# Torn

## Chapter One

Regardless of grades, deciding whether to stay home for the local college in New Hope had always been a no-brainer. I didn't have to. Gina and Gregg far from depended upon me. The opposite, in fact. My adopted parents had squirreled away nothing short of a small fortune just so I hadn't felt pressured into making my educational choices based on financial strain. But leaving them, leaving New Hope – a place that knew no winter unlike the British Isles where I'd formerly lived – and my friends who had also decided to stay to be close to their ancestral roots didn't bear thinking about.

Our house here was one of character. A cosy sunflower yellow chalet – not my first choice in colour but it was growing on me – right on the coast, overlooking the beach fringes. Rustic, it was, and one of the few residential properties in the area with the rest finding occasional use as holiday homes for some modern-day Midas types with more money than they

reasonably knew what to do with. There were, however, two perks to this; the first being that their arrival was good for business – practically every board stall and restaurant put hiring posters up during tourist season – and the second, the number of vacant pads there were to choose from whenever we wanted to drink or party, our guardians none the wiser.

My eighth week back of the first semester, I was awake long before my alarm could ever ring, and it wasn't because I'd went to bed early the night before. Dark rings circling my sleep-swollen eyes stared back at me mockingly from the mirror. The dreams were back. They shouldn't have been. Pandora's box was what they were, events best left unanalysed and unopened. But my mind that day seemed bent on tormenting me in what was the plague of a guilty conscience.

"You're quiet today," Jasper interrupted my thoughts as we ambled down the usual dusty road towards our campus' gates. The sleek, towering buildings ahead were somewhat out of place with the aging shoe-box-in-comparison sized ones that surrounded them and populated the rest of the town. Reclusive as it was, even New Hope could not escape the revolution that was modernisation. "You okay?"

Removing my gaze from the giant wolf mascot – grey, white and snarling – plastered across the wall above the main entranceway, I tipped my head to his, the top of which sprouted obstinate golden locks that curled and seemed to grow upwards instead of down and was carried by his hulking frame.

"Of course," I shot him a smile from beneath the brim of my baseball cap. "Just a tad nervous about second period." This, at least, was only a half-lie. "Grabowski will be getting back to us on our submissions for the NIC Portrait competition."

"Rather you than me," he laughed, ducking under Lisa's low-hanging 'Vote Me for Student President' advert in the main corridor. It was no secret my fastidious art professor never minced words, so much so that her reputation preceded her. "Still, at least you don't have a math quiz first thing."

"Bummer. But it is kind of your fault for choosing such an anaemic discipline." I pointed out, holding my hands up when he widened his eyes in feigned offense. "Did you get any revision in last night?"

As if he needed it. Jasper's mind was a cut-through-the-competition kind of sharp and everyone knew it. I dodged paths with the students

filtering out of the library and adjacent common room. A few nodded my best friend's way as they passed us by. Jasper, as extroverted as they came – it was testament to our friendship that he still hung out with me when there were so many other options – returned the gestures and, when they were out of earshot, said;

"Actually, I was out with Warren." Sheriff Ward, that was; Jasper's uncle. He adjusted the strap of his messenger bag to the centre of his chest, voice lowered so that the information wouldn't carry. "Mr Atwell didn't show up for work again this week. He hasn't been calling in either."

My brows drew inward. "Strange. That's not like him." And I should know. The man had been a stickler for punctuality as my supervisor last summer, manning the tills at the Radwell Mercantile. "Is he sick? Hurt?"

"Missing is what he is."

"No!" I gasped. "Another person?"

"Seems like it." Seemed like it indeed. Carrie Bates, the girl who'd sat beside me in band practice all throughout high school had simply vanished three weeks prior. Her parents were sick with worry but, for everyone else, it had seemed only natural to assume the girl who'd openly fantasised about moving to a big metropolis had finally found the courage to do so. The idea that she mightn't have left so willingly after all unsettled me.

I wondered whether the new out-of-town boyfriend had anything to do with these mystery disappearances. I mean, I had thought he'd had more than a little something to do with Carrie's as I'd told Deputy Anand. And so I had thought it a little uncharacteristically irresponsible of her, cruel not sending word to either of her parents about her intentions or whereabouts, she'd looked happy the last time I'd seen her and I'd figured she'd had her reasons.

I'd run into Carrie and her boyfriend, Seth I believe he'd called himself, at Pepper Jack's during a double-free the week before she'd left. Or vanished. Whichever had been the case. Carrie had run right up to my makeshift study in the diner with an unexpected enthusiasm given the two of us had rarely ever shared more than a short word or two even when we'd been forced to sit together. But I figured she'd probably wanted to introduce her new guy to some people from her hometown and, from what little I knew, had few enough friends. Was one of those people who kept mostly to themselves. Had her nose in a book more often than not.

The two of them had slid into the opposite side of the creaky booth and

I'd moved all my open books and plethora of uncapped multi-coloured pens aside to make more room for them. Seth, with elaborate markings shaved near his scalp and cheekbones that jutted out against the barrier of his taut skin, hadn't talked much. Just observed, giving the perfunctory nods here and there, his arm about Carrie who'd happily chatted away with more gusto than I'd previously imagined her capable of. Hadn't ordered anything or picked at his girlfriend's food as the two of us demolished two double cheeseburgers, a basket of fries and a freak-shake between us.

He'd stared for far longer than could be considered polite, but I'd chalked that up to the horrid sunburn streaking the bridge of my freckled nose and cheeks, legendary affliction of the red-headed that it is. When Carrie had excused herself to go to the toilets, I'd tried staring back in the hopes Seth would realise how uncomfortable I'd been getting and avert his gaze but he'd stared even harder then, if that were possible. Not admiring or flirty. It was more the way one might study a zoo creature as they stare at them, without shame or reserve, through the glass of their enclosure and the bars of their metal cages.

And when a smirk had tipped his lips, I'd gotten the sense it was the first real sign of emotion I'd seen all night. Only, I hadn't been in on that particular joke.

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Something about being in the studio tended to bring me a great sense of peace and comfort. Art had always been my preferred form of therapy and the building was quiet, far removed from the remainder of the bustling campus. The outer walls were made almost entirely of glass, allowing for a spacious and airy atmosphere and the background music we periodically put on added to the liberal vibe. My efforts to calm and concentrate that morning, however, were to prove futile.

By the end of Mr Simpson's, or Aaron's as he so fervently insisted upon us calling him, two-hour lecture on Late Renaissance and Early Baroque Art, I'd managed to populate the margins of several pages in my notebook with doodles of eyes instead of the body with relevant notes, each of them except the last discarded with no more than a scribble owing to their being wrong in one way or another. But all held that same expression of hurt, of

fury and betrayal.

They were her eyes, of course. *Who else's?*

But I couldn't seem to recall the exact shade they'd been. Hard as I tried, I could only envision red. Eyes that flashed red with venom. With animosity. An animosity I'd well deserved but could scarcely believe existed, despite having witnessed it first-hand. Despite what everyone around me, her and us had claimed. That we needed to be apart. That we weren't good for one another and that my presence would only worsen her illness.

I hadn't allowed myself to think of her in a while. Had blocked the memories out to save myself from falling into the endless abyss that was depression once more. But it had never occurred to me that I might forget her. That I might forget a single thing about the girl who'd once meant everything to me.

My eyes moved over the tubes of oil paint in my open case and their array of labelled colours as Professor Grabowski made her way over to me. *Manganese.*

"I see you have hesitated for quite some time when it's come to today's task," she said as I dithered between *phthalo turquoise* and *cobalt teal*. *Or was it a simpler cerulean blue?* "Not stuck, are you?" Grabowski asked, the words thick with her native accent.

I shook my head, unwilling to hold conversation for longer than needed be lest I should lose track of my train of thought. The shrewd look on the professor's face could easily have been mistaken for one of disapproval. It was the severity to the woman's features, I think. The frown lines and the propensity of her poorly fitted glasses to fall halfway down her nose that scared most people away. That, and her bread-ish attitude. Crusty around the edges – Mrs Grabowski rarely did compliments – but soft in the middle in that she cared a great deal for her students.

"Good." A single strand of white hair fell into her face and away from the rest collected in a barrette at the back of her head as she nodded. "It is best not to think too much when it comes to topics like this. Just think of a subject, a person or a place that you have truly cherished. Generally, it is the first that comes to mind that produces the finest work. You might not know it, but your attachment to the subject will always shine through. Emotion is what truly transforms the ordinary into something extraordinary." She paused and watched me closely as she said, "And

extraordinary it must be if I am going to submit it for exhibition at the Walker and Pope gallery in New York.”

“What?”

“Hold that thought,” she ordered as the door sounded open behind us and, seconds later, clicked shut. “I am just going to welcome the new student.”

Now, ordinarily, I’d have shown as much interest as everyone else, leaning past their easels to catch a glimpse of said new student but I was occupied then with the squirting of various shades of blue onto my plastic palette and the mixing of them with my brush. *My piece at Walker and Pope? Most of the works there sell for thousands!*

It wasn’t until the new student passed me by, until I’d caught a glimpse of her – of the girl who should not and could not possibly be there – from the corner of eye, that my palette clattered to the floor. I was unaware of when I’d stood and indifferent to my making a spectacle of myself. In that moment, I had eyes only for the owner of hair so dark it must have been inked in a thousand nights and a gaze so heavy it was impossible to move from beneath it as she rose and held out my fallen palette.

Those eyes, true to her namesake, were a perfect-weather-for-a-picnic sky blue. The room flashed with the colour.



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