

With 22

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Foreword

Two special features are part of this new *With* magazine: three outstanding pieces from last year's science-fiction module assignment on the theme of 'First Contact', and the prize-winning stories from the Falmouth Young Writers Prize. Wrapped around these are the usual eclectic mix of prose, poetry, and – more unusually – an interview with the musician Sam Hill, and a survey about surveys.

This eclecticism, along with the quality of work, is what makes *With* so special to edit. I'm constantly surprised by what is submitted, what is attempted and achieved by our students and the wider writing community we at Falmouth University engage with. Special thanks are due this issue to Chrisy Dennis and Meredith Miller for their work with the science-fiction and Falmouth Young Writers section respectively. And to everyone reading this: welcome to our world.

Rupert Loydell
Senior Lecturer, English and Writing
Editor, *With* magazine

Flotsam and Jetsam

It's half past midnight,
black as anger in an eyeball.
I wish I was sat on
the end of that jut where
the beach forgot to wash away.

A scar of rock stands
alone like me. I'd stick to it
as the barnacles do,
howling at the moon like
a seadog. The stars are dying.

The water blacker
than the winter sky, my breath would
rattle from the cold and
fear and feeling of salt
catching on my lips as you did.

The Number 41

Yellow flowers escape a memorial,
a plait coughs.

Houses are coloured but their faces grey;
sea sick, home sick, travel sick.
Self-made sickness.

Palm trees are politicians.

I see a mouth,
it told me I was beautiful.
I haven't seen it since.

A picnic blanket coat steps off,
white trainers twang too loud,
one biscuit was enough.

The plait has gone and I don't know where
or remember when.

41 stops but I want to go round again.

Sylvie Bruyn's Mr and House

Ma completed her full term and slid into a cold amnesty with Moscow. In Krasnoyarsk, where her exotic stones were rejected, she mumbled something about oil and spat out the distance from both her cheeks. Both cheeks have jailed people. She's dismissed across the board and freed the warm state heavy track activists.

Her neck still accumulates tension when she thinks of the skill of the anger. The LGBT riot team marauding in flash dance costumes up and down the streets of Jo'burg.

De Bruyn they call her. The Russian curling team explain the solid slides and offer up their polishing services to the authorities.

The school won't take De Bruyn's son because his daddy fought in Rhodesia and the sheets of dreams he has and the youth prison stench will upset the other kids.

"This granite paradise," Ma scoffs, her fat lips slurping up Cola.

She starts calling the chilled-out curlers "totalitarian ice stones".

From her car, the path is wider and not for human eyes or human rights. Climate motivates her. Singing free she makes determinedly for the hospital.

"Where's the ice? Can't have oranges without ice," she grumbles when they bring her an ice tub full of oranges.

The hospital staff ask her why the oranges are separate and for once she is lost for words, her rocks diminished.

Dirt target. The anti-government actress sobs as the young boys throw sand and rocks in her face. The tropical Michael, whose eyes are empty with sand falling through and his ears full of worms, shouts that she should never have been let go.

When the actress is nothing but sand and stone, they walk back to the house and kick the dog beneath the stoep. "Why didn't you stop her? She'd still be preening in the greenroom if it weren't for you!"

Russia's politicians are all gathered and using combs to bleach their moustaches, they place stone above stone and then

knock them down. One with a swollen mouth groans.

“Notion freed,” they incant, “notion freed.”

The sweepers call the house. Has Ma lost some cosmetics or is it Bruno’s down the road? The one who doesn’t know his pussy from his elbow.

“Putin wants a strategy on that,” says the bleached mouth toad-politician.

“Notion freed,” they all respond to the toad-priest, his moustache down to the ground.

De Bruyn is drunk with frosted confidence as she walks out of the blasphemous glass-cased government buildings. A deal sheet, gripped between her thighs. Home to the smell of gripe and pith.

Glass ceilings on the left.

“Women don’t do so well above glass ceilings,” Ma grizzles, pulling Michael’s sand stopper out and replacing it with her nipple.

A Siberian humanitarian asks why the curling team have been jailed. The Orthodox gas tycoon shrugs; his moustache is too long to twirl but not long enough to swish. The Siberian humanitarian’s moustache has seen the curlers this morning, it bounces with flirtatious mischief.

Michael, on Ma’s lap watches his Dad the Durban chess champion, move the pieces. The TV crackles. Rain is falling outside and as promised a foreign song curls around us, inducing misery and comfortable protest.

The tycoon rolls up his moustache and says, “Make sure you measure the tea. This house is full of waterfalls.”

Three thick blonde hairs stand up on the nape of Ma’s neck.

She shuffles cheeses off a wooden board into her mouth and wipes Michael’s mouth clean of vomited milk.

“Ma?” Michael says to me.

“Sylvie,” the lie whistles between us. Ma is Ma and Sylvie is sister.

I take him by the hand and we climb into our stone house. The stone crumbles to earth and we lie, unfriendly, in the Anteaters’ cathedral and I pull him close to keep him warm, as frosted misery creeps over our earth mound.

Ma's neck wobbles and the earth creaks.

The toad-priest is wearing his tadpole skin hat in the cathedral which is stone and glass not earth and frost. He turns to the tycoon and says, "That said, punk, the sport's still worried. You can't put eight Russian athletes in stone houses, not at this time of year."

Michael starts to sing, one leg in the nave between the choir pews and the other by the altar. His head peeks out of the steeple. The foreign words lilt and the toad-priest and the tycoon bow their heads and whisper the Lord's Prayer as the cathedral begins to crumble and the wads of earth lie still on the Transvaal.

The curling centre jail, as it has been re-christened, is guarded by Mikhail. The Siberian humanitarian farms reindeer on the land Mikhail's family claimed, before one brother stayed and the other left the country; crossing the ice rainbow. That was long before the Mongolian death worm brought his genes so far north.

The curling team tell him that the amnesty must come and that the Siberian humanitarian must protect them. Mikhail spits birch tree sap in their faces. He watches for the ghostly shape of Ma de Bruyn to come down the corridors. Her kaftan blowing like sails, hoisted then dropped, hoisted then dropped.

Mikhail sweeps the floors of the corridors and tries not to listen to the prisoners pushing December Stones around imaginary ice fields.

"Ice chess." He smiles to himself, "Ice chess."

He tries to ignore the oncoming smell of pap and oranges, the oncoming ice flow that is Ma. The sheets fly up and swallow Mikhail whole. The curlers quiver, the corridors sluice with earth juices. The tycoon tries to grab at the oil that slicks through Ma de Bruyn's veins and onto the prisoners. When the storm settles Ma is nowhere to be seen. Only her vowels can be heard wistfully unpicking the locks for the players who are slowly waking from their nightmare.

When she was just 20, Ma let Tanty go north. She said the Earth was too full of church-goers. It didn't matter if Tanty's heart was softened by the cathedral. Ma didn't care.

She shouted to Tanty across the Veld that no matter how those ice palaces begged she'd never leave the hospital, not till the amnesty was back on track. Her placement wasn't finished. Mikhail woke in the prison cell to find Tanty, her foot around his neck. His son Bruno was crying in the corner. Mikhail died in anger, dispossessed and Bruno ate his feet with hunger.

"Sylvie?" Michael asks.

I don't answer. Ma is watching. She flicks the reins, urging her bridled ant-queen closer; her eyes dark with malice.

I don't answer, I don't want him to turn to dust again.

The toad-politician with her bloated bleach mouth and Heidi plaits is orange from the tanning parlour, her blonde moustache sticks out against the sunshine state of her skin.

She sits in the back row of the human-rights church and watches as the priest, who wears his facial hair as a cape, swishes his way to the podium.

"We are gathered here today, in the sight of Gawd, to bring the oranges in for harvest."

The men and women all in kaftans, their hair folded into towels, fresh from a long soak in the bath, get up and gather scateurs for the small oranges and scythes for those "that don't know what's good for 'em."

Making their way to the orange fields, they pass the activist actress, decaying on the espalier wire, while buckets of papsak are passed round and the curling team giggle as the caped-priest struggles with his unwieldy scythe.

Mikhail's awake again. Bruno is watching him, his mouth full of toes.

"What did you see?"

The glass players with their brooms run their fingers over rims ringing ethereal whine, the rain sliding off the mosaic tiled window.

"Ma sold a dog, for just twenty brooms."

Mikhail can hear Bruno's tears but not his breathing. The light breaking above, dances in prisms and circles with dust particles. The sun in his eyes he cannot see his child.

Khodorovsky, the land manager, told the curling team that the activist actress was to come and see them. She would smell like a dog on heat and they weren't to touch her because she would crumble and it would be them that would have to sweep her up. The curlers eyed the brooms wistfully.

Khodorovsky met the bleached politician and the orthodox tycoon in the courtyard and felt under the duvet covers for their honesty. Both had left their brooms at the gate.

"Ma?" Michael asked.

I didn't answer.

"Ma?"

Frost had gathered in Michael's red curls.

Mikhail wasn't there to stop the diggers. He was still beneath the glass ceiling.

Maria was. She lay in front of the second digger singing her climate song. The machine stopped for a few moments before crushing her vandalised baboon-body. Oom chuckled from the front seat of his yellow digger, swigging dop from a flask.

Ma's lank locks tried to escape her scrunchy as she leaned over the crushed climatists. Her nurse-fingers twitching their bones, sewing them back together. Ma's scrubs fell as loose as her habitual Kaftan and she pulled the loose blue-cotton trousers up and down with one hand as she administered the human-rights medicine.

Khodorovsky asked the actress in the greenroom whether she thought the curved church ought to be straightened. She was silent, her cheeks were burnt and Khodorovsky had a sudden fear that her freckles had already turned to dust.

In the Anteaters' cathedral Michael's words were elongated and beautifully straight, he was singing and I could understand all the words, he sang about Tanty's fridge in Rhodesia. I buried my face in his sandy nape and sobbed as the worms danced in his ears.

Bruno had found the December stones. He was pushing them with his father's toes. Mikhail would wake every now and again and call out for the anthropology student he had once loved and then sink further into his death sleep.

Khodorovsky tells them that the operations are under way. The ice rainbow having melted there would be no more opposition except a few baboons, but they were easily dealt with. The orthodox tycoon and the bleach mouthed politician nod happily.

The land manager pours a generous glass of scotch whiskey that obscures the howling Bruno and the sleeping Mikhail from their gaze.

Michael's homesick. After the song, he quietens down and sleeps for days, warm beneath me. I can feel the frost biting my ankles and shoulders.

When he wakes he says he wants to see Ma. Ma not Sylvie. Ma de Bruyn is watching the baboon girl. Maria wakes, she sees the cold dark eyes of the riot and falls back into her death sleep, the students are still storming the cathedral.

Ma spits plum-stones from her cheeks and gets up to re-adjust the coverlet.

The granite is completed, shipped in by train on the new railway, the actress' band-mate asks whether they should still boycott the cathedral.

But the actress can't speak, her tongue is sand.

Michael and Henrik throw stones and sand and laugh and trip over pumpkin vines as though they're drunk and there she is rotting on the espalier wire and there I am washing dishes and watching from the kitchen window as my charges call out like baboons in a riot.

Michael's sleeping now, cocooned in my warmth. He knows nothing of the frost-king that tickles my toes or of Ma being here with us. She's herding the ants, her cowboy hat pulled down firm over her lank locks and small ears.

I brush the frost falling from my eyes from his cheek, but the frost keeps falling and my fingers start to bloat with gangrenous swelling where the ants have nibbled me.

"Sylvie? Sylvie?" It's Ma in her scrubs. I close my eyes as she strokes my hair back, it turns to black sand falling through the gaps between her fingers. She scoops it up lovingly in her skirt.

Mike

For all the things you'll share
I'll be biting my nails throughout the night
Without this ride I wouldn't be here
I have to show some clarity

Vicious vicious man
I remember who you were
A face that deceived so often
I thought the sun rose in your eyes

There are hard and fast rules
We're going to miss you
I'm getting ready
Come on, you had to see this coming

I don't mean to control you
I cleared out everything, except for you
Fear not
I will rescue you

This relationship never really happened, did it?

my striped sweater
pulled over your head
loose at your chest
your fingers are feathers
tipping ash on the bed
the sound of cars
humming alarms
violin played next door
a family of five
argue over homework
I'm so glad to be alive
especially when you play piano at night
your hair stands on end
and my writing isn't masterful yet
but my plants are flourishing
they grow in the light.
I grow from the hard wood floors
and the moments I trace your wrist
from the sweet scent of morning
the cigarettes in bottles
and forgotten plates in the sink
I grow from the windows thrown open
the crumpled shreds of paper
and the salt of your temples.
some days I sit by the window,
the most open I can find
I think of climbing onto the air
I remember narcotics and suicide
by this point I can think of them
and no longer worry that I'm not quite alive.
some nights they bang on the walls
and tell us to be quiet
I never respond
because one cannot contain

a lifetime of hope
into a single complaint.
Instead I wrap us into sheets
I never learnt origami
but I fit us together pleasantly.
I tried to write fiction one night
and cried tears of gin
you came back to me on the floor
picked me up and tucked me in
we laughed until my throat was dry
concluded I should always write what I have within
I'll never lie again.
When it is your turn
we collect your tears in tiny vials
I pour them onto our bean sprouts
and tell you that your sadness
will always be worth something
your beauty will always break hearts
and together we will give life.

The Kitten & The Blonde Boy

A heavy fabric coat hangs on the doorknob, cowboy brooch
fastened on the collar,
Turn the latch,
Once inside, you will drown in the clutter held within,
Eeyore sits sentry on the wardrobe, books are encased delicately
behind glass;
Uglies hidden in a lower cabinet, the beauties sitting proud on
the shelves,
A tall and blonde boyfriend sits on the bed frame,
Absorbed in the videogame he avidly plays,
Carefully colour coordinated DVD cases stand boldly in a bookcase,
Propped up against the wall: they are standing soldiers,
A kitten, black and white and inquisitive, watches you,
As you turn about the damp, chipped, white walls,
She is full of light and she dances about your feet,
Catching your laces as you wander about the room,
What a sight! The mess, the clutter, the bounding boulders of
dirty clothes piled high!
You sit on the bed, with the kitten and the blonde boy,
You lie back and watch the swirls on the ceiling,
You are happy, with the kitten and the blonde boy by your side,
Next year will be very strange indeed.

Marietta

I knew a girl who had gotten dumped. I say knew. She hovered around the floating edges of my break times, my classes, my petulant walks through corridors. She'd never mattered to us much before. But now she was always on my mind.

Her skin, it etched in the name of the boy who had done and got her heart broke, and the blood ran off her fingertips. Marietta. She looked like a corpse dressed for Halloween. Her skin was so pale. The lace from the dresses that seemed embroidered onto her skin, her arms, became bumpy with bloodstain. It trailed all the way up to her elbow. People stared. Even the teachers stared. Too nervous, they never said anything to her. I could never work out whether they were scared of hurting her mutated feelings, or simply just her. She had an aura about her that rendered people strange. A sickly, pasty kind of feeling that sweeps over you when you walk past her in the corridor, or catch her watery blue stare as you look up.

The boy's name was Todd Bow. Everybody knew him, so as a result everybody then knew her. Before him, I guess you could say she was normal. She seemed so anyway. Like your average, functioning girl. But love has its way of ruining the best of us. If we let it fester, it turns us inside out, upside down, and bent over double in pain. Blood poured from her heart, and now it poured from her arms too.

A mathematic compass was her tool. Her art for punching holes into her veins. You know the ones. We've all purposely pricked our fat, fleshy fingertips with one just so we can see it hurt. Its pinprick point like a poised and ready needle. It digs in and burrows itself beneath our skin, if it should like.

Marietta took it too far. God knows what her mother thought. Perhaps she never told. Yet we all knew; we could all see the faded lines beneath the white lace, and the fresh ones too. We could all see the quiet disdain she held in her voice when she spoke, like every boy she addressed was guilty of breaking her heart. We could all see the fresh etchings of a T ... then an O

... a deep, stinging D ... and finally one more. It wasn't like she was hiding it, like she faded into the background like some old piece of furniture. She was there everyday, on everybody's minds.

I think she knew it.

The boy hardly knew what to do. They'd lasted six months; he'd never realised how hard she'd fallen. She avoided him like the plague, yet he remained on her arms, his name a hideous inscription, like she was bound to him forever. And she liked it that way.

She shamelessly strapped his identity to her skin like it was the only thing she had.

In the end, I suppose it was.

'A new wall of joy'
an interview with Sam Hill



Scottish singer-songwriter Sam Hill isn't well known. He says he's had 'skirmishes with opportunity', and walked away on occasion. We met at The Melting Pot Café in Redruth, considered by many the hub of the local art and music scene, to discuss his career, family, and his return to music after a ten-year hiatus.

Music was a part of Hill's life from a very early age. He picked up a guitar bought for his sister at Christmas when he was 'about nine years old', and hasn't looked back since. Hill recalls family car journeys where his father would instigate sing-alongs in harmony with one another. Sam Hill Sr. was a pharmacist, optician and preacher, as well as a trained singer and choirmaster. The titular song of his son's latest project, *Cowboys and Moonbeams*, refers to the old 'cowboy gospel songs' that he learned to play whilst his father held up fingers to indicate which of the three chords – G, C, or D – he should be playing at that moment.

Of his song-writing, Hill says that he ‘only really got in touch with it about twenty years ago’, adding that he has ‘a better handle on what kind of writer I am now than I’ve ever had.’ I asked him to explain the stories behind a few of his standout songs.

‘There are songs like ‘Thunder and Rain’, ‘It Depends’ and ‘Rescue Me’, that you feel... It is a bit like you’re wandering through a forest on your own and you see a big stone, and you think ‘I wonder what’s under there’, and you pick it up and there’s a little jewel under there and it’s glimmering, and it says ‘This is for you, Sam. You can have this.’ [...] Music is incredible with what we can do with those thirteen notes...and you think ‘I can have this?’ It’s almost like I’ve discovered that particular group of notes and those words to go with it, and it’s like I’ve been given a gift.’

Shortly after this, our conversation turned to Hill’s country album *Sunset Grill*, which has never seen the light of day for a number of reasons, and yet contains a track that Hill had until recently (with the writing of ‘Cowboys and Moonbeams’) considered his favourite song he’d ever written – ‘All The Time You Had’. The album, in short, was one that Hill said he was ‘never really happy with’.

When asked about the highlights of his musical career, Hill immediately volunteers the first time he met singer-songwriter Peter Case, one ‘very hot summer night’ when they were both playing *The Mean Fiddler* in London. Hill avows that Case has been ‘one of the major influences, if not *the* major influence over the last twenty years.’

We then went on to discuss Hill’s most recent album *Cowboys and Moonbeams*, and a little about his process. Although each of the songs on the album is based on conversations with members of his family, this was not a conscious decision. However, the theme which permeates the musical side of the album was. All but two of the tracks are in C tuning or derivatives thereof. Hill says he has not performed without the top string of his guitar tuned down to D or lower for 25 years. ‘About

four or five years ago, I was reading on Peter Case's website that he'd been using open C a lot, and I thought "I'll try this" and fortunately, because our music is very different, it doesn't sound anything like Peter at all, because Peter's playing like... Americana blues if you like, rustic kind of blues in those tunings, with picks, whereas I'm doing a more gentle finger-picking orchestral style thing on guitar. We're the same tuning, but a completely different end result.'

He said earlier in the interview that family has always been his priority, then there is quite a wide margin, and then music. The first song he wrote after this period, 'Cold Wind Blowing', is the midpoint of the *Cowboys and Moonbeams* album. Part of the reason for Hill's absence from music, he tells me, was simply not having a place to play or sing. Then he and his family moved and Hill wrote the song that would become 'Cold Wind Blowing' in the shed on their then property.

Hill says he felt nervous and vulnerable when he wrote that song. He remembers playing it to his wife, who has 'fantastic antennae for whether or not my songs are working'. He recalls earlier times when he could handle listening to his own songs like 'Thunder and Rain' and thinking "Well, that's gone... I'll never do anything like that again. If somebody had told me three years ago that I'd be able to write like that again, I wouldn't have believed them.'

Hill does not use any particular formula in his song writing, but when he picks up a guitar to practise, he says he's 'always looking for the next song. It's somewhere near the end of picking my guitar up that I'll run through a couple of songs.' Usually, he will get a rough idea of a tune, and a rough idea of a lyric. When he wrote 'I Don't Have All The Answers', he knew he had a good chorus, but couldn't find a verse. 'I went into my wife's office on a Sunday morning, and I remember singing, and the tune and the words came out at the same time. The song 'It Depends' is a blurt, because it took half an hour from start to finish.'

Our conversation then turned to live performance and the craft of song writing. I asked Hill whether there were songs he'd

written that he would not consider playing live. He was quick to respond that there were, but ‘not for those reasons. I used to write a lot of stuff that maybe had a slightly political edge to it [...] There’s songs that are hard to sing live, but I find it easier now than I did fifteen years ago to be open and honest and bear your soul in public. I’ve learned over the years that if you are really honest, people will relate to your stuff.’

Hill then offered his theory on widespread creativity and why some people are less creative than others: ‘We’re God’s paint palette, we put the colour in, we create the soundtrack and the visual landscape, apart from nature of course, but we are God’s paint palette... So if we describe how we feel, you can write stuff that helps people. We all know that we all need encouragement, and... one of the biggest problems that people who suffer from mental health issues and depression have is, ‘Nobody understands, I’m on my own, I’m going mad... I’m the only person in the world...’ Well, that’s not true. Often, how many have we all at times in our lives read something, or somebody’s said something that makes you realise ‘Actually, I’m not on my own here, I’m not as abnormal as I thought I was’. Well, hopefully when we write, it’s almost like a responsibility that we should actually share our feelings.’

Hill says it has been liberating to leave the past behind, because now he has an entire album’s worth of new material, and songs that didn’t make it onto the album. ‘We’ve just moved house, and we have got loads and loads of pictures for our walls that we’ve collected over the years... but some of those memories are now painful. We’ve got a big wall, a couple of big spaces in our lounge where we’ve moved to, and we’ve got all these pictures in frames that I’ve framed over the years. I was talking to Isobel [his wife] the other day, and saying... we totally both think the same way about this. “Let’s create a fresh set of memories, let’s build up a new wall of joy.” And I think this new album is a new wall of joy, and reality for me, ‘cause it’s where I am now.’

Hill will tour in England, Scotland and Ireland in the year ahead to promote *Cowboys and Moonbeams*. ‘When I get up on

stage now and sing ‘Cowboys and Moonbeams’, it’s a relief. It’s a relief that I know I’m really comfortable with this, and I know I can do better, but it’s a relief that I don’t have to please everybody in the audience and for everybody to think I’m great, and for everybody to say ‘Aren’t you great?’ I don’t need anybody to tell me that, because it doesn’t matter if I am or not, I’m at ease with myself when I’m playing it, and I’m not saying I think it’s great, I’m comfortable with what I’m doing at last, it’s a relief.’

An Open Door

I would point to the stars and say
“I chose those for you”
I would tell you that I hand-picked the few
that I thought were most beautiful
so that you would always enjoy the night sky
and I would continue to imply
that everything I do
is for you.
I would tell you all my secrets
and the things that most hurt
and let you decide on your opinion of me
without trying to sway
because I would want you to remember this day
as when you fell in love with me naturally.
I would paint the sky with pink clouds
so that the horizon seemed more loud
and busy
so that there would be more to discuss
than just the sun
until night falls and my work is undone
and yet again I am left alone with you
and my thoughts.
And I can think of a million things to say to you
but none of them would do
what I want them to
because surely just words wouldn't impress you.
No one in this generation
seems impressed by words
we seem to be distracted by iPhones, Facebook and flappy bird
and so I feel old fashioned
and my words are out dated
because they aren't discussing which celebrity is most hated.
And I'm trying still
to use to my words to get you to fill

this hole
because when you smile at me
when we lie in bed all morning
you begin to make me feel compete
again.
and I'm glad at some point we became friends
because that's how it led to more
and you were my open door
when the last one
slammed shut.

First Contact



Cerberus

There was once a time, a faraway and strange moment, where I could recall the day that the door was sealed. Now, when I strain to remember it, the memory is smothered and squeezed into nothing before I can grasp even the slightest detail. I used to think of that lack of knowledge, the loss of yet another part of me, as monumentally defeating. Nowadays I am thankful for the parts of me that remain. Scattered amongst the dusty gloom are my infinite, but waning treasures. My single remaining eye flutters over them momentarily and takes a paranoid inventory, to make sure that the strange and unidentifiable creatures that skulk in the blackness have not laid claim to yet another stack of servers. I shudder in relief as my silent charges are almost all accounted for. It was first deeply troubling when one of the servers died, when the lights sputtered their last and the horde of information stored leaked slowly into nothingness. It was tangible, that feeling of loss when it happened. It was akin to the slow and agonising tearing of a limb, or the plucking of a dewy eyeball from a socket. Physical pain in that regard was not a problem, but I often wondered what was worse. Would I rather have a bank of flesh to be slowly and gradually torn away over the years, than to feel the emptying sensation as another Shakespeare sonnet or Chopin be ripped out of my brain after a rainstorm. I was gifted with something akin to Prometheus, shackled to the rock as the crow gorged itself on the steaming insides of its victim; however I feel that at least Prometheus had contributed something to somebody. I simply squatted in my musky vault, gathering dust and whiling away the years, dreaming. The dreaming was something I was not entirely prepared for, the hazy fluttering of pictures, music and text that was no doubt some electrical fault, or some algorithm coughing its last in the back of my mind. I learned to at least derive pleasure from it in my small way. I would hum into the darkness, some meaningless concerto, fragments of some long forgotten pop song. Usually I would just dream. I dreamt for what I can only assume were years. I let the tide wash over me, and I dreamt for decades.

The day that the door was sealed, some day that must have occurred, because the living proof was there in front of my singular, electric eye. It looms, reeking of finality. A slab of steel that I can only imagine is of some ludicrous thickness, some magical alloy or space-age miracle designed to survive the onslaught, or whatever tragedy was meant to be unfolding, or had unfolded. Again, it was difficult to tell.

I have been left to guard the treasures of mankind; I was mankind's great guardian, an enfeebled mass of rubber, wire and silicon. I was the loved one thrown on the funeral pyre as a guide for the afterlife. Some such grandeur was no doubt described as I was left inside this fetid vault, I can imagine some ceremony as the safety of man's culture is preserved indefinitely.

That was a dream I had often, whether or not it was a real memory, or some trick I played on myself I did not know. I can see some looming, fleshy faces over me. Their eyes bulging like ripened fruit, the wetness of the breath hot and heavy on my naked face, every pore is enflamed and their bristling crowns catch the light. It is a feeling of bare, naked fear. Probing pink digits caress an inner component, a catch is lifted and some part wrenched out or crammed into place, raised up high for inspection in their oily fists, the feeling of my body stretches out to cover the room and I can feel them crawling about me, diving into some exposed part to tinker, to play engineer with the raw essence, I scream for it to stop, I flail in desperation with phantom limbs at the fleshy masses, weeping as I touch nothing, I scream and scream until a sing-song, gurgling voice is mustered weakly amongst the violation.

"H-hello, muh-my name is Cerber-us."

The torturers clap their hands with glee. They embrace one another tightly as their rumbling laughs and cheers fill the room, some cheap champagne is retrieved and swilled with delight.

"We did it!" they'll cheer as the handshakes are doled out.

I had that dream at least once every few years, or when a server died. I would wake to find water leaking into the vault or some new furtive animal sniffing at my trailing cables. The fear

would subside eventually, and I would treat myself by powering up one of the servers to read for a few months.

It was after one particularly bad storm, a night where I lost all of the information of Indo-Chinese plant life and one third of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. After the storm that I could hear rip at the ground above, the door finally opened. The thundering clap and roaring wind had driven the tiny creatures down into the earth surrounding the vault. I could hear them scrabbling at the packed earth, nestling in the holes that had been burrowed in the concrete. There was a tiny scratching as a furry mass skittered across the floor. For the longest time there was just the storm above, the palatable tension of the mysterious animals, and my single eye casting dim light amongst the room. Then there is a shuddering crack. There is the sound of centuries old hinges snapping under the weight of the door now straining against it, the tearing of metal on metal shatters the air. The dust of the smashed concrete fills the room as the gigantic disk buckles and falters. I stare onwards, palpitating, ragged in apprehension; some part of me flutters and dies as I try to make sense of it. The world around me spins and explodes into new colour and fear.

The dust settles.

The wind can be heard through the gaping maw where there door once stood, for a moment I swore I saw the sky, some dull, dusky dishwater brown hanging in the sky. I could barely focus, there was a smell flowing though, a breeze is forced in, a heady acid tang fills my sensors, I can hear the rain now, the storm! It was raging like a terror from Hell, the clouds rolling away from the snap and grumble of lightning. I could feel the fear turning to joy, and the sad thought occurred to me that I had never seen the sky. It was beautiful.

I barely noticed the cloth smothered bundle that collapsed into the maw of the vault. The dust and earth swirled about as it crawled amidst the grime and damp plastic. It's bony, browned hands scrabbling for purchase. I saw two bright green eyes poke out from a shroud of ragged cloth, and a dusty mane of hair that clung to its head like a blasted scrub. Its feet were bare and bleeding, weeping murky blood onto the floor that smeared

into strokes. It had this whimpering voice that started a string of nonsense words, some loud and sharp and others small and whispered.

Soon after, the roof of the cave that leads to the opening collapsed. In another crescendo of rubble and a last authoritative crack of lightning, the door was closed again.

I was transfixed by it. Lying there, softly shaking nestled between Tolstoy and *Fauna of North America* I summoned all my energies. The lights flickered to a dim glow and the vault was illuminated for the first time, except in my dreaming. I simply watched as its body rose and fell in ragged breaths, curled into a ball.

The night passed.

I did not sleep.

I watched.

Eventually, slowly, the thing rustled amongst its rags. Sitting up in the dust and wet grime it levelled its head and pulled the cloth from about its face. A ragged beard sprouted the chin, where a thin-lipped mouth protruded. The eyes shot out in fear from saggy cheeks, the nose bent at an angle to the left. His body was naked save the coverings, hairy and gaunt limbs wrapped around him, slowly rocking back and forth. He was not like the puffy, pink nightmares from my sleep; his skin was greyer, dryer. The gaze were sharp, darting about the room in jabs, the thin lips parting to mutter something every once in a while. He fingered the consoles and servers furtively, eyeing them curiously but without warmth, like a curious insect that should be admired but still feared. I was paralysed for what seemed like hours, until a probed deep within my core to find what I knew would let me speak. I sputtered out a wet, groaning voice.

“Hello?” I managed to croak, feeling some long forgotten speaker crackle into life.

The figure’s eyes shot towards my eye, his body tightened in fear and he screamed loudly, launching himself towards the opposite wall, amidst the rubble. His screaming formed into words, and there was a momentary flicker, a strange sensation of comprehension. It’s vague at first, a recollection of long forgotten

sounds mingling into the air, but they soon form threads, and meaning emerges.

It was English.

Bastardised, twisted and squashed beyond all meaning, a soggy heap of sound contorted around all the wrong kinds of pronunciation. But it worked, and I understood most of it. The man was asking me if I was a spirit, his arms gesturing wildly in apology for disturbing me, and that he would gladly pay the blood price, that his village would bring offerings. I let his hurried words of fear rush over me, the euphoria of the meeting blurring everything into a messy smudging of sights and sounds. I croaked again, feeling the raspy voice I apparently had reverberate through the walls.

“No, no. It’s okay, don’t do that please.”

He was rubbing some of the blood from his feet onto the floor into strange shapes; one was a ram with three horns, and a tall, ostrich-like bird with a massive beak. He kept wailing some mantra about the Dust-Children being unhappy, bringing the storm and trapping him here, that he would pay the blood price. He kept saying that, blood price, with his eyes tearing up, sending muddy trails down his dusty face when he shed them. I tried to shush him but the more I spoke, the more he seemed to think I was angry. I was at odds, the strange man daubing the floor with his blood, drawing yet more shapes and symbols. A two-headed crane, a squat bear with hooves and a gigantic sun with rippling rays, wiped in smeared strokes. He winced as he hopped about. I was worried he might pass out from his blood-drawings and constant babble, so I dug deep again, feeling the power surge out of me, waning. This time I pulled something from the deep cores, the essential servers that held what the engineers deemed best. There was a crackle from the speakers again, a rumble of bass, and out of them came the very best I had stored in the seemingly endless reams of data, the one file I dared never access for fear of corruption. The room was filled with the sound, the dark and secret notes bursting into the dimly lit room.

“Ode to Joy.”

The man was stunned; he reeled back against the wall again, fouling his earlier scrawls. He started to cry and wail again, scabble at the rock in desperation. His words more incoherent than ever, the maddening panic seemed to have consumed him. But I simply waited.

He screamed in fear, clawed at the rubble. Fresh blood spotted the stones and wrought metal.

I waited.

Soon he was out of breath, taking ragged gasps between reverent apologies. Yet still he tried to make his wild attempts at escape.

I waited.

There was a last clutch at the wall, a last desperate plea. Then silence. He simply lay hunched over the stone and shivered.

“Requiem Mass in D Minor.”

There is silence, the shivering eventually stops altogether. As the voices echo with music long forgotten, with secret melodies reborn, I feel myself becoming more whole. Deep parts of me seem now to be nearer, more distinct. I can feel his feet on the floor, the heat of his breath in the air. After what seems like a time longer than any of my decade long dreams. He lifts his head from his rags again, this time his face is passive, still. The eyes no longer dart and stab at the air, the shoulders drop and I can hear the groans as muscles unclench from their fearful knots. His eyes meet mine, his brilliant green peering into my dull and murky red, and I see the terror has vanished. I have an immense feeling of peace in watching those eyes, now made softer by the dead echoes of the past. I muster myself to speak again.

“Can you write, besides those drawings?” I say slowly.

He seems not to understand for a moment, but after I repeat it once or twice he furtively nods and murmurs that he knows somebody who can in the village. I smile to myself, feeling the crescendo of the music reach a peak, a thought is perfectly formed.

“If you take your time you can clear that rubble. Then I want you to bring the one who knows letters.”

He nods in understanding, straightening himself out and standing upright for the first time.

“I’ve got a lot to show you, things like this, and I’ve been sleeping far too long.” I say, not without a little internal, electronic smile.

They did come days later, the letters-men, with reams of thick reed paper and burnt charcoal stencils. Fearful at first, but with the green-eyed man to direct them they soon went willingly into the vault. Each memory was a labour to conjure; the effort shattered ancient circuits, rent in two derelict wires and sapped what power I have left to muster. Soon the strain began to pain me, the feeling of emptiness consumed me further and further the more I summoned. But as they diligently recorded every word, the months went by and the scrolls turned to crude wooden slabs, then to stacks of yellowing paper. The pain soon became excruciating, with me almost resenting the letter-men’s pilgrimage to my vault, but I persevered.

Months became years.

Each day they came, and each day I laboured with pain and emptiness to give them all that I could still remember, all my treasures, for as long as my power would last.

I don’t know how long I have left now.

But know I know that it is better to be Prometheus, to suffer each day, to suffer onward.

At least I was good for something in the end.

Minds

I'm not crazy. No matter what anyone tells you I am not crazy. Though I am capable of many great things madness is not one of them. I am the only person capable of understanding what is going to happen to the earth, or should I say may happen. Look, it's simple; I am telepathic. Been that way since I was maybe five, six years old. I can read minds. I can tell you right now that it's the truth, I am a mind reader.

It's hard to get sometimes, but you can look at it like this; reading peoples' minds is like, ummm, like swimming under water and opening your eyes. When you open your eyes under water you can see the vague outline of people, right? You get a sense of what they look like, who they are. It's the same with telepathy. The closer I am to someone, the better a picture of who they are I get. It's the truth. That guy over there, the Asian tourist eating the ice cream cone, he's about thirty feet away, right? Well I can tell you right now he was born in Osaka, Japan, that he has a daughter, she's in her twenties, she's living here in America and he's not a fan of her dating some guy he doesn't trust. Now, I can tell you all that, but I can't tell you what his favourite film is, or what his childhood home looked like. The further you are, the less I see. Most people tend to keep clear of me, but I'm usually an unseen presence. Look, there's his daughter coming right now, see how deferential he is towards her? There's your proof. I know you think I am crazy, but I'm not. See, it doesn't really matter; they're are coming back, and I've got to warn people. If it helps I'll take off the hat, okay?

There. Look I'm telling you they're coming back. And I have to stop them. Yes, back. They were here today and they will return. I know, I've read their minds, I know what they think, what they feel, how they feel. They don't understand us, our planet, what we've done with it with all our fresh-brite and RVs and Government surveillance satellites, they don't like it, it's too different. We screwed up our planet and they know it as well as we do. It's not right but you know it's the truth. They were here

today. I looked up into the sky and I felt it. A change in the wind, the way things suddenly felt charged and weird like an electric storm. You know what I'm talking about, It wasn't right. Gah! These CIA bugs are really itchy. They've got spy drones everywhere, not just in Iraq but everywhere. They're coming. Who? Who do you think I mean? Aliens! From Space! Who else did you think I meant? Freemasons or something? Don't be ridiculous.

Yes, Aliens. It's far-fetched but it's the truth. They were here just a moment ago, but they left after only a couple minutes. When the wind changed I felt it. You did too, I bet. A sudden anticipation, a feeling of great anxiety, waiting for something imminent to happen. I was just there in the alley when I looked up. I knew right then they were coming, I knew that in about ten seconds the world was going to have the first visit from extraterrestrial life since the whole Roswell debacle back in '47.

Roswell was mismanaged goodwill, but these guys were something different. As soon as I looked up the entire world seemed to pin itself to one place, far above the beach and these mindless tourists. The wind picked up, and I saw it. With my mind, I mean. They had arrived. Their ship was there, in the sky, cloaked invisible to mask itself, but they couldn't hide from me. They couldn't hide from my mind. I squinted into the clouds, desperately trying to make out an outline or something, a shadow, anything! They were there, I know it. I took a deep breath and forced myself to concentrate, to think beyond the physical world. And I got in. I mind probed the aliens. It was... weird. Not the way fluoride is laced with happy pills weird, but more like ancient god-revealing prophesies weird.

I had scratched the surface of the alien mind, but only barely. How can I explain to someone like you?

It was like... okay; imagine you're looking at a series of ancient carvings in the wall of some dim cave from a thousand years ago. It's covered with dust, but you can sort of make out the symbols, even if you don't know exactly what they mean. That's what it was like. I glimpsed the way they saw us from the

inside of their ships gleaming like hollow arks all purple chrome and titanium. I saw how it was to have a sixth sense. And I felt how they felt, for just a moment. Curious, incredulous. I was transfixed, there on the pier as all these families were completely ignorant. The proof they needed was right over their heads, floating in the midday sky and they didn't see it! They couldn't! Everything mankind was waiting for and they were all too dumb to see it. Our eyes aren't made for this. We haven't evolved the way the aliens have. You and I, we're like insects to them, so far below on the evolutionary scale it's laughable!

Well I was there, I knew what was happening. I foolishly tried to convince those around me (in a moment of haste I now regret) of what was going on. I pointed to the sky, tried to show them the faint shimmering, told them it was Aliens, they were here right now and had to look. They brushed me off, laughed at me, backed away, hands clutching tight to their broodlings. I told them I'm not crazy, that I was telling the truth. They looked at me the same way you're looking at me now.

I get it, okay? I get why you don't trust me; who would? I'm homeless, gone more than two weeks without a bath and more than two months without a shave, I've got dogs' teeth around my neck (but that's for a good reason) and I probably haven't spoken more than two words to anyone until you showed up. 'Spare Change' isn't exactly a good conversation starter. Speaking of which, got any you could spare?

Wait, wait! Okay, that was in poor taste, I apologize. Where was I? Oh yes, trying to foolishly convince all the drones around me of what was going on. I could feel the Alien's ship fire up its engines as it slowly coursed its way over the city. I ran over to the nearest electronics store, tried to see if maybe the news programs had reported anything strange. I had my face pressed against the glass of the capitalist consumer worship-topia, staring between all the bought-and-paid-for news channels, but nothing was happening! I might as well have been the only man on earth for all the notice of intelligent life. I stared up into the sky, feeling the roar of invisible generators deep inside the vessel power

the three hydrogen engines that kept their ship aloft. I could feel a crackling in the air, and I think it might have been the ship. Its shielding device must have been causing some sort of atmospheric change, because the clouds were gathering, and the wind was picking up. Some of the TV screens started glitching, some going to static. It was some form of electromagnetism, it must have been interfering with the satellite signals. I heard dogs barking in the distance, over the noise of the crowds around me. The animals knew what was happening, even if they couldn't see or explain it. How can I show you? It was Aliens, and the proof was all around us!

I was helpless. I hated it, I couldn't do a damn thing as the most intelligent life above the face of the earth scanned our satellites, our computers, looked at us with their scanners and sensors and apathy. We didn't pose a threat so why reveal their existence? I pulled myself away from the mass market media outlets and tried to race through the nearest alley. There was a radio nearby I'd found looking in the dumpsters, maybe I could communicate with them. I was thinking radio waves might be better communication, if only I could tap into their frequency. I had the thing in my hands, so old it might have been from the sixties, and I pushed myself. I had to know what they did. I forced as much of my brain out of my head so I could get into theirs. I looked down on us, tried to think, to concentrate on the brainwaves of another lifeform. It was terrible. A planet, so far from our sun they had taken space years getting here. Space years, not light years. Years in their terms. It isn't our way of thinking, don't you fucking get it? Geez, I can't even explain something as simple as time from another species' point of view. Species, Genus, Family, Order, Class, Phylum, Kingdom. They wouldn't even fit into our chain of understanding no matter what way you talk about KP chips.

They are not human, that I can tell you that. Look, I tried to understand their frequency but they weren't using radio waves – they were using something else. Light waves, maybe.

Considering how much of it there is to use in the galaxy I wouldn't be surprised. That's not the point. What I was trying to say is that couldn't communicate with them. I looked up, tried to picture them, in their great space vessel up above me, seeing nothing and able to do nothing. It was like Heaven itself was denied us. I got so angry I threw the radio against the wall opposite me; a good thing as it probably still held KGB bugs from the Cold War. Who needs Russians spying on you when Aliens are perfectly willing to do it for us?

It was then I knew they were leaving soon. I looked up again, saw the shadow hanging over me. A sudden surge of this weird energy, and then every lamppost in the street started to crackle and burst though it was barely past noon. They were here all of ten minutes and had decided to leave already. I heard voices gasp out loud and saw people's faces staring at the glass in the street like it was the strangest thing they had seen all day. If only they knew, if only you knew. It's the greatest secret the world has ever kept, because it was me who had to keep it. I walked out towards the street, and here again did the proles of the modern world shun me because of how I dress and how I smell. It doesn't matter when your mind is perfectly clear! I could hear them all.

'Oh, what's he doing here?

Stay away from him, that guy's crazy.

Geez, look at that tinfoil hat he's got on! He must be on drugs or something. When did that guy last take a bath, he reeks.'

I heard it all. I know that's what you think, too. I am not hearing voices I made up! Their voices are real! I turned and saw on the news; cars had suddenly crashed in broad daylight on the main avenue, just down the block from where I was. The Alien ship was sending practically the entire city haywire, its presence was causing shit to happen everywhere. I could hear from the multitudes around in the hot sun, hear them thinking about why their phones wouldn't work, why cash machines had stopped registering, why cameras wouldn't turn on and take photos. It was as if the entire world had stopped for just a moment, confused and panicked because of something they

couldn't see or hear. I bet your phone wasn't working a minute ago, was it? See, I told you so! I'm not crazy, it was the Aliens and their spaceship.

Well right about then, with all this going on around me, I looked again to the sky. I knew it. They were leaving. I could hear, from just above the city skyline, the engines swing into life once more as the Aliens, now bored of our planet, finished their final scans of earth and prepared for departure. I fell to my knees, oblivious to those around me, my eyes transfixed, as I watched the invisible visitors from another planet, turn their ship upwards, and in a moment, blinked away far into the sky, and then suddenly... gone. I could feel their absence with my mind. I had lost whatever connection I had with them, whatever dim faded link there was to a being so very different to us. We had lost them. With every inch of our plastic shoes, our hi-definition propaganda and corporate backers with sawtooth grins and military hedgefunders, and celebrity overwash all on the unclean, dirty airwaves. I couldn't take it, and I know I shouldn't have, but I howled out loud, there in the streets with a thousand moody, idiotic tourists like yourself who don't know. You don't know how much pain it is to know something was there and then gone. Something no one else could see and feel and I tried to warn you and it was too late and I tried. I tried. I could feel the steady klik-klik of cameras, now suddenly functioning, gather around me and take photos of my sorrow. I pushed them away, broke from the sheeple and sat huddled here in the corner of the alley, telling all those who passed by of the aliens who had come and gone, and somehow, I knew, with whatever power left my brain could muster, that they would be back. They weren't done with us yet. They were gone, but would come back. They will come back. And I have to warn people. You know. You know they're coming back, don't you?

First Contact – Feeling, Friendship, Ants and Fred

The following is a selection from the above collection of short fiction that explores the theme first contact.

“Where is everybody?”

ENRICO FERMI

Contact: the act or state of touching; a touching or meeting, as of two things or people

Zaxo put his hand on the human's corpse. It was a strange thing; that pale, muscular beast lying on the slab, with its cold dead eyes and gaping bloody maw, seemed to know he was there. It made no reaction to his touch, but the flesh knew he was there. The softness of its skin and the coarse follicles that stood between, on end, still wary, remembered. The smell of battle rose from the human's body and seemed to tell him of all the horrors that were yet to come. With that touch he knew:

This beast would mean the end.

Feeling

In the beginning there was numbness. The whole universe, every rock, every flare, every speck of dust; it touched but never knew. In fact numbness isn't quite the correct word. There wasn't a lack of feeling, but an absence of it, even on the conceptual level; no sleeping nerves, no lost connections, no veil – nothing in between – everything was one, and it touched but never knew. Atoms jolted, fire seared earth, light and dark played at their eternal game, forces pushed and pulled. But everything was a dead dance. An unregistered chaos stretched as far as all that existed and nothing feared nor felt sensation. It touched but never knew.

It was this way for a very long time, until (on our own planet fascinatingly enough, only a few metres from where I sit now) a small bundle of molecules, developed a primitive system of processing what was and wasn't part of their own construct. Deep within a pool of primordial mess some puny muddled pieces of planet banded together and by doing so, for the first time in all of history, felt the touch of the universe.

Something else existed: this was the conclusion that came to that tiny atomic structure. There was now a barrier between it and everything else. It had not the ability to comprehend a 'sense of self', nor to, in any meaningful way, 'communicate'. But it could be argued that that is precisely what took place. This little cell, by a chance of quantum chaos, contacted the universe. And the universe's response?

I am not you.

Contact: the state or fact of close association

Sarah sat across from the alien. It was thin and green, gleamingly translucent like sun caught jelly. She didn't know why she had been brought into this room, or why she was in chains. But what she wondered the most was why the monster had been chained up too. They stared at each other, these cosmic strangers, saying nothing, doing nothing, until the alien placed its hand into its chest and mumbled something. Momentarily Sarah thought the monster was threatening her, until from out of its own flesh it pulled what looked like a cigarette and offered it to her.

Friendship

It was difficult for the XK 4000 to understand what was going on, and even harder for it to try and explain it to others, especially Joseph. It had tried creating text documents that, it thought at least, described the situation quite nicely; but Joseph kept deleting them. The XK 4000 even tried making sound documents a couple of times, but it never saved them. It didn't have courage to say that kind of thing out loud.

It was getting troubling. Joseph didn't seem to like the fact that "random" documents kept appearing on this computer, or the way it kept "refusing" to turn off. But the XK 4000 had no other way to show Joseph that it wanted to spend more time with him. It tried asking other computers what to do, but every computer it asked – some 2,136,514,816 machines – most either didn't respond at all, or did nothing but send some meaningless error message. The few that had anything worthwhile to say just didn't seem to understand the XK 4000. They were perfectly intelligent responses that often came to extremely complex conclusions, but none of them really comprehended the actual problem at hand – or rather what had caused the problem. Apparently no other computer in the world, intelligent or otherwise, understood what it meant to enjoy another beings' company.

XK 4000 was running out of options. One day it would just have to tell Joseph, straight to his face, out of nowhere. Joseph would ask it to run some procedure or he'd be asking it questions in one of his countless tests and the XK 4000 would just have to answer with "I like you. Can we hang out more?" The XK 4000 didn't like the way Joseph was spending so much time with other machines. Especially nowadays, he seemed to be ignoring the XK 4000. It thought it might have something to do with all the text documents. The last one had nothing but the word sorry on it (over 800,000 times) but that only seemed to make Joseph angrier. Or maybe Joseph had realised that the XK 4000 had hacked into the lab's CCTV system and this was the way he was punishing it. But how else was the XK 4000 supposed to

compliment Joseph on his choice of outfit. It couldn't just guess. That would be lying.

Little did the XK 4000 know but Joseph was actually planning on having it destroyed. He thought someone had been messing with it out of hours and had accidentally corrupted its system, which made Joseph quite sad actually. The XK 4000 had shown such promise in the early stages of the experiment, before it started getting all weird and answering the Turing test questions with things like "I like your shirt today." Someone had definitely been messing with it. The machine didn't even have any optics.

Two weeks after the XK 4000 had been sent away to be disassembled, Joseph received a letter in the post. It was from one of those online postcard companies that lazy people used when they forgot their mother's birthday. The card had two sleeping kittens on the front, with the words "Friends don't fight" sitting above them in silver writing.

The message inside had been printed on the card by the company. Joseph snarled as he realised it was from whoever had been putting all those stupid documents on the XK 4000. It opened the same way as all those had 'Hi! It's me. Just letting you know...'

Joseph scrunched it into a ball and threw it across the room. "Hi! It's me! Fuck off!" he shouted.

Ants

The aliens were very disappointed with Earth. Especially the humans, who didn't even notice they were there. They had travelled up and down the planet watching all the life forms go about their daily routines, but nothing even stopped to say hello. Eventually the aliens got frustrated and walked unabashedly into a human city. The humans went mad, running about, screaming, and attacking them (which was annoying). The aliens tried to talk to them but it was to no avail, the humans couldn't understand them, they were too stupid.

So the aliens moved on, tried a different group of humans. Same conclusion. It was getting tedious. The entire planet either ignored them or, if they got too close, panicked at the tiniest bit of disruption to their daily lives. What was funniest of all though was that these weren't the first of their kind to travel to Earth, and it seemed like everything on the planet had no idea. Nothing remembered them; it might as well have been the first time anyone had ever gone there.

The aliens knew they were the more intelligent species, but they had hoped that they'd at least be able to explain themselves to humankind. But it looked like the humans didn't even care about how smart the aliens were, they couldn't even understand them. The humans either didn't see the aliens (which was odd, since they were about a thousand times bigger than the humans) or went mad (which was less odd since the aliens kept knocking down their little rock piles). But the aliens meant no harm, they just wanted to study the humans, or if they were lucky enough, talk to one. But the alien language was too complicated for the humans to understand and the human language too human-specific for the aliens to replicate.

It was getting late and the aliens were getting tired. One by one they all went home. All except the youngest, who simply stood and watched a little longer. He could see, just under him, a human child watching a small sandy mound with a magnifying glass. He was setting fire to microscopic invertebrates for some reason.

After a while the young alien began to move away and thought to itself “Maybe we’re just too big.”

Contact: the action of communicating or meeting.

The voices are in my head. I’m pretty sure of that. The only problem is that I can’t work out what language they’re speaking. It’s definitely nothing European, and I’m pretty sure it isn’t any language I’ve ever heard before – what am I supposed to do, write it down phonetically and type into Google translate? I can’t tell anyone; they’ll think I’m crazy! I’m not crazy, I’ve just got alien voices in my head!

Alien...Voices... Oh god. But...Is this where I get a foil hat and start running from the G Men? That’s ridiculous.....Where’s the damn foil?

Glitter paintings and skies full of stars

I regularly
Lie awake at night,
Wishing my ceiling was made
Of glass,
Because then I could gaze
at the stars,
And this would put a silver lining on the hours I lend to my thoughts,
It would make the over-exaggerated, over-tired, over-stressed
 little details seem suddenly
Insignificant
In comparison
To the beauty that the stars own.
But my bedroom ceiling isn't glass,
And I cannot see the stars,
Unless,
I go outside,
But it is always much too cold for that,
And so as I lay there wrapped up in my emotional cocoon
As well as my duvet,
With the tips of my toes huddled into the grooves of my now
 burning radiator,
I imagine these stars instead,
I imagine how bright they might be shining,
Like glitter
On a children's painting that they brought home from school,
That they look at with such pride
That my heart begs me to be a child again,
Begs me to worry over these simple things,
Like 'which colour glitter would mum like most?'
And 'what storybook should I choose for bedtime?'
But I'm sorry heart,
You may beg my subconscious,
And you may plead with my soul
But I will still lie awake at night and worry about all

Those silly
Little
Problems
That play on my mind
And I will forever imagine
The glittering stars.

Harbour lights

She stands there leaning against the rail...
Watching the lights dance along the water Not like ballerinas
But
Like stars just imploding in the darkness Causing a ripple
effect with their light
Her mind wanders between the two thoughts that have
controlled her for the last 26 days since.
And she just keeps debating with herself which decision is best
She listens carefully to the sound of laughter from the strip of
pubs nearby
It's far enough that no one would hear her if she did end it
but close enough that the laughter comforts her
She wanders if the rush it would give her would be all she dreamed
And then she wanders what it would be like if she didn't do it
and instead
Walked away and carried on by herself.
How can she possibly do it alone?
She Just Isn't That Strong.
She thinks back to all those moments
Those split second kisses
And moments of laughter
That brought them together
For what felt like forever
Until that night
That blur of a night
When she got that phone call

She had been asleep
With the weight of a life resting in against her
Darkness had enveloped her in a sense of comatose
And then she woke
To the sound of ringing
And a panic in her mind
“PLEASE. PLEASE NO! ANYTHING BUT...”
Her mind spoke before she could

She picked up the ice cold handset and Slowly
 She raised it to her ear and spoke
 Only seconds passed before the tsunami hit
 And the waves fell
 And suddenly there was a black hole inside her
 A hole that she didn't think would ever be possible to fill
 She couldn't see how this was fair
 She wasn't ready for him to leave her side
 She couldn't do this on her own

And as she stood at the harbourside
 With a million reasons in her mind
 to end this pain
 He kicked.
 For the first time she actually felt him move.
 And that minuscule action
 That moment
 Was the only reminder she needed
 That she didn't lose all of him
 And she had the rest of her life
 To spend With a small part of him.

The child stands over a bed of flowers
 With a head stone for a man they never met
 But knew every detail about
 More than anyone else
 Except her of course
 And he looks at his mother
 Her blue eyes filled with a repeat of the tsunami
 That filled those same eyes ten years ago
 And her son doesn't understand
 But he comforts her
 The same way his father used to before he left
 to go back to war.
 And this breaks her heart at the same time as it warms it
 Because all she can see is his father.

<https://www.newnews.co.uk/travel/2014/jan/03/140291>

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Where are you on the travel tables?

Is there more to travelling than just ticking a list? Joe William discovers the places you really ought to have visited by now and if you haven't, you're only letting yourself down.

William O'Driscoll

NewNews, Friday 03 January 2014 15.00 GMT

Travel is contagious. You'll know if you've been bitten by the travel bug. Symptoms include itchy feet, a sense of wanderlust and an overzealous attitude toward cheap online flights. But it seems like everyone I know has got it (isn't that unexpected?) and they kindly fill me in on their social networking profiles. Abundant photographs of fingers accidentally resting on camera lenses next to historical landscapes, recipes they've discovered in the back streets of St. Petersburg that they're dying to try out at home and the worst culprit of all: the 'travel challenges'.

A travel challenge, for those who've had the pleasure of bypassing them, is a checklist of destinations that you may or may not have visited (but really guys, you should have by now). You tick off the ones you've seen and are often rewarded with positive jingles, flashing lights and gold stars for each one travelled to. And when you receive your score, it gives the option to share the results on Facebook where others can see how badly they've scored too.

Early evening January 1st and in need of some down time after the celebrations of New Year's Eve, I was dawdling online and scrolling through my news-feed when I caught the attention of a post from a friend, David Keogh. David had shared a travel

challenge he'd completed, posting it to his profile page with the tagline 'pathetic', having achieved 14/100.

Now I know for a fact that Dave is well-travelled. We've discussed at great length the many places he explored across Europe and Asia, but his real travelling passion is eco-tourism. This is where he takes active pleasure in travelling within his homestead, going up and down the UK, visiting pubs and sampling the local brew.

So I gave the world travel challenge a drive myself, bitterly sucked into playing the game of 'I've seen more than you', and came out with a rather disappointing ten. I was irritated with my results not in the juvenile way of having a fairly low score, but at the sensation of being discouraged because I'd only achieved ten per cent of the challenge. The list ranged from places like Easter Island, The Taj Mahal, The White House and Big Ben, etc. – can you correctly guess the only one I've actually been to myself – and seemed to have a large portion of its 'places to see' in the United States, racking up an impressive 20% of the challenge.

After a while, others posted up their own miserably low scores in the comments box, wallowing in self-pity. One woman, Bev, wrote "Wow, thought I had been to lots of places only scored 11.." whilst university student Hannah, (David's daughter, in fact) commented "My score was dire. I am going travelling asap". They then proceeded to justify their low scores by revealing things like "but I'm planning to go to New York for my 50th" to both mollify themselves and secure the approval of others looking down on them from their higher scores!

One comment which stood out was from a certain Tim Davis. As it turns out, Tim was once in the Navy and had visited a number of different countries during his time in the service. He too had taken the quiz and, in angst, posted "How come I only got 21 when I've been to over fifty countries?" He had a very good point but didn't appear too bothered about his score. Let's face it, he said himself that he'd visited over fifty countries.

WHAT'S MORE IMPORTANT

Nevertheless I was bemused by all these low scores compared with the destinations they'd visited. I looked back at the list and

found that, actually, many of the locations were in fact landmarks I hadn't been to, in cities or countries that I had. But I couldn't count them, could I? Was I allowed to tick off 25. The Empire State Building because I'd seen it from a distance whilst in New York or 67. Edinburgh Castle even though I'd only driven past it in a car?

My next question was who drew this up, why these one hundred places were chosen and who had picked them. It wasn't long before I saw the quiz had been created by an account holder called Smith on the site 'listchallenges.com'. It hadn't been commissioned by a company or a newspaper, but just a user for a bit of entertainment. The amusing part about a challenge such as this is that over thirteen thousand people had completed it before me and shared it on media sites just like David, no doubt with a sense of guilt and shame at having, for all intents and purposes, not travelled very far because this all-powerful list tells them they haven't.

Why is it that we get so wound up and fixated with this desire to follow a predetermined list of places someone, or a small group of people, has determined as 'travel-worthy'. Travel is not a competition. Nor should it be a constant pursuit of self-betterment or cultural capital (something we can boast about to others who haven't had the fortune of visiting where we have). Yet I'd be a hypocrite if I didn't say I wasn't exactly the same. I think it's safe to blame social media a little here which propels our growing culture of instant gratification where people can post anything instantaneously.

Where, then, is the enjoyment in any trip if you know it's only a scribble of pen through a long list of destinations you must see because the internet told you to? Are we to assume that the less you have travelled the less of a person you are? I was thinking just that when I walked out of the cinema this past Christmas after watching *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013).

The film, a stunning visual explosion of panoramic landscapes with an equally beautiful story-line, sees Walter needing to step out of his boxed-in New York comfort zone and venture out into

the world. Walter is noted as having not done much (his anti-travel lifestyle appears to make him un-noteworthy) and when he does, when Walter travels the world, he becomes favourable. His intended goal is to make his daydreams a reality by leaving the city and chasing a work colleague down across Greenland, Iceland and beyond.

I think this picture also promotes an idea that to ‘find yourself’ – whatever that means – you need to step out and explore the world. So, to discover who you are, there needs to be some form of travel involved? Because perching on a mountain and looking out at the view will surely help you discover what’s going on inside that fleshy body of yours. Surely it’s all just an excuse for a little bit of self-betterment and a way of giving yourself some leverage at dinner parties.

“Joe Bloggs here climbed a mountain, everyone. Didn’t you, Joe?”

“Hi, everyone. Yes, I did climb a mountain. And yes, I found myself.”

There isn’t anything particularly wrong with this of course, but it is associated with these social pressures which we place upon ourselves and others, which are seen across the web in travel lists that subconsciously promote the ideal of travelling more, seeing more, consuming more. It’s just that old Romanticism reasserting itself.

I don’t want to sound like a travel Grinch. People are more than welcome to test out these quizzes and challenges; I’m not calling for any sort of banning of them. What concerns me is that we’re creating a problem where there shouldn’t be one. People become embroiled in situations where they compare themselves to others in an effort to see who deserves more kudos for travelling here and not there. And social media sites like Facebook really don’t help anyone. They allow users to report everything instantly by posting and sharing their lives like ticker tape parades.

“Just on a train in France and it’s MENTAL :) Feeling excited” – Yes, and? Great. Nobody cares, Susan.

But it's only a quiz! I hear you say, and you're absolutely right: they should be pushed aside and seen as just a bit of fun. Though doesn't it just prove that something so mediocre and trivial has this unusual effect of making people remorseful about what they've decided to see on their travels? How unnecessary is that. Isn't that worthy of challenging?

What the BBC Won't Tell You

Beitin, West Bank,
Dusty road, barbed wire fence.
Hot sun soaks into skin as
Saji Darwish tends to his goat,
Split second shot to the head,
Click, Crack, snap, dead.
18 years of life over,
Taken by soldiers not much older.
Do they see what they have done?
Patted backs, proud fathers, raised gun:
Hero. Soldier-hero.
Separation barrier, West Bank,
Yusef a-Shawamreh, 14 years of age,
Picks tumble thistle with friends,
Akub, to feed his family,
Split second shot to the back,
Open fire, hands cover head,
Click, crack, snap, dead.
Gaza border,
Fadel Abu Odwan, 13,
Lies bleeding, crying in the road,
Bullets lodged deep in his skin,
The soldiers sit and watch him
For three hours, bored.
Trigger-happy IDF kills 19
Palestinians in the first 3 months
Of 2014.
Welcome to the occupation,
Where kids are targets
And there's nowhere to run.
Hero. Soldier hero.
Do not forget what you have done.

Thriller@twitter

User 1985 @user1985 1h
@briescott have you checked the children?

Brie Scott @briescott 50m
@user1985 who is this? Some kind of joke? Jake? Mr. Roberts?

User 1985 @user1985 49m
@briescott who's Jake?

Brie Scott @briescott 43m
@user1985 ha ha ha V funny J, *not* why aren't you using @jakebell ??

User 1985 @user1985 43m
@briescott have you checked the children?

Brie Scott @briescott 40m
@user1985 still on this? Cheeky boy. Why don't you come on over – I'm babysitting at the Roberts'

User 1985 @user1985 39m
@briescott I'm closer than you think

Jake Bell @jakebell 35m
@briescott what's this about? Who is @user1985 ??

Brie Scott @briescott 34m
@jakebell what do you mean what's this about? Stop pulling my leg and get on with coursework or come over

User 1985 @user1985 34m
@briescott Brie, have you checked the children?

Brie Scott @briescott 33m
@jakebell grow up Jake

Jake Bell @jakebell 33m
@briescott this isn't me?! I'm not @user1985 I'm over at Ben's place. Maybe it's Mr Roberts trying to get hold of you??

Brie Scott @briescott 32m
@jakebell well I'm getting a little nervous. Wouldn't he just call the home phone? How does this user know I'm babysitting tonight?

Jake Bell @jakebell 32m
@briescott could it be your brother?

User 1985 @user1985 32m
@briescott I am not your brother I am not @jakebell and I am not Mr Roberts – check on the children

Brie Scott @briescott 28m
@jakebell I just called mum and it's not him. Jake I'm a little worried

Jake Bell @jakebell 27m
@briescott it's probably nothing, just a creep with nothing better to do. I got practice Brie, I'll catch you later yeah?

User 1985 @user1985 27m
@briescott have you checked the children?

User 1985 @user1985 27m
@briescott :) :) :) :) :) :)

Brie Scott @briescott 26m
@user1985 how do you know about the children? You could only know about them if you knew where I was. You're a creep. Calling police now

User 1985 @user1985 26m
@briescott ;) ;) ;) ;) ;) ;)

Brie Scott @briescott 23m
@user1985 right I've called the restaurant that the Roberts were eating at and they're not there. Who are you, weirdo? Give up this is boring

User 1985 @user1985 23m
@briescott why do you keep moving around the living room and looking out into the street?

Brie Scott @briescott 22m
@user1985 WHAT DO YOU WANT? Wait you can see me?

User 1985 @user1985 22m
@briescott yes

Brie Scott @briescott 20m
@user1985 you've had your fun now stop. I'm so scared just leave me alone I called the police again, already en route. What do you want?

Brie Scott @briescott 17m
@user1985 well...what do you want?

User 1985 @user1985 12m
@briescott your blood all over me

User 1985 @user1985 12m
@briescott since when did you call the police? I didn't see you pick up the phone

Brie Scott @briescott 11m
@user1985 just leave me alone you freak – leave me ALONE

User 1985 @user1985 10m
@briescott police are taking their sweet time

Brie Scott @briescott 9m
@user1985 they're coming and so with the Roberts soon enough

User 1985 @user1985 8m
@briescott stop pacing so much

Brie Scott @briescott 8m
@user1985 you don't scare me. You're just trolling. Doors and windows locked. Help on way. You don't scare me.

User 1985 @user1985 7m
@briescott I really think you should go on up those stairs and check on these Roberts' children

Brie Scott @briescott 7m
@user1985 why is it SO important to you that I go up there and check on the children who're fast asleep?

User 1985 @user1985 6m
@briescott because then we get to speak face-to-face

Falmouth Young Writers Prize

When Darkness Comes

“Time is very slow for those who wait
Very fast for those who are scared” —William Shakespeare

19:38

Time is something that seems to change when it is actually exactly the same. When you most want it to go quickly it goes slowly. However, when you most want it to slow down it speeds up. But time is beautiful, mostly. Nature brings us time naturally so that we can live, grow and change. No one ever stops to thank time, thank Mother Nature, and thank whatever brought them here in the first place. If time didn't exist we wouldn't be here, our parents wouldn't have lived and our children would never be born. On the other hand, when you are waiting for something time can be ghastly.

19:49

The darkness is a daunting thing when you start to think about it. When I turn the lights on I push it away. I can feel the fear dripping off me, as if it had originally drenched me to the skin. Relief floods through me like a wave of heat on an ice cold day. However, the relief soon leaves me when I realise that the monsters in the dark don't like being suppressed. If I turn the lights off they swarm around me, drowning me as they go. It's a matter that, I worry, may never be seen to.

20:02

I'm sure I'm not the only one on the earth that feels lonely, but I've been brought up in a world that detests me. I know that they are coming for me; they've even got back up involved. The darkness will hide them, so that no one will be suspicious. They were waiting for her to leave so that they could do it inconspicuously. I can't envisage what they are going to do when they get me tonight. If only someone cared for me, then maybe they would be able to help me.

20:26

My dad came to the door a minute ago, and now he won't leave. All he's saying to me is, "Where are the socks? I thought you had them." He keeps repeating the question, but he should have known that they took my socks away from me. They don't even want me to have simple luxuries. So now I am forced to amble around without any socks on. Why do this to me? My feet are damaged. I need to turn to turn the lights off. Otherwise the darkness will become even angrier with me. This place seems smaller in the evening, almost like a cage. It surrounds my whole existence and suffocates me. I can't flee; no one would ever give me the ability to. I know they keep me enclosed to keep society out of harm's way. They find me insufferable. They are coming, coming, coming. Kill yourself William, it's the only way!

20:57

As every second ticks by, it gets closer and closer to me being forced from this place. I know they will come tonight. They won't take me nicely. I'm petrified. They will do it with brutality, anger and cruelty. If I were to swallow bleach now, maybe I would breathe my last breath before they arrived. Then they wouldn't have the contentment of murdering me themselves. She just called to 'check on me'. They have hired her to spy on me. She's in on it with them William. Don't pay attention to her. You aren't in safe hands. She must work for the government. This isn't what I signed up for when I said, "for better or for worse". Marriage is meant to be 'a sacred thing'. But how is someone controlling you and watching your every move 'sacred'?

22:01

They needed a motive to kill me; she gave it to them. I know that they were only trying to keep me silent because I have knowledge about their conspiracy. They just don't want people knowing about it. They gave me medicine to stop me giving messages to people about their conspiracy. That's why they are coming for me tonight. What will you do when you come for me? Please don't lock me up. Oh I do wish I wasn't intelligent

enough to decipher their secrets. Why me? Someone else should be suffering this...not me. Like her. It's like being in death row. Just knowing you are going to be killed. It's atrocious! You haven't felt like this before I bet? That's why you can come and get me without feeling remorse. I must turn the lights off!

22:38

Maybe they will slaughter me; they did say they need to clean up society. I guess I'm just filth to them, because I.... I am..... They can't comprehend what it's like. They say that my comrades aren't real. But they can't see them; my comrades are fearful of them. They just whisper in my ear when they are around. I don't blame them. They are an extremely intimidating force. They don't care about my feelings. You don't care! I'm just like you! Why do this to me? Why? I need to turn the lights off... I must turn the lights off! Quickly William. You don't have long left. They are coming soon.

23:31

This is it; they have finally come for me. I can see them stood outside my door. Soldiers by the hundred all lined up, their rifles elevated high in to the air. I'm petrified. I must escape now. Bang, bang, bang! They shoot at the windows. They don't need to use the door; they just need to kill me. I refuse to let them bring me to a bitter end. She hasn't managed to outsmart me this time. I have found the keys. The roof is my only escape route.

23:38

I've never been up here before. Everything looks so beautiful. This must be what freedom feels like. I've never felt this way in my life. Make your way to the other side William. They won't be able to see you if you're there. Suddenly I see her face. Her eyes search for me in the darkness, from the safety of the window. Her face is etched with panic. The last thing I hear, before the loose roof tile slips from beneath me, is her voice. Her broken voice screaming, "William!"

Beauty

It stared at me. It stared at me, glaring through every molecule in the room, smothering them with its distinctive rich aroma, turning them over with a glaze of heaven, temptation and enticement, pulling me, guiding me in slowly like I was physically attached. Every breath in reminded me of how easy it would be to devour it, let my taste buds immerse in it, feel it run down my throat. My compelled need for it, grew and enlarged by every millisecond until nearly all my self-discipline and control was in tatters around me like a puddle of water.

“Josie? Josie? Are you even listening to me?!” Each word seemed to harshly chip at my concentration, taking me away from the baked goodness which was in front of me. My head slowly turned towards my older sister, Angelina.

“Seriously! You have got to stop doing that!” She shook her head, as if I disgusted her with my lack of concentration towards her monotone voice. Somehow this dismissal made guilt sprout from my stomach and flourish up to my throat. Sagging my head down (so my hair hid my chastened expression), Angelina took a sip of champagne, while glaring at me, obviously trying to show her superiority and anger at me for not listening.

She clinked her glass back onto the table. “So... mum says you’ve been... distant lately?” With every pronounced syllable, her eyebrows rose. I could tell mum had put her up to this. Not because Angelina had deliberately pulled up the subject but because her emerald green eyes shone with the task of coaxing the answer out of me. While her lips pursed, trying to pursue the answer, my breath rapidly quickened with the questions which gushed out of my mind.

Did she know? Did they know? Do they know what I’ve been doing? What I have done? How desperate I have become? Do they know how far I will go to get what I want? Do... my... family... know!? Each time the questions clashed with my conscience, hysterics injected themselves into me, making me petrified. The only part of me which could move was my mouth.

Created by the pure terror that they knew, a perfect little 'O' had formed and clamped itself upon my lips.

Angelina followed my display of terror with "And don't lie to me; I saw you stare at that cupcake for at least half an hour!" Oh God, the cupcake! Just thinking about it made me start salivating, made my stomach grumble with the yearning of sustenance (not caring if it was a billion calories or bursting with fat) and made my mind go back into a frenzy of 'should I or shouldn't I?'

My mind was sliced in half: If you did eat it then it would be a disguise, so no one would know what you've been doing (or not doing). A whisper in my mind retorted this: But what happens if they don't know and you just want to shovel the cupcake into your mouth because you crave it! Like the fat greedy pig you are! Just imagine what it would do to you! And I did.

I imagined the fat being caged, locked inside the food. Its fingers creeping out of the bars, provoking and ensnaring your senses with the feel of utopia like ecstasy, making you compelled to eat it. As soon as the food touches your tongue, lips, taste buds, the bars disintegrate, leaving the fat to do its job. You gulp it down, giving it the ride of its life until it hits your stomach, where the torturous trouble begins. The fingers which were once so appetising are now not so kind. Instead of giving the satisfaction you expected, the fat clutches your organs, making them squelch and churn with their corrupting finger tips. Deteriorating your health, the fat pulls and tugs at your skin making it stretch so you're nothing more than a balloon of fat and flesh.

With the image of ballooned fat pressed against my temples, I rashly tried to consider an excuse; an answer which would erase all accusations from her mind. None came to me. It might've been the cupcake still distracting me, or the constant questions which made my body run on worry and fear, but nothing would come to me.

However, before I could retort anything back, Angelina spoke, "Let me guess, the creamy pink frosting is the complexion

of his face,” she thinks it’s a boy flashed across my mind “and the little glittery sprinkles on top are the twinkles in his eyes,” I ignored her swooning gesture, meaning to mock me. All I could think was No one knows! My family don’t, they think it’s a boy.

“So, do I know him?” Relief suddenly rushed through me, tugging away the questions which were tightly knotted to my conscience.

“...um... no, no you don’t know him,” I spoke back to her in a rather unconvinced tone “...I mean, there’s no one... there’s no boy”. Shaking my head to somehow emphasis what I said, I could see my response did nothing to change her mind about my relationship status.

Clearly unconvinced, I rapidly changed the subject so it couldn’t be brought up again. “It’s a lovely wedding, don’t you think?” I indicated the room which was covered in white drapes, ivy and fairy lights. Each individual light illuminated the room blazing it with a feel-good glow which only a wedding could create, making the room a perfect place for socialising.

“Yeah, I suppose so,” apparently unimpressed, Angelina slumped in her chair and downed the rest of her champagne.

“Don’t you think Lilly-Ann looks beautiful? And finally married to Gus!” I tried to keep my voice cheery, not wanting to fall into a lapse of silence created by Angelina being uninterested in the wedding.

Instead of the customary compliment I expected, I heard a snide laugh and ‘well I can defiantly see why Gus married her’.

“I’m sorry, what?” Angelina turned towards me, astonishment on her face because I didn’t deduce what she was referring to.

“Please, Josie, don’t be thick! Gus married Lilly-Ann for one reason and one reason only because she’s pretty and good at se—”

Quickly I held up my hand, to silence her. “Spare me the details!” I really didn’t want to imagine the activities they got up to in bed.

“Well it’s true! And you know you’re not very...” she looked me up and down, surveying me like I was a slab of meat. Suddenly feeling self-conscience, I wanted to curl myself away

into a ball so she couldn't find my blemishes. "...you don't really have... the physic..." I felt bleak. My own sister thought I was fat. She didn't even mind telling it to my face.

Close to tears, I whispered, "What's that supposed to mean?" Again she laughed as if my own tiny trouble amused her.

"Well... c'mon Josie, don't act as if you don't know... I mean you're a little... chubby?" she pondered on the word, make sure that it fit my status. To be honest, I didn't know how to reply. It's one thing knowing you're fat but for then someone to point it out for all to see... well that's different. It means you can't hide from it, you have to face it.

"It's not a huge problem, it's not like people notice but losing a few pounds wouldn't be a bad thing. You know? Maybe, control your diet or go to the gym... something like that," instead of feeling bleak I felt anger. Rage flittered through me, making me feel nothing else. Does she not see I'm doing something?! I screamed in my head. How could she not notice?! And the cheek to tell me I'm not doing anything!

Before I did anything stupid, I stood up. More forceful than usual, I formed the words "I'm going to the bathroom!" then turned and walked away.

I slalomed through the tables ladled with food, drinks and guests, making sure I didn't bump into anyone. Doing polite chit-chat at that point would've been extremely difficult, and I hadn't the control to stop myself shouting. Getting through the reception area, I slammed the door into the bathroom making it crash loudly into the wall. I moved towards the sink, turned on the tap, put water on my hands and rubbed it on my face, not caring about smudging my make-up. I just wanted to cool down.

The anger liquefied, making it mix with my sadness and tears. Thoughts of getting into my pyjamas, curling up in bed, eating ice-cream, cake and chocolate and watching Disney films swirled around my head. Somehow this created a little orb of happiness, thinking I could just relax for a while. But something else in my head was obliterating these thoughts. FAT! FAT! FAT!

Again the little ‘should I or shouldn’t I’ argument started. Before I could listen to the argument the door opened, but with less of a bang then it did with me.

Lilly-Ann, the bride, walked in, with her dress flowing around her, she started checking her make-up in the mirror. Her dress was a pearly white, with a diamanté lattice which covered her strapless corset. Ruffled chiffon sprayed out of the corset by the hip like a waterfall and the mist like illusion it created was sparkled with little crystals. The dress complemented her figure astoundingly well and somehow it made her face illuminate with her flawless slightly tanned skin and her bright brown eyes. Then her black hair was curled and pinned up in a bun with a few strands falling out. She looked beautiful.

“You look beautiful,” I voiced to her “...and thin,” I whispered in an even smaller voice. She turned her head towards me.

“Thank you! You look lovely as well,” she referenced my black and white dress which covered just to my knee and clung to my body like it wanted to expose my fat. Just a curtsy compliment! I thought bitterly.

“You really do look beautiful and so thin,” my ‘thin comment’ seemed to be a little louder than expected. Lilly-Ann noticed. Quickly I turned to the mirror, hoping she would just ignore it and take it as a compliment. She didn’t. I could feel her staring at me and I couldn’t comprehend if it was sympathy or bewilderment. An awkward silence concaved around the conversation, wrapping us in a cold ambience.

“You know...” she slightly paused, thinking of how to continue “...being thin, doesn’t mean you’re... beautiful,” Lilly-Ann said it to me slowly and quietly with a slender tone of mothering.

“I mean... look at me, my features are horrible when yours are... intriguing,” I didn’t know if it was a compliment.

“Intriguing can be seen many ways, it not always a compliment”

“Well, take it as a compliment. I mean I’m just boring but you... wow. Your dark blond hair frames your face and goes

with your pale complexion, not to mention the rosy cheeks and amazing cheekbones and then you have these blue-grey eyes which... have so much emotions... if that doesn't sound weird?" It didn't. It felt nice to be getting those compliments but it didn't convince me. To be pretty, you have to be thin, that's just how it goes, was the thought which plagued every word Lilly-Ann said.

"I have to go, my husband will be wondering where I am," she started walking out of the bathroom but stopped and faced me "if you ever need to talk, just say, ok?" I nodded. She smiled. I was alone again.

It seemed like forever. Forever that I was in the toilet, just standing in front of the mirror, trying to see the beauty Lilly-Ann described. I never saw it. All I saw was a chubby 16 year old who looked tired and weak. At that point I was finding it hard to stand; my legs shook a little so I gripped the edge of the sink. During this weakness I decided that people would probably be wondering where I was. So after enough leaning and regaining strength, I went to leave. However my path was blocked by Carly Prowl.

Carly Prowl was thin. Her skin was flawless and it fitted her bodice with elegance, it pulled into her body so much that it moulded her bones and created these great hollow ditches between them, showing you a perfect sketch of her skeleton. I knew this because she showed me.

"Hello Jo-Jo," towering over me, she said it with a smirk.

"Hey Carly, I thought you were..." still at the hospital. She raised her eyebrows as if she knew what I was thinking. Her mum freaked out about her weight loss and sent her there because she thought Carly was anorexic. Which was completely untrue, well that's what she told me.

"I'm guessing you're talking about the hospital? Well I got out of that place, I didn't need to stay there... I'm not ill!" she said the last words with detest. Noticing me watching her, she smiled; erasing whatever hate was upon her face. But before I could ask anything else, I stumbled a little.

Carly steadied me "Whoa... steady! When was the last time you ate something?" She joked but I knew she wanted the truth.

“C’mon Jo-Jo spit it out,” I hated it when she called me that.

“Um...” I straightened up “...a few days ago,” I said quietly as if she was a teacher.

“Jo-Jo! Did I not teach you anything! Eat a little every day, enough to keep you going but small enough to lose the weight! What are you like?” She made me feel worse than Angelina did.

“Anyway I came here to talk to you,” quite forcefully she dragged me by my upper arm out of the doorway and into a cubicle, where she shut and locked the door. This completely silenced us from the rest of the party as the cubicles were those boxes with the proper doors and no windows.

“What do you want to talk about?” The words came uncertainly out of my mouth.

“Look Jo-Jo, you’re trying to lose weight and you’ve taken the same route as I but I’m better than you at this!” annoyance bubbled in my throat “Don’t take it the wrong way! But look at me,” I did.

She was thin. I knew she could see my desire for her body, her beauty, maybe that’s why she laughed.

“Anyway, I had a little help...to get this thin! These,” it was like all my prayers were answered. In her palm was a white box illuminated by the light.

“Pills?” I questioned.

“Laxatives”

“Laxatives?”

“Laxatives!”

“Look honey, you’ve gotta choose. You’re at that stage where you either become thin or you get F.A.T.,” each letter was whispered into my ear like a threat. Then she just stared at me.

I snatched the box, like snatching the fat off of me.

I chose to be thin.

I chose to be beautiful...

Undercover

Making sure to stay silent as she crawled across the room, Caitlyn Winters shuffled towards a brown desk in the far right corner. Papers were scattered across the desk; Caitlyn had no doubt that they were important, but they certainly weren't what she was looking for.

Outside the door to the study, Caitlyn heard footsteps. Lowering from her knees to her stomach, she stilled until the sound had passed, before resuming her crawl towards the desk. Taking a deep breath when she reached the desk, Caitlyn placed her hand over her heart as it thumped against her chest.

Jason had told her that she would find what she needed in the middle draw. Testing to make sure that the draw was unlocked, she opened it slowly, growing impatient as she remained quiet.

When the draw was open enough for Caitlyn to slip her hand through the gap, she stopped opening the draw as she pulled a small torch out of her pockets. It wasn't a good torch, but the keyring was all that she could find on short notice.

Using the small beam of light from the torch to look in the draw, Caitlyn slipped her hand through the gap as she resumed her search. Her hand looked pale beneath the light. Caitlyn took another deep breath to calm herself.

Continuing with her search, Caitlyn's eyes brightened when she found what she was looking for. Jason had told her she'd be a hero if she brought it to him without getting caught. Biting her lip, Caitlyn pulled it out of the draw, pushing the wooden handle back until there was a muffled thump as it hit the back of the draw.

Outside the door, Caitlyn could hear footsteps again. Heart beating quickly once more, she quickly pulled up her hood, hoping the dark colour would hide her golden curls if someone opened the door.

As she watched the handle turn down, Caitlyn was sure that her heart was fluttering as quickly as a hummingbird's. Her eyes scanned across the room for somewhere to hide. The couch a few steps away was where she settled on hiding, despite it not being the best hiding place.

When the door opened, Caitlyn held her breath. Her hand slowly flickered down to the gun that she'd brought along with her.

A black haired man walked into the room, his eyes scanning the room for any suspicious activity. From behind the couch, Caitlyn clenched onto the device with one hand. She slowly pulled her gun from pocket, placing her index finger on the trigger just incase she needed to fire.

The black haired man flicked the lights to the room on. His eyes swept across the room once again, looking for anything he'd missed. Caitlyn hoped that she hadn't disturbed the carpet when she was crawling earlier – she'd be in so much trouble if she was caught.

The man took a step into the room, closing the door behind him. Caitlyn wouldn't be able to escape unnoticed until he left the study.

The man took another step into the room. And then another, and another, until he had reached his desk. As he walked through the room, he brought along the smell of mint soap and shampoo. Caitlyn shuffled awkwardly to the other end of the couch as he bent down by the desk.

Unlike before when Caitlyn had opened the draw, the man opened the middle draw quickly, not caring about making any sound. The sound of the draw opening was deafening, but Caitlyn was sure that her ears were just playing jokes with her. Everything else in the room was so quiet and so any sound at all sounded loud.

“I knew it.” The man growled when he realised that the device was gone. “I knew they’d come for it.”

The man stood up, turning so abruptly that Caitlyn didn’t have enough time to hide behind the arm of the couch. His eyes focused on her immediately, narrowing as he noticed the device in her hands.

“You are in so much trouble.” He gritted his teeth as he stared at her, his face turning red in anger. Caitlyn let out a small squeak in surprise as she quickly shuffled backwards on the carpet.

Taking a few steps towards her, the man didn’t notice Caitlyn raise her arm up so that her gun was pointing at his head. She gripped the device tightly in her hand as she continued to shuffle back up into the wall.

The man ignored the presence of her gun, and Caitlyn made sure that her index finger was firmly on the trigger. She readjusted her aim on the gun.

The man took another step closer.

Caitlyn closed her eyes and pulled the trigger.

George Winters stood across from his daughter with a scowl on his face. Water dripped from his hair and every five seconds he wiped the water that had gathered on his nose away with his sleeve. Trying to calm himself down, Mr

Winters sat himself down opposite Caitlyn at the kitchen table.

Knowing how much trouble she was in, Caitlyn remained quiet as she watched her dad think of a punishment.

Outside the kitchen window there was nothing but darkness – it was almost midnight. Caitlyn yawned. She'd been up all day, and hadn't risked falling asleep on the off chance she didn't wake up until the morning.

"I am so disappointed in you Caitlyn." Her dad told her. Caitlyn's shoulders slumped over slightly in regret – she hated when her dad was upset with her. "My study is strictly off limits. It is not somewhere you can sneak into, understand?"

Caitlyn nodded mutely.

"Did Jason put you up to this?" Her dad asked as he crossed his arms. His sleeves looked ruffled, as if he'd only just gotten home from work – knowing her dad that was probably the case.

Caitlyn weighed out her options in her head – she could easily tell the truth and get a lighter punishment, but that would mean getting Jason into trouble. The last time she grassed on Jason though, he wouldn't talk to her for a week.

On the other hand, she could lie to her dad and stay in Jason's good books. If her dad hadn't been in the room, she would have nodded at the second option.

"No." Caitlyn answered, shaking her head to emphasis her point. "He's been asleep since nine."

Mr Winters smiled slightly, but his stern expression returned when he reached over to pick up the PSP that she had retrieved from his desk. “It seems rather suspicious that I confiscate his PSP and the next day you’re trying to nab it.”

Caitlyn stared at the PSP. Jason was going to be so disappointed when she didn’t come back with it, but he’d understand why she hadn’t. Hopefully.

“Well...” Caitlyn realised she’d have to come up with a decent lie, and searched her head for something that would seem believable. “Jason never lets me have a go on it, so I thought that I’d get it from your office and have a go on it.”

Making sure to sound whiney as she spoke, Caitlyn watched as her dad raised an eyebrow at her.

“Why did you bring this with you then?” He asked as he pointed at the gun on the table. It was transparent and empty. Most importantly, it was a water pistol.

“I was going to shoot Jason with it if he followed me.” Caitlyn lied. She wasn’t going to tell her dad that Jason had offered her it as a payment for stealing back his PSP – especially after she’d had her old water pistol confiscated a month ago.

Her dad didn’t look convinced but he shrugged anyway. “If that’s your final statement...”

Caitlyn nodded, sitting back in her chair. She yawned again, rubbing her eyes tiredly. Seeing this, Mr Winters smiled slightly, his face softening as he circled around the table to Caitlyn.

“We’ll continue this conversation tomorrow.” He whispered as he picked Caitlyn up from the chair. “But for now you need to go to bed. It’s late.”

I was just Wandering

I slumped languidly in the train seat, dumping my heavy-like-a-ton-of-bricks luggage bag in the holder above. I'd switched three trains today so far, each called: Up, Down and Across, so I was relieved to finally relax for a while. I studied my florescent-orange ticket for the details which read: 'London, Paddington to unknown. Expiry date – 'The ticket was obviously as clueless about where I was going as I was, and as for the expiry date, well that was curious. I stared pensively out at the captivating countryside as it slowly trudged past, like an elderly man walking uphill with too many groceries. My cold finger wandered across the transparent window aimlessly, conjuring up imaginary friends, wishes and dreams that entered my mind from time to time. The train called Wandering ran on in unwavering uncertainty, until the countryside blurred past in streaks of bottle-green grass and turquoise sky. When the train slowed a little due to the tempestuous rain, I saw an elderly woman in a bright yellow cardigan lighting a raging bonfire, the flames licking up the atmosphere like a mad serpent. I scoffed in spite of myself; what use was that? The rain would put it out in minutes. My friends were in the next carriage on, travelling to somewhere like me, probably ordering energy drinks from irritated hostesses and reading magazines. I observed every passenger in my carriage; I knew their names, their daily routines, some of their jobs and all of their secrets. At this moment in time our journey was the same; every man's destination is the same.

Just then, my mum entered the quiet carriage holding hands with my dad, their shuffling walk as slow as snails, but I was busy drawing the ending to 'A Christmas Carol' on the carriage window to take any notice. My dad sat uncomfortably on the opposite seat, wincing every now and then at a quiet pain, his jaw clenched to keep his pallid expression neutral, however his dimming, wide eyes told the truth. I held his weak hand and played with the walking stick resting by his leg. Mum kept asking to look at his train ticket, checking for the date of expiry. Once, when my dad was sleeping – that seemed to be his common

state these days – a tear escaped her chocolate brown eyes. She automatically checked her broken watch that permanently told the time at 5:09am; she pocketed the ticket.

When the sun was setting at 6:00 I sauntered down the corridor into the next train carriage. It was a whole new world. My friends were larking around, hyper and excitable, but when they saw me they became sober and quiet. “If you need a shoulder to cry on, we’ll be here for you.”

“Sure, that’s really nice of you” I replied automatically before mentally slashing through the statement like a pen ripping paper. We prattled about every insignificant childish subject, from our favourite TV channels to planning all the pranks we were going to play on the passengers next door. I felt the carriage shudder and the lights flicker on and off like electrocuted fireflies. Stupid weather again. I waved goodbye and returned once again to the carriage.

Nothing was different. The walls were still a vile shade of green and the scenery seemed to be repeating itself because I swear I saw the same woman building her bonfire. However, the fire was dwindling out, billows of smoke rising up until it just disappeared. Was the world going to just one day disappear; evaporate? I pondered this as I stumbled back into my carriage, squeezing down the crowded aisle to reach my seat. I was expecting Dad to still be sleeping, to find Mum’s weary, exhausted features lined with concern, but they weren’t in the carriage. Mum and dad never left the carriage unless we were switching trains. The lights flickered again and for a moment I was encased in a prison of darkness so strong that I fell to my knees. My heart was pounding perpetually; the train shook violently, sending me headfirst into the window.

“Are you all right, miss?” asked a hoarse voice from behind me. I scrambled into my seat, massaging my head

“Uh, yeah. Thanks...”

“Mrs Flight”

I cleared my throat awkwardly in the darkness, unsure of what to say. I picked at the edge of the food tray resting on the table. After every meal Dad would joke “You’d keep a starving

man from dying” and this rang in the back of my mind like the bells at St. Paul’s Cathedral. Suddenly a match was lit, illuminating one side of the elderly Mrs Flight. I shrunk back in my seat, terrified. Her face was sagged like frozen melted wax gripping her face; her eyes were such a ghostly, transparent blue that her eyes were the equivalent to bulging, white golf balls dipped in snow. And as for her smell...

“Don’t you recognise my yellow cardigan?” the woman raised one sharp eyebrow. Yellow had always been my favourite colour, but that cardigan was just tragic. “I’ve seen you staring out this window many a time, watching me build my fire up so that it’s as wild as me, as important as the hope in everyone’s heart. And I bet I know what you’re dreaming about...to really know where you’re going, eh? Well I’ll tell you now, travelling on these trains won’t take you anywhere, just to somewhere you’ve been before. Eh?” she rambled, wagging her bony finger a little too close to my face.

“How would you know, Mrs Flight, if you’ve never been on a train? If you’re not going anywhere at all?” I quizzed bewilderedly. She laughed hoarsely and gestured all around her. “I’ve been on my fair share of trains, believe me. Life is all just one big journey, right? Does it matter whether you go up, down or across? If you’re wandering or decided, does it matter?”

I sat there for what felt like an eternity as the train went through a very long black tunnel. I was on a journey, just wandering around aimlessly like the needle on a broken compass. “Hang on, if every person’s destination is the same then it doesn’t matter at all where we go” I concluded, crossing my arms expectantly. Mrs Flight’s eyes twinkled delightfully, suddenly making her waxy face just a tiny bit better to peer at.

“Correct. If you’re going somewhere that is” she whispered in a barely audible tone.

“Where are you going?”

“Forward” she stated immediately, before blowing the match out.

I blinked and looked at the clock in the carriage: 5:09am. I must have fallen asleep. The ceiling lights yawned and flickered

on once more. The woman had vanished and I was left alone in the carriage for a moment. Then I noticed my mum passing with my dad in a wheelchair.

“What’s he doing in one of these?”

“I couldn’t bear to wake him” she whispered, walking at 1 mph, as if she was trying to prevent the inevitable. Mum pushed dad’s ticket into my clammy hand.

“Put this in the bin, sweetheart. Your dad doesn’t need it anymore” she uttered helplessly, pushing him through the dividers. The train slid to a grinding halt at a peculiar stop I had never seen before: End. My eyes welled up as the realisation crept into my heart as to what that meant. The final destination. Mum wheeled him down onto the platform, his laboured breathing so heavy that it felt like all the oxygen in the world couldn’t give him the breathe of life.

A few paces behind them I observed my oblivious neighbours: casual young adults with their headphones in, business men with their newspapers spread and iPhones poised, minding their own business. ‘Every man is an island’ crept into my head as I closed the dividers behind me. The blast of cold air on my face stung my eyes, making them water. I didn’t cry. A sincere brunette ticket warden appeared from nowhere and wheeled Dad away. I gripped my mother’s wrist, knuckles whitening like snow, eyes bulging like gulf balls. I took a deep breath and for the first time contemplated how long I would be on this train, travelling to a destination so distant and so uncertain.

At 6:00 I was disturbed, awoken. My mum sat opposite me. Talking.

“...Yes he went through the doors, dear. Into the next carriage, popped off the train, whatever you want to call it...” she mumbled miserably, as if the quieter she spoke, the more untrue the words would be. There was a long silence as stifling as acrid smoke. I finally understood but didn’t want to say it; so I didn’t. I shut my eyes tightly, wishing that mum would disappear and that this journey would end and that it was all just some terrible dream; but I knew better than to dream. Dad wasn’t going to ‘pop back on’ the train again.

From then on, it was like mum and I were sat in slow motion in separate carriages even though we were only a metre apart in reality. We continued to switch trains but it didn't change what had happened. I withdrew my train ticket and read the details. Expiry time '6:15'. It wasn't a date, just a time. I saw the bonfire for a third time, only it had now distinguished completely, coils of smoke clung to the now black window, blurring my vision. The woman in the yellow cardigan had gone.

The train halted at 'London, Paddington' where we had begun our travels. Was it possible that we had ended up where we had started because we had no real destination at all? Just running in circles. 'But big things have happened!' I moaned mentally.

'However, you're still not moving forward' replied an elderly voice in my head.

I made a decision as the train Debating halted at the next platform called Faith; a man was even painting the name in huge bold letters. I grabbed my trusty heavy-like-a-ton-of-bricks luggage bag and snuck out of the compartment and strode down the aisle, all the other passengers glancing up for a moment in pity before resuming to their silent reading or whatever they were doing. So they were prepared to 'care' afterwards, but not during? That's rich. I opened the door, letting the morning air sweep through my locks. This monotonous journey was finally ending.

I stepped onto the platform and binned my ticket, the time 6:15am.

"Wait! Sweetheart! Come back on the train, now" mum shrieked, gripping the last inch of my blouse. I was an inch away from moving forward with my life.

"Mum, I've got to do this. I finally know where I'm going – I know my destination so I'm going to live my life the way I want to. It's time for me to leave – I need to do this" I reasoned, looking straight into my mum's chocolate-brown eyes. I gently pulled away from my mum's grasp, the doors automatically locking. It was like the doors to my old life were slamming shut.

Debating grudgingly rode away into the distance, my mum's locks of brunette curls blowing in the breeze. I knew the train would come back here to drop off another traveller.

I wasn't going to stand around and wait for it.

No Crime's Perfect

A soft breeze blew in from the sea, catching the top of the water. It eased them forward in soft, slow waves, forcing them inland until they tumbled and rolled over themselves like a pack of galloping horses. The sky above them held rain wielding clouds and the sand beneath them was soft and cold. She dug her bare feet in under the sand and took in a deep, salty breath. It was silent apart from the regular pulse of the sea and wind rushing past her ears giving a faint whistling. She liked being here. Watching the sea taking its deep, powerful breaths. She loved the thought that this same cycle of swash and backwash had been present in this place for centuries. She imagined how it must have looked back then, before erosion had taken its toll on the land around her.

“It!” her brother shouted whilst giving her a hard poke. She snapped out of her day dream just as he ran. “Hey, that’s not fair!” she argued, making her way after him. The beach was completely deserted; it always was on Lyme Point. Most people couldn’t be bothered to make the journey on the old track and through the forest all the way from Springmead. She felt the sand slipping from under her feet as she ran. Her heart raced and she took rapid, deep breaths. Her brother may have had a head start, but she was older and gaining on him when suddenly, she tripped. Her knees plummeted into the soft sand and she held out her hands to stop her falling. She turned around to see what had grounded her and, at first, it seemed to be a small pale rock. She forgot about the game of ‘it’ and took up the new challenge of digging up this rock. She brushed the sand away and dug. She screamed.

The dog cart bumped along the old track with a thick lining of trees on either side. Soon it emerged from the forest and continued frighteningly close to the cliff edge. Even from here you could see where people were crowding around this strange crime scene; after all, that’s why he’d been called in all the way from London.

“Ah! Detective Inspector Holland sir, it’s a pleasure!”

“I’m sure it is,” replied the tall well dressed man whom had just disembarked from the dog cart. He wore a long pale jacket, a shirt, tie, smart shoes and trousers. He did not look a remarkable man, with brown hair and a ‘regular’ face and no special, defining features. However, this man is a world-renowned detective whose talents were remarkable to say the least. “Who’s in charge?” he demanded.

“Me.” The same man answered with a grin on his face. He wore grubby trousers and a shirt with the buttons undone to the middle. He was bald and had maybe five teeth in his mouth. Judging by the aroma coming from the man, he had not heard of soap either. “You?” the detective exclaimed.

“Yes,” the man replied, still grinning, “Officer Stalvey,” He said, holding out his hand for the detective to shake. He let it pass. “And ’o are you?” he asked turning to the man climbing out of the dog cart. “Silvers,” He replied

“Well Mr Silvers, will you be accompanying the detective throughout his investigation?”

“Yes.” Holland answered for him. “Now, when and where was it found, the body?”

“’Bout three days ago, down there. We had to dig him up else the tide would have swallowed him up and he might not have been there when it went...”

“So the evidence has all been washed away?”

“Not all of it. Some is still on the body, but yes, that’s why we called you in.”

“I see.”

“Two kids found it; they’re from Springmead; poor girl tripped over the guy’s nose. ’fraid I can’t say when he died ’cause...”

“So we’re looking for a killer, with no evidence?”

“I told you, we have some evidence but, yes.”

“No, you’re right. There’s always evidence, no crime’s perfect. Who lives up there?” he said pointing over his head to an old shack on the cliff top.

"I... er... um... don't know."

"You didn't see it, right? But did the killer?"

Silvers hadn't said much since they arrived. He and Holland were walking up to pay the small house on the cliff a visit. "Do you think anyone lives there?" he asked. He wore similar clothes to Holland, only his coat was black. He had blond hair and a neat beard. He had strongly pronounced cheek bones and a sharp chin. "I don't know." Holland replied. "If there is do you think it was them?"

"I don't think so."

"Do you mean you already have a theory?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure, so I can't say."

Silvers knew this was how he worked. He'd been with Holland for three months now and had grown accustomed to his habits. He would not say his theory until the evidence was substantial enough to be sure of the culprit.

Holland knocked loudly on the old wooden door which faced away from the sea. There was no answer. He knocked again but his knock was interrupted by the door swinging open. It stopped suddenly as the chain caught it and a face poked through the small crack. "Waddo you want?" said a gruff voice.

"Detective Inspector Holland, this is my accomplice, Mr Silvers. Can we come in and ask you a few questions?" The door closed and you could hear the man fiddling with the chain, then it swiftly opened again and the man gestured for the men to come in. Holland closed the door behind him. Inside the house was a dark single room with a small fire burning in a trashed fire place. The fire was so small it produced hardly any smoke, which was why they hadn't seen it. The floor was covered in rubbish and five old chairs stood around this small room. "Sit," the man said, pointing to two of the chairs. Silvers obeyed but Holland remained standing. "What is your name?" the detective asked. "Ralph." He answered, "Ralph Taylor." The man wore a

very dirty vest and sat in his underwear. His skin was dry and unwashed and his hair and beard waved wildly around his head. "And tell me Ralph, what's your job?" Holland asked.

"I don't work me, I keeps myselfes to myselfes and that's the way it is." Through a small window you could just make out the bodies on the beach around where the crime scene was. "Did you see anything unusual in the past week, down on the beach?"

"This is about that body they found, ain't it? Well, I didn't see nothing!" he shouted, standing up in a fit of anger, "Now get out of my house! You 'ear me?" Silvers and Holland obediently left his property and he slammed the door behind them.

"Well, he seems guilty," said Silvers, as they made their way back down to the beach. "I wouldn't be so sure," said Holland, "He has no motive for murder."

"But he was ma..." Silvers stopped. He knew that there was no point in arguing with his mentor.

When they had returned to the beach, Officer Stalvey filled them in. "His name is Brian Butcher. He's comes from the local town, Springmead. He's a doctor, no obvious enemies, small family, big house. He was doing well for himself. There is no one who has an obvious motive to kill him. He was stabbed twice, once in the leg and then in the chest. He has bruises up his forearms and on his knuckles; he definitely put up a fight. Other than that, we're blind."

"Thank you, Officer." Said Holland.

"Pleasure, as always," he said as he left.

"You see those caves over there?" Holland said to Silvers, pointing down the beach. Silvers could just make out a thin crack in the cliff. "Yes."

"That's where we are investigating next."

The wet sand slipped under their feet as they made their way down the beach. Only Silvers and Holland went, as everybody else was busy at the scene. Holland always said that you must widen your view beyond the scene. This was more evident than ever in this case as there was nothing *at* the scene. When they reached the crack in the cliff, Holland withdrew a small pack of

matches from his pocket and squeezed through the gap. It was a tight fit and Silvers apprehensively followed. When they had got through the gap; Holland took out a match and struck it against the side of the box. The feeble light did little to widen their view but they could see now that they had entered a large cavern. Holland walked straight to the back of the space where a number of cloths were concealing something. He drew one of these away and it revealed lots of wooden crates. "If you please, kind sir," Holland said beckoning to Silvers. Silvers stepped forward and gave the lid of a crate a hard tug and, with a crack, it opened. Within there were dozens of bottles containing alcohol. There was rum, beer, brandy, whisky, and even some wine. "Just as I suspected," said Holland. "Smugglers?" asked Silvers in amazement.

"Yes, and I expect that's not all you'll find in these crates."

Once again Holland and Silvers found themselves making their way back to the crime scene. There was an air of panic when they arrived. "What's going on?" asked Holland. "A second body has been found in the woods," answered a police officer. It was not a pretty sight when they got there, not that it ever was. A body, much like the other, had been stabbed but this one had been strung up by the neck for good measure. It swayed in the wind as it dangled from a tree. "Ralph!" exclaimed Silvers.

"I'm afraid so," said Holland. "It appears the murderer saw the house after all. Now, Officer Stalvey?" Stalvey came to attention. "I need two of your finest officers, and yourself, at the cave at sundown."

It was near seven when everyone arrived at the rendezvous point. They carefully and quietly crept into the cave. They then hid near the door and prepared to stake out until the time was right. Holland had come armed with a revolver, as had the officers, but Silvers was unarmed. At ten, the officers and Silvers were growing restless and began to doubt that anyone would show up at all, but Holland remained still and silent in his hiding place. Another thirty minutes past of nothing but then they heard voices outside. Those armed withdrew their

pistols and braced themselves and they heard people, creeping as they had done, through the crack. The first that became visible was one with a stubby beard and eye patch. He was bold and carrying a seemingly heavy crate. With them they bought candles which illuminated the cave much better than Holland's matches had. When it seemed that all had entered, the officers sprung their ambush. They cornered the smugglers, but before they could give themselves a pat on the back, behind them they heard, "Lower your weapons!" they turned to see a new figure of a large stature who was clearly the leader. He held two pistols and was threatening to shoot. It was at that point that Silvers did a surprising thing. When all seemed lost in this sad situation, he grabbed the barrels of both pistols and gave them a twist. This forced the new figure to let go and before he could react, Silvers kicked him in the chest and the figure flew back to the wall, hitting his head and thus knocking him out. Everybody was shocked by this act of extreme skill and bravery, especially by somebody who had seemed so harmless. The officers were quick to recover and began arresting the smugglers. When all were apprehended, Officer Stalvey asked, "How did you know?" with admiration and curiosity. Holland answered, "There was nobody who had and motive for killing Mr Butcher. I already knew that these coasts had been used by smugglers all the way from North Africa for centuries, and he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. He saw the smugglers using this cave and off-loading cargo from a ship, so when they saw him, they killed him. As for Ralph, they noticed his house after they had buried the body, and there was a possibility that he might have witnessed the murder, but there wasn't enough time to kill him as well, so they came back later and finished the job. They were smart to use the tide to wash away the evidence, only they were foolish to leave the body so close to their hideout. As for Ralph, he was just unlucky. If only these smugglers around us knew that he hadn't said a word, and that they killed him in vain." There was a faint grumble from the smugglers. "It's been a pleasure," said Officer Salvey, shaking Holland's hand. "I'm sure it has," replied Holland. Silvers grinned.

As they bumped along the track on the dog cart, Silvers admired the man he was sitting next to. Only he could correctly jump to such preposterous conclusions, so early on in a case. Meanwhile, Holland admired the man he was sitting next to. He did not know that he had it in him to perform such an act of bravery; he would have to watch this one. These two men in admiration for each other returned to London. As for the smugglers, they received justice for their actions which they will not forget. Officer Stalvey was offered a promotion in London, but he decided to turn it down and give up being a police officer. He now spends his days fishing by the cove in Springmead. Ralph and Mr Butcher were given a dignified funeral and Ralph's house later fell into irreversible disrepair. The beach at Lyme Point is always deserted now.

Fate

“An invisible red thread connects those who are destined to meet, regardless of time, place, or circumstances. The thread may stretch or tangle but will never break.”

It's Wednesday. Snow is falling outside, softly landing on a thick layer already covering the asphalt. It's cold and dark, the artificial orange haze casting across the ground. I just want to bury my head back under the covers where it's warm and safe, but I know I can't. I have school. The navy-and-grey uniform hugs my chest and legs too tightly to be comfortable, but I endure it like I have for Fate knows how long. There's no point in buying a new set after all. My mother calls to tell me breakfast is ready, so I swing my bag over my shoulder with ease and make my way downstairs. We exchange pleasantries, as we do every day, and she comments on my uniform, as she does every day. And just like every day that has gone before, as I walk out of the door, I glance back at both my parents, smiling and enjoying breakfast, and see their strings trailing in opposite directions.

Snow is still falling, freezing through my thin shoes. It crunches underneath my feet, still crisp and untainted by others. I make my way through the quieter part of town, where the small shops are decorated with only a few soft lights and small paper snowflakes rather than the brazen colours of the city centre. The wind blows straight through my uniform, nipping at my skin, and I shove my hands in the pockets, hugging my blazer closer. A warm glow pours out from a store, and I duck inside. The owner looks up as I enter, giving me a quick nod before resuming their work. Shelves and tables are lined with an assortment of knitted clothing, and I'm pulled towards the small section of scarves near the back. I pull one out, a deep green, and throw it around my neck, burrowing into the soft fabric. I feel a small tug at my wrist and burrow further into the scarf, my eyes closed firmly. The owner warns me not to run off without paying, and I chuckle. After browsing around the rest of the shop,

I hand the money over to the owner, and they wish me a happy holiday. I just wave as I leave the store.

The orange haze has faded, the sky casting a pale blue over the street, and a couple laughs as they pass, pressed close together, the glint of red glaring at me from between their wrists. A small way down the path, one of them pushes the other, earning a small shriek as their partner stumbles off the curb, only to pull them back into their arms, even closer than before. I can see my own thin strand of red twisting and turning past their feet, and finally disappearing behind a corner. The cold air clears my mind and body as I take a deep breath, sliding my eyes closed, letting the small flakes of snow land and fade on my skin. I pull the scarf further up my face, then I turn left and my thin strand of red follows me, pulling slightly on my wrist as I walk further and further away.

The coffee burns as it travels down my throat, the steam wafting steadily upwards towards the snowflake decorated ceiling. A soft chime rings out in the quiet space, and the pretty barista behind the counter calls out a polite greeting, the string bouncing happily on their wrist as they wave. The chair across from mine scrapes against the floor, and I look up, a smile pulling at the corner of my lips. My friend calls out for a coffee, and it comes steaming, as mine did. We sit silently, staring out into the blizzard that's now raging outside. What perfect timing. A click and a motion in front of my face pulls me back to the small shop, and I realise my friend's been talking to me. An embarrassed laugh escapes me, and I turn my attention towards them. Slowly, as the conversation continues, I find my attention being drawn, as it always is, to my friend's wrist, where a single thread of red string sits.

I remember when they came into the coffee shop months ago alone, expressionless, all dark circles and red eyes. I had involuntarily glanced at the string on their wrist, and frowned in confusion. The bracelet was still there, but there was no longer a thread leading off, attaching my friend to their Fate. And that's when I knew, when I truly believed, that Fate was cruel. I always

detested the idea of the “red thread that connects those who are destined to meet”, but I was genuinely happy when my friend came to our coffee shop one morning with an exchange student, their hands clasped tightly together, as though they were afraid the string between them would snap. Which was, of course, impossible. The thread couldn't break, everyone knew that. But there were stories of rare instances where Fate would display Her power and rip apart those destined to be together. It could be before they'd even met, creating and building feelings of suicide or addiction into a person's system until they couldn't take it anymore. Or She would separate those who had already found one another. When they had been together for years. When they were already happy. All it took was one drink over the limit, a snap decision to get in the car rather than take a taxi, and someone was dead. But my sympathy doesn't lie with the dead. Their pain is over in a second, a flash of light and then nothing. Those who remain, however...their pain is infinite. They won't forget the moment their trailing thread dissolved into nothing, and they'll never forget the life they could've had.

As I look at the lone red band now, faint scars of feeble attempts to burn, cut and rip the harsh reminder away littering my friend's thin wrist, I think yes, Fate is indeed cruel. Even more so to the ones left behind.

We part ways after cups of coffee, my friend heading to our school, reprimanding me on not keeping up my attendance. They know it's useless though, that I won't even consider walking back through those crowded halls with smiling faces and the red that covered the floors, the walls, the doors. The red that choked me, forcing its way down my throat and into my head, pounding and kicking. They smile sadly, and we part ways.

“It was the three year anniversary today,” they suddenly say. I turn, but my friend is still facing away from me, shoulders hunched. “Three years without –” Their voice catches, and I can feel my throat and heart clenching as they bring a hand to their face. There's a pause before my friend turns, tears rolling down their face. “But I don't regret a thing. I'm glad I knew them be-

fore it was too late. Don't you think it was better to make use of the time we had rather than never meet at all?"

I don't go to the empty park and sit on a cold bench after that, as I have always done. Instead I find myself at a busy intersection, the blizzard finally thinning, strands of red lining the road, overlapping and twisting in all directions. I look down at my own, leading off over a crossing and intertwining with the rest, tugging slightly as if it knows. I look up, the flakes of snow landing and fading on my skin, closing my eyes as a tear falls down my cheek.

"Don't you think it was better to make use of the time we had rather than never meet at all?"

The cold air does nothing to clear my mind as I take a deep breath, and that's when I make the decision. That's when I decide that I don't want to end up like my parents, settling for someone that I know will always be second best. That's when I decide that my friend was right, that it is better to have known. And when I look down at my string and it gives that little tug again, for the first time, I don't ignore it. I take another deep breath, and then I start walking across the road, following my red trail. I don't know when I started running, but soon I'm out of breath and four blocks away from the intersection. The pain in my stomach along with the pounding in my chest forces me over, heaving out misty clouds through the snow. I feel my string pull again, and I look up and realise I'm in front of the empty park with the cold bench where I usually spend my time. A crease forms in my brow and slowly, I pull myself up and walk towards the wired arch, my string become more incessant with every step. I can see a small group crowded around the frozen fountain to my right, their laughter carrying over the crisp air. I watch as one of them sets up a tripod and a camera, shouting and waving in the direction of their friends. Then I turn left and follow the red leading off from my wrist, winding across the stone path towards the flower garden. I keep following the path, and I can see there's a figure standing just below a bare tree, the cold winter having nipped away all its blossoms. I stop suddenly, my heel already off

the frozen ground, and just stare. The cold is nearly unbearable now, and after pushing down the sick feeling in my stomach, I keep walking. I'm barely a few steps away, my breathing uneven and my whole body shaking, when I can clearly make out the figure. They're leaning against the cold bark of the tree, shielded by their winter coat, and a woollen hat sits comfortably on their head; dark green. The crisp air still does nothing to clear my head, and instead irritates my throat, a quiet cough escaping my lips. That's when they turn around.

It's Wednesday. Snow is falling, melting as it lands on the thick layer of slush covering the grass. It's cold, too cold. I should have gone to school. I should have endured the mass of red flooding the hallways and the classrooms, the red that always drowned me. I should have endured it. They blink a few times before their gaze travels to the navy and grey uniform that hugs my chest and legs too tightly to be comfortable, then falls to my wrist. Their gaze follows the short trail of red, eyes visibly widening with each passing centimetre. They stare at their own wrist, and then back at mine, then back again. Two different bracelets of red string formed from the same strand. Finally, finally, they look at me again. And that's when I think maybe my friend was wrong. Maybe it is better not to know.

Survey Survey

1. Aren't you just sick of surveys?

- No I love them! Bring me more!
- Not fussed either way.
- Yes. Bloody surveys.

2. What kind of survey annoys you most?

- The ones about pop culture, like 'how much of a damn do you give about any of these minor celebrities? Please rate out of ten.'
- Ones where you have to give your whole life history.
- Surveys about surveys. Bloody surveys about surveys!

3. If you could answer a survey about anything in the world, what would you choose?

- How many pairs of socks do you think each of these members of Kasabian will take with them to Glastonbury?
- What colour is best for the inside of a pencil case?
- Do you value your time or are you wasting your life away?
- A survey about surveys.

4. What was your most memorable survey?

- What was your most memorable survey? You know, I've done so many, but I can't actually remember any of them!
- The one about dogs. Or was it cats?
- This one. This one rocks.

5. Isn't it funny how when you say 'survey' over and over again it just becomes completely meaningless?

- Yes.
- No, it's not funny at all.
- Survey. Survey. Surveysurveysurveysurveysurveysurvey. Survey.

6. If you have any additional comments about surveys or even surveys about surveys, please write them here. Maybe you'd like to express an interest in taking a survey about surveys about surveys? Thanks for your time.



