



A STORY FOR YOU

**52 SHORT SHORT STORIES OF
ADVENTURE, INTRIGUE & WHIMSY**

Dan Metcalf

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52 Pieces of Flash Fiction

By Dan Metcalf

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Introduction

It was supposed to be easy...

When I started a newsletter service for my website danmetcalf.co.uk I had the crazy idea of sending out flash fiction every Friday. I had a few pieces stored up, and it wouldn't be too difficult to write a few more to fill the end of the week...would it?

It soon became my pastime, thinking up little tales on the bus and jotting them down quickly. I began to think in flash fiction – short, dynamic stories which peaked the reader's interest and left them hanging just as quickly.

It was fun, but I always had Friday on my mind, hoping inspiration would strike in time for the end of the week.

This collection is a years' worth of newsletters, and it has been a delight to write.

Dan Metcalf

About the Author

Dan Metcalf is a writer living and working in Devon, UK. Born in Torquay, he went on to gain a degree in Scriptwriting for Film and Television from Bournemouth University. After a career in the film industry in London, Dan returned to the Westcountry and embarked on a career in libraries, all the while continuing to write stories for publication. He now writes children's books under his own name and a handful of pseudonyms.

Writing Exercises

If you enjoy writing or want to use this collection of stories in an educational setting, please feel free to use the tales within to inspire and stimulate creative minds.

Here are some ideas of how you could use the stories:

1. Write your own six word story (harder than it looks!)
2. Use a story as a jumping off point for your own writing. Decide what happens to the characters after you finish reading the story.
3. Re-tell a story from a different character's point of view.
4. Use the story as inspiration to write something similar.
5. Draw your own interpretation of the story.
6. Turn the story into a play and act it out.
7. Compose a piece of music based on the story.
8. Use the central concept of a story and develop your own tale.

Let me know how it goes!

Desolation

The sky hung heavy with the threat of rain, whilst below, on grey November streets, a pale figure paced.

Just £20 a week, two weeks behind, his life had been placed on a skip. He shivered, waiting for eye to eye contact.

“This -” he shed his sweater and threw it to the pavement. “- is my home!”

The nearby bus queue shuffled as the wind lashed his naked chest.

“I have nothing. No place to go.”

The queue looked on.

“Nothing! Not a thing.”

A blue rinse tutted.

He sank into a corner, and rained tears, invisible.

The bus queue shuffled.

The Snowman

The bleak bare trees stared back from a white sky, the frozen faces of snowmen petrified by the frost of the previous night. Coal eyes look out pitifully.

Children approach warily, their welly boots scrunching through the white wastes.

“Is he looking at us?” said the first boy, head shaven and goose pimples. He pointed at the largest snowman, a crooked carrot for a nose.

“What if I am?”

Adventures of Inspector Drood

Wiltshire, 1854;

Inspector Drood examined the corpse in the lock up, the small stone hut perched on the bridge above the Avon. The man's face was blue like the twilight sky.

"I only put him in last night. Drunk as a fart, he was," said PC Downs.

"Drowned," said Drood. He was known for his pinpoint diagnoses, and his economical turn of phrase.

"But we's twenty feet above the river. Should I alert the courts?"

Drood paced awhile. He removed his top hat, and reached his leather-gloved hand down to the man's face, tenderly closing his eyes.

"No. Thankfully no murder has occurred," he said revelling in his own dramatic revelation. "The victim has suffered kidney failure, causing the lungs to fill with fluid."

Drood departed, his cloak spinning around him, returning to his awaiting carriage, ready to take him back to his club, and a long-overdue brandy.

Memory

I knew she was dead when the birthday card didn't arrive on time. Thirty-four years, and she had always remembered. As a child, I had marvelled at her memory, her ability to recall facts and dates. She had always been so organised. The absence of a birthday card was therefore telling.

That night I lit a candle, not for myself, but to her memory.

The Black Widow

"Beautiful day!" called Joan.

The man on the boat smiled, tipping his hat. Joan liked to take tea in the garden, and watch the Avon drift by.

It was high time she started courting, she thought. After all, she had buried her latest husband underneath the patio nearly six months ago...

Lying Low

The soup bubbled in the pan, lentil and bacon, the smell drifting through the small thatched cottage. I looked up from my novel – an awful hack job of a conspiracy thriller – at the window. A web of ice crept its way along the pane, the condensation battling with the frozen wastes outside.

The cottage had been chosen from the website to be as many miles away from any contact as possible. I hadn't had a visitor yet in the four months I had boarded there, and that was just the way I liked it. The perfect place to lie low.

I rose and turned off the hob, dipping my finger into the hot liquid. More salt required.

There was a knock at the door. My hand dropped instinctively to the pistol at my side.

Regret

When I first met her she wore beads in her hair, and listened to Janis Joplin. Now she wears a suit and works in high finance.

I suppose we all change. I no longer listen to The Clash, or drink pints of snakebite. But God, do I miss those days.

Off to the Mountains

I entered to find the house devoid of furniture. Judy was sat cross-legged on the floor. She looked good; calm, collected, and...happy.

"It's silly, I know, but I packed the chairs already. Your clothes are in bags out front, and all your other stuff is in boxes."

She was still so calm, and this, after weeks of yelling.

"I'm leaving?"

She nodded.

"Me too. I'm selling up. I'll take the money from here, and buy an old ski lodge near Aspen. I can start my jewellery business, just like I wanted. It wasn't just the affair, Gary. I just need to getaway from all this. You understand, right?"

I'm not sure that I did.

"Jude, the affair. We can move past this-"

The tears began to form. I took her hand.

"Jude, The affair...I forgive you."

Ghost Town

“Do you remember the good old days before the ghost town?”

“Good old days?” said Beenie, flicking his ring pull into the bushes. I swear he was addicted to that Tizer stuff. “That’s a laugh. Three day weeks, no power, no bin collection. You see better places on the news. Those kids covered in flies are better off than we were.”

“I don’t reckon they had Tizer.”

We walked along the train tracks, nettles brushing our legs. We were going to Guildford, but the next train weren’t until Thursday, so we decided to hoof it. Beenie nipped into the bushes for a slash. That’s when I saw it.

A duffel bag, zipped up with a lock on it. I walked over, didn’t think of what I might be getting into. I smashed the tiny padlock with a stone and unzipped it.

Three hundred and thirty seven thousand, two hundred and forty – five pounds sterling.

I didn’t know that then, of course. I just knew I had about twenty seconds before Beenie came back, doing the flies up on his 501s.

I zipped it up again. Picked it up, threw it into the bushes, and made a note of the number on the marker by the track that said where we were.

This could change everything.

The Red Apple

"Take it, my dear, take the fruit," hissed the decrepit old hag. "It is for you, and you alone."

The pale maiden looked at the shiny skin on its surface. Red. Red as blood on snow, red as the sun, red as anger and fury and hatred.

"No," she said, turning away. "No, thank you. I don't want it."

But the hag was not so easily dissuaded.

"It is yours. Take the fruit that fell from the tree. Taste it. It will taste divine, like none other you have tasted."

"No. Please, I don't want to."

The pale maiden started to walk away. The hag had one last trick.

"It will help you forget!" she called. The young girl stopped, turned back.

"Forget?" she asked.

"Forget."

The juice was sweet yet sour, and the young girl smiled with the bliss of a thousand summers as she fell into unconsciousness...

Revelation

"If you got pregnant now, would you keep it?"

I don't know why I said that. We'd been arguing, and I guess I wanted to pull the conversation onto her. All I really wanted to know was if she loved me. It's stupid, we'd been going out for two years, and I still wasn't convinced that she did. Using the pregnancy thing was a cheap and crummy trick.

I was about to apologise when she turned to me with tears in her eyes:

"What do you mean 'if'?"

Rejection

I once knew this girl who talked to herself. She'd sit there having animated discussions with nobody at all. I dunno why, but I fell in love with her immediately.

I asked her out and she looked at me suspiciously, like it was a trick. She discussed it with herself and said yes. We dated for a while, and it was great. She didn't mind if I didn't call, she had herself for company.

Finally, she decided to dump me. She said we weren't right for each other. I was sad, especially when she called me the same night and had the exact same conversation.

I'd never been dumped twice in the same night before, but it felt kinda good. I can't explain that.

The Monster Returns

We wait at the docks for the ship to come in, my mother's hand in mine - red, white and blue in the other. A tour of duty is nine months, just long enough for the bruises to heal, for her to forget his true nature, but not long enough for me to forgive.

The boat docks, the band plays, and expectant children run to their fathers, spared the indignity of a flag-covered coffin. I wait. I grip my mother's hand tightly.

"This time it'll be different, pet," she says. She lies.

I see his face and know I should feel love, but I feel nothing. He extends his arms for a hug, and I dutifully obey.

The Monster has returned.

The Ferryman

The boat floated gently down the river, a black hooded figure at the tiller. I did not know where I was. The misty evening air was soaking through my shirt. I could see my breath, but the only light came from the ferryman's lamp.

"Where does this river take us?" I asked. I received no reply. The bony hand did not even move from the handle. I looked down at my own hands, and saw for the first time that they were bound in thick, black rope.

"Who are you?" I asked. I received a shake of the head this time, as if to say that it was of no significance.

"Where are we going?" I asked, getting louder now. If I shouted, maybe someone from the shore might hear?

"Wrong question," said the figure finally. It's voice was as black as smoke, hoarse from decades of neglect.

"What is the right question?" I asked once more, not sure if I wanted to hear the answer.

"The question you should be asking," said the figure with a bronchial delivery, "Is *why*?"

His hand lifted to point behind me. Shaking as he raised his finger, I followed it to the shore, where a jetty was waiting. A flaming torch lit the way, and deep in the forest I could hear the sound of drums...

WLTM

Boy wizard seeks nemesis for revenge...maybe more?

Wake-Up Call

Denny woke in the dark, dank basement of a restaurant. He was naked on the floor, his wrists gaffer taped to his ankles. He was tied like a Christmas turkey, his head sore and his nose bleeding.

He had no idea why he was there.

A black figure grunted in the corner.

"Hello?" said Denny. His voice was hoarse, dry and cracking.

The figure moved into the light of the single bulb which hung from the ceiling. It wore a ski mask and held a wooden mallet loosely by its side.

"There's been a mistake. Last thing I remember was leaving a restaurant. I'm not the one you want!"

"Dennis Cleaver? Yeah. It's you I want."

The figure stepped forward and produced a flick knife. It crouched to Denny's level, and only then could he see the red, bloodshot eyes of the madman inside the mask.

"Next time, leave a tip."

Undead (six word story)

First, I died.

Then arose, zombified.

This is Coach F

Rhythm of the tracks

Make me long for simple times.

Thoughts fly fast like swifts.

Russian Roulette

One Bullet.

Spin the cylinder.

Pull.

The One

In a second, he knew she was The One. He could tell from the way she looked at him, that half-smile and the way she pushed her hair behind her ear.

He smiled back. She looked to the side, as if to say "Who, me?". His smitten stare confirmed it. She bit her lip, mock-shy, but moved her bag from the seat next to her in invitation.

He could see his life of happiness and love spread ahead of him. To grab it, he only had to walk forward and take that seat.

Then the train doors hissed shut, leaving her on the train, him on the platform, both heartbroken and alone.

Wraithhunter

Don't panic. Whatever you do, don't panic.

Drax slowly popped the clip on his holster and slid the safety catch off. The lights in the corridor flickered. He had seen the wraith come this way, but there was no sign of it now. He stepped forward, slowly.

Drax turned a dial on the pistol, increasing the shock 'n' stun level to five. It would kill a human, and possibly knock a wraith out for a few extra seconds, but beggars couldn't be choosers, and the wraithrocket was all he had. He held tight.

He crept around the corner, but there was still no wraith, just a dead end.

He gave up and turned back but was immediately confronted by the white, glowing entrails of the beast.

"Clever girl," he said, before opening fire.

What is Love?

In the Deep Dark Forest lived a little girl, who lived in the trees and played in the leaves and moss. She had lived there all her life, all alone.

One day, she found a boy walking through the undergrowth. The boy had come from a village, and had ventured into the heart of the Deep Dark Forest to prove how brave he was.

“Who are you? Why are you here?” said the boy, gazing at the girl in wonder.

She was covered in mud and had twigs stuck in her matted hair.

“I don’t know,” said the girl. “Do you?”

“Where are your mother and father?”

“What is a mother?” asked the girl. The boy thought very hard.

“A mother is someone who feeds you and cleans you.”

The girl grabbed the boy’s hand and they ran through the forest. They reached the river, where the girl dived in and swam to the other side.

“Here! The river cleans me and the forest gives me its fruits and berries. Now, what is a father?”

The boy thought hard about this also.

"A father protects you, and teaches you things."

The girl swam back, grabbed the boy's hand and ran through the forest once more. They came to rest in a clearing, where tall trees around them shrouded them with their canopies.

"Here! The trees protect me from the rain, and the earth teaches me to respect the land and creatures around me."

The boy turned to her once more.

"But what about love?" he said.

"What is love?"

This time, the boy took the girl's hand and they ran, further than the girl had ever been before. They ran to the boy's village, where everyone welcomed him back from the Deep Dark Forest. His mother embraced him, and his father was proud of his brave son.

They took in the little girl. His mother bathed, clothed and fed her, and his father protected her and taught her about the village. She played in the village with the boy and the other children, and she laughed and ran free.

When it was time to go to sleep, they wrapped her up in the warmest blanket next to the boy, and kissed them both good night.

As the light faded, and the little girl drifted towards sleep, she felt a warm glow ignite in her heart. She smiled at the boy, who smiled back.

"This," he whispered. "This is love."

The Opal King

Cas surveyed the land ahead, peering into the red desert sun. His bioelectronically enhanced dingo whined by his side.

"I don't like it either, Duke. Too quiet."

Cas had started walking ever since the bomb had dropped on Sydney. He had taken a Humidair to dehumidify the air and grab water from his surroundings, the clothes on his back and set out across the bush towards the North Coast. Once there, he intended to hop on boat and work his way through Asia. He had backpacked there as a kid and wondered if it was still as beautiful after the bombs had destroyed all the cities. He didn't have a penny to his name, but along the way had picked up the legend of the Opal King and his buried treasure.

"Reckon that's it mate?" he muttered. The cave stood proud from the rock, the only place in a five hundred mile radius that could possibly house the crown. "All right then, let's go get our treasure..."

They approached the cave with care, not least because of the fifty human skulls that surrounded its entrance, set into the wall with dried clay mud. Cas reached down to his belt and took the only weapon he had – a short length of scaffold that he had sharpened to a point. Duke whined.

"Shh, boy," said Cas. "Nothing to be afraid of here."

But as his booted foot set down over the mouth of the cave, he heard a screaming like he had never done before. So loud that Duke's ears lay flat, so high that the fillings in Cas's teeth shook. Duke automatically went to back away, but Cas grabbed the scruff of his neck and pulled him forwards, further into the cave.

Just a few strides later, the noise stopped.

"Audio deterrent. Nice," nodded Cas. He walked on, Duke by his side.

The walls were streaked with blood, dried for decades but nonetheless providing a fresh warning. The travellers that had told Cas the legend of the Opal King had said that no one who had searched had left alive. Cas sincerely hoped they had been exaggerating.

Turning a corner, he came to a cavern illuminated by a shaft of sunlight from an opening in the roof which reflected off a pile of opals and rubies. In the centre sat the grand throne. The Opal King sat still, his face white, his hair grey, a golden crown on his head. His eyes darted to Cas and his lips moved into a smile.

"Greetings, traveller," he said, his voice cracked with dust. "You have come to retrieve the crown?" Cas nodded. "You are righteous and true?" Cas paused, then nodded again. "Then approach and claim your prize."

Cas paused. There must be a catch, he thought. But the golden glare of the crown was too enticing. He reached out and took the crown from the King's head.

“So what’s the catch?” said Cas, but he faltered. His view had changed – he was now the one who was seated. His hands rested on the arms of the throne. The Crown sat upon his head. He was immobile, unable to move anything but his eyes and lips.

“Cheers for that, pal,” said the figure in front of him. It was a man his own age, dressed in hiking gear and sunglasses. “Nearly ten years I was there. Still, it’s your turn now.” He turned to leave.

“What? No! Don’t leave me!” called Cas.

“What’s the matter? You’ve got the crown, haven’t ya?” The man smiled. “Don’t worry, I’ll pass on the legend of the Opal King. Some greedy fool’ll be over in a few years or so. Enjoy being King!”

And off he walked, a confused dingo trotting after him, leaving Cas to start his reign...

The Crow Princess

"Are you gonna feed us then, or what?"

The voice had come from nowhere. More accurately, it had come from somewhere, but Jen just couldn't place where. She was alone in the park, it seemed, and seated on a bench which was at least a hundred yards from any hedge or bush in which a joker could be hiding.

"Hello?" she uttered. She had gone to the park across from her Grandad's house. Her mother was driving her crazy. They had come over to clear out her Grandad's things, but Mum was arguing so much with her sister over who got what out of the worldly goods he had left behind, that Jen had performed her best sigh, picked up the bag of bread crumbs that was always in the breadbin, and flounced out of the door. She went to Grandad's bench to feed the crows, as he always did around lunchtime. It's what he would have wanted.

"Down here!" came the voice again. Jen looked down but could only see a solitary crow, its head tilted to one side.

"You?" she said with a foolish smile. She blushed at her own silliness.

"Of course me! Now give us a handful before the rest get here!" the crow said.

The Crow. It had spoken. The Crow spoke.

"Y-you...spoke," she stuttered. Just then, a flock of eleven birds, all crows, descended on them, chattering like the first.

"Gizza bit!"

"Go on love!"

"Over here!"

Jen stood and backed away but the hungry crows just followed, their beaks trained on the plastic bag in her hand.

"No, go away!" she shouted. The murder of crows took no notice. "Get back! What's happening?"

"We's hungry, that's all!" said the first crow. In truth, Jen thought they all looked alike, but could tell the voice apart by its whiney cockney drawl. "And you got the bag! Now feed us, will ya?"

Jen tipped the bag over their feathery heads, sending them into a feeding frenzy. A plump crow looked up with a square of bread in his mouth.

"Where's his highness then?" he said.

"Who?" Jen asked. She was getting pretty freaked out now.

"The King! Y'know, the old fella," said the Crow, eating the square in one go. "Whatsisname? Harold."

Jen looked down sadly.

“Grandad,” she said. “He...he passed away.”

The twelve crows stopped feeding and looked up at her. They were silent for a moment and then lowered their beaks to the floor.

“Did...did you all just bow?” said Jen.

“Yes, your highness,” said the plump crow.

“What? Why did you call me that?”

The crows looked up again and the first crow hopped forward. He spread his wings and flapped them to lift himself up to the bench.

“You’re Jen, aren’t you? He spoke of you, y’know,” he said. “The King said you would come. That you would take his place.”

Jen swallowed and sat down on the bench.

“What place?”

The crows on the ground laughed.

“The Crow King is dead,” said the first crow. “Long live the Crow Princess!”

The Hand

Joseph woke to find that his hand was not his own.

His left hand was fine. It still contained his wedding ring, despite his divorce having gone through two years ago, and the small brown mole on his knuckle was still present.

His right however, was different. The skin was smoother than usual, the fingers thinner and longer. The nails had been manicured recently to a French polish.

It was, Joseph thought, a woman's hand.

Joseph was not panicking. In fact, curiosity overcame him and he found himself flexing the new fingers, moving them back and forth and wiggling them to test the dexterity. He found that touching things was a strange sensation. His coffee mug felt lighter, his razor rougher and his towel softer. And when he touched his own skin, it felt as if a stranger was feeling her way across his body. No, Joseph was not panicking.

Meanwhile, two thousand miles away, a woman screamed as she looked down to find a man's tattooed hand adorning her wrist...

The Island

"Land ahoy, Captain!"

Francis carefully climbed down the rigging from the crow's nest and landed on the deck with a thud. He ran to the captain on the upper deck.

"Captain, land! Island off to port," he said breathlessly.

Captain West ruffled the boy's hair.

"Excellent! Well done young Francis! We'll make a captain of you yet!"

West gave an almighty cry and the crew pricked up their ears. When West gave an order, it was in your best interest to obey. He was a fair man, but woe betide any that crossed him. Francis had seen a man lashed for talking back.

Francis watched as the select crew climbed aboard the boat, ready to row to the island. Captain West saw his longing look and laughed.

"Come on, boy! Feel the sand under your feet. Taste the ripe mangos fresh from the vine. Join us!"

Francis did not need asking twice.

When the boat hit the beach, he leapt onto shore and helped pull it up onto the sand. He looked around him at the tropical paradise and sighed. He hadn't felt land under his feet for six months, and it was strange. There was something about the stability that spooked him.

Suddenly he heard a sound from the undergrowth of the jungle that covered the island. He peered amongst the green creepers and his heart beat faster. He knew to be wary of vicious beasts, but he was not prepared for the next sight.

Blue eyes glared back at him.

"Get back on that ship, Frankie," whispered the figure in a soft westcountry accent. "Sail away. Far away, while you can."

The face emerged from the leaves and Francis recognised him straightaway. It was as though he was looking in a mirror, albeit once streaked with mud and aged. The face staring back at him was his own.

"What...how?"

"I dunno, Frankie. Just is. Don't ask questions, just run. Get on the boat, don't look back. For the others it may be too late."

Francis used the spike of fear running through him to run to the boat. He was about to push off and call to his crewmates when he looked down the beach. They stood with cutlasses in hand, facing down a group of tanned, hungry, angry-looking figures. Each man was staring at their own face, one contorted with fear and confusion. Each feral double held their own cutlass and raised it, ready to strike.

As Francis looked on at the battle and butchery, he felt the boat shift under him. He looked up to see a future Francis, naked save for a rag and a strange tattoo on his arm.

"Sail away, Frankie. Sail far away..."

The Alien

The first time I knew my brother was an alien was when he let me borrow his headphones.

These weren't just any headphones. These were noise-cancelling, premium quality sound, Dr Dre Beats headphones. They were his pride and joy. He worked for months stacking shelves to get those beauties. Once, I had picked them up off his bed without asking him and he threw me out of the room – he literally *threw* me, picking me up by my belt and hurling me out the door.

But this time I was just talking to him while he scrolled through his timeline. He wasn't all there, I could tell. He was just saying 'Uh-huh,' and 'Mmm...' to everything I said. Then I asked about the headphones.

"Yeah, sure," he said.

I froze.

"You sure?" I asked.

"Yeah. Take 'em," he said. He looked up from the screen and smiled.

I took them and got out of there. I went to put them on but stopped. He couldn't be my brother. He just couldn't. I looked back at the evidence.

He hadn't eaten in days. He was glued to his computer, reading page after page of online encyclopedias. It was like he was revising life, learning how to be a human. When he spoke it was crystal clear English, not his usual estuary accent.

And he had smiled at me. *Smiled*. He hadn't done that since...well, ever.

I placed the headphones down on my bed and reached for my phone and the baseball bat I had stashed under my bed. I texted all my mates.

'Invasion has begun. Arm yourself and defend your home. They have landed'

The Package

The Strait of Gibraltar, Mediterranean Sea, 1838.

“Land ahoy Captain!”

Captain Drake of the merchant ship SS Roundway had never been so pleased to see the cliffs of Spain. The job, when he had accepted it, seemed easy. All he had to do was transport two men and their cargo – a small wooden box – from North Africa to Spain, but the journey had soon run into complications.

His crew, like typical sailors, were deeply superstitious and their suspicions had been raised early on about the nature of the men’s wooden box. One deckhand said it emanated evil, that death and destruction followed it wherever it went. Another said it could only contain the heart of a saint, such was its power. One said that the two men were none other than emissaries of the devil, transporting a soul to the afterlife.

Captain Drake reminded them that it was none of their business. The men were paying customers and they paid for their privacy. Secretly, he would be glad to see the back of them. He was as superstitious as his crew and he couldn’t help but feel uneasy about his passengers. Ever since they had stepped aboard, the ship had taken a dislike to them. The deck creaked, the sails flapped in the wind like a dying gull and the hull rocked to and fro, even on calm waters. A good captain knew when to

listen to his ship and Drake knew that the Roundway was issuing a warning: Danger Aboard.

He stepped across the deck, a black sky bubbling overhead and up to the door of his passengers' cabin. He gave a short knock and entered.

The two men sat on armchairs, seemingly staring into space. As Drake entered, he saw they were actually staring at their box, which sat on a small table, an equal distance between them. Drake coughed politely until they seemed to notice him. Still they did not take their eyes off the box. He knew them only as they knew each other; by codenames, such was the secrecy of their mission.

"Mr Clench, Mr Rudge. We should dock in twenty minutes."

"Thank you Captain," said Rudge. He was the heavier-set of the two. They looked as though they might have been made in the same factory; each wore a long leather coat and military boots over a crisp white shirt.

"Has your journey been pleasurable?"

"Quite," said Clench.

Drake nodded and turned to leave. After an awkward pause, he turned back.

"I don't suppose..." he started.

"Yes Captain?" Clench sighed.

The Captain blushed, suddenly flustered.

“The crew and I – that is, we were... curious as to what it was you were transporting.”

Rudge smiled. “You don’t need to know.”

That was what he had said at the start of the trip. Drake turned to go again, but turned back, indignant.

“I’m afraid I will need to know. Curiosity aside, customs laws are very strict in Spain and if I’m seen to be supporting smuggling, it’ll spell my end.”

Rudge looked to Clench, who shrugged.

“You really want to know?”

“I’m afraid I must insist.”

The two guards paused and nodded.

Drake stepped up to the small table and casually flipped the lid of the box open.

His face froze in an expression of wonder.

The crimson blade shimmered at him, the belt coiled around it.

“It’s...beautiful,” he whispered.

He continued to stare, a red reflection of the box’s contents gleaming in his eyes. Rudge and Clench stood.

“One of a kind.”

"Y-your mission?" stammered Drake.

"Our orders were quite clear," said Rudge.

"To transport the package from Marrakech to England, directly into the hands of Her Majesty the Queen Herself." said Clench. The three stared at the box in hushed reverence.

"We also swore to protect the package," said Rudge. "And to kill any man who sets eyes on it."

Drake looked to his passengers to see if he had heard correctly. He sank to his knees as Clench drew a cold steel blade across his throat.

The SS Roundway was boarded by Spanish customs hours later, after they noticed it had been anchored off-shore for some time. Each crew member lay in a pile of their own blood. The passengers and their package were nowhere to be found.

The Killing Moon

The orbit was low, low enough to see the craters they would soon blow to dust. The mining gig was meant to be a stop-gap, something to fund Gerry's PhD and get him on the ladder to academic brilliance. So far the stop gap had lasted seven years.

"Commencing countdown, engines on," intoned the monotone ship's computer.

"Someone should change that announcement," Gerry said to his shipmate, Sergei. "I get that Bowie song in my head for the rest of the day." Sergei barely blinked. He was not a chatter.

"The announcement is factually correct," he said. Sometimes Gerry wondered which was the more robotic, Sergei or the ship's computer.

"Time to touchdown," Gerry said, back to business. "This moon has rich Zinc deposits apparently. We can set the 'bots to work and be millionaires by lunchtime."

He did so. He had mined unclaimed moons hundreds of times now, and he always felt like a thief. The bore-bots drilled their way into the moon rock and a vacuum sucked the dust into their craft, which sorted through the rubble and kept the riches in the hold. It was like taking candy from a baby. A big, intergalactic, lunar baby.

The quake happened two hours in. The craft rocked, throwing Sergei and Gerry from their chairs.

“What happened?” Gerry asked. He looked at the monitors which just fizzed with snow. Sergei was down on the ground, holding his eyes. “You okay?”

Through the porthole came a strange, shifting shape. It was all colours at once and had no form. It seemed to stop and look around itself, like a sentient lightning bolt. It turned its attentions on Sergei and thrust itself forward, entering his body through the chest.

“You...have...no...right...” muttered Sergei. Gerry moved towards him. “You...should...leave...now...”

Sergei looked up and Gerry saw the green glow in his eyes.

“Sergei?” he said. His friend had never been friendly, but his face now showed anger, hatred and betrayal. His face was red, sweating and the veins on his forehead looked like they were about to pop. “Dude, calm down!”

Sergei erupted. He smashed the nearby controls and dived on Gerry. He reached for the medipak and grabbed at the nearest syringe. He thrust it into Gerry's neck and felt him fall still. Sergei rose to his full height and began to tap on the keyboard.

“Commencing countdown,” said the computer. “Self-destruct program on...”

Losing the Plot

I was asleep at my desk when the phone rang. I peeled my face from the stack of papers and answered it. Attempting to sound alert.

"Lo?" I muttered.

"Mr Scott? It's your narrator here. I was wondering if we could talk about your story. I feel we should move the plot forward a little."

I paused before answering to think of the right words with which to respond.

"What?"

There. The perfect response.

"Your story, Mr Scott. It's feeling a little...flat. Perhaps we could talk about injecting some action, you know, really get the plot going."

I was clearly having a breakdown. Or the person on the phone was, either one. The voice suggested meeting, and while I was wary that the man may be a crazed killer, I was intrigued enough and frankly, bored enough that I agreed to meet at the sandwich shop across the road from my office. Besides, his words had rung true in my mind. My story, or rather, life, was a little flat.

I suggested we meet in an hour and hung back from the sandwich shop for a while, watching the patrons. I was deliberately making myself

late, but I wanted to see if anyone clearly carrying an axe or machete walked in.

After fifteen minutes or so, I had seen no one but a man in a black suit, carrying an umbrella and bowler hat, sitting at the table and pecking delicately at the corners of a wholemeal wrap. I approached, and he smiled.

“Mr Scott!” he said happily. “We meet at last!” He ushered me to sit and I did so, maintaining eye contact all the while. “Now, shall we get right to it? I'm sorry it has taken this long for us to meet, but we've had a bit of a move-around at the agency and I've only just been allocated your file.”

I stopped him with a raised hand.

“I'm sorry, you're going to have to back up a little. Agency?” I said.

“Yes of course, I should show some identification,” he muttered. He had thin lips like a lying politician with a dab of mayonnaise at the corner. He produced a business card. It was black with an unimaginative white font. It said:

Carlton Jones

Narrator (2nd Pers, 3rd Pers, Omnis)

The Agency (Dept of Drama and Tragedies)

"I have no idea what this is," I said. I could have tried going along with the joke to see where it ended up but I was so lost that it would have taken a mental satnav to get me back on track.

"I've been put in charge of narrating your story, Mr Scott. Your plot is about to begin." He regarded me for a few seconds and his face dropped as he studied the frown of confusion etched into my forehead. "Oh dear. Oh dear me. I'm so sorry, you should have been told before now. Mr Scott...I have to break it to you that you are the protagonist in a book that has not yet been written."

The Event

I was taking a walk to clear my head. Work was giving me a migraine. We had been forced to do overtime, which meant ten intelligence data processors in a room, sweating, mouth breathing and handing around cartons of takeaway Chinese food. It was not conducive to a great working environment.

I took a right down the road and stepped into a corner shop to grab some junk food; excess sugar was the only way I was going to make it through the night.

The reason for the overtime had not been stated, but if you work in the military in any respect, even a lowly data processor like myself, you learn not to ask questions. All Mr Trudeau, my boss, had said was they were expecting a major 'anomalous event'. Whatever that meant.

I stepped back on the street and ripped the wrapper off a Mars bar. It was dark already, the air getting colder and my breath steaming from my lips as I chewed the delicious treat.

I heard the screech of tyres come around the corner and froze. Years of working in military intelligence had me nervous about sudden sounds and movement. A black van swerved around the corner and revved the engine, its wheels spinning on the road. It whizzed alongside me and the side door slid open.

“Don't move!” said the first man inside. It was strange, I knew him from somewhere. He had ginger hair like mine, and some horn rimmed glasses which he adjusted nervously. In his hand he held a Glock 19, ready to fire.

“Woah! Don't shoot!” I said, dropping my bag of snacks and raising my hands above my head.

“I'm not going to hurt you, just get in the van,” said the man. I looked him up and down and my brain began to fizz with confusion. He looked familiar all right.

It was me.

“Get him inside!” came the call from the driver's seat. I looked through and recognised the driver too. Ginger hair, horn-rimmed glasses. Me again.

“What on Earth is going on?” I said. I hadn't budged an inch. Another me poked his head out from the van. He held a handgun casually, not pointed at me, but the safety catch was off and ready to fire.

“Let's call it... a major anomalous event,” he said with a grin. “Now get in the van.”

I froze.

“Come on!” the three me's called.

“Hey,” said the first me. “If you can't trust us, who can you trust?”

The Last Woman on Earth

Susan sank the prongs of the fork into the ground, pressed hard with a booted foot and marvelled as the red skinned spuds rose to the surface. *I can do this, she thought. I can survive.*

Surviving so far had been defined as a mixture of scavenging and stealing. Looting empty stores and liberating food from vending machines with a trusty crowbar. She had feasted well this way, but there is only so much crisps and chocolate a girl can eat.

Now I can grow my own crisps! She thought. Next she turned to the carrots, digging down with her bare hands, the remnants of a manicure and French tip on her nails. She pulled, but all that appeared was a rancid lump of orange matter. She dug down again, but discovered the entire crop was diseased, mulch in her hands.

Tears sprang to her eyes which she angrily slapped away. How did she think she could do this? Who did she think she was? She was no one special. She was no one.

Emblem

It started as a game. It ended as a cult.

"What are you doing?" Mikey whispered as I reached across the counter of the library and picked up the sheet of stickers. It was a small sheet, not even a few inches across, but maybe if I had never picked it up none of this would have happened.

"I've got an idea," I said, swiftly placing the stickers into my blazer pocket. From there the game began. I proudly placed a red sticker, just half an inch in diameter, on the lapel of my school blazer. It was small enough not to be noticed by the teachers, and so not to be picked up under the school's draconian uniform standards. I wore it for a week, the sheet of untouched stickers in my pocket, without explanation.

"So what's the deal with the sticker?" Mikey asked finally.

"It's a game," I explained. "And it's not a sticker. It's an *emblem*." I was thinking on my feet now. Hearing Mikey say 'sticker' made it sound so childish. Emblem had a ring to it. "And that's the name of the game."

In truth, I had not thought any of this through. When I picked that sheet up in the library I had no idea what it was for, but I knew that whatever I did with it had to be a gamechanger.

I was nobody. Worse than nobody. No one knew my name, let alone my face, and it was beginning to sicken me. It was the curse of the boy who moved to the area too late. I had entered school a term in, so everyone had already made their friendship groups. Mikey only hung out

with me because we had been forced to work together in science class. He was never truly a friend, but as we developed our project together outside of class, we got chatting and discovered a mutual admiration of fantasy novels. That was our key connection, until I roped him into the game.

“If you wear the emblem, you are part of the game. The aim is to get someone wearing the emblem without them noticing. If the person discovers the emblem after you have placed it, they cannot refuse to play. They are part of the game.”

“Cool,” said Mikey. “Like a game of silent 'tag'. Who's going to be the first victim?”

I stared at him with a slight smile.

“Mikey, you've been wearing one for the past three days.”

He checked his blazer and discovered the red spot – sorry, *emblem* – under his lapel. That was how he became my number two.

And so the game started. Mikey wore his emblem with pride, and when people asked him he cheerfully explained the concept of the game. Some laughed, but some were intrigued. Mikey shrewdly played a few times, obviously trying to attach the emblem to them while they weren't looking. They always saw though, laughing at his attempts. It's not how I would have done it, but it served a good purpose. It brought the game out into the open, got it spoken about in the playground and corridors. It also made the victory more sweet when Mikey or I were able to attach an emblem to them without them noticing. If they caught us doing it (or

more accurately caught Mikey – I was never caught) they were able to force it back in our hands, but if they discovered the emblem afterwards, they were part of the game, whether they liked it or not.

“The beauty of this game,” Mikey extolled, “Is that it lasts for days, weeks even! It's not confined to the playground. It's not even confined to our friends.”

Which was true. We had a core team of six players, the first ones to receive the emblem. Other students in the same year had heard about the game and were intrigued. I first heard about the game spreading whilst standing in the dinner queue.

“Dom got the emblem!” said one boy. “He got home and found one in his pants. God knows how they got it there.”

Fame of the game was spreading. I was now known as the creator, and it increased my standing in the school's complicated social strata.

The strange thing was, that even the cool kids got in on the game. No one refused to play. I found myself getting more and more stickers (the sold them at the local newsagents – the library had got wise to my pilfering and locked theirs away). I soon became the kingpin of stickers. The game lasted for weeks. It became like a underground code. The teachers didn't know what to make of the word 'emblem' and the strange game that had popped up. It seemed harmless enough, at least at first.

The problem came when the game started to grow bigger and bigger. Those wearing the emblem became like a subculture. One of the boys

snuck into his mum's bead shop and made a hundred circular red pins, a more permanent replacement for the tatty stickers on our lapels.

Those who didn't wear the emblem felt like they were missing out on something. They wanted to be included but by this time we only had a limited number of red pins, so I held onto them. If someone wanted to indoctrinate a boy, they would have to come to me first. I guess that's when it stopped being a game, when people stopped refusing the emblem and started craving it.

The emblem got banned at school, largely out of fear on the part of the teachers. They didn't understand it, so they tried to get rid of it, but by then we all knew who was in the gang and who wasn't. We simply kept the pins in our pockets, or on the reverse of our lapels.

It was soon after that I lost control of the emblem. I ceased to be the de facto leader of the group and instead was the old man in the corner, still preaching the old ways.

The emblem was what some boys had been waiting for. A symbol of their identity, of separation from the rest of society. They treated it like a badge of honour, like a tattoo in a street gang. They became a gang themselves.

The emblem was their identifier. They began to steal, to mug, to attack.

To hurt.

And kill.

I never wanted that.

It was just supposed to be a game.

I'm sorry.

Lester Kane

Lester Kane was notorious. In the gaming industry, there was only two things that scared the executives; The IRS, and Kane himself. How he gained this notoriety is a kind of programming myth, passed from chatroom to chatroom, like a spook story that geeks would tell their kids.

Back in the days when the internet was slow and boring, there were still a few people getting their kicks from hacking. Not the anti-capitalist, no-logo type that brought down websites, but the sneak around, see what you can find, then take over someone's life kind of hacking. Here, Kane was king. Legend has it that he was raised by good hippie-type programmer parents and started to abuse his genius for computer skills at the age of six, using just a touch tone phone to rig a TV vote, just so they'd play his favourite cartoon episode. He began to show off, and taught some school chums how to perform some simple hacks. In his grade, every kid passed their tests, and school always ended early on Fridays, due to a slight 'bug' in the fire alarm system.

Kane soon realised the power of the PC. Whereas Charlie Manson had his 'family' of killers, by the age of thirteen, Kane had a clan. He hung out at cyber cafes, stalked mysterious strangers on chatrooms, and when they started stalking him back, he knew he had his man. Between the eight of them, there was nothing they couldn't do, and sometimes being states apart meant they were untraceable. They brought down websites,

transferred money between accounts, the usual stuff. Kane even did some of his best hacks whilst under house arrest for a misdemeanour, because, of course, he had hacked the tracking device to say that he was at home watching re-runs.

Kane hacked the White House. Kane hacked CIA, FBI, MI5 *and* MI6. He hacked the Vatican. Nowhere was sacred, nowhere was safe. Kane really pissed off the gaming industry however, when he performed his most elaborate coup. On his tiny PC in his bedroom, Kane had written the game to end all games. Entitled *Brotherhood*, it had an epic storyline, following a city gang and their illicit exploits. The aim was to dominate the city. Then they had to take over America, and then, the world, like a hardcore version of *Risk*. Kane wasn't content with simply selling this to a company (besides, who would publish something so riské?). He hacked into a major game manufacturers and substituted their bestselling family console game for the *Brotherhood* file the night before it went to the factories for duplicating. He even designed it for different consoles and different languages. When the testers came in, they played the correct game, giving it the two thumbs up, but when home buyers played it, the programme reverted to Kane's killing spree. 4.5 million people went out to buy *Fluffy's Family Day Out* and came back with *Brotherhood*. The weird thing was, only 40% returned it to the stores.

Kane had unwittingly (or was it on purpose? No one could tell) tuned in on the mood of a nation, and *Brotherhood* was a hit. Those who hadn't

bought it copied it, and it became a household name. The real trouble started with the riots.

Copycat gangs started to plague the cities. It wasn't enough just to play the game, they had to taste the power of a violent gang themselves. The killings happened in ones and twos, and then suddenly exploded. They took over parts of the cities, some even copying the names of the gangs in *Brotherhood*. At one point, the whole of Long Island was under control of one of the gangs and there was nothing the police could do about it. The Army moved in and the whole of the US became a no man's land. When the war had finally finished, Kane was imprisoned, but only for his *Fluffy's Family Day Out* stunt. There was no proof that *Brotherhood* had sparked America's new lust for blood, just like there was no proof that action movies caused gun violence. He got out after just over eighteen months, but it seemed to have done the trick. Kane straightened out, took his prison cheque directly to MIT, where he breezed through the degree, even teaching some of the old dogs a few tricks.

Then he just...disappeared.

Someone Like Me

"Don't touch me! You can never touch me!"

Kelly shrank into the passenger seat, pulling the hood of her sweatshirt down as far as it could go.

"Kelly, what's the matter? I thought you liked me?" David said, worried. He glanced back and forth from the road to her face. "I just wanted to hold your hand."

Which was partially true. When he had put his hand out, he had wanted to grab her knee. Still a first-base move in his book, but holding hands sounded more innocent.

"Well, you can't. Pull over here, I'll walk the rest of the way." Kelly was nearly hugging the door now, eager to free herself from the car. David slowed the car to a stop and turned off the engine.

"Don't go," he said. "Just talk to me."

Kelly paused, her fingers on the handle. She looked over to David. She liked him. God, she *really* liked him. But she knew the rules. Skin to skin contact would mean the end of their relationship. She had enjoyed the date. The talking, laughing, walking back from the bowling alley to his car. She knew where she *wanted* the date to head (and she was pretty sure David wanted it to end that way too. He *was* a boy, after all.), but she couldn't let it.

"I'm sorry. I just..." How could she explain it? He'd think she was nuts. "I have a condition."

David looked over to her.

“Medical?”

Kelly shook her head.

“More like...supernatural,” she said. To her surprise, David did not laugh. So she continued. “When I was five, I was killed in a boating accident. It was on a lake. The sail span around and hit me into the water. My life jacket was too loose and...I sank.”

David did not flinch, but Kelly noticed he was not breathing.

“I...I don't understand. You were hurt, but survived?” he managed to say.

“No. I died,” Kelly said. She boldly looked him in the eye. It was only at that moment that he noticed the pale grey irises. “I walked out of the lake three days later. My parents were so relieved. Until they tried to hug me.”

Kelly pulled up the sleeve on her sweatshirt, removed her gloves, and passed her hand straight through the pine scented air freshener that dangled between them.

David jumped in his seat, finally exhaling.

“What the hell?”

Kelly sighed and shrugged.

“I'm sorry David. I really wanted for us to have a normal relationship, but I don't know what I was thinking.” She silently swung her legs through the car door and passed straight through the metal. She

was now standing outside, where she blew him a kiss. "You're a nice guy.
But I could never ask you to love someone like me."

Phoenix

Cara woke in a garden. She raised her head and looked around.

"Hello?" she whispered. The morning dew clung to the grass, each blade shimmering in the light of the sunrise. "Is anyone there?"

The previous night was a blur. There had been laughing, dancing, wine and friends. Then her friends had deserted her and left her in the mansion with the man with the phoenix tattoo.

He had been kind to her. He had golden, smiling eyes and a southern drawl that she found exotic. He plied her with drink and showed her tricks with a deck of cards. She had not feared for her safety, not until he had asked her the question:

"You wanna see some real magic?"

Cara had then collapsed. She fell unconscious, dreaming of a far off land where the sky fell in red raindrops, the land burned with white fire and the man with the phoenix tattoo played the violin for hours until he grew restless and Cara remembered seeing a glint in his eye. It was the mark of evil, she thought, and if she could have run, she would have. She tried to stand, but she was strapped to a chair and the man was getting closer. The malevolent smile spread across his face and Cara knew he was going to do terrible things.

She remembered ecstasy and pain at once, the pricking of needles on her palm, the feeling of power and submission at the same time. Then

the sense of hot and cold on her skin. She screamed, and then Cara woke in a garden.

All was peaceful.

She tried to rise but had to move slowly. Her head was in a different timezone, a fog between her and her surroundings. She inhaled the sharp morning air and rubbed her face to clear the mist in her eyes.

Her hand stung. She stared at it, unable to comprehend the sight in front of her.

An eye, freshly tattooed and bloody, stared back at her from the skin on her palm. The golden eye of the man with the phoenix tattoo.

Breakdown (six word story)

He lied.

She cried.

Romance died.

Santa's Back (six word story)

"He's stuck down the chimney again...!"

The Goblin King

The Goblin King was dying. That much was clear.

The green-skinned, toad-like minions that served him gathered around his bed of leaves and twigs in a silent vigil while he slept, wheezing as the moonlight fell onto his face. After a while, one of them spoke.

"Save 'im," said the one named Flu.

"Ow?" said another, named Prink.

"Spells," said Flu.

After much consternation, the goblins, who were slight of mind and low on wit, managed to source the king's spellbook. Opening it up with a distinct lack of care, they began to read:

"The juice of a true goblin," read the wisest goblin, a crusty faced loon by the name of Sprak. He spat on the floor. "The blood of a servant," he continued. He quickly punched his neighbour, Blot, in the face. Purple blood spat forth from his nose. "And the pure soul of an infant."

The creatures looked around them. No infant here. The youngest of them was over two hundred years old but still armed himself with a nearby rock just in case his soul was still considered 'pure' by the others.

"Need a baby," said Sprak.

"Ow?" said Blot, cradling his broken nose.

Sprak took the Goblin King's hand and ripped off his ring. The pearl set into the middle shone like fire and as he peered into it, Sprak could see deep into the human realm. Through an open window, in the pink-lined walls of a nursery, a brown-haired babe slumbered peacefully.

"Flu! Prink! Fetch the Changling!" Sprak growled. "We's got work to do..."

Obsession

Sarah was obsessed with Adam. She knew she would never be able to have him and that made her want him even more.

She loved everything about him; his laugh, his walk, his smile. The way his shirt hugged his tight body. She longed to feel him against her, to touch his lips with hers and blend her body with his.

Everyday she would pass him and try to catch his eye whilst remaining as nonchalant as possible. She wanted to grab him and tell him all she felt, and for him to gaze at her, and kiss her deeply. Alas, the greeting was always the same.

“Hello Adam,” she would smile.

“Hello Miss,” he would reply, before disappearing into a nearby classroom.

The Princess & The Beggar

Deep in a forest lay a palace and a town.

In the palace was a Princess, who longed to wear the crown.

In the town was a Beggar, who longed only for some bread,

For it was many days and nights since he had last been fed.

The Princess was a lonely girl, and never had much fun,

So one day, she stole away, and to the town did run.

She wandered through the crowded streets, into the market place.

To disguise herself she wore a veil, across her pretty face.

There she saw the beggar boy, wandering in the street,

Cold and weak and hungry, he fell down at her feet.

The Princess smiled, took off her veil, and kissed the Beggar's cheek.

The Beggar sighed, held his heart, and for a moment did not speak.

"I have travelled land and sea, to find the perfect kiss,"

"Squandered all my fortune, in the hope that it exists."

"Marry me, sweet lady, let me take your hand in mine,"

"And spend with me eternity, be my love divine."

The beggar met the King that day, and told him of their love,

Which was pure as snow, sweet as wine, and sent from up above.

The poor and humble beggar boy became a noble Prince,

There had ever been a love so true, and there has never been one since.

Perry & I

That's me, there. The lanky one, hunched in the corner of the playground. Immaculate uniform, top of the class, Bugs Bunny bucked teeth and Joseph in three nativities.

Over there, that's Perry. He's troubled. Suspended twice, swears at the teacher, and steals from lunch boxes when he bunks out of lessons.

But Perry is my best friend. No one can explain it, not the teachers, the parents, not even Perry's social worker. Somehow we became friends, and came to rely on each other. He beats up the kids that bully me, and I let him copy me in class.

Perry is kicking the side of the sports hut. I'm reading *White Fang*, and occasionally dodging the tennis balls aimed at my head.

"What d'you think of Carli Brickman?" he spits.

"Hmm?"

"What d'you think - Christ, we do enough of that in class," he bats my book to the floor. "Carli Brickman, what d'you reckon?"

"What about her?" I sniffle, my ever present allergy manifesting itself.

"Should I snog her?" he leers at Carli, innocently playing skip rope with friends. I shuffle in my Parka, uncomfortable.

"She's year above. Can't go out with year five."

"Didn't say I wanted to go out with her, did I?"

And off he strides, across the playground, decision made. A few words, a beaming smile, and Carli drops her end of the skipping rope. They disappear behind the canteen block together.

* * * * *

Barton Vale. The name still has mystical, mythical qualities. The fact that it was the name of the old filled in refuse tip where local dog walkers would continue to pollute the landscape was a moot point. It was our playground, and it belonged to us.

Perry is stood over a small furry black lump, prodding it with a stick. I join him, looking worried.

"I think it was a badger." he says ghoulishly.

"Let's leave it alone," I convince him, and we wheel our bikes along, kicking at the red mud under our feet.

"What do you want to do when you grow up?" he asks.

"Never really thought about it. Be a DJ maybe, on the radio. What about you?"

He mulls this over for a while and suddenly lets rip with a torrent of words.

"I wanna get out of school and work in a garage, and repair cars. People always need cars. And when I'm not doing that I want to make motor bikes, like from scratch, and race them."

He elaborates, saying how he'd win races and give the money to his mum, and maybe have some kids (but never get married, because that'd be gross).

"OI!" A voice shatters Perry's monologue of hope. Kai, his older brother, runs up to us.

"You, get home," he orders. Perry draws breath to protest, and Kai slaps him around the face before a sound can leave his mouth. I gasp, and Perry is dragged off.

"And you can shut it and all," he shouts back, unnecessarily.

* * * * *

I trudge home in my nylon blazer, sun beating on my back. I've been at the local grammar school for six months, and haven't seen Perry once. I suppose we move in different circles now. The rumour was that he 'went to stay with relatives'. This coincidentally happened after his mother tried to overdose on paracetamol, and social services payed a visit.

I feel a rock fly past my head.

A group of kids laugh. I look around to see my tormentors. A few of the usual crowd, hell bent on making life hell for the kid in the stupid Grammar uniform. They wear tracksuits, sick grins and cigarettes hanging from their lips. One of the faces sticks in my brain now. Perry, a new rock in hand, already aiming at my scalp.

"Alright Perry?" I mumble, and the surrounding thugs are silenced. One of them addresses their leader.

"Oozat?"

Perry looks me straight in the eye, and a wealth of information is exchanged. *This ain't primary school anymore*, he seems to say to me. *This ain't messing about in the playground. We've both moved on, and we ain't mates anymore. You've chosen your way, I've chosen mine. Good luck and all that, but let me make this clear; I don't know you. And you sure as hell don't want to know me.*

The stone hits my shoulder, and I move away on the double. I've just learnt one of life's lessons; everyone moves on

* * * * *

There I am again, getting off the National Express. Much older, trendy-ish stubble, obligatory long student hair, and a new found air of confidence. The winter sun shines unnaturally bright, and the tourists are soaking up their last rays in the English Riviera. I decide to walk the route home.

As I round the corner, I can see the familial home, exactly as it has been for the last eighteen years; clean, white and fresh. The garden is still immaculate, a result of my mother's near-fanatical sense of order and cleanliness.

A difference can be seen however. One huge hole in the front door. I increase my speed, intending to run, luggage slowing me down. I reach the door and see the shattered glass carpeting the floor. My Dad ushers me in, and I tiptoe over shards and walk through to the kitchen, where Mum sits in tears, a policeman nearby supping tea.

Dad explains. Returned home, door smashed, neighbours unaware. CDs, walkman and jewellery missing. Even the wedding ring of my Great-grandfather William, a man so obese that legend tells that the jeweller couldn't cope and enlisted the blacksmith for help. No human could fill this ring now, making it worthless to any thief.

"Do you have any suspicions as to the perpetrator?" drones our man in blue.

A glance shoots around the room. My misguided childhood loyalty makes me disbelieve, but sense prevails.

"Perry."

The Policeman nods, not even needing a surname.

* * * * *

The police are visiting again. Perry had been pulled in, but no evidence could be brought against him. He was released.

Feeling anger and dismay, I seek to satisfy my new-found student sense of liberalism by scouring my home town for a copy of *The Guardian*, to no avail.

I turn into the Co-op car park, and there he is, slouching against the recycling bins, exactly as we did as infants. But Perry is far from infantile; pale skin, sunken eyes and a gaunt expression give him a maturity beyond his years. I can practically see the heroin oozing out of his pores.

I pass by, intending not to look.

"Gotta light mate?" he drools at me. I shake my head.

"You wanna buy a CD?" He obviously doesn't recognise me, as he pulls out a Dido CD. Mum's favourite. I shake my head again. He shrugs, returns the album to his pocket. As his coat lifts slightly, I glimpse a large band of gold attached to his keyring. Maybe it's just a keyring, but I doubt it.

I peer into his opium soaked eyes. I feel anger. I feel hatred. But overall, I feel pity.

Nigel

Holly sighed and watched the snow fall from the night sky, landing gently on her back lawn. Each snowflake looked like a fairy, drifting down from high above, delicately placing itself on the already snow-laden grass. All except for one snowflake, which looked decidedly person-shaped, and fell into her garden at a speed of fifty-six metres per second.

Holly had been looking forward to Christmas. She had saved up her pocket money, bought and wrapped the presents for her family, and even made gingerbread decorations to hang on the tree. Every year they woke up early, her mum, dad, and baby brother Jamie, and they exchanged presents.

This year was different. Her dad had to go away for work, and would be eating his turkey in a hotel on the motorway. Her mum was in bed with the flu, and Jamie had been shipped off to a friend's house so he didn't catch it. Holly's Christmas looked like it would consist of serving her mum hot cups of lemsip.

On top of all this was the fight she had had with her best friend. The day before school had broken up for the holidays, Naomi had announced in class that she no longer believed in Father Christmas. The teacher had turned it into a debate, with Holly arguing for the existence of Santa, and Naomi against. It got a bit ugly, each side getting more passionate about

their beliefs, until things got out of hand, and after school Naomi refused to talk to her.

What made Holly really cross however, was that Naomi had a good argument and Holly had begun to doubt whether Father Christmas really would be coming that night. It was, without a doubt, Holly's most miserable Christmas Eve *ever*.

Until an elf crash landed in her back garden.

Holly stood and rubbed furiously at the condensation on the window, trying to get a better look. A small, thin man, with pointy ears and a green and white uniform had fallen from the sky, skidded across the back lawn and knocked over the birdbath.

Holly peered out to see if he was moving. She couldn't see any signs of life, so she quickly threw a coat over her pyjamas, pulled on some wellies and dashed out into the back garden. Scrunching through the snow, she walked carefully up to the figure which lay face down on the lawn.

"H-hello?" she shivered. The figure lay still. Holly edged a little closer. "Are you okay?"

The figure jumped up in one bound, making Holly jump.

"FLIPPIN' ECK!" he shouted at the sky. "Bloomin' learner driver!"

He began to check for signs of damage.

“Oh, he’s lucky nothing’s broken. I’d sue, I would! I seen those adverts on the telly, you can get loads for breaking an arm at work.”

Holly stood in the snow, mouth open, eyes wide. The creature was shorter than her, with a skinny figure and long thin limbs. He was obviously old, with greying hair and wrinkles around his eyes. He turned to see Holly staring at him.

“Oh. ‘Ello. What you doing out here?”

“I-I came to see if you were alright.” Holly stammered.

“Very nice of you sweetheart. I’m fine, thank you very much, no thanks to SOMEBODY!” he shouted at the sky again. “I mean I ask you, who thought up that tradition of leaving a glass of sherry out for him? He was steering that sleigh all over the place. No wonder I fell out.”

“Who are you talking about?” said Holly.

“The Fat Man of course. Now, I apologise for the birdbath, but I really need to be getting back.” His hand moved to a breast pocket, and panic came over his face. “Where’s it gone?”

“Where’s what gone?” asked Holly.

“My whistle! It must’ve dropped out when I fell. Without that I’m stuck!”

Holly started to look on the ground with him. “What’s it for?”

“Like a distress signal. Only the reindeer can hear it. We use it in an elf overboard situation.”

Holly smiled. "So you are an elf then?"

"Course I am. What do I look like, a pizza delivery boy?"

"And you work for..."

"We call him The Fat Man. Keeps him humble. He's alright. Lousy driver, but a good boss."

"Wow," whispered Holly. "I'm Holly."

"I'm, er...Nigel."

Holly frowned. "Nigel?"

"What's wrong with Nigel?"

"Nothing. It's not very...elf-ish though is it?"

"So speaks the elf expert! An elf is an elf, no matter what he's called."

"Why are you so grumpy?"

"Wouldn't you be if you had to work on Christmas Eve? You going to help me find this thing or what?"

They both searched the ground for a while. Holly was ecstatic. First she thought she'd have a miserable Christmas, then she meets a real live elf! A slightly grumpy one, but she didn't mind. What's more, she could go to Naomi and tell her she was wrong about Father Christmas.

Holly found a tiny silver whistle in the remains of a smashed garden gnome and handed it to Nigel, who blew on it, relieved.

"Thanks for that. I'll see the boss leaves an extra pressie for you."

"Oh you can't leave! I've got so many questions! How does he get around every child on one night? How do reindeer fly? Does he really eat the mince pies we leave out for him?"

Nigel sighed. "Alright, very quickly: Lots of planning, top secret, and no, he's wheat intolerant. I take 'em back for the lads. Now what sort of pressie do you want?"

Holly looked back to the house and looked down sadly.

"I don't want a present. I just want a proper Christmas with my family."

"Hmm..." said Nigel. "The best present of all. I think we can manage that."

He grinned and withdrew a handful of silvery dust from his pocket. "I'm not supposed to do this, but if I can't spread a little happiness at Christmas, then what's the point of being a magical entity? Now, shut your eyes." He blew, covering Holly in the dust.

Holly woke in her own bed. She threw back the covers and raced to the window. The garden was as new; no elf shaped hole in the lawn, the birdbath restored.

Must've dreamt the whole thing, she thought. As she pulled on her dressing gown, she heard the front door open.

"Surprise!" shouted her dad. She heard a gurgle from baby Jamie too. "I decided to drive back overnight and collect Jamie! Oh darling, you're looking so much better!"

"I feel fine! The flu's totally gone," said Holly's mum. "Our little Christmas miracle!"

Thank you so much Nigel, thought Holly. And Merry Christmas!

Leaper

I am not of this time.

I came here from a time of black skies and freezing rain, of dragons and warlords, of swords and sorcery. I am a warrior. I am a father. I am a husband.

I am not of this time.

The battle of Chelish had been won and I surveyed the ground around me. Hundreds of men lay dead or dying. This was a battle for the soul and my people had won under my command. The heathens had lost. I came upon the body of their shaman and found a spark of life still in his eyes.

"Time to give up old man," I said to him. He looked up and I saw the anger and rage in the dying man's face.

"You will suffer for this, Abratral," he croaked. I smiled and sought to put the wretch out of his misery by placing my boot on his neck. It was then that he chanted the incantation, and I was sucked into the swirling sky.

I am not of this time.

I found myself in your world, full of steel horses and glowing orbs of light. This city of London is no place for a man like me. I have no skills here. I am a monster. I am a blunt instrument. I can kill a man in a thousand different ways but find that here, in this time, that is an ability that is frowned upon.

What am I to do? Where can an oaf like me go in strange time, a strange place, with even stranger people? Where can I go that would admire my ruthlessness, my lack of empathy and my disdain for others?

I found the transition into banking surprisingly easy...

Featherhead

"So...are they heavy?" Callum said, unable to take his eyes off them.

"Heavy?" I asked.

"Yeah. Like, is it like wearing a backpack or...or what?"

This was not helping. I had met Callum in the park because he's supposed to be my best friend, the guy I can tell anything to. At the moment, he was doing his best impression of a stoned owl – eyes wide, ever-so-slightly freaking out.

"No. They're not heavy. I mean, they're just made of feathers, right?"

I don't know where the wings had come from. I just woke up that morning and they were there. I had rolled onto my front because something was digging into my back and when I got up to shower, I saw the two stubby bits of bone sticking out of my shoulder blades. I nearly fainted. Not in a girly swoony way, just from the shock, y'know? Well, wouldn't you?

I stared into the mirror for nearly an hour. Luckily it was the school hols and Mum and Dad had left me on my own while they went to work. Once I had shaken off my horror, I quickly texted Callum to meet me in the park. When I tried to sling a hoodie over the top of the bones, I felt something and reached back to feel it. Feathers.

“Wotcha Gabe! Wassup?” Callum had said. I wanted to tell him, *needed* to show him, but couldn’t think up how to approach the subject. So I just whipped off my shirt and showed him.

The wings had grown longer even in the short time it had taken me to get to the park.

After a deafening scream from Callum, I tried to calm him down. We sat on a wall and he asked me a load of inane questions.

“Have you shown your parents?” he asked. I laughed.

“No chance! They’d lock me up,” I said. “What do you think it is?”

Callum shook his head, looking at the two lumps on my back.

“Puberty?” he chanced.

“Seriously? That’s all you’ve got?”

“Well I don’t know, do I?” he shouted. He looked down, mumbling to the ground. “It’s kinda cool though, innit?”

I laughed. Then he laughed. Then we both laughed and we were okay again, just mates hanging out and having a giggle.

“They’re still growing. I can feel it.”

Callum whipped out his phone and typed in the search box.

“According to this, you’d need a wingspan of seven metres to lift a fully-grown human,” he said, matter-of-factly. “Of course, you’re only fourteen. If you’re not fully grown, it won’t be that big.”

It was my turn to freak out now.

“Seven metres? Are you saying I’m going to have seven metre wings attached to me?” I yelled.

Callum tried to calm me, speaking softly like you would to a toddler in a tantrum.

"No, no, of course not," he said. "I'm saying it will be more like three, three and a half metres? Each side, obviously."

I contemplated my future life. Living in hiding, pursued as a freak. Scientists will want to dissect me, religious zealots will want to worship me. The fact that I'm called Gabriel won't help the argument that I'm not an angel sent to Earth to judge them.

I had to keep the wings secret. I had to stop anyone from finding out. I had to find out why they were there and how to get rid of them. But Callum already had other plans. He pointed his smartphone at me.

"Give us a look again. This is *definitely* going to go viral..."

What is Love?

In the Deep Dark Forest lived a little girl, who lived in the trees and played in the leaves and moss. She had lived there all her life, all alone.

One day, she found a boy walking through the undergrowth. The boy had come from a village, and had ventured into the heart of the Deep Dark Forest to prove how brave he was.

“Who are you? Why are you here?” said the boy, gazing at the girl in wonder.

She was covered in mud and had twigs stuck in her matted hair.

“I don’t know,” said the girl. “Do you?”

“Where are your mother and father?”

“What is a mother?” asked the girl. The boy thought very hard.

“A mother is someone who feeds you and cleans you.”

The girl grabbed the boy’s hand and they ran through the forest. They reached the river, where the girl dived in and swam to the other side.

“Here! The river cleans me and the forest gives me its fruits and berries. Now, what is a father?”

The boy thought hard about this also.

“A father protects you, and teaches you things.”

The girl swam back, grabbed the boy’s hand and ran through the forest once more. They came to rest in a clearing, where tall trees around them shrouded them with their canopies.

“Here! The trees protect me from the rain, and the earth teaches me to respect the land and creatures around me.”

The boy turned to her once more.

“But what about love?” he said.

“What is love?”

This time, the boy took the girl’s hand and they ran, further than the girl had ever been before. They ran to the boy’s village, where everyone welcomed him back from the Deep Dark Forest. His mother embraced him, and his father was proud of his brave son.

They took in the little girl. His mother bathed, clothed and fed her, and his father protected her and taught her about the village. She played in the village with the boy and the other children, and she laughed and ran free.

When it was time to go to sleep, they wrapped her up in the warmest blanket next to the boy, and kissed them both good night.

As the light faded, and the little girl drifted towards sleep, she felt a warm glow ignite in her heart. She smiled at the boy, who smiled back.

“This,” he whispered. “This is love.”

Pyro

"This dangerous?" one whispered.

"What do *you* think?" another shot back.

"Will we get in trouble?" the third asked.

"Scared?" the last grinned.

Aiden looked down into the darkness of the nearby alley, and could make out the figures of four boys, older than him, huddled around several objects on the ground. Looking closely, Aide saw the objects clearly for the first time; four small barrels, coated in tar. It was an old tradition, banned in their town now, but still held in folklore and memory. The boys of the town would light the barrels, put them on their backs and run through the streets past onlookers before throwing them into the bonfire on the recreation ground. It was dangerous and foolhardy, but many of the young lads wanted to try it for the honour and prestige.

"Run fast, no one'll dare try to catch you with that on your back."

"We'll be for it if anyone sees it's us."

"Then don't get seen!"

Tiny five-year-old Aide turned his head away from the boys and looked back to the parade, just a short distance away. The crowds watched, entranced by the dancing girls with rings on their toes, the local schools and scouts with their home-made floats, and the Obby-Oss, a man in an evil-looking costume that could ensnare a young girl and make her his wife. Somewhere among the crowd was his mum, caring and

cooing over his new baby brother, safely strapped to her front. Aide had asked her to move forward, so he could see his dad ride proudly through the town in the big red engine, but she had been nattering with Mrs Trevithick from the grocers. So he had squeezed his mittened hand from hers and made off towards the harbour wall to get a better view.

But now he was lost. Caught up in the crowd, he had lost sight of the wall and had emerged away from the parade. These were no streets he knew. They were dark and wet, away from the main harbour, its shops and throng of tourists.

Aide stared at the mysterious boys from afar, and could have slipped away unnoticed were it not for a Roman Candle suddenly erupting high above him at that very moment, casting the alleyway into light, illuminating the boys and their watcher. Aide covered his ears instinctively, now more frightened than ever. The boys turned briefly to see the firework and instead found tiny Aide silhouetted against the lights of the parade.

"Who's that?" yelled the biggest one.

"Ken Jones' boy!"

"He'll grass us up. His dad's in the fire brigade!"

Aide was rooted to the spot with fear. The boys, all older and bigger, whispered as they decided his fate. The biggest one looked his way and raised a lighter in the air. He lit it with a flick of his wrist and his face was illuminated immediately. It was a face Aide knew; Rainer Stone. His dad was a successful businessman around town and knew Aide's dad. Rainer

was a spoilt rich boy, who had never heard the word 'no' from his parent's lips. He seemingly had free reign over the town, and was always causing trouble. He looked directly at Aide, and took his barrel in one hand. He lit it with a flourish and smiled.

“Boys - get him!”

Aide burst out from the side street and out into the crowd, searching desperately for his mum, dad, or any friendly face. The crowd had moved and he could see no one he knew, just faces illuminated by the glow from the pyrotechnics in the sky. A glance behind him told him that the boys were upon him, the tops of their bodies aflame with the barrels on their shoulders. The tops of their heads seemed to shimmer with orange fire and billow black smoke up to the night sky. Aide could feel the heat as they chased him.

He darted through the crowd, unnoticed around the legs of strangers, his pursuers attracting rather more attention. The crowd screamed and laughed at the boys, and a few proud cheers emanated from those who had performed the same mad stunt in their youth. Aide rebounded off a fat man's legs and found himself in the main road, now a part of the parade himself. The crowd pointed and laughed at the lost boy. Aide turned around, desperate for a sight of his mum, instead coming face to face with the Obby-Oss, his large black costume rocking to and fro with the beat of drums, the painted mask with flaming eyes bearing down on him. Aide screamed and changed his tack, running sideways toward the chip shop, separating from the main crowd to see if he could shake off

Rainer and the barrel boys, but still they came, in hot pursuit. He sprinted towards the harbour, and found himself alone among rows and rows of lobster pots, unable to see the crowd or his attackers. The smell of stale fish and fireworks lingered in the air and he could hear the muffled exclamations of the crowd as another display exploded above them. Aide slipped down another aisle of woven lobster pots, catching his breath and peering through the gaps in the walls to see if he had finally shaken off the boys. He found himself down a dead end, the pots leading him to a ten foot drop into the harbour, but nowhere else. He started back towards the crowd, convinced he had lost them, but as he turned, he saw them.

The burning barrels hung loosely at their sides, lighting them from below. Their malevolent grins were bathed in a hellish glow. Rainer led them slowly towards Aide, dragging the barrels by their sides. He spoke, soft and low, menacing and evil.

“You like sticking your nose in Jones?”

Aide cowered in fear and backed away.

“You want to be one of us?”

Aide shook his head fervently and sidestepped closer to the harbour, his cheap trainers gripping the edge of the wall.

“You want to feel the fire?”

Aide, consumed with panic, looked around manically for help, but of course there was no one. Just tiny Aide, surrounded by burning bullies. He looked down at the harbour. The murky water was dark and uninviting, his only way out. It was a long drop into the black abyss, but

he could see no other option. He couldn't quite swim yet, but his dad had taught him how to stay afloat. He shrank down to the ground as the boys inched closer to him, crouching and covering his head, as if to block the boys out completely. Rainer laughed.

“Let's give him a taste of the fire boys!”

The other boys agreed and raised their barrels above their heads. They laughed and shouted insults, jostling Aide with their feet. Aide knew there was worse to come. He was doubled up on the ground now, his face buried in his knees. He rocked back and forth, moaning, trying to wish himself away to safety. The fear coursed through his body, his tiny heart beating inside his chest. The shouts grew louder and louder. Out of the corner of his eye a few dying embers from the barrels fell to the ground. He looked up into Rainer's face, and his fear turned to anger and hatred. He despised this boy, hated him with all his body and soul. He felt it welling up inside of him, flowing through him like lava. It crept up his body to reach his head, burning his cheeks and ears, until finally-

“Aaagh!” screamed one of the boys.

“Bloody hell!” yelled another. Rainer and the last boy screamed in unison as the barrels above their heads exploded, sending shards of tar-soaked wood flying around them. Sparks drifted down onto their clothes and they threw what was left of the barrels into the harbour below. The boys ran off, stamping out small fires along the way, patting their smouldering sleeves and yelling for their mothers. Rainer turned at the

end of the aisle of lobster pots and sneered at Aide, still crouched low, his head buried in his lap.

“This ain't over Jones,” he shouted, and ran off into the night.

Aide lay down on the damp of the ground, his mind a chaotic mess of fear, anger, relief and confusion. He started to cry. He hugged his legs to his body, rocking back and forth, clutching his one remaining mitten. He was scared to move, scared to stay, scared to his very core. He wanted to hear his mum's voice, feel her arms around him, and smell her perfume close to him...

“There you are you silly beggar. I've been worried sick.”

He didn't know how much time had passed, only that she was there, and he was safe now. He stood and flung his arms around her. She whispered soothing words, and led him home, washing the fear away.

The Old Man by the Sea

There once was an old man who lived by the sea. His house was on a cliff top, and on a clear day he could see far across the ocean, all the way to the other side of the world. The old man was very wise, and in his life had travelled the earth, collecting stories and wisdom. All the people from the nearby village would come to him for help and advice.

The old man would listen to their questions, lean back in his creaky old rocking chair and mutter: "Hmm, let's see..."

After a pause, he would tell them the answer to their questions and much more besides.

Everyone came to see the old man;

...children who wanted to know about life, love and the world around them...

...elderly men and women in search of memories long forgotten...

...even those who didn't know they needed help would come by and speak to the old man, just for the pleasure of being told something new and amazing.

The old man filled everyone's minds with wonder and knowledge.

One night, there was a terrific storm. The trees around blew this way and that, the air crackled with electricity, and the sea below the old man's house rose and crashed into the cliff, over and over again.

When their village woke the next day, they found that the cliff had fallen, taking the old man's garden with it.

"If we do not do something soon, the old man's house will disappear too," said the villagers. They all agreed they would never let this happen.

Yet the people of the village did nothing and watched as slowly, inch by inch, the cliff fell away. They watched as, brick by brick, the house tumbled into the sea.

With nowhere to live, the old man took what he had left and sailed away across the ocean, to the other side of the world.

Life in the village carried on as normal. "Why did we ever go and see that old man by the sea?" they laughed.

A while later, a child was born in the village. She grew up, and began to notice the world around her. She found she had so many questions that no one could answer.

"Why is the moon round?"

"Why does the sea move?"

"Where do we come from?"

"What lies beyond the sea?"

The villagers found they had questions too. Their minds were full of queries, curiosity and doubt.

"Why did we let the old man sail away? Why didn't we save him when we could?" The villagers started to shout and blame each other.

The little girl calmly took a brick from her own house, and placed it on the ground by the sea. The villagers saw this, and each did the same.

One by one, the villagers came and helped build a new home for the old man, where he could once again sit in his creaky old rocking chair and fill their minds with wonder and knowledge.

When the house was complete, the little girl stood by the sea and called out:

“We’ll never let you go again, old man...”

She stood by the sea and waited, until one clear day, when she could see all the way to the other side of the world, she spied a small boat, and her heart filled with hope.

The old man came to live in the house by the sea, and the villagers all came to see him once again. By his side sat the little girl, who listened to all his stories and wisdom, and made sure that the village never lost them again.

The Collector

The house in the forest was haunted. Everyone knew that.

Children for generations had dared each other to step on its rotting porch and many had done so, their hearts beating a timpani on their breast bones. None, however, had ventured further. None had placed their hand on the handle of the front door which was so clearly unlocked. None had dared to step inside the hut by the grand oak, its paint peeling and roof sagging.

None until one fine August day, when Seth McBain, a strange boy who could see fairies in the light of the dying sun, who could speak to the leaves of an elm tree and hear them answer back, who could sit in an empty room and never feel alone, taking comfort from the spirits of the netherworld, came off the beaten path and stepped onto the creaking porch.

"This isn't so bad," he muttered to himself. The afternoon sun that beat through the trees had faded, the house in the forest seemingly having its own climate. There was a chill in the air which made goosebumps appear on his pale flesh and the long and unruly hair on his head tingled with electricity. A howl punctured the serene silence of the wood, a scream that had been uttered centuries before and repeated in the echoes of the netherworld ever since. Any ordinary boy would have run for the hills, but Seth McBain was no ordinary boy.

"You should probably know, I don't spook easily," he said. The air around him shivered. "So you can show yourself now."

The atmosphere crackled and spun. Seth struggled to maintain his cool and sense of reality as the house seemed to fold in on itself and the dark crept in, transporting him to another dimension completely. Looking around him, he found himself in a black void illuminated only by the whispering spirit in front of him which emitted a luminescent glow.

...boy...why...you...here...?

"Someone told me this place was haunted. That a ghoul had occupied this house for centuries. That it feasted on fear and delighted in torturing the souls of innocent young passers-by."

There was a crackle of electricity.

...they...speak...the...truth....

"Good. I wanted to meet you. To show you something." Seth reached into his pocket and pulled out a small silver snuffbox.

...trickery...

"No tricks here, sunshine," said Seth. "This is where you belong. A universe of ghouls and ghosties. A resting place for the lost ones, the ones who never made it to the next life of their own accord. It was passed to me by my father, and his father before him. You might say it runs in the family."

The ghoul, now just a shimmering shape, a glowing flash of light, shook with fear and anger.

...who...are..you...?

Seth had been waiting for that question.

"They call me," he said, his voice rising as he flipped open the lid of the snuffbox, "*The Collector.*"

There was a cacophony of screams as the spirit was sucked into the snuff box and into the universe contained within it. As quickly as it had arrived, the black void vanished, leaving the skinny boy alone in the damp house with the broken windows.

He produced a small notebook from his pocket and pencilled in another line on his tally-chart, next to the hundreds of others.

"One more for the collection," he muttered to himself as he stepped back outside into a shaft of sunlight and back onto the forest path.

The Hollow

"This place is haunted, so the warlocks say. Pookas and Boggarts abound in these woods."

Kroot stepped over the gnarled roots of an ancient oak, his broadsword ready by his side. His limping servant Drackle wimpered behind him.

"Silence, Drackle, or I'll throw you to the Elflings."

They rounded a corner to see a long-abandoned ruin, overgrown with moss and lichen.

"Master, magic is near. I can feel it."

Kroot stepped forward and was about to admonish Drackle for his twittering when he heard a groan from the ruin. He leapt forward, his sword raised.

The figure he found in the broken stone house was old and wrinkled, crippled by arthritis and slumped in a heap.

"Do not strike, young Kroot. I have not long on this earth as it is..."

"You...you know me?" he said, frowning.

"I was once like you...noble and brave, but blind to the dangers of life and the woods. You should listen to young Drackle, although it is not the boggarts you should fear."

"Master? Is it time?" came a voice from behind them. It shocked Kroot, who spun around and extended his sword hand. The limping servant, old and as wizened as his master, fell to the ground, wounded.

"Aaaaarrrrgghh!" screamed the figure. Drackle rushed to his side.

"Master, it is myself. But...how?"

The old man arose and spoke.

"It's the temporal nymphs you've got to watch out for," he said.

"Tricky little blighters, trapping you in a moment in time, forever returning you to the same place so you live out your life in the same few moments."

Kroot's mind reeled.

"You're...I mean, I am..." he stuttered.

"Don't worry yourself with the niceties. Took me a decade to get my head around it."

Kroot raised his sword.

"It's a trick! Witchery!" he thrust forward, piercing the old man in the chest. He fell like an axed birch.

"Ah...such a sweet release..." muttered the man as his breath left his body.

Kroot cleaned his sword.

"Temporal nymphs...have you ever heard such a thing, Drackle? Drackle?"

He turned. Drackle was stood rigid, a small nymph on his shoulder, its teeth bared, ready to draw blood.

Before he could warn his servant, he fell to the ground, clutching his neck...

"Magic, master...magic..."

Memories

I knew she was dead when the birthday card didn't arrive on time. Thirty-four years, and she had always remembered. As a child, I had marvelled at her memory, her ability to recall facts and dates. She had always been so organised. The absence of a birthday card was therefore telling.

That night I lit a candle, not for myself, but to her memory.

The Copse

We moved house in the spring, to a tumbledown cottage full of ivy, rats and damp. The fields that surrounded it were barren and unkempt, waiting for the new crops to bloom and grow.

Mum and Dad stared proudly at their dream home, while I mentally counted the miles from my old friends.

"You'll make new friends," said Dad, reading my mind.

I kicked the side of the garden wall idly. The brick cracked and crumbled.

Whilst Mum and Dad argued about potential cutlery drawers, decking and infestations, I trudged up a muddy pathway from our garden, towards a copse high on the hill. The walk was wet and treacherous, and took a route through brambles and bogs.

In the quiet of the copse I sat on a seat of moss, alone.

"Are you new?"

The child stood in a clearing, bright and clear. She had locks of crimson curls and a rag for a dress.

"Where did you come from?"

She shrugged.

"I'm new too."

"Do you live around here?"

She shrugged again, thought, and then nodded. "Around."

She was small, with smile in her eyes and a carefree way about her.

"We should be friends." She danced around the clearing, as light as a sunbeam.

"Okay," I laughed. "Where are your parents?"

She stopped and giggled, throwing her hands up to the sky.

"Everywhere!"

We played together that day. I had not known freedom like it since I was her age. We laughed, and ran, and built castles from fallen branches, and drank tea from acorn cups. Dusk came, and I told her to go home. I could hear my mum calling me, and was worried the girl's parents would be looking for her. She pushed me out of the copse and I ran back through the gorse and the falling dew. I turned at our gate, but I could only see the sun setting over the hill.

*

School started. I limped through the term, waiting and wishing that summer would come, so I could visit my old friends. When it came, I found they had moved on. The holidays stretched out before me like a jail

sentence. Dad refused to have me in the house, so sent me out across the fields on errands, or simply sent me out. I climbed the hill again to the copse, my memory of the child I met hazy like a fading reflection on a pond. I carved at a branch with my knife, boredom set deep. Behind me a twig snapped.

She was my age, tall, and pale. She moved like the wind blew her along. Her cherry hair tumbled down from her head, her eyes staring into me.

"You're here," she said, tilting her head inquisitively.

"I suppose."

"I'm glad," she smiled, and offered her hand. "Walk with me."

I took her hand and walked, never taking my eyes from her perfect face. She was so unlike the girls I knew. She did not hide behind cruel jokes and laughter. When she spoke, she spoke with reason. When I spoke, she listened as if each word were the most important word ever spoken.

Dusk came, and I looked across the field to my house. The thought of parting from her already stung.

"Will you be here tomorrow?" I asked.

"I'll always be here."

"Can I come and walk with you again?"

She smiled. Our fingers interlocked and she closed her lips around mine.

“I’ll always walk with you.”

Mum and Dad didn’t see me for the rest of the summer. I’d wake early, and run out to the fields to find her. She’d be there always, sometimes in the copse, sometimes near the lake, sometimes all around. She’d see me, and I’d smile as she took my hand. We’d run through fields of corn and lie on beds of heather. Each night as the sun set, we would kiss once more and I would return home. As summer faded, I knew I would not see her at school the next year.

“I’ll stay here with you.”

She smiled and shook her head.

“We’ll be together always.”

“But I won’t see you?”

“You don’t need to.”

She was wrong. The term started, and I became sullen. Each night I would look out from my rotting window frame and stare out at the copse. I needed her. I wanted to feel her skin against mine again, to run with her once more. As the nights drew in, her face faded from my memory. I mourned.

The leaves turned, and I set off to the hill one grey Sunday afternoon, escaping Mum and Dad's silent bitter glances and whispered battles. The floor of the copse was dank and carpeted with leaves, the sky above constantly threatening.

"You should not have come," she said, unseen behind an oak trunk.

"I wanted to. I wanted it to be like last time."

She moved through the trees. Still I had yet to see her flawless face.

"The world turns around and around. You know this. We all move on, grow old, whither and die."

I laughed and sat down on a log. Suddenly she was beside me, her scent consuming me. I looked up and saw her clear blue eyes, bright against her pale skin. She had crow's feet around them, and white hairs starting to show near her temples. Her body was strong, but she held herself as if she was starting to tire.

"We all change, and must learn from our history," the woman whispered to me.

"I don't want to change. I don't want to grow up. Not just yet."

We leant into each other, and she held me tightly. We rocked gently with the breeze, and she sang to me a soothing song, a lullaby from time gone by.

*

Yuletide passed and the snow came. At home, a man came with a briefcase and closed himself in the front room with Mum and Dad. Dotted lines were signed, access discussed. We'd move in the spring, just Mum and I.

In boots and scarves I climbed the hill. The snow scrunched underneath my feet, the slope treacherous yet pristine and bright. At the top I peered down at my home, tiny and broken. In amongst the trees I heard a sobbing.

Crouched at the base of an elm was a ball of white hair and fragile thin skin. Dressed in satin, she rocked to and fro, shivering in the snow. I took my coat and placed it around her. The old woman looked up with glassy eyes.

"I have to leave," I said.

She nodded. "All things end," she said, her voice tired and cracked.

"Where will you go?"

"I'll remain, as I always have," she said. "You'll see. Be as good as new."

I crouched down with her and put my arm around her. She rested into me, and I put my chin on her head. She smelt of snowdrops.

"I'll stay for a while," I said.

"Won't take but a moment."

As the afternoon faded, the falling snow thickened, swirling around the copse in a mad ballet. A blizzard rose from nowhere, the wind howling through the trees.

"Time's ending!" she shouted. She rose and stood in the clearing, the snow whipping her frail body. Soon there was nothing but a white mist. I crouched down by the elm, sheltered and safe for now. As the woman's body disappeared from view, a voice played through my mind:

"I'll always walk with you."

When the blizzard died, I was alone once more.

*

The car was full of boxes, Mum packing all and sundry. Dad watched on from an upstairs window. I had already said goodbye; a manly handshake and a confused hug. I'd see him in the holidays. I put on the seatbelt, and Mum started the car, snapping the radio off as it came on. We drove off in silence.

"Cheer up," she said lightly. "You'll see your friends again."

We wound our way down the drive, past shoots of daffodils and crocuses. I stared up to the small patch of trees that had meant so much to me. A small figure stood atop the hill, her arms wide. She span around, running through the grass, playing amongst the trees.

"We'll be starting afresh," said Mum. "A new day."

"A new day," I agreed, smiling at the waving outline on the hill.

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