



City Voice

Anthology 2022

**MA Creative Writing
City, University of London**

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Introduction

Every group of students – every group of writers – is different. What links a ‘scene’ or a movement can be as much do with how a particular set of people were thrown together, as with the literary features they hold in common.

This particular group of students – this cohort – were the first to complete the newly designed MA Creative Writing at City, University of London, and so they have that experience in common. They have friends and peers who stayed on to complete the two-year MFA programme, or to finish the MA part-time, but to see what these students produced, individually as writers, and together, as members of an ongoing writing community, offers a real sense of clarification of what we were trying to achieve.

So in reading their pieces – mostly extracts from novels-in-progress – you’ll necessarily see a wide spread of styles, genres and locations: Japan to Ireland to London to a variety of imagined worlds and spaces. But hopefully you’ll also see what underpins them: the evidence of worked prose, of voices developed through careful testing, reflection and revision. I hope you enjoy reading them as much as we enjoyed watching them grow and blossom to this point.

Jonathan Gibbs
Programme Director
MA/MFA Creative Writing

Gabriella Lewis-Jagne



Gabriella has completed a BA in English Literature, Graduate Law Diploma and now a Creative Writing MA. Grappling with growing into womanhood as a girl who is biracial, disabled and LGBTQIA+ she didn't have as many role models as everyone else in the media. Even today, with the push for more diversity, disabled people are still not represented appropriately. She hopes to contribute to changing that with her first novel.

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My genres

Trauma, Romance, Contemporary Fiction

Thick-skinned is split into three sections: 20 – 25, 25 – 30 and 30 – 35.

Arlo narrates her journey of self-discovery. After splitting with her first love, she falls into an exciting yet toxic relationship that poses a threat to her mental state and gradually triggers her past traumas to come to the surface. She hits rock bottom after discovering she's not only ADHD but autistic too. Her whole life has a new perspective. Will she heal, learn to love herself and seek partners who reflect this or go down a darker path of despair and self-destruction?

Novel extract

Thick-skinned

Mount Fuji

After a hectic morning of internal stupor and rushing for our coach, we found our stop and hopped on board. To my surprise, it wasn't as busy as I anticipated. A few elderly Japanese couples and single western tourists. I felt my body ease.

After sitting for ten minutes, we pulled away from our stop into the main road. I wondered what Tristan was thinking and feeling after last night when he turned to me, looked down at my mouth and started to laugh.

'What?'

More laughter with no response so I nudged his arm.

'What's this funny?!'

I covered my face then peeked through my fingers to see his eyes creased at the edges, watching me affectionately.

'You have dry toothpaste down your chin.'

'Oh great. I've been walking around looking like I've dribbled on myself. Thanks.'

'I can see your smirk fighting through, don't try it.'

'Rub it off for me then! No wonder why people are staring.'

He licked his thumb, held my chin with his other hand and rubbed it away.

'I thought it was because I'm a tall lanky white dude who towers above everyone here.'

'Yeah, you're a beanstalk to be fair.'

'A beanstalk?'

'Yeah.'

'You're so random.'

I looked out the window and ignored him for a little while.

'You're constantly giving me sass, where's the affection?'

'Don't sulk.'

'I'm a man, what do you expect.'

'At least you're honest.'

I enjoyed watching the brown and yellow leaves falling off the blossom trees, locals rushing through the streets on their way to work and multicoloured lights down nearly every street. I turned back to Tristan and leaned into his neck. I guess I am quite cold, but he sends mixed signals. I don't know if we're friends or something more.

'Ow. This isn't as comfortable as I thought it would be. You're so bony.'

'Thanks.'

'No worries, I'll take your lap instead.'

I moved my head down his body and placed my head on the top of his thighs. He stretched his legs out to give me more space.

'Get up a moment, let me adjust myself.'

After he'd subtly adjusted, I laid my head back down. He put his arms around my shoulders to support me and stroke my hair.

He was warm. I liked his natural smell, it was comforting, he didn't need cologne.

'You purr when I do this.'

I laughed but it was quite cringe.

'That's ridiculous, humans can't purr.'

'Well, this one does.'

'Weirdo.'

'So are you, purring human.'

'You're making me sleepy.'

We enjoyed the silence, my eyes were closing and opening to find him watching me.

'Why do you keep staring at me?'

'Why do you?'

'Because you do.'

'Why wouldn't I?'

I didn't have an answer.

I don't understand how others can like what I see in the reflection. I look ugly but I know by how others treat me that I guess I can't be... Maybe all women are treated this way though, dad did say men always want one thing...

I must have drifted mid thought because I woke up when the driver announced that we had arrived at Kawaguchi station. The hotel staff collected us in a minibus and drove us to our hotel.

'The town is so quiet, I guess it's out of season.'

'Yeah, in Spring I'm sure it's hectic as fuck.'

I was still surprised because the sun was beaming, with clear skies and a delicate warmth that didn't feel too stifling.

Tristan took my bags and carried them to reception, then came back and lightly guided me by my hips out of the door. He pulled away quickly as soon as I was on the pavement. We were in front of the locals, public displays of affection were frowned upon here. Well, not necessarily frowned upon, but people didn't do it. They saved any kind of affection for behind closed doors within their own privacy.

We checked in, paid, and were shown to our rooms. We got the room with traditional tatami mats, a private Onsen on the balcony and a direct view of Mount Fuji.

After unpacking our belongings, we decided to make the most of the

day and go to the lakes Kawaguchi and Saiki which were a short bus ride away.

We came out of the hotel, crossed the road, and walked to Kawaguchi as it was closer. I placed my hand under the clear water which rippled over my hands from the blows of the wind.

Tristan walked up to crouch behind me and pretend to push me in.

'Tris!! My phone!'

'It's okay I've got you.'

'Fucking hell.' I leaned back into his chest.

'Like I'd push you in.'

'Wouldn't put it past you.'

'Are you ever not giving me sass? Is it an armour? The queen of sass whose guard can't be penetrated.'

'Only by those who shall be blessed.'

'Was that... technically a compliment for once?'

'No, what made you think that?'

'Oh, here we go again.'

He lifted me from under my arms.

'You're so light.'

'Doubt it.'

'Nah you are, it's so easy to pick you up.'

'If you say so chicken legs.'

He put me back down.

'Fuck off,' He laughed. 'I know I'm lanky but I'm strong.'

He flexed his biceps mocking all the gym bros who flex themselves on Instagram.

The leaves were bright red on the trees, something I'd never seen before. The view of mount fuji was in the background of the lake with an icing of snow and clouds dispersed yet gathered around the top.

They had duck-shaped boats for hire which we decided to get. We walked over to the small dock where a young-looking couple came up to us and asked if we could take a photo for them. Tristan did. I watched as the man put his arm around her waist and pulled her in tight while they both smiled. I wondered if that would be us one day or whether this flame would burn bright then fizzle out in one fell swoop.

Once we paid and climbed into the boat Tristan started to row on one side while I relaxed on the other. We had an hour booked so he pushed us quite far out from the dock. He set the oars down, let us float idly, then leaned towards me and stroked my knee lightly before tucking a loose hair behind my ear.

I flushed every time he touched me, even if it was brushing my skin by accident. I convinced myself it was the sun, but I knew it wasn't.

I put my hand in the water again, swirling it around while watching the fish swim up to nip my fingertips. They looked like koi. Bright coloured. I wiped the water over my forehead and smoothed the front of my hair, drying the rest on the waist of my dress as Tristan started to row again.

Once he had gotten back into the swing of it, I spread my legs ever so slightly as he watched. Not enough for him to notice I was doing it on purpose but enough for him to think to himself that I might be.

I wasn't even sure why. I tend to be a tease apparently, that's what men have said most of my life. Sometimes people think I'm flirting when I'm just trying to be friendly but when I'm flirting, they don't realise. Exactly what's happening now.

It took Ludo three months of solid effort to sleep with me. Not that it matters, but I like to take my time with people I'm developing feelings for but with Tristan It's cliché, I feel like I've been getting to know him for much longer than I have.

I have known him for three years now, but we only properly started to hang out a bit before this trip and it was mostly platonic. I say mostly because it was the kind of platonic where you know there's mutual attraction, but you don't cross the line.

Something about him disarmed me at first. It must have done; I was willing to travel to another country for him. A bigger deal than I originally thought. Even though I'm extremely impulsive this wasn't something I'd ever done before.

I couldn't pinpoint what it was. Why him?

'Are you alright over there? You look like you're away with the fairies.'

When he looked at me it felt like he saw me. He saw me, for me. A fantasy I now know I was projecting onto him. Other people saw an idea of me they liked or wanted, and I didn't think he did too. I was deluding

myself because it felt right to.

'I'm good, just thinking.'

'About?'

'Nothing major. What are you thinking about?'

'You.'

'I'm right here.'

'I'm thinking about what you could be thinking about.'

'Okay, now you're just talking in circles to get me to open up.'

'You're switched on. I like it.'

I decided to carry on dancing around the words I wanted to say.

During the evening the hotel had given us traditional Japanese Kimonos to wear for dinner. Tristan helped me put mine on before he dressed in his then persuaded me to stand against the tall wooden wardrobe for a photo. I begrudgingly agreed. I hated photos of my face. I turned my head to the side and laughed in awkwardness. I did look genuinely happy when he showed me though.

'You're always giggling and smiling. It's enamouring'

'I think it's half awkward and half finding things funny for no real reason sometimes.'

'I know, but it's warming when you're in these light silly moods. It makes me happy.'

'Probably because I'm goofy and you are too.'

'Not with everyone though.'

'Got to play it cool with the masses.'

'What masses?' He laughed.

'No idea, I'm talking complete shit.'

'Okay bub, let's go to dinner.'

We were seated at our table for the 5-course meal we'd booked with the room. I was worried as it was a set menu and I'm fussy with food. It would likely be a lot of seafood by the smell of the room. Something I wasn't too fond of overall even though I like some fish.

'I hope I like everything,' I whispered so the waiters couldn't hear.

'I'm sure you will. I know you find certain textures difficult but it's good to try new things. I used to be like you, but I pushed through it.'

'Ah, but the textures of certain foods really do make me uncomfortable Tris. Honestly, I'll get watery-eyed and almost have a meltdown.

Sometimes I must get whatever it is out of my mouth. I don't know why.'

'Okay, I get it but try not to do that here. That would be so offensive to Japanese people. They pride themselves on food.'

'I know, I know.' I sighed. 'We'll see what comes. Maybe you can eat mine.'

'It hasn't even come yet. Don't overthink it!'

'Okay, okay.' I took a sip of water to calm myself down.

The first course was only miso soup, the second course was some tuna sushi which is always a delight. But now the tricky part was a small boiling pot of liquid with the whole body of a small fish floating inside it. The sight of it alone put me off. The black beaded eyes staring back at me. I couldn't bring myself to try it. Tristan did and looked disappointed I wouldn't.

'I'm going to be hungry later, I can tell.'

'Well, you're not even trying it bub, but I probably will too. They're small portions.'

'I know I don't like fish like this though, I don't want to risk spitting it out.'

'Yeah, don't do that.' He matched my low tone and laughed but looked serious in his eyes.

'Do you even like it?'

'It's not my favourite thing I've tried but it's okay.'

When the waiter came to collect our plates, Tristan told him I wasn't feeling too well and was finding it difficult to eat now. Then he asked if we could have some rice. At least rice was safe and filling. I could eat it alone and be happy. I used to put a dollop of butter in rice as a child with a little pepper and salt. The same with pasta. Believe it or not, I did love Japanese food. It was one of my favourite cuisines and one of the reasons I was excited to come here. I had been fine until now when I had a choice from the menu. I just don't do well with the heavily seafood-based dishes unless it's sushi or sashimi.

They came with a bowl of fluffy rice for each of us. I put some soya

sauce on mine and ate it with chopsticks. I was quite impressed with myself.

'You're pretty good with those!'

'I have no idea how to hold them properly though.'

'Jake and Yua have shown me before, they can eat so fast with them, and I've seen it explained on those cooking shows I like. I watch them in the bath all the time. Anyway—' He explained as he demonstrated. 'First, hold the upper chopstick like a pencil about one-third of the way from its top. Next, place the second chopstick against your ring finger ... Yeah like that. Holding it with the base of your thumb.'

'This?'

'No, like this. It should be pointing the same way as the first chopstick. Now, move the upper chopstick with your thumb, index, and middle fingers.'

I tried to do it but found it more difficult than whatever way I was doing before.

'I think I get it, but the other way was easier?!'

'To be fair you were managing fine the other way, but this is the way you're meant to. It's easier the right way with smaller things too apparently. Individual grains of rice for instance. You have more control.'

After forcing myself to try the next few dishes that weren't so bad while daydreaming about tempura and karaage chicken, the waiter brought out the dessert. A small green cube. It looked like matcha. Perhaps some kind of jelly cake. I was fixated on matcha. Latte, tea, cakes, KitKats, even just the powder sprinkled on things.

I bit into it, taking half with me.

Instant regret.

No.

Tristan looked at me with the same expression I think I'm pulling. This was not matcha. I shook my head at him.

I couldn't.

I grabbed the napkin as he carried on watching me, looking around the room to see if anyone was watching and spat it out discreetly.

'Oh. My. God,' I whispered.

Tristan swallowed it stubbornly as if he refused to be defeated by the

disgusting dessert attacking our tastebuds. He readjusted the front of his hair and looked down at his plate.

'I know. To be fair, that was bad. I don't know what that was. I was expecting matcha. At least no one saw you spit it out. Try to hide it or something.'

'Okay.'

'This hasn't been the greatest meal, I'll admit. It's a shame, I thought we'd be able to pick from the menu, but it makes sense if it comes with the room I guess.'

'Not doing that ever again.'

'Sorry, I wanted it to be good for us.'

'Why are you apologising? It's not your fault.'

'I found this place, so I feel responsible and now you're still hungry.'

'But the hotel is super nice, and we got an affordable room with a private Onsen on the balcony. Like... Seriously don't sweat it. At least we had that nice steak for lunch down the road earlier.'

He readjusted the front of his hair again and took a sip of water.

'Shall we finish up and get back upstairs? There's nothing to do around here at night anyway unless you want to sit for longer?'

'Nah, I'd rather get into PJs and chill.'

'Cool.'

He smiled at me but still looked flustered. Maybe his IBS was playing up, he couldn't be this affected by my disappointment. I guess I did make our entire meal about how I didn't like it though.

Now I felt bad. I didn't think it was a big deal, but I had kind of made it one.

We both finished up our water and thanked the waiter for our meals. I apologised for being unwell and not being able to finish everything then bowed my head with my hands together.

Once we got back to our room, I started to change into my pyjamas and told Tristan not to peek. We were still in the grey zone.

I didn't know what was acceptable. I didn't want to strip off butt naked with the light on and overstep a boundary. It sounds silly now I'm thinking about it and what we have done.

'Eyes closed!'

He put his hands over his eyes.

'Turn around then.'

I gestured with my hands while holding my kimono together.

'Is this school?' He laughed but obliged.

He still hadn't kissed me yet. We were affectionate and flirty, I knew I was sassy, but we hadn't had sex, only foreplay. Plus, people fool around all the time, didn't they? And it meant nothing. I hoped that wasn't us. I couldn't do that again. I'd been there. You were left with the torture of a fantasy of what could have been.

He was down to his boxers at this point. I was in mini shorts and a tank top. We were brushing our teeth together while I also took my make-up off. Surprising how comfortable I was in this bright LED light as he watched. People seeing me without make up on was a huge anxiety of mine. Especially this early before anything had even really begun. I usually took it off in low light and then woke up, scooted off to shower and reapplied it in the morning.

We both came out once we were done and I turned the light off. I laid down on the tatami mat and put the sheet over me then wriggled around trying to get comfortable.

'Why are you so restless?'

'Just am.'

I started to shuffle my hips; this was something I did often to chill out while trying to wind down for sleep.

'Why do you do that?'

'Shuffle my hips?'

'Yeah, I noticed you doing that last night too.'

'I don't know really, I'm not sure when it started but I've done it since I can remember. It soothes me. Sometimes I do it even when I'm just lying down not getting ready to sleep, like on the sofa.'

'Cute, I don't have anything like that. I shuffle my feet together sometimes.'

'I do that too. I'm just a shuffley wriggly girl.'

He laughed then tried to move subtly closer to me. I turned my back to him and got into a foetus position with my hand under the pillow. My behind was further towards him because of how I was curled. He reached

his hand over to stroke the skin of my cheeks then sighed in what sounded like annoyance.

'Argh, you're so dangerous.' He pulled away quickly.

'What do you mean?' Now I was frustrated.

'Your arse is out.'

'Only because these shorts are small. I usually sleep naked, but I figured I needed something, or it would be inappropriate.'

'Same.'

He reached his hand out again, but slower this time, as if he was trying to resist but I could feel the movement against the sheet.

I arched my back which moved me closer to him.

He put his hand around one of my cheeks and squeezed it tightly.

I could feel three of his fingers between my legs.

'Behave.'

He breathed into my ear.

'Dangerous.'

Then he turned the other way.

'Why?' I whispered. 'I'm not doing anything.'

He laughed.

'You just do something to me.'

'Sorry.'

'Don't be.'

He turned around one last time, placed his thumb on my neck and kissed it gently while his other hand slid between my legs.

'Oh my god, you're dripping. What brought that on?'

'Shut—' I groaned but bit my lip to disguise it, '—up.'

'Tell me.'

'Nothing.'

He pushed his finger into me, I gasped, and sensations tingled up through the centre of my body. He thrust a few more times then pulled it out slowly.

I could feel myself drip down onto the top of my thighs.

'I need to behave. You're dangerous and tempting. So wet, my god.'

What was that? Dangerous?

Tempting? Then what was the problem? Maybe it was the age gap, but

I'd never experienced someone who wanted me yet fought it.

Vocally. To my face.

My brain and body were scrambled. It did turn me on. Witnessing someone that frustrated, fight it, and make it worse for themselves by indulging then having the willpower to pull away. Was it a game? Was it genuine? People usually just went for it if they had a green light to satisfy the want or need; they had.

It was fascinating.

Fascinating, but frustrating.

'Night, I guess. You've worn me down.'

I was tired by this point from all the walking around during the day, chaotic dinner and whatever happened just now.

'Night bub.'

He got up from the tatami mat and went outside. I wanted to ask why but my eyes kept opening and closing until I drifted into sleep.

Mackenzie Manelski



Mackenzie grew up between Greenwich, Connecticut and Vero Beach, Florida. A lover of all things unknown, she made her way to Scotland to obtain her undergraduate degree in Arabic and Persian languages between 2016 and 2020. Deciding to follow her true passion of writing fantasy during the pandemic, she then returned to the United Kingdom to undertake her study of Creative Writing via City, University of London's MA program. She currently resides in Manhattan, New York, where she is finishing her novel, *Marshall, in Suspended Time*.

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My genres

Speculative fiction, fantasy, magical realism

Marshall Shaw's story begins as it ends: by jumping in front of a subway train. Expecting to die on impact, Marshall is shocked when he ends up in Suspended Time – a cross between purgatory and his own imagination.

Via flashbacks to the four months leading up to his suicide, Marshall navigates the perils of tenth-grade homework, the breakdown of his seemingly air-tight relationships, and a precarious home life.

Marshall finds out exactly who he is in the most adverse of circumstances, be it a conversation about heaven and hell with a talking dolphin, or on the court of a high school basketball game.

Novel extract

Marshall, in Suspended Time

Chapter One

Sweden

Marshall Shaw sat on the second to last step from platform level. The stairs were horrendously dirty; he could feel the cold concrete through his jeans. He checked his phone.

1:19 am on New Year's Day.

There were only six minutes left until the final train of the evening. It was this train that he would jump in front of.

He didn't want to inconvenience travelers by jumping in front of an earlier train. That would cause the rest of the evening's trains to run late. They might even have to shut the track until tomorrow in order to move his body. He endeavored to make his final act as selfless as possible. He had been grappling constantly with the level of selfishness in this decision for the past several weeks.

The second to last train of the evening sped by on the track to his right, sending a wave of thick, stale subway air straight into his face. He cleared his throat. He could nearly taste the grime.

It was freezing cold, even this far below street level. Marshall pulled his cracked leather bomber jacket closer around him. The lining smelled like his father. Cinnamon, citrus, vodka. He tried not to think about it.

Marshall checked his phone clock one more time. 1:20 am. He opened the stop-watch app. Watched the seconds tick until twenty past the minute. He shuffled some apps around and clicked play on *When I'm Gone* by Eminem.

4 minutes and 40 seconds exactly. If he timed it correctly, his life would end with the final beat of his favorite song.

Marshall had listened to Eminem on repeat while he took the train to Manhattan that morning. He was halfway through his sophomore year at the Jesuit high school on the Upper East Side.

It was alright there. The Jesuits weren't the reason he was sitting on this cold concrete slab.

He rolled his ankles, shook out his feet. Twiddled with the silver chain around his neck. Aimlessly opened the text app on his phone.

Where are you? From his mother, at half past eleven. He hadn't bothered to answer. She hadn't sent a follow up.

There was no school that morning, as it was the holiday break, but he'd left a note on the kitchen counter informing any one of his family members that deigned to care that he was taking the train into the city anyways, to see some of his friends from school.

He met up with Jacob and Sam in Central Park around 11 a.m. They wandered slowly down the snow-covered paths, petting dogs and discussing the scores from last night's basketball game and what they'd gotten for Christmas.

Sam had gone to Mexico for Christmas break. He showed Jacob and Marshall photos of an idyllic beach with rolling, blue waves. A whale was breaching in one of them. A spout of water shot into the air. It looked humid, even on the shitty iPhone camera.

‘That’s amazing, man,’ Jacob said to Sam, in response to the photo.

Marshall smiled and nodded along.

He parted from Jacob and Sam around 8pm. The winter sun had set long before, and the Upper East Side was shrouded in December darkness. His mother texted him at 8:15.

Still out?

Yes, everything okay? he replied.

She didn’t answer.

He walked through the park for several more hours. He shuffled Eminem and other favorites on his iPhone. Lil Wayne, Blink 182, Tupac. He periodically rubbed the wires of his headphones between his gloved hands to ensure they kept working. To his surprise, his phone didn’t die the entire day.

A last gift from the universe, perhaps.

Marshall looked down at his phone again. Three minutes had passed since he had last checked the time. He stood up slowly, jumped up and down a few times to let warmth back into his legs and feet.

Eminem was rapping about standing on a stage now, a crowd on their feet, a standing ovation for his performance. His daughter asked him how he’d gotten to Sweden.

How had Marshall gotten to 28th Street Subway Station, in the early hours of New Year’s Day, 2013?

Around 10:30 he stood up from a park bench. The park attendant was making his rounds for the evening, yelling at homeless people to leave, picking up empty trash with that mechanical claw contraption that convicts used to pick up Styrofoam cups on the side of the Hutchinson Parkway.

Slowly, Marshall walked down Park Avenue. He started on 72nd street and strolled all the way down to the 28th Street Station. His feet were aching and numb by the time he arrived, just past midnight.

As he passed the skyscrapers and the bustling restaurants and the golden, glowing windows of first floor apartments, he kept his eyes on the wet, gum-spackled pavement. His worst fear was seeing some glimpse of hope that would stop him from acting.

It had happened before.

Now he walked down the platform of the subway track. His feet straddled the painted yellow line. Life on the left side, death on the right.

The sound of a rat scuttling amongst a pile of debris down on the tracks reached him from where he stood on the platform.

He stopped walking a few feet before the tunnel opening. It was here he would wait for the train to arrive.

He sent up a silent prayer - to the god he didn't believe in - that Sam or Jacob or Greta or Ella or his sister wouldn't text him now. He only had a minute left, and a text from one of them would make him stay. A quick succession of five images crossed his mind. Sam passed out in the chair in front of his dad's big TV, football highlights still running. Jacob asleep on the lower bunk, his younger brother above him. Greta, in her cocoon of pink silk sheets, a white noise machine running on the side table. Ella, orange cat curled up on the pillow next to her, a book open on the crumpled blanket. His sister –

But that thought was too painful. He shoved it as far away as he could.

Another blast of air hit him as he stood there, waiting for the train. Just a few more seconds and it would all be over. He heard the groaning of the train on the metal rails down the tunnel. The beam of white from its front lights reached him, reflected on the grey tile wall. A round gleam of green came next, indicating that this train was a 6 train, northbound, towards Pelham and the Bronx.

Eminem's final line in his ears. Something about not feeling pain, smiling back. His words seemed so quiet over the roar of the subway car.

The front lights of the train were blinding him now. Just a moment longer. He took a step towards the track, where the platform turned into the edge of a cliff, the tracks below a deep, dark pit. The subway was a snarling, malevolent beast as it approached at full speed. Terrifying, yet also his savior. The conductor didn't seem to have even hit the brakes yet.

Marshall took a deep breath. It shuddered in his cold lungs. He refused to allow himself to think of anything except moving forward.

He had to time it correctly, there was no space for error. It was now or never. There was no other train running tonight on this track. He didn't want to go home defeated, have to explain to his mother where he had been, have to hide this excursion from his friends, like he had done after the last situation.

Marshall forced his right knee to bend. He took a small, short step forward. He shut his eyes, felt the tunnel wind on his face.

Marshall took his final step.

Both his feet left the platform.

Tan Timberland boots hovered in midair for the splittest of split seconds.

One of the earphones fell out of his ear, where it had been nestled for hours, and the wire bounced against his hip.

Marshall clamped his eyes shut. He thought he could hear, as if from far, far away, the sound of the train horn. But he may have been imagining it, he wasn't sure.

He waited for impact. He expected to feel an intense, vibrant pain as the train hit him, followed by a vast, black wall of nothing. Or perhaps, his boots would hit the track first, breaking his legs.

But after the initial shock of stepping off the platform, and the bright white light, he felt nothing, no pain, no collision, no ankle breaking fall onto the tracks –

Actually, he did feel something. Wind. But not from the same direction as it had been coming from in the tunnel. This was wind from below. Or above? Marshall couldn't tell at all.

Then he began to fall, as if from a great height.

Chapter Two

Shark bait

It was his Timbs that hit the water first.

As his legs submerged, then his chest, followed by his head, a thought passed briefly through Marshall's mind. He was sure, sometime in seventh grade, that he and Jacob had watched a Myth Busters series where the bald guy with the mustache talked about a human body making impact with water from a great height. They tested it with a dummy. Mustache man had said, survival? Zero chance.

So surely, Marshall must be dead now.

But no, he was alive. Alive and confused. At least he thought he was. He could feel the cold water saturating his clothing and hair. His legs felt like they'd been electrocuted.

Marshall opened his eyes to a wall of grey water. They were immediately irritated by the salt— he could feel them reddening by the second. Lungs straining for air, he looked around frantically for any sign of daylight. Finding a pocket of slightly less grey water, he swam upwards at full speed.

He broke the surface of the water gasping, the salt and cold thoroughly burning his throat and lungs as he gulped down air. Passing a hand over his eyes to wipe away the salt, his situation materialized before him.

He was bobbing in the middle of the ocean, like an apple in a barrel. Waves rose and fell around him, massive blocks of steel and iron coming his way relentlessly. His arms worked double time as he fought to keep his head above the water.

He labored like this for what felt like hours, until something hit him from behind. Bewildered, Marshall turned to see a capsized wooden canoe of sorts. He could have sworn it wasn't there a moment ago, during his field assessment.

Marshall clambered onto the upturned raft, clawing his way onto its swollen center. As he did so, his left hand snagged against a broken piece of wood. He pulled it away, wincing. An inch long splinter protruded from the fleshy part of his palm.

Successfully perched on the raft, Marshall looked around once more. The waves were rocking him violently, and it took all his strength to hang on. His arms were shaking from the effort. As far as he could see in all directions, there was no sign of land. Not even a tiny, deserted island.

‘What the fuck,’ he said. It comforted him for a moment to hear his own voice.

Possibilities were running a marathon through his mind. Did the train not kill him? How did he survive the fall into the ocean? Where the hell was he? How was he *conscious*?

For the first time, he looked directly up. Part of him was expecting to see some alien-esque portal in the sky, perhaps a circular bank vault door through which he had fallen.

His inquisitive stare was met only by dark, gloomy clouds. Not even a seabird wheeled overhead.

The rocking of the boat, the expanse of grey water, and the taste of bitter salt in his mouth, were beginning to make Marshall nauseous. He pulled his legs up to his chest and rested his head on his knees. He focused on breathing deeply.

A particularly large wave crested beneath his raft, and Marshall’s stomach lurched. He gripped the edge of the wood harder, shoving the splinter farther into his hand. He cried out in pain. Before he could register how ridiculous he sounded, he yelled out at the waves.

‘Would you just fucking stop!’

Instantly, the water calmed. The waves flattened out beneath his vessel to a gentle, quiet lapping. Marshall reeled backward in shock, nearly falling off the raft. He righted himself, staring down into the water, dumbstruck.

‘Thanks,’ Marshall said gruffly. ‘Didn’t mean to yell.’

The ocean made no response.

Marshall took the moment of tranquility to examine his hand. The splinter had been jammed even farther in than he thought – only a small portion remained poking out of his skin. The area around it was bruised already, the flesh turned a hideous purple blue. He drew in a deep breath, and using his teeth, pried the splinter from his palm.

It didn’t hurt as much as he thought it should have. Once removed, he tossed the offending piece of wood into the ocean. A trail of bright red blood, even more vivid against his monotonous, grey surroundings, trailed down his palm and onto his wrist.

Salt water cleansed wounds, right? Marshall was pretty sure that it did. He and Jacob probably learned that off Myth Busters, too.

He shrugged and stuck his hand into the water. The hole the splinter had left prickled for a moment, and then the pain dulled. Little clouds of his blood bloomed on the surface of the ocean and floated away, funny red flowers in a colorless field.

Marshall held his hand under the water for a few minutes. When he felt comfortable that it had stopped bleeding, he put his hand in his sodden jacket pocket. His fingers brushed his iPhone. He realized with a start that he had completely forgotten about it.

Doubting it worked now, after a five-minute swim in the ocean, he pulled it gingerly from his pocket. To his amazement, the phone screen still lit up when he tapped it with his finger. He looked at the screen's top right corner, hoping to see even one bar of signal.

Nothing.

He should've known.

A splashing in the water, a noise unlike the sound of the waves, caught his attention. Marshall raised his eyes just in time to see a grey dorsal fin approaching from the north, heading straight for his life raft.

'You're kidding me,' Marshall said.

He had attracted a damn shark by bleeding in the ocean. He could've kicked himself for his stupidity.

Getting hit by a train was one thing. Turning into a shark's late-night snack was something completely different.

The shark's wake reached him first. Would it try to throw him off the boat and stun him, like Orcas did to seals on icebergs?

It better not.

Marshall curled his hands into fists, preparing to punch the shark in the nose, if and when it surfaced. He tried to appear braver than he felt. He could feel his heart beating in his clenched fingers.

The surface of the water broke. A slick, grey body was hurtling towards Marshall, full speed. He braced for impact, hoping for a collision of shark nose and sixteen-year-old boy fist.

But as the shark came closer, Marshall saw the dorsal fin was sloped, not as triangular as he had thought at first glance. Surely, that head was too small to be attached to the gigantic body of the Great White that

Marshall was imagining. The water parted for a moment, and Marshall could've sworn he saw the outline of a blowhole.

'Bonjour!' the dolphin said as it surfaced.

Marshall's eyes bugged out of his head. The air in his lungs deserted him.

'What?' he croaked.

'I said bonjour, mon garçon! Make some kind of reply. Is this the way you speak to your teacher?' The dolphin's voice was high and a bit squeaky, but Marshall couldn't deny there was a quality in it that he recognized.

He scooted closer to the edge of the boat, to where the dolphin was turning circles in the water.

'Monsieur Dupont?' Marshall asked. His voice was a barely audible whisper. His French teacher was a dolphin. Marshall was dead. He'd jumped in front of a train.

A horrible thought occurred to him now. Did he survive the train's impact? Was he in a coma right now, being poked and prodded by medical professionals, under some anesthesia that was making him hallucinate this entire experience? Or was he very, very dead and – yep. He had to have been wrong all this time. There *was* something after death. None of that I-just-don't-exist-anymore shit he had convinced himself of over the years. This had to be Heaven or Hell or... well, if one of his high school teachers had followed him here, it could actually be something worse.

His sin had been suicide.

Punishment? Eternal French homework. Like some kind of twisted, academic purgatory.

'Of course! Of course!' the dolphin cried.

'Are you dead?'

'Why would I be dead?'

'Because I'm dead!' Marshall said, indignantly. 'At least, I'm meant to be.'

'Then you're dead, but I'm certainly not.' Monsieur Dolphin-Dupont was turning in lazy circles in the water. Marshall wanted to scream at him to stop but didn't want another rebuke from his favorite teacher.

‘How is it we’re speaking now, then? If I’m alive and you’re dead. And how are you a dolphin?’

‘How are you a human?’

Marshall had no response to that – other than the quintessential and Jesuit-approved ‘because God made me one’ – so he just huffed.

‘We’re speaking because you open your mouth and make noises, and I do the same in response. I can’t go into more detail. I teach French, not science.’

Marshall had no idea how to respond to that either, so he changed tactics. There were dozens, hundreds of pressing questions he wished to ask, the most important of which sprung out of his mouth.

‘But Monsieur Dupont. Where the hell am I?’

‘Marshall, my boy. You’re in Suspended Time, of course!’ the dolphin version of Monsieur Dupont said, letting out a series of squeaks. They almost resembled human laughter.

Freda Mills



Freda is a teaching principal based in Cork, Ireland. She studied an MA in Creative Writing at City, University of London and is currently completing an MFA in Creative Writing in University College of Dublin. Freda is working on her debut novel, *Jackie*, a family saga which examines the conflict that exists between wealth and greed and how far someone will go to get what they want. Her short story 'An Phian/The Pain' was published in the Irish language magazine *Feasta* and an article about her time teaching abroad was published in *InTouch*.

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My genres

Irish Fiction, Family Saga, Historical fiction

From rags to riches, a family business is born. A large fortune. Two sons. A disaster waiting to happen. While Jackie grapples to keep his family together, it seems as though they are destined to fall apart. As the sun rises on Christmas Day 2016, a new day dawns, one that the Ryan family will never forget.

Novel Extract

Jackie

Chapter Seven

1965

Cork City, Ireland

It was Christmas Eve. The perfect time to do it.

When Jackie got home from work, he was relieved to have the house to himself. Visiting the crib on Christmas Eve was the Ryan family tradition - even the staff at Ford's knew that Jim never worked past one o'clock on Christmas Eve. His mam had been upset that Jackie wouldn't make it, but this year, he had more important things to do.

He made himself a cup of tea, buttered a slice of his mam's soda bread and took both upstairs, eating the bread as he walked. He showered quickly and put on his good trousers and his best shirt. He downed the last of the tea and thanked God once again that his family weren't there. If his mam had seen him dressed like this, there was no way he could have left without questioning. He combed his hair in the bathroom, checking it in the mirror as he did. He dipped his fingers under the cold water and ran them through the front and sides. He was ready.

At the front door, Jackie pulled on his good jacket. He'd saved for months to afford it; the grey wool three button blazer Mary had admired as they'd walked through Cork City during the summer. 'You'd look handsome in that,' she'd said.

He hesitated for a moment, looking at the one photo of his parents that stood on the hall table in a simple rectangular silver frame. His mam and dad adored each other. He went into the kitchen and poured a glass of water. His hand was shaking as he lifted the glass. In that moment, he wished his dad was there. One glance at his watch, however, and he was out the front door. Timing was everything.

Jackie hadn't seen Mary in over two weeks. She'd told him at the beginning of December that she'd have to keep her head down in the lead up to the Christmas exams. Leaving Certificate year. It was an important time for Mary. Jackie made sure to give her the space she needed. But at the same time, he wanted her to know how he felt about her.

How he really felt.

During those two weeks, Jackie had missed Mary. A lot. Afternoons in the workshop were long without her visits and he had spent the past two Friday nights cooped up at home. On one or two occasions, he had been tempted to wait for her outside the school after one of her papers, but decided against it each time. It would be better to wait until her exams were finished.

He found himself daydreaming about her; memories of kissing her in the workshop mixed in with fantasies of running his hands up her legs in the back of his car. Her legs were perfect; the inside of her thighs were so soft. The sensation of brushing his hands against her underwear, every time the most incredible feeling as he pressed his hand underneath. He remembered back to that night in Charlie's, seeing Mary properly for the first time, without any underwear. The thoughts distracted him, made it difficult for him to focus on his work.

Most of all though, he missed her company.

Mary was the easiest person to be around. It didn't matter if Jackie was wearing his dirty boilersuit, or dressed up for a Friday night date, he always felt at ease around her. When he spoke to Michael, he held back, expecting the slagging that was so typical of his friend. He had a great

relationship with his parents, but then how could he tell his mam or dad that he wanted so much more than they could ever give him? When Jackie had told Mary about his dreams for the future, she'd simply said, 'You'll do it. I know you will.' The previous week, he'd messed up a pretty big job for one of his regular customers. Since then, he'd been having doubts about his plans to move to a bigger workshop. He needed to hear Mary's reassuring words again. At night as he lay in bed, he pictured her beside him, whispering those same words. 'You'll do it. I know you will.' But it wasn't the same.

The summer had been incredible. Mary's parents had given her a bit more freedom than usual before her final year and so Jackie had been lucky to spend most of his spare time with her. It was the best three months of his life. They'd cycled to Crosshaven, had picnics in Fitzgerald's Park, gone for afternoon cinema dates, and taken the train to Cobh.

One of his favourite memories from the summer was their trip to Youghal. Jackie had known, long before their first date back in April even, that Mary was special. As the months went on, Jackie was certain that Mary was the one; the person he wanted to build his life with. But it was during that trip to Youghal beach that Jackie understood that the feeling was mutual.

*

It was the August bank holiday weekend. The hottest day of the year. They took the train to Youghal. Mary wore the red dress that Jackie loved. The dress itself was loosely fitted, except for around the chest where it pulled in a bit tighter, mildly showing the shape of her breasts. He had wanted to hold her hand on that train journey so badly, but there were too many people around. They stepped off the train and onto the platform amid the hustle and bustle of other beachgoers, all travelling up from the city for the day. Mary brought a little bag with her which Jackie insisted on carrying. Eileen had given them tomato and onion sandwiches, and Jim had made up a flask of tea. 'Be sure to drink lots of water too,' Eileen had said. 'And don't forget to put on your sun cream.' When they arrived at the station, they let the crowds pass, Jackie resting his hand on the small of Mary's back as they did, then walked the ten-minute stretch to the beach, hand in hand.

Most of the morning had been spent in and out of the water. Jackie couldn't take his eyes off of Mary in her red and white polka dot bathing suit. He had seen one or two girls on the beach wearing a two-piece swimsuit, but Mary wore a one piece that covered her stomach. She told Jackie there was no way she'd ever show off her stomach in public, especially with a priest walking up and down the beach keeping an eye on everyone. Jackie didn't mind. He liked the thought of being the only one allowed to see that part of Mary.

She floated beside him in the sea, the sun sending a shimmer across her entire body. He swam around her and listened as she told him about the places she wanted to travel to after she became a doctor. Her father had brought a friend to dinner one time, a visiting doctor from Germany. Throughout the dinner, Dr. Bauer had spoken about her home town of Heppenheim, about the families she worked with, and the sense of community that they shared. Mary wanted to begin her travels there. 'I'll only work abroad on short trips though,' she had added, 'a couple of times a year. My specialty will be in histopathology so most of my work will be here, in Cork.' She smiled at Jackie then. Her green eyes had never looked so beautiful.

After their swim, they moved to the far end of the beach, right down to the end, where no one else could see them. Though the edge wasn't very pretty, it was more stones than sand, it felt good to be alone, away from the crowds. They stretched out side by side on a shared towel. Jackie rested his hand on Mary's thigh, and she snuggled into him. Afternoon moved towards evening. The far-off din of shouts and shrieks from the beach quietened as families began to leave, the sound of waves lapping onto the beach getting louder.

'You know Jackie, I really love this.'

Jackie sighed and put one hand behind his head. 'Me too. We should spend all our weekends at the beach.'

Mary laughed and flicked a bit of sand onto his chest. 'Yeah that, but I meant us. I love us.'

Jackie wrapped his arm around Mary then, really paying attention now. Her cheeks were pink. He brushed a wet curl behind her ear. 'Mary, this is the best thing that's ever happened to me. You're the best thing that's

ever happened to me.’ The words burst out of him, more rushed than he had hoped.

Mary squeezed Jackie’s hand. ‘Do you think we’ll... I mean...’ She blushed. ‘Anyway, it’s just really great, and... I’m mad about you.’

Jackie smiled and pulled Mary onto him, so that her legs were wrapped around his waist. ‘If you’re asking me if I think we’ll last, the answer is yes.’

Mary beamed at Jackie and put her hands on the sides of his face. Their foreheads pressed against each other. Their lips met and they kissed slowly, gently, then with an intensity that made Jackie wish more than anything that they were the only two people on the beach. Mary’s weight pressing against him felt so good. His heart raced. He breathed into Mary’s neck as he spoke.

‘My God Mary, I love you so much.’

Mary’s voice was a whisper. ‘I love you so much too, Jackie Ryan.’

*

Jackie hadn’t told anyone about what he planned to do. His parents wouldn’t understand. Though they liked Mary, they reminded him constantly that she was ‘only seventeen’. Michael would have just laughed. But he’d imagined this moment, night after night, for months. He knew they were young. They both had so much ahead of them. Jackie would build up his business, he’d have a successful garage of his own. Mary would study to become a doctor, maybe have her clinic. They’d do all of this together; they’d be married. Mr and Mrs Ryan.

Jackie had thought about their children. Mary had once joked that she wanted five kids. Jackie wasn’t sure about that, from his own experience, but he’d definitely like one or two. If they were anything like Mary, maybe he’d have more.

Once they were married, they’d rent a room somewhere to begin with. They’d save enough to rent a place of their own, and then the next step would be to buy. It would depend on where Jackie’s garage was, of course, and Mary’s clinic, but he’d like to live somewhere along the Western Road. That way they’d be close to both Jackie’s and Mary’s parents, and even though Mary had once said that living in a big house wasn’t important to her, Jackie felt it was only right, considering the house she grew up in.

Mary had once told him that Christmas was her favourite time of the year. She believed that magical things happened during this time, that anything was possible. When she had listed off the events organised for the coming Christmas, she mentioned that her parents would be attending the Chamber of Commerce cheese and wine evening on Christmas Eve from five o'clock on. Mary added that she planned to use the time at home alone to wrap presents for her mother and father, which she would then hide around the house. She made Jackie promise not to tell anyone that she still did that at seventeen.

Jackie closed the front door behind him and headed down Pearse Lane, turning left onto St. Anthony's Road. The main street was humming with people collecting turkeys and purchasing last minute items. Children pointed excitedly at twinkling lights that hung across shopfronts. A group of carol singers from the local primary school stood outside Canty's pub singing *Away in a Manger*. Normally Jackie would have thrown something into the bucket, but he was in a rush.

He made his way straight to Fiona's Flowers, the last shop on the main road. He pushed the door open to the sound of a jingle from the rusty bell hanging overhead and was hit by the overwhelming scent. It was the first time he'd ever set foot in a flower shop. Bright red roses glared up at him from vases beside his foot. He considered backing out when Carol popped up from behind the counter, scissors in one hand, a Christmas wreath in the other. She wiped her brow and beamed.

'Jackie Ryan. I've never seen you in here before. Who's the lucky girl?'

Jackie stuck his hands into his pockets and smiled.

'Carol, how are you keeping? I didn't know you were working here, but then I should have guessed.'

'I know. My mam has me here night and day sure. Slavery is what it is.' She rolled her eyes and laid the wreath onto the counter. 'What can I get you Jackie? Did your mam send you over?'

'No, I just need to pick up some flowers. Something pretty...whatever you think.'

Carol nodded. 'Yeah, okay. I think I can help you with that.'

While Carol moved towards the flowers at the front of the shop, Jackie eyed himself in the small mirror beside the counter. He brushed his hair back and straightened the collar of his shirt.

‘Are you looking forward to tomorrow Jackie? Máire must be all excited is she? Sure the others are probably too old for the Santa stuff?’

‘Ah yeah they’re all excited. They’re gone off up to see the crib.’ Jackie looked at his watch.

‘The crib is beautiful this year, it’s been freshly repainted. I went up to the church myself last night for a quick look.’ She tied a knot around the bunch of red roses and handed them to Jackie. ‘There you are Jackie, I hope whoever gets them enjoys.’ She gave him a wink. ‘Two shillings so, when you’re ready.’

The bell on the shop door rung again and Mrs Doyle bustled in, a large bag in each hand making her entrance an awkward one. She beamed as soon as she saw Jackie.

‘Ah Jackie, how are you getting on? Did you finish up early for Christmas Eve? You’re dead right.’

Jackie handed his two shillings to Carol and took the flowers, his face hot as he did. ‘I did Mrs. Doyle. Are you all set for tomorrow?’

Mrs. Doyle was grinning now, her eyes on the roses as she spoke.

‘I am, sure it’ll just be myself and George. But never mind me, how’s that beautiful girl of yours?’

‘She’s good. I’m heading off to see her now.’ He looked at his watch again.

Mrs Doyle picked up her bags energetically and moved towards the counter as if suddenly on a mission. ‘Oh go on, I won’t keep you – nobody should get in the way of young love.’ Jackie waved and turned to leave. As he did, he caught a smile pass between Mrs. Doyle and Carol. He wondered what they would say after he left. He looked at the flowers in his hand, and continued on his way.

The walk to Mary’s took twenty-five minutes. He’d done it so many times, although he never actually went right to the door. He usually met Mary on the bridge next to the University, and that was always as far as he’d go whenever he walked Mary home. It was on that bridge that he and Mary had their first kiss. And it would be to that bridge, in just over

twenty-five minutes, that he'd bring Mary, to propose. He felt for the ring in his pocket again, just to be sure. First, he had to call for her at the house. He knew Mary's house, of course. He knew College Avenue well from his childhood days as a paper boy.

Jackie had never met Mary's parents, but from the way Mary spoke about them, they sounded great. Mary's dad had been in the paper once, after he received an award for his surgical achievements in the Bons Secours Hospital. Her mam had always been hugely supportive of Mary's dreams, and had begun calling her Dr. Fitzpatrick around the house. They were a close family, and Jackie could tell how important it was to Mary to make her parents proud. Mary told Jackie at the start of September that she'd hinted to her parents there was someone in her life. She never told Jackie any more after that. He wondered how they had reacted. When asked, Mary said he'd meet them when the time was right.

The University grounds were quiet that afternoon. Festive lights shone brightly on the edges of the campus. He paused for a moment on the bridge and gazed over at the chimneys of the mansions on College Avenue. Even now, at twenty years of age, the childhood amazement at seeing those houses for the first time remained. He pictured Mary in the sitting room. He imagined her wrapping presents for her parents, *The Supremes* playing on the record player.

He crossed the road, dodging a cyclist who was carrying his child on the cross bar, and walked through the entrance of College Avenue. Luckily, the gates were open. He paused for a second and drew a deep breath. He patted his pocket, then brushed down the front of his jacket. Most of the houses in the estate were lit up brightly against the dark winter evening which was already setting in. Jackie glimpsed a small party underway in the house directly across from Mary's. The curtains were open and six or seven people were milling around holding what looked like champagne glasses in their hands. The houses on either side of Mary's were lit up too, and smoke billowed from the chimneys.

Mary's house was in darkness.

Jackie moved up the path and climbed the steps towards the front door, the flowers suddenly awkward in his hand. He wondered if Mary had

changed her mind and gone to the party with her parents, although he knew that wasn't her kind of thing. Maybe she'd gone out with friends.

He knocked on the door once, then rang the doorbell.

The curtains of the window to the left of the front door were closed, but the ones to the right were open. He hopped down from the step and pressed his forehead against the cold pane.

He pulled his face away and stood frozen to the spot. He looked around at the other houses, their lights now hurting his eyes and making him feel sick. He returned again and peered inside once more needing to confirm what he had just seen.

The sitting room was empty.

There was nothing in there. A vast open space. No table, no chairs. The purple velvet sofa was gone along with the record player that once sat in the corner. The picture frames had been removed; perfectly rectangular stains left instead. Even the chandelier had been taken down. All of the things that he glimpsed through the window, craned his neck to see, in those days as a paperboy; all of those things were gone. Everything was gone.

Jackie steadied himself against the window sill and tried to draw a breath.

'Are you all right there young man?'

He looked up to see an elderly woman poking her head out of the front door of the house next to Mary's.

'I said are you all right, love?'

Jackie knew he should walk over to her, but his legs wouldn't move.

'I... I...,' he looked at the house, then back again at the woman. 'I was looking for Mary. I thought... she'd be here, I thought she...'

The woman's head tilted to the side. 'Oh you poor pet.' She shook her head. 'It was the strangest thing, love. We woke up yesterday morning, my husband and I, to the sound of moving vans. I'd say it wasn't even eight o'clock. Anyway, I went straight out and asked them what was going on. Two men there were. They didn't know anything about who lived there, they said they were just doing a job – picking up boxes to be moved. I only spoke to Daniel and Elizabeth last week, they never said a thing.'

She took a step towards Jackie, then stopped.

‘I’m sorry love. I don’t know what else to tell you.’

Jackie waved a hand slowly, as if trying to clear the fog that was forming right in front of his eyes. ‘Did they say... or did they, did Mary...’ His breath was shallow. He knew he wasn’t making any sense. ‘It’s okay. It’s okay. Yeah, I’d... I’d better go.’ He turned to leave. ‘Thank you.’

‘You’re all right love. You take care now. And Happy Christmas.’

‘Yeah, Happy Christmas to you too.’

Jackie barely remembered the walk home. The flowers were gone but he wasn’t sure at what point he’d dropped them. There was a buzzing sound in his ears. His head hurt. He was already at the Lough but he couldn’t recall passing the bridge, or even the University. Had he gone that way? He kept going; everything around him was a blur. He tripped over a crack in the footpath and was confused when a group of young girls across the road started laughing. One of them called out to him, ‘Are you drunk?’

He looked up and saw the church ahead, stunned to realise he was already almost home. Someone called his name.

‘Jackie? Jackie are you deaf?’

Michael and Maggie walked towards him, hand in hand, laughter on their faces.

‘Jesus Jackie you’re in your own world.’ Michael gave his friend a playful punch in the arm. ‘Are you all right?’

Maggie’s eyebrows furrowed. ‘We’re just heading in to see the crib Jackie – if you want to join us. Or if you’re meeting Mary later we could all go together then? What do you think? Jackie?’

Jackie was staring straight ahead. His face was white.

‘She’s gone.’

Michael looked from Maggie back to Jackie. ‘What are you on about Jackie?’

‘She’s gone. Mary’s gone.’

Olumayokun Ogunde



Olumayokun Ogunde, a City University Creative Writing MA graduate, currently working as a freelance copywriter. She's dedicated to telling the stories of black women, as well as combining her education in writing craft with her desire to champion underrepresented voices by incorporating their stories into her work. She is currently working on her first novel, *Ife*.

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My genres

Romance, Women's Fiction, Yoruba Folklore and Mythology, Black Love

Fat, Black, and a woman. Despite everything being designed to work against her, Ife's life seems great until she begins to dismantle it. A coveted job, great friends, she's made her family proud, but she still hasn't been loved, not properly, not truly.

Ife is fed up with looking for love, she's done all the work. There are no good men left in London. Just as she is about to give up, she meets Michael.

A London love story.

As her wishes start to come true, Ife realises that things look different when they are held up to the light.

Novel extract

Ife

Ife was on a date.

‘So, what do you do when you’re not working?’

‘I game’, her date replied.

Ife watched as his face lit up and his lips began to move faster and faster. She was good at that. Good at making people feel like they could tell her what made them happiest in this world. The words spilt out of his mouth so fast she doubted he even realised she wasn’t listening. She was nodding and smiling at the right moments, but his voice was a flat buzzing in her ears.

‘Some weekends I won’t leave my chair for hours, and my mum will have to come to mine and bring cooked food to me, so I don’t starve, you know?’

She didn't know. Of course, she didn't know, but she smiled politely anyway.

She should have stood up and told him she wasn't interested in dating narcissistic mummy's boys at this point in time. She should have said that she appreciated him taking the time out to meet her, but they weren't well suited. But instead, she played with her food and allowed him to spiral deeper into the intricate world of Twitch streaming.

She nudged a single chickpea around her plate, watching the bright orange oil stain the bottom of the bowl, when a notification flashed across her phone screen and caught her eye.

She looked down and saw the familiar bird icon in the corner of her screen.

If I hear that man scream 'you're my gurlfriendddd' one more time my head is going to explode, the tweet read.

A smile tugged at her lips; she had forfeited her nightly ritual of reality TV and Twitter to listen to a man she didn't like talk about how much he liked to game.

He was the kind of man who was used to being listened to. Twenty-five, six foot three, bearded, employed, a homeowner. On paper, he seemed like a catch. In reality, it was clear he believed his height and handsome face made up for a stark lack of charisma.

'I'm just going to the bathroom quickly.'

Without waiting for a reply, Ife made her way through the restaurant. Her date had chosen one of those whitewashed Caribbean food chains that advertised themselves as the height of culinary innovation but instead were flavourless imitations.

She slipped through the doorway leading up to the toilet. The hallway had a gaudy pop art wall of Bob Marley's face splashed across it. The words 'one love' were stamped across his face in each frame, obscuring his eyes. Ife thought that this must be some sort of copyright infringement.

She pushed the bathroom door open and was faced with much of the same. The walls were covered in the same image. Even the sinks looked like steel pans. She'd already looked up the restaurant before she got here. Its owner was a fifty-year-old white man who'd spent six months in

Jamaica two years ago and decided that this experience gave him the necessary expertise to open a restaurant. Her date had claimed to know a 'really good Caribbean spot' and this was what he meant. This alone for Ife was definitely a red flag.

Her phone buzzed in her back pocket. She was expecting to see another Love Island tweet, instead, it was Vic calling.

She clicked accept just as she entered the cubicle.

'Yes?'

'So should I be preparing *Aso Ebi*?'

'I asked him what his favourite book was.'

'And?'

'*Rich Dad, Poor Dad.*'

'Oh.'

'Exactly.'

She paused for a moment, focusing her gaze on the familiar *Ask Angela* poster on the toilet door.

Are you on a date that isn't working out? Go to the bar and ask for Angela, the bar staff will help get you out of your situation. No questions asked.

She considered it briefly. Technically she was on a date that wasn't working out.

'Okay so he isn't the right person, but the next one might be.'

She sighed turned away from the poster and looked instead at her watch. Ten minutes had passed already.

'I don't think I can do this anymore Vic.'

Vic huffed.

'The right one is out there', she said.

Lie.

'You just have to be a bit more open', she said.

Lie.

'Any man would be lucky to have you', she said.

True.

'Vic, I have to go.'

'Are you okay?'

Ife breathed out. Vic's voice was sympathetic. She wanted to cry.

‘I have to go back out there. I’ll speak to you later.’

Before Vic could probe any further, Ife hung up.

She stared at her reflection in the blank screen for a moment. She had spent two hours getting ready for this date. Her false lashes were so long she could feel them brushing the tops of her cheeks as she blinked. She looked good, and it was wasted.

Shaking her head, she stood and left. As soon as she exited the bathroom, the chill of the restaurant’s air conditioning triggered goosebumps on her arms.

Choosing to take the longer route back to the table, she walked by the colourful bar in the centre of the restaurant. The side of the bar is decorated with fake palm fronds and Jamaican flags, the sight of it was so ridiculous she smiled.

Gyptians *Hold Yuh* began to play, and an older couple stood up and began dancing to it by the bar.

Feeling no rush to return to her table, she stopped to watch them. She watched as they swayed together, heads tipped back slightly so they could look into each other’s eyes. He mouthed something that made her eyes crinkle with laughter. He watched her and smiled, gripped her waist tighter. The streaks of white and grey amidst the woman’s afro caught the light as she swayed, matching the greying beard of her husband. Their feet moved in sync, they didn’t need prompting or coordination.

There wasn’t a dance floor but there should have been. Just so they could dance together, just so Ife could watch them dance.

As the song faded into the next, the couple returned to their seats, and so did Ife.

‘I thought maybe you’d run off.’

Ife grimaced. If she hadn’t left her bag at the table she might have.

‘I’m not feeling too good.’

‘Oh. Okay, let me call the waitress over for the bill.’

He lifted his hand and clicked. Twice. Ife watched in disgust as he sat back with a satisfied look.

The waitress made her way towards their table.

‘What can I do for you?’

‘Bill please’, he said shortly.

The waitress, seemingly unphased, did as he asked and returned moments later with the bill and a card machine in hand.

‘Here’s your bill. I hope everything was okay with your meal.’

Ife smiled at the waitress hoping that her eyes were apologising well enough for her date’s behaviour.

‘Actually, the chicken was dry, take it off the bill.’

Ife looked at the waitress who lifted an eyebrow in surprise.

Her date turned to her.

‘I’m not paying for bad food. And I only got water. You got the chickpea curry and a mojito, so you should probably pay for that.’

Slowly the waitress said ‘Okay.’

Ife saying nothing pulled her card from her purse and held it out to waitress.

‘You sure?’

Ife nodded and waited for the familiar beep, then pushed her chair out to leave.

‘So, you coming back to mine?’

‘You’re an idiot.’

The satisfied smile fell from his face as he realised what she’d said.

‘What?’ he spluttered, conjuring up a retort, but she didn’t wait for it.

Ife stood and walked towards the waitress who was now wiping down another table.

‘Hey, I’m sorry about him. Here.’

She pushed a ten-pound note into her hands then made a beeline for the restaurant exit.

Out on the street people buzzed around as usual. Shoreditch was alight with excitement. She started to walk, worried that if she didn’t, her date might attempt to catch up with her. After about two streets of craning over her shoulder to make sure she wasn’t being followed, she slowed her pace.

It was one of those rare days at the start of a British summer where temperatures reached 30 degrees. The warmth that had seconds ago been a welcome change, was already oppressive.

Everything was sticky.

Pulling her dress away from her clammy chest she enjoyed a fleeting moment of relief. She decided that instead of her usual bad habit of getting a cab to Liverpool Street Station, she'd walk.

As she walked, she reached into her bag for her phone, swiped onto the page with a folder labelled *bottomless pit* and one by one deleted all the apps.

Are you sure you want to delete this app? Deleting this app will also delete all its data.

Yes.

After watching the folder disappear, she continued down the street.

The sun retreated slowly into the horizon as more and more people filled the pavement. Groups of friends poured into clubs already giddy and tipsy, and happy.

Everyone around her looked so happy.

Suddenly, her breaths were getting shallower. As she walked, she tried to force them deeper. A familiar pressure rose in her. There was an alley coming up, she turned into it and dropped her bag onto the floor. She brought a hand to the space just above her bust and rubbed, attempting to relieve the sharp ache that was making it impossible to breathe.

Then, the sob that had been sitting at the back of her throat since she left the restaurant ripped its way through her chest.

It was one of those sobs that were so deep, so powerful that she was silent apart from the occasional jagged shudder. She could hear the beeps from cars and the laughs of passers-by, but she needed a sound to anchor onto. There was music playing from the bar across the street from the alley. She could barely make out the lyrics, but she could feel the vibrations of the bass under her feet. Forcing her mind to focus and counting in time with the bass, the grip on her chest began to slacken, and the space around her came slowly back into focus.

She wasn't okay.

Hey, I just want to be honest. I don't think I'm ready for a relationship right now. I don't want to lead you.

Droplets of water on her phone screen distorted the words of the text.

Don't want to lead you on.

She'd just gotten out of the shower.

Her skin was still wet.

The message was from her latest romantic interest, who was supposed to be picking her up for dinner in an hour. After the gamer she'd told herself she was no longer dating. She even deleted all her dating apps. But she had resurrected from her WhatsApp archive graveyard and asked her out on a date. Maybe it was fate? And who was she to stand in the way of fate?

Ife stood by her bedside table for a few moments. She was wrapped in a pink towel, her favourite. The towel had been washed so many times it wasn't fluffy anymore, a few loose threads hung from it.

She wasn't angry.

Anger required energy. She didn't have energy. The string of useless men she'd been entertaining for the last year and a half had stolen all of hers.

She wiped her phone screen clean with the corner of her towel and began to type out a response.

After typing and retyping for a minute, she decided against it.

Up until today, Sam had been nice. He messaged her regularly, they'd been on three unremarkable but sort of enjoyable dates, and he was kind of cute. Kind of.

She couldn't even feel sorry for herself. Her incessant need to be dating or 'talking' at all times was a character flaw. She knew that.

Sam said he just wanted to be honest. Ife was sick and tired of men and their honesty. She could imagine him thinking 'wow, how tactful of me' when he typed out his stupid message.

He had surprised her. Normally she could see the *'I'm not ready for a relationship'* spiel coming from a mile off. It usually started with a few lacklustre replies. First clipped answers, then one-word replies, then laughing faces, then nothing, then this. On their last date only a week ago, Sam had suggested that they should go on holiday to his family's timeshare in Spain in the autumn.

At the time she didn't think much of it. It was nice to believe he thought they might be in each other's lives in a couple of months' time. Now, she could only wonder why he felt the need to lie. Had he known the words were untrue as he said them?

Ife returned her phone to the bedside table and collapsed onto her bed on top of all the clothes she'd tried on. She didn't care. She lay there stretched out like a starfish.

That only lasted for a few moments. She could feel her skin drying, between her fingers, on her face.

She reached for the tub of cream on the table. Her door opened.

'Don't you have a date with 'Mr I'm 5'9" but say I'm 5'11"?''

Her best friend stood in the doorway, still wearing hospital scrubs and her ugly work rucksack on her back. Ife couldn't be bothered to explain, instead, she tossed Vic the phone.

She watched Vic's eyes scan the screen, reading quickly.

'Men are not good people,' she said shaking her head.

Ife rolled her eyes and began to spread her thick white cream over her arms, rubbing until it melted under the heat of her palms.

'See, I know that. So why do I keep subjecting myself to their torture?'

The question was rhetorical. They both knew why.

Vic liked to say that Ife tried to microdose on love. Some phrase she'd picked up from a social media relationship guru, most likely. But unfortunately, the description was accurate.

Most of the time when Ife met these men, she knew they couldn't be *the one* (she wasn't completely sure she believed in *the one*, but that didn't stop her from trying). They were hardly ever very smart, or interesting, or funny. But they offered crumbs that she could collect and pretend they made up for her longing for love. A hug. A kiss. Sex.

All these men took more than they gave.

Ife felt the bed dip. Vic sat down beside her, after clearing a small spot in the mess, and handed back her phone.

'Are you gonna respond?'

'Nope.'

'Makes sense. He definitely doesn't deserve one, dick head.'

Ife nodded. The outfit she was going to wear was laid out over her pillow. Jeans and a blue strappy top. Piles of other clothes, outfits that had been tried on and immediately discarded. Clothes on the bed, on the floor, everywhere. She stood up and started to fold items, creating a neat pile in

the midst of the mess. She picked up the clothes and began to return them to their respective spaces in her wardrobe.

‘I think I’m going to have an early night. I might order a Chinese. Should I get your usual?’ Ife said whilst placing the hangers back onto the rack.

‘No.’

‘You’re trying something new?’ Ife turned, surprised. They’d both been ordering the same thing since they’d moved in together two years ago.

‘No Chinese. We’re going out.’

‘Out?’

Vic nodded.

‘I’m getting you out of this flat and onto the streets. Literal streets, not the proverbial dating streets.’

‘Vic, I’m tired,’ Ife said. Today’s disappointment had manifested itself as a dull ache at her temples.

‘No, no, no. You need to snap out of it, Fe. You need to take a break from this dating torture thing you’ve been doing and have some fun.’

‘I have lots of fun.’

‘Of course you do,’ she said sarcastically. ‘Tonight, you need to just enjoy yourself. Kiss a boy in the club or something.’

Ife grimaced at the prospect. Kiss men whose mouths had been God knows where? Vic would say that. She had her boyfriend to call when she was drunk and horny.

‘We’re gonna get dressed up. Heels dressed up. Then we’ll go to Calypso. Lani knows the promoter and she’s gonna be there tonight.’

‘How do you even know this? Didn’t you finish your shift less than an hour ago?’

‘I can multitask.’

‘I don’t think doctors are supposed to organise nights out while their patients suffer.’

‘Oh, shut it. We’re going out! We’ll go, look good, get drunk.’

‘No’ didn’t seem like a viable option.

‘Okay.’

‘Good, let’s find you something to wear in this bombbsite of a room.’

Ife watched as Vic rummaged through the heaping pile of clothes on the bed.

‘What are you looking for?’

‘We need the corset.’

At that, she stilled.

‘The corset?’

Vic pulled it out from under the mess.

The corset was legend. The corset was everything a favourite piece of clothing should be. Black, satin, and expensive.

‘Put it on.’

‘I was thinking something a bit more casual?’ Ife said picking up a top from the bed.

Vic lifted an eyebrow at her.

She’d never worn the corset outside of her room. Vic had only seen it in the blurry window of a FaceTime call. Ife loved clothes, and she wasn’t shy about wearing revealing ones. Not anymore. But the corset was *a lot*.

Ife was soft. She had grown up seeing girls who were made up of harsh edges and sharp angles splatted across TV screens, on the front of magazines, even between the lines of the romance novels she held so dear. But she was soft, all dimpled flesh and pudgy rolls.

The first time she’d worn the corset, she looked at herself properly. She twisted and turned in the mirror for what felt like hours. She was the version of herself she imagined when she thought of outfits, a version that usually wasn’t reality. The bones of the corset forced her waist to dip where it didn’t naturally, moulding her into the shape she felt her body was meant to be. It forced the softness of her belly downwards before flaring out in hips she didn’t have before.

The corset was dangerous territory.

‘I don’t think the corset should be worn outside of these four walls Victoria.’

‘Why not?’

She couldn’t tell Vic how she felt about it. She would be inundated with talks about how beautiful and worthy she was. She knew how beautiful and worthy she was.

‘Will you try it on? It’s just us Ife. It’s only me.’

She took the corset from Vic. It was smooth against her fingers.

‘Fine, I’ll wear it.’

‘Good, I’m gonna get a glass of water and I’ll be back to help you fasten it.’

‘I’m good. I can do it.’

‘I’ll be back.’

She waited until she could hear Vic’s footsteps padding down the hallway to drop her towel. She felt silly hiding from Vic. She quickly pulled on a pair of knickers and moved to the mirror.

The feeling of the weight of her chest was familiar. She stared at herself, watching the gentle undulation of her chest, rising, rising, rising, then falling.

She picked the corset up from where it was waiting on the bed. The ribbon was threaded through each eyelet, the strings sagged awaiting her body to push them, to make them taut. The opening was wide enough for her to step into. She wiggled it over her hips and pulled till the top of the corset was held just below her neck. In the mirror’s reflection she could see Vic slip back into the room. No glass in hand.

Her friend stood behind her and paused.

After a few moments she could feel Vic’s fingers pulling on the ribbon. Without a word she began working down the laces, each like the rung of a ladder. As she pulled, Ife’s back straightened, forcing her to look up into the mirror and watch. Vic moved quickly. With each pull Ife could feel her waist give way to the rigid boning. She watched as her waist was carved into, chiselled away. She tried to look down at herself, the softness of her bust was now almost brushing her chin.

‘Steady?’

‘Steady.’

Vic pulled the ribbon, harder this time, hard enough to move Ife. Ife reached her arms out searching for something to steady herself. Before she could find anything to hold Vic pulled again. This time the force rocked Ife so hard that she lost her footing for a moment.

‘Last pull.’

With one last pull the corset was fastened. Vic stepped out from behind Ife, so she could watch her friend in the mirror.

Ife was quiet.

The corset was the same as before, unchanged by Victoria's presence. Ife felt the warmth of confidence flood her body as she looked at herself.

She ran her hands down her sides, watching them in the mirror as if they weren't her own.

'You look so fucking sexy.'

They both broke into laughter.

Mololuwa M. Ogunyemi



Mololuwa M. Ogunyemi is a British Nigerian Writer, from Surrey, England. She studied Cultural Studies and Media during her undergraduate degree as she's always had an interest in sociology and the influence of media on greater society. After a two-year break from education, she went back to complete her master's degree in Creative Writing. She now combines her sociological background with her love of writing, to create better stories with even better characters.

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My genres

Science Fiction, Contemporary Fiction, New Adult

Feyi is choking on the pressure to succeed as the leader of a failing team, Zach has made himself a traitor to the only family he has ever known, and Lela is fighting against the everlasting title of “second best”.

In an effort to prevent Mordem from destroying the reputation of Eden, Hellsing House’s top-level trainees come together to thwart what could be the end of the nation’s greatest defence system. Whilst bonding over feeling lost and restricted by the expectations placed on them, Feyi, Zach, and Lela lead the way to a new-age Hellsing House. One where the truth might truly set them free.

Novel extract

The Children of Eden

Chapter One

Zachariah wasn’t a backstabber. He knew he wasn’t, but somehow, leaving Mordem the way that he did, left him with a sour taste in his mouth. He tried telling himself he was doing it to take a chance on something new. He was tired of running, tired of working to an end he couldn’t see and for a vision that was never his. Mordem had already lost all merit. They had lost steam, lost relevance and even a driving force, so he wanted to give himself the chance to see how the other side lived. He wanted to know what it was like to fight for something other than greed.

*

Zach never thought his well-needed escape would arrive in the form of three loud knocks against his window, in the early hours of a pitch-black Tuesday morning. The hairs on the back of his neck stood high when he first heard the faint knocking against the 18th-floor windowpane. It didn't help that his freshly washed curls were still dripping down his spine adding to the chilling sensation.

Zach lived too high up and too far out for just anyone to find him, let alone have the guts to call on him in such an unconventional way.

His toes curled up between the thick fibre of his beige carpet and his fingers began to twitch. It felt unfamiliar. It wasn't like Mordem to send an anonymous messenger at night to call on him, but Mordecai was starting to become an unpredictable fuse. Zach's jaw tightened as he went back to the conversation that drenched his thoughts over and over just five minutes prior in the shower. Not being the "obedient" soldier Mordecai wanted was becoming a common theme during their arguments at the time, and the more they went back and forth the further away they were from reaching some common ground. But even then, Zach couldn't see Mordecai being the low-level petty type. Being called out for a job at night was laughably childish compared to the harsh realities Mordecai had previously put Zach through.

As the thoughts rattled around Zach's brain, trying to decipher what was waiting for him in the cold darkness, he slid halfway across the opposite side of his room, toward the doorway. He took his time, practically forcing his feet to float on the fluffy rug. Beside the wooden airtight doorframe laid the dimmer for his lights. He gently twisted it down, lowering the brightness just enough so he could still gaze at the movements of the person outside. He thought it the best way to have the upper hand on them whilst also obscuring his own movements.

A sigh escaped him as he lowered himself onto the plump mustard sofa beside the light switch. He knew he couldn't just sit waiting to find out what his stalker had in store, so it was time for him to get proactive. The last thing Zach wanted to do was fight, but when duty called, he made sure to answer. He was always ready to answer. He scanned his rooms ticking off all the places he knew he kept something of use.

A pair of unloaded handguns in the wardrobe. *Check*. A combat knife stuck on the lower side of the desk. *Check*. Another knife taped to the inner side of the top drawer. *Check*. A bat beside the couch. *Check*. And his bed, well that is where he kept all his favourite toys.

Another set of three loud knocks echoed around the pale blue walls of Zach's room. Whoever stood at his ledge was getting impatient and Zach couldn't help but chuckle. He started doubting if the person behind the curtain even really knew what they were doing. He smiled at the irony of the sneaky guest being someone who lacked simple patience to get the job done. It was obvious they were skilled since scaling the side of an apartment building, unnoticed, required a certain level of expertise, but then waiting to be invited in like a dinner guest made him think there was a lack of aggression in their visit, though he didn't let the humour of the scenario distract him from the alternative possibilities of their visit.

Zach lifted himself from the indented couch cushion and traced the edge of his bed until he reached the top end. He reached below his pillow, grabbing a hold of the hidden gem – a 2001 silver dagger he had recently stumbled upon in one of his more recent jobs. He clasped the leather handle, lining the blade with his index finger and thumb. His teeth tutted from the inherent bluntness of the blade, but there wasn't much he could do about it at this point. Zach slid the dagger between his skin and the band of his blue and white striped pyjama bottoms. He grabbed the matching button-down shirt from his bed and draped it over his back and arms, using it as a quick cover.

Zach's wet curls now clung to his forehead and neck, but the chill he once felt had now passed. The feeling of cold water hitting the collar of his shirt only made his eyes brighten up and his chest puff out. His eagerness was brewing.

Bang, bang, bang.

The three thumps were just as loud as the last. *Why the rush?* Zach smirked to himself.

Though entertaining, he didn't want to be up much longer so he made his way to the far wall, right where the window resided. Clicking on the first of two switches, he leant back on his rich mahogany desk watching the beige curtains rise at a humble pace.

Oh.

Where he expected to see only one person, he saw two. Their silhouettes were hidden under sleek black bodysuits, and their faces were covered by black-tinted faceguards. They swayed in and out of frame making their slender bodies only known when they swung into the little light left reflecting out from Zach's room. The brief spotlight left Zach assuming his two stalkers were women. He noticed the silhouette on the right gripping onto something attached to her, presumably holding her hanging body in place. Whatever it was, it wasn't obvious to the naked eye. They were using some sort of rope or string-like tool that was strong enough to hold human weight, yet so thin it was practically invisible. Few materials around could hold the weight of one person for so long, let alone two. With that in mind, Zach knew it also wasn't the kind of material he could easily find at any old local street market.

Whilst studying the two girls in the dark, he felt himself staring for what was probably a couple of seconds too long. Though, whilst doing so, he felt an unthreatening nature from both of them. All their hands were visible and there was no immediate jump into action from either of them.

He pressed down on the second switch on the wall, only just enough for the bottom of the window to open a few centimetres high.

'How can I help you guys today?' he asked.

It took about a second or two for either girl to answer. The whistling sound from the wind cut deep until the girl on the right finally spoke.

'We'd love for you to let us in for one,' she said.

'I'm sure you would,' Zach smirked.

The two silhouettes turned to each other, still under hidden face marks, with the one on the left shrugging her shoulders. *What was that?* Zach's forehead gained indented lines and his shoulders hardened. His new movements made the cold blade shock him into remembering its nearby presence, and its perfect position for him to grab.

'I'd be happy to let you in once you tell me what could be so important, you had to scale the side of a building to get to me,' he said.

The two mysterious black figures pulled in closer to the glass.

'Don't get too excited,' said the girl on the right.

The one who hadn't spoken yet cleared her throat. She grabbed onto the invisible string steadying herself in place.

'We're here on behalf of the Shadow Embassy's Training Division, Eden.' *She speaks.* Despite the intensity – or maybe because of it – her voice was memorable. It was cool and direct.

'So maybe get a little excited,' her companion said.

'Eden?' Zach raised a brow.

'I'm assuming you're aware of what the Shadow Embassy is?' said the cool voice on the left

'Yeah, the secret police that's isn't really much of a secret anymore,' Zach said.

The girl on the right made a sound that sounded somewhere between a chuckle and a scoff. 'The Shadow Embassy's exposure was for the best. It helped improve the honest relationship the government tried to keep with the people of Britain.'

'Yeah... sure,' said Zach.

'We're not here to discuss that right now,' the intense tone cut through. 'We'll be more than happy to elaborate on the nature of our visit once you let us in.' In Zach's mind, he definitely heard a smile through her words.

Zach tutted his teeth, and looked down at his dancing toes, pretending contemplation.

'Hm. Alright. Back up from the glass a sec,' he finally said.

'Glad you came to your senses,' said the girl on Zach's right.

The two black figures crawled through the enlarged gap in his window, bringing in the cold breeze with them. Zach stayed leaning against his desk allowing him to reach around and grab whatever he needed, in case things turned sour. He made sure to position himself directly opposite both girls, to keep his tricks hidden, whilst they stood in front of his bed.

Zach's eyes widened when he realised something new about his strange company. Their all-black outfits were made of microfibre material. It did more than just cover their bodies but blended into one full suit starting underneath the ear, covering each finger and following down through into their boots. Though the light was limited, thanks to Zach's

previous adjustment, he still noticed a line of demarcation along the seams of both suits. It was a different tone of black, a nearly faded tone of black, making it look like there was something hidden in the edges of the stitch. The Shadow Embassy's existence may have become common knowledge by this point, but the intricacies of what they work with were still a mystery, which meant Zach was stuck guessing as to what was hidden beneath.

There were some details that were easily describable though. Both girls wore harnesses, though they housed very different weapons. The one on the right's weapon of choice was a set of handguns laying on her hips. The gloss of the handles was mildly hidden underneath the cropped bomber jacket she wore over it. On the other hand, the girl on the left carried some sort of staff or baton. It laid diagonally across her back.

'Now where were we?' Zach clasped his hands together.

'Well, we can start with you dropping whatever weapon you're hiding, on the desk behind you.'

Zach felt his eyes twitch as he held tightly onto the smile already plastered on his face.

'That's funny. You expect me to stand here unable to defend myself whilst you guys stay strapped.' He points a finger at both of their harnesses.

The cool-toned girl deeply inhaled and exhaled, causing the straps of her harness to tighten.

'Look, if we wanted to kill you, we would have done so already. We wouldn't have bothered dangling away in the freezing cold whilst you waste our time.'

Her companion tossed herself down onto Zach's bed, straightening out the waves she made on his duvet.

'Since we can't really leave until our job is done, we're just gonna have to wait for you to cooperate,' she said.

The one left standing crossed her arms and tossed her head back, seemingly in frustration.

'Just drop the knife, Zachariah,' she sighed.

He recognised when someone's patience was wearing dangerously thin and, though he tried to deny it to himself, he wanted to know more about Eden and why they'd sent people to "speak" with him.

'First of all, it's a dagger, not a knife, and second of all, you're lucky I'm curious to hear what you guys have to say.'

With heavy arms, Zach pulled up the back of his shirt and tossed the dagger to the other end of the desk. The vibrations from the weapon's metal hitting the dark wood reverberated across the room.

To Zach's surprise, the two girls went to lift the blacked-tinted faceguards, mirroring each other's exact movements. He leant in, surprised by the immediate candidness. His eyes widened and the corners of his mouth rose with the thrill.

But of course, it couldn't be that easy.

The reveal was nothing like what he expected, but exactly what he should have seen coming. The widened eyes and searing smile quickly deflated when their masks were finally off. The microfibre material of the suits extended to the bottom half of their faces, covering everything except the two strangers' eyes. Zach forced himself to find satisfaction in it though. He could tell a lot about a person from their eyes. It wasn't the reveal he had hoped for, but it gave him some insight.

'You have formally been invited to an interview with Eden Representative, Madame Kia. Your interview will be held in three days at Eden's Southern training facilities, Hellsing House. Becoming an Eden trainee means you will learn what it takes to maintain the peace and protection of the British public.'

'The Shadow Embassy is one of the country's biggest assets.' The bomber jacket girl handed Zach a golden-brown envelope sealed with Eden's infamous silver seal. 'Here,' she said.

Her companion went back to narrating the rest of the speech the two of them had obviously rehearsed.

'Training at Hellsing House will allow you to become an Eden graduate and an official member of the Shadow Embassy, giving you the opportunity to learn from the best about National Security, Technological Innovation, Educational Systems, Economic Trade and Human Sciences.'

‘Okay, I get it. “Join Eden it’s the best”,’ Zach interrupted. ‘You guys don’t need to go through the whole spiel.’ His eyes could no longer focus on anything except that silver seal on the envelope.

‘Great. Just make sure to thoroughly read through the instructions on the invite, and most importantly, don’t be late.’ The intense voice cut through to Zach.

Zach looked up at her, stunned. Her voice sounded harsher, coarse even. Her eyes were squinting at him. The look made his stomach tense as he realised, she likely didn’t appreciate being rudely interrupted halfway through her speech.

‘Well that’s us done then,’ said the girl on the right. She slid the faceguard back on and started walking toward the window. Her partner tutted, following her lead.

‘Can I ask you guys a question?’ Zach rushed.

The bomber jacket girl shrugged.

‘Sure.’

‘Why did you guys choose me, like to recruit or whatever?’

They both turned to each other and chuckled. The reapplied faceguards muffled their hidden laughs.

‘Look we’re not privy to that information,’ said the woman on the left. ‘We’re simply here to deliver the message, and now that it’s been delivered, we’ll be on our way.’

‘Wait, If I even wanted to join Eden, how am I meant to get there? This small card isn’t much to go off,’ he said, waving the envelope around.

Still getting her bearings, with one foot already out the windows ledge, the intense girl spoke,

‘Figure it out, Zachariah. For your own sake. Everything you need to attend the meeting is on that invite, I promise you.’

Zach watched as his surprised guests reattached themselves to whatever thread they used. He took in a steep breath and looked down at his fingers tightening around the shimmering envelope, finding the solution to all his problems had somehow made its way to him.

He waited for the two girls to disappear into the darkness of the night, lowered the blinds, and stood dead centre of the room. He peeled the Eden “E” apart and pulled out an eggshell white card and read:

Dear Zachariah Aboah,
You've been formally invited for an interview with Madame Kia.
Further details are below:
March 21st
8 am

Christopher Smith



Christopher was introduced to the world of literature at an early age by Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*, developing a love for the fantastical and mythological. Whilst he would write poetry and snippets of prose during his teenage years, he only started exploring his authorial voice in late 2020, when he joined a writing group of university friends during quarantine. It was here that he discovered a love for writing prose, inspiring him to apply for City, University of London's Creative Writing MA.

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My genres

Dark Fantasy, Fantasy, Short Story

Mixni and Glorkim takes the reader through the titular character's lives, from children to young adults as they navigate the harsh, fantastical world around them. In Part One, Mixni learns magic and attempts to meet her mother's expectations whilst Glorkim is enslaved and trained as a gladiator. Part Two begins with Mixni rescuing Glorkim from a dire situation and bringing him to her village. The story then follows the pair learning to trust one another as they uncover the rotten core of the village, culminating in a desperate escape.

Novella extract

Mixni and Glorkim

Part One

11th Miqim 1303 P.S.W.

Mixni whimpered.

'Oh, silly girl, up you get.' A familiar voice wriggled its way through the pain. Mixni's head felt frazzled, like bugs were fluttering around and bumping her thoughts away.

She'd been running through the village and had tripped on a wet tree root. She'd fallen on her front, limbs splayed about her. Moving felt weird, as if she were trying to control someone else's body. Mixni pushed herself up, feeling mud run off her chest.

'There we go.'

Pain in her chest flared up and Mixni snapped her eyes shut. An uncomfortable ball wormed its way up her throat and burst as she let out a shrill scream. Moments later, warm arms wrapped around her, cutting off the cry.

‘Hush now child. There’s nothing wrong with you.’

Strange shapes were being traced on her back, like fancy stars and circles. Slowly, the pain ebbed away, leaving her thoughts clearer. She opened her eyes and was met with a beautiful face smiling down at her.

‘There we are, how about a smile for Mama?’

Mixni’s mouth twitched as she tried to smile the way her mother liked. Her mother’s laugh fluttered like a butterfly.

‘A good try dear. Tell me, does your chest still hurt?’

Mixni shook her head.

‘See? No pain lasts forever, remember that.’

Her mother leaned forward, creating a shadowy curtain of raven hair. With her eyes clearing, Mixni could make out the purple glow of her mother’s eyes.

‘Good girl. Now let’s get you home for tea.’

27th Qatsi 1302 P.S.W.

Glorkim groaned. His eyes were dry and itchy from too much crying. In the distance, he thought he could hear children shouting and the clash of metal. When he rolled over, chains clanked around his ankles.

‘Awake, I see,’ said a gruff voice.

Glorkim opened his eyes. A bearded man he’d never met before loomed over him, his face pulled into a sneer.

‘Skinny kids like you don’ usually last long, but I’ll see what I can get out o’ you.’

Glorkim shivered. The man stared at him as if he were a new toy.

‘Where am I? Who are you? Where’s my sister?’ Glorkim asked.

The man’s ugly smile grew wider.

‘Don’ know, don’ care. But think o’ me as your uncle if you like. Uncle Qonzo. I’ll teach you to fight, and if you die, I’ll bury you.’

Glorkim’s head ached, and his stomach roiled at the thought of being related to this man. He could smell the man’s sweat and see the manic glint in his eyes.

‘I want to go home,’ he stammered.

Qonzo’s hand came out of nowhere, lifting Glorkim up by the throat. He struggled to break free, battering the man’s arm with weak fists. He

pried at the fingers, but they only squeezed harder. Desperate, the boy scratched at the man's face, digging pointed nails into Qonzo's eyes.

Growling, Qonzo threw Glorkim down, giving the boy a chance to catch his breath. It felt like all his blood had rushed to his head, making him feel dizzy. A shadow fell over him.

'Took me by surprise kid.'

When Glorkim looked up, he was met by Qonzo's garish smile. Blood dripped from the corner of his left eye, but the man didn't seem to care.

'Looks like there's a fighter in you after all.'

7th Vir 1305 P.S.W.

The snake fit perfectly in Mixni's lap. It was a luscious moss colour and its soft underbelly tickled Mixni's legs. She giggled and stroked its head.

There was no one else in the corridor. This part of her home usually had kids running around, kicking up dust and scuffing up the walls, but this late in the day, it was empty. Mixni liked this because then her animal friends would visit.

She'd never met a snake before. The little reptile slithered up her left arm and rested its diamond head on her shoulder. Mixni smiled.

'I'm going to call you Mal-Kan,' she said.

'Who are you talking to dear?' came a voice.

Mixni turned and saw her mother standing behind her, wearing white teaching overalls. In a flash, Mal-Kan was gone, seemingly disappearing into the wall. Mixni pouted at her mother.

'You scared my new friend away,' she said.

Her mother raised an eyebrow, smiling.

'Did I? Well, if it is truly your friend, it'll find its way back to you.' She held out her arms. 'Now, up you get. I'm going to teach you to weave.'

Mixni stayed where she was.

'I want to play with my friend though.'

A flicker of irritation crossed her mother's face.

'Enough of that Mixni. Come here.'

Without waiting for a response, Mixni's mother swept up the girl in her arms, carrying her through the house. For a moment, Mixni imagined

herself as a little bird, weightless and soaring in the sky. But soon enough, it was over, and her mother dropped her in the crafting room.

Inside, Mixni saw towering cupboards and chests of drawers propped up on wooden blocks. The back wall was covered in a honeycomb of cubbyholes, packed with scrolls and tools. The room was lit by orbs of white light floating in the air, buzzing softly and occasionally bumping into one another. She watched them. They were just out of arm's reach, but Mixni didn't mind. The light felt warm and full of life, making the room feel less stuffy. In the middle, there was a small desk and two wooden stools.

As she'd done a thousand times, her mother slipped past the table, and pulled a well-worn scroll from the wall.

'Honey, grab some straw from that drawer please. Four bundles will do,' she said.

Her mother pointed at a drawer off to her left. It was heavy, thunking open as Mixni pulled on the handles, revealing bundles of straw wrapped in twine. She picked out four and brought them to the desk, where her mother was unravelling the scroll. Mixni couldn't figure out the bigger words, but the pictures looked like instructions for braiding thick hair.

'What are we making Mama?' Mixni asked.

'Call me Mother Elder, dear. It is important to use titles when appropriate, such as when I am your teacher.'

Mixni scratched her head.

'Why Mama?'

'Because I said so.' Her tone said not to question her again.

'Yes, Mother Elder,' Mixni mumbled.

Her mother smiled and patted Mixni's shoulder.

'To answer your question, we'll be weaving straw hats,' she said, pulling a small pair of shears from a cubbyhole. 'Most children wouldn't start crafting until their seventh birth ceremony, but I know my daughter is much more capable than them.'

Mixni felt a ball of warmth form in her chest at her mother's praise. The Mother Elder sat her down, then dragged the other stool closer.

'I'll show you how to do it first, then you can have a go,' she said.

Mixni watched as her mother's fingers danced with the straw. She couldn't understand what was happening, but soon enough the straw resembled a hat.

When she was done, the Mother Elder placed the accessory on her head, a smug smile on her face.

'Now, your turn darling.'

Mixni blinked.

'Can you show me again please?' she asked.

The Mother Elder shook her head and pushed the instructions across the table.

'Give it a go. Show me how talented you are.'

Her mother smiled, but Mixni wasn't sure if she had any to show off. The pictures on the scroll looked like a mess of worms, the straw was rough, and it never bent where she wanted it to. After half an hour, Mixni's resolve was crumbling. All she'd wanted to do was wander the swamp and play with her friends. Instead, she was stuck with her mother, failing to make a hat.

After her latest attempt unravelled, she kicked the table leg.

'Enough of that. This kind of behaviour is beneath you,' her mother said.

'I'm tired.'

The Mother Elder shook her head.

'I understand you're frustrated, but you mustn't quit now. Push past all of that and you'll become a stronger, more determined person for it.'

Mixni shoved the scroll away.

'I want to go play.'

Her mother scoffed.

'Don't be silly Mixni. Playing is for the other children, the ones who grow up to join your flock. If you want lead them, then you must act like a leader.'

Mixni's cheeks felt hot. Her eyes were wet, drowning the room in a haze of tears.

'Now then, we are going to stay here all night if we have to until you get this right.'

Mixni wailed in frustration. She threw her straw on the ground and jumped up, kicking the stool against a cupboard.

‘Mixni, wait a second –’

But she had already fled from the crafting room, filling the narrow corridor beyond with her sobs. Someone else called for her, but she didn’t stop. She spotted a small, round door and, not thinking about it, tugged it open and crawled inside.

Curling up into a ball, Mixni hugged her sides, rubbing her forehead against the dirt floor. The cool air made the heat in her face ease away. The pain in her chest dulled and her heart stopped fluttering so quickly. The quiet swallowed her, pushing out the unhappy thoughts and leaving her head empty. After a few moments of deep breaths, Mixni opened her eyes.

The room was shaped like a cup, round and short, with just enough room for her to sit up and stretch out her arms to the side. It was dark and the dirt floor was cool against her legs. Mixni had never been in here before. In fact, she couldn’t think of why she hadn’t come across it before. Maybe it was a pointless storage room her mother had forgotten about. Either way, Mixni was glad she had found this room.

She wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but Mixni knew it was wrong of her to run away from her mother. She knew she needed to apologise.

Slowly, she pushed open the door and crawled out into the torch-lit corridor. When she turned back to close it, her heart jumped. The door was gone, and the room along with it. There wasn’t even an outline of it in the wall.

‘There you are!’

A slave boy appeared behind Mixni, a look of relief on his face. He had curly blonde hair, and a hand bent the wrong way. He only had a loincloth on: it felt wrong to look at him, but Mixni knew she had to. She wasn’t allowed to look away and give him power over her.

‘You were looking for me?’ she asked.

‘Yes, your mother sent for you. She’s waiting in the crafting room.’

Mixni’s shoulders sagged. With nothing else to keep her, Mixni followed the boy back to the crafting room.

It was like she had never left, except the straw had all been picked up and placed in front of her stool, back in its original position. Mixni couldn't look at her mother. She would surely be upset with her, angry even. She would tell Mixni that she wanted a new daughter, a beautiful, kind girl who listened to her.

Mixni heard the swish of robes and felt the air shiver as the Mother Elder stepped closer.

'I'm sorry Mama,' she said.

There was a long pause. Mixni counted the seconds away, more and more certain of her mother's anger.

Her mother's arms wrapped around her, gently pulling her into a hug.

'All is forgiven, my dear. It's my fault, I should have realised you weren't ready.'

Mixni pulled away, looking up at her mother. There was nothing but love in her eyes and joy in her smile. Something inside Mixni rushed up from her chest to her head, making her feel warm inside. She could see her true mother now, the one who let her have extra apples at tea and combed her hair until it felt like running your hands through a stream.

'No Mama, I want to try.'

Her mother's smile grew wider.

'You do? Oh, how wonderful. Don't worry, this time I'll talk you through the scroll.'

With a tight grip on her arm, her mother sat Mixni down and started explaining the proper braiding techniques, referencing the scroll, and pointing out her daughter's earlier mistakes. The girl followed along as her mother wove. Like before, she was mesmerised by her mother's weaving, watching as she tucked, pulled, and twisted until she held a beautiful wide-brimmed straw hat.

Despite her renewed determination, it was a slow process for Mixni. Straw wouldn't fit through the right holes. The frayed ends poked under her nails and left marks on her palms. An hour in, she pulled the wrong end and collapsed the little lattice work she had. Her mother's encouragement was quiet but constant throughout.

'That's right, through there ... Don't tug too hard now ... You'll be a master in no time.'

After another hour, Mixni was left with sweaty, aching palms, and a misshapen hat with an uneven brim. When she tugged it on, loose ends prodded her head.

‘I love it,’ she said.

Her mother smiled, though it looked tighter than usual.

‘You have definitely achieved more than most during their first session.’

Mixni felt a warm feeling spread across her chest.

‘Your next hat will be much better, I’m sure,’ her mother said.

The feeling stopped spreading. Mixni pulled the hat off and turned it around in her hands. It seemed wrong to dismiss what she had made. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to make a new one.

‘Mother Elder?’

‘Not now dear. Why don’t you run along and ask the cooks to start preparing tea? I’ll tidy up in here.’

Sensing this wasn’t really a suggestion, Mixni slipped off the stool and ran from the crafting room, her hat clenched in her hands.

3rd Xiqui 1303 P.S.W.

‘May I sit here?’ a kid asked.

Glorkim shrugged, so the boy dropped down next to him, balancing his bowl in his lap. Glorkim reckoned this kid was new. His skin was peachy pink, he scratched at his tunic, and when he opened his mouth, Glorkim couldn’t see any missing teeth.

‘Not the nicest food, is it?’ the boy said.

Glorkim shrugged.

‘You’ll get used to it.’

The boy ate a spoonful of grey, watery oats and frowned.

‘Is all the food like this?’

‘Nah, they give us meat and vegetables at evening meal.’

‘That doesn’t sound too bad.’

Glorkim chuckled.

‘If you don’t like flavour,’ he said.

The boy snorted, giving Glorkim a toothy grin.

‘I’m Mora-Kim,’ he said.

‘Glorkim.’

‘Nice to meet you.’

‘Sure.’

The two boys sat in silence, eating. The din of clattering bowls and chatting children enveloped them. Most of the boys grouped up at tables to discuss training, which left Glorkim alone with his thoughts. He preferred it this way. The cafeteria was large enough that he could find a wall bench away from everyone.

‘Do you know anyone else here?’ Mora-Kim asked.

Glorkim frowned.

‘Not really.’

‘Is that why you’re sat by yourself?’

‘I guess.’

‘How about we be friends?’ the boy asked, leaning closer. Glorkim could feel Mora-Kim’s hot breath on his face.

‘Probably not a good idea,’ he said.

‘Why not?’

That was something Foloki, Glorkim’s sister, loved to ask. *Why can’t I play with them kids? Why can’t I take apples from the tree? Why don’t we have a hut to sleep in?* It used to irritate him, but now he’d do anything to see her again.

‘How old are you?’ Glorkim asked.

‘Six.’

The older boy’s chest tightened. Foloki would be around that age now, assuming she was still alive. Glorkim sighed.

‘You’re better off joining a group,’ he said. Glorkim pointed to a collection of youths about his age. ‘Those guys take in newbies sometimes. But only if you meet their standards.’

Mora-Kim stared at the group, considering it. Then, he pointed to a group of young men hovering around the cafeteria entrance.

‘What about them? They were nice when I came in.’

Glorkim shook his head.

‘Don’t bother, they’ll be gone in a week.’

A guard in the corner of the room banged his spear butt against the wooden floor, and everyone began clearing up. Glorkim felt a tug on his

tunic. When he looked at Mora-Kim, he saw the younger boy had turned pale.

‘Please help me,’ he said.

Glorkim bit his lip. If this were Foloki, he’d tell her everything would be okay, that nothing could touch her as long as she were with him. But she wasn’t and Mora-Kim needed honest advice to stay alive.

‘Look, this first week is going to really hurt. The best thing you can do is stay in the middle of the group. If you come first, the handlers will push you harder. If you come last, they’ll treat you like dead weight. Never be last, okay?’

Mora-Kim nodded. He was still pale, but Glorkim could see a spark of determination in his eyes. Glorkim patted the kid’s shoulder, and the pair rose together.

‘Does this mean we’re friends?’ Mora-Kim asked.

The older boy smiled.

‘Yeah, we’re friends.’

For the first time since arriving at the gladiator school, Glorkim didn’t feel alone.

21st Vir 1306 P.S.W.

Mixni led her mother through a maze of twisted roots and gnarled branches that pointed the girl along a path only she could follow. Her mother lagged behind, grunting in annoyance every time she stumbled or caught her hair on something.

After ten minutes of walking, they emerged in a spot where the canopy of trees broke so that sunlight trickled down to the forest floor, bathing everything in drops of honey. A stream flowed nearby, kicking up a fine spray that cooled the air and left Mixni feeling refreshed whenever she entered the cove.

She wasn’t surprised to find a deer drinking at the bank. Mixni had met a lot of animals who came here to drink, though she didn’t recognise this young buck. It raised its head as they approached, wary of danger. Followed by her mother, Mixni kept low and crept downstream to keep out of the deer’s way.

Once they’d found a quiet spot, the Mother Elder nodded her approval.

‘I can see why you’d come here to centre yourself,’ she said.

Mixni smiled, glad to finally share this place with someone. Her mother stood behind Mixni and laid her hands on her shoulders.

‘Close your eyes now. Don’t focus on trying to *do* magic. Feel the energy flow running through this land. Get used to how it passes through you and how it feels in your mind. When you’re ready, say the words that come to mind. I’ll be here if you need me.’

Mixni reached up to touch her mother’s hand, who gave it a reassuring squeeze. As long as she had her mother, she knew nothing could go wrong.

Tamping down her growing excitement, Mixni closed her eyes. At first, all she could feel were her thoughts bouncing around her mind. Beyond herself, there was the gurgle of the stream and the whisper of a stray wind. She could feel the moss between her toes and the warmth of her mother at her back.

Mixni lost track of time. She embraced the swamp, feeling the tremors of every footfall, the hungry maw of every stream, the graceful poise of every tree. Every nesting bird found a home in her arms and the blaze of Zikkern’s light crowned her with eternal youth.

‘Pull it all back now. Find yourself again,’ came a familiar voice.

The words clung to her like leeches. A name flitted by on the wings of a butterfly and slipped into her mind. *Mixni*. Suddenly, the trees collapsed into her, the stream froze over, and sunlight drained away. She could feel the swamp pulling away as she remembered her humanity.

‘Don’t let go Mixni. Draw the energy in with you.’

Feeling her mother’s presence strengthened Mixni’s resolve. As she drew back, she held onto what felt like a pulse of golden light, rolling it over in her mind. On one side it felt blindingly hot and on the other piercingly cold. As she did, words emerged like tiny flares.

‘Elzz ni-ess yyij vknn,’ she chanted.

A swell of cold energy burst from the orb and rushed into the world. Mixni heard a distressed bleat and opened her eyes to watch as a wave of grey light rippled across the buck. Where the light passed, the fur shimmered and hardened to stone. Mixni’s stomach sank as the young deer became a statue, a monument to its former beauty.

‘Excellent work dear,’ her mother said.

Before she could respond, everything around her shifted out of focus and Mixni collapsed into her mother’s arms.

‘Easy child. Take it slowly.’

The Mother Elder eased her daughter to the ground. Mixni felt so heavy, as if the ground around her were pulling her in.

‘Rest for now. You’ve done such incredible work.’

The last thing Mixni saw before passing out was the pride that shone in her mother’s eyes.

Creative Writing at City, University of London

City's Creative Writing teaching sits within the Department of Media, Culture and Creative Industries in the School of Communication and Creativity. Our redesigned suite of MA and MFA Creative Writing degrees replaces the extended MA Creative Writing programme that flourished here for many years.

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