

EAST**LIFE**



# EASTLIFE

An Anthology of Life Writing

EDITED BY

**TESSA MCWATT, SAM DODD  
AND STEPHEN MADDISON**



[www.citylifestories.co.uk](http://www.citylifestories.co.uk)

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The  
Writings  
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# Foreword

The University of East London is an extraordinary University in an extraordinary place. Since 1898 we have had a longstanding commitment to our community as an ‘anchor institution’ which truly makes a difference to people’s lives – offering people opportunities for education and employment that they otherwise would not have had.

From our roots at the turn of the century – when John Passmore Edwards opened the West Ham Technical Institute and described it as ‘the people’s university’ – to the turn of the twenty-first century, our commitment to serve our communities in East London and to work in partnership with them has remained firm.

In short, engaging with our community (what is often referred to these days as ‘civic engagement’) is a crucial part of our DNA as an institution. And, in no small part, one could also say that the anthology presented here – *EastLife: Life Writing from UEL and the East London Community* – embodies that spirit of engagement, especially as it is realised here in partnership with our community.

In many ways, the memories and voices gathered together in this collection also remind us that East London has always been a place of extraordinary diversity as well as rapid change and transition – often a place of dislocation and displacement for some, but equally,

a distinctive place, instilling a sense of pride and belonging for the people who live here.

Working together with their communities, the students from our creative writing programmes have effectively explored the shifting relationship between place, memory, and identity; often in an inter-generational dialogue which mediates between the past and present. In doing so, they have successfully evoked a rich sense of 'lives lived', but, by unleashing and empowering the stories of our elders, they also offer a way of re-thinking the city that will enrich the lives of East London citizens yet to come.

I hope you enjoy the collection.

*Professor John J. Joughin  
Vice Chancellor  
University of East London*

# Introduction

## EastLife: Life Writing from UEL and the East London Community

*I suppose what I mean is this: you get these opportunities in life, and let me tell you, you just need to grab them with both hands, because you never know what they might lead to. At the end of the day, if you don't like it, then you can just drop it like a hot potato.*

- IRENE PASQUINI, EASTLIFE CONTRIBUTOR

### The Context

East London is a dynamic, vibrant and diverse community, with youth and elders who embody a spirit of resistance and perseverance in the face of adversity, change, and struggle. *EastLife* is a project that pairs young writers and community elders in conversation about life, in monologue and in dialogue, about their experiences in the past and the present.

Life writing, both autobiographical and biographical, offers us insight into our culture. Rather than relying on cultural statistics and news features, life stories provide an intimate way of experiencing the cultural history of cities and nations. Life writing reveals the real lives of Londoners and their relationship to their communities. Comprised of several boroughs that are in the midst of huge shifts,

East London is a microcosm of the key convergences of contemporary London: regeneration, the economic downturn, past and future immigration, and other issues arising from its cultural diversity.

*EastLife* is a research project developed by the Writing Centre in the School of Arts and Digital Industries at UEL, and inspired by the life writing of students in the Creative Writing programmes. The work the students produce each year is so moving, vivid and full of insights into places and people we rarely hear about, that it became crucial for us to bring them to a wider audience. In deciding to uncover these voices for publication it became clear that they were not the only ones waiting to be heard, and indeed there was a parallel chorus of elders in the community whose stories needed a platform. Through the Civic Engagement initiative at the University of East London we were able to put students and community elders in touch, meeting to exchange stories. The students not only participated in the community by meeting and engaging with the elders' stories, but they were offered the wonderful privilege of using their writing talent to tell those stories in original and evocative ways.

Culture is memory; memory is collective; and elders are a creative resource for cultural history. These concepts are at the centre of *EastLife* – and we feel that the project has unearthed some of the cultural richness of East London that is embedded in personal experience. Community elders are not only key sources of memories and the cultural histories that enrich the local community, but, unfortunately, they are often isolated (in terms of access, mobility, and technology) from participation in cultural exchange. This project allowed youth and elders to learn a bit more about one another, and this anthology presents the fruits of their exchanges.

## The Process

Students and alumni of UEL's Creative and Professional Writing (BA) and the MA Writing: Imaginative Practice degrees collaborated with the director and coordinator of *EastLife* to produce short autobiographical pieces on a particular aspect of their lives that they chose to 'perform.' The pieces are innovative, unique, and speak from a wide range of voices and perspectives, based on the students' choice of the 'self' they wished to write about. In no way do they represent traditional autobiographical approaches rooted in purely non-fiction voices, or confessional journalism. These pieces are experimental and playful, diverse in subject matter, voice and style.

After the students submitted their autobiographical pieces, the challenge was to set them up with community elders from whom they could learn a little more about the East London that came before them. Some writers found their own elders to interview and write about, but the majority were paired with elders via several community events. Conversations with members of these groups, including the weekly Canning Town Library coffee morning and Age UK Stroke Survivors support group, both of which we were warmly welcomed into, provided inspiration and real-life detail for stories that the writers developed into biographical pieces. The writers took away with them more than stories: they were moved and touched by the connection they made with the elders, and certainly that went both ways. As with their autobiographical pieces, the biographical pieces included here are creative interpretations of interviews and stories that the community elders so generously shared with our project team.

We have organised the pieces around three themes: Memory, Culture, and Change. These are key themes in any urban life, and they allowed us to interweave biography with autobiography, offering a way of looking at life writing in the broader context of its socio-political importance.

## Coordinating the Project

Sam Dodd, a graduate of the BA (Hons) Creative and Professional Writing degree, was the project coordinator. She worked together with Link Up (UK) through Great British Community to find groups in the local area that were willing to let our writers talk to their members.

We were essentially asking groups of people who did not know us to spend their time telling us things that were, and still are, very personal to them. We were asking for them to trust that we wouldn't present their stories in a way that was uncomfortable for them, or take advantage of how they so openly welcomed us into their memories. It was an intellectual and emotional challenge for the writers, but within minutes of them sitting down with their community members for the many and varied interviews, they felt at ease. We discovered magic and a down-to-earth perspective in our senior East Enders. They were by turns blunt, honest, raw, serious, and playful, and their wicked senses of humour sometimes left us wiping away tears of laughter. These people have seen a significant patch of London become unrecognisable, and they're happy to talk loudly and proudly, if it means that society gets a snapshot of what 'community' used to mean – perhaps, what it should still mean.

Watching the interviews take place was a privilege; seeing the community members laugh animatedly, gesticulate when they were talking of old markets, old docks, old pubs and old manners, and lower their tone to lean in when they had something a bit sadder to talk about. We saw our writers enthralled and engaged, forging deep connections with these elders, then worrying that they wouldn't be able to represent their stories in a way that did them justice. The sheer amount of work our writers put in – the level of attention to detail, and the complete immersion into the life stories they'd learned so much about within the space of a few hours – was inspiring. It was

indicative of how crucial these conversations can be for the growth of individuals.

The value of pairing young people with older community members, so that we can learn more about the world around us and increase conversations between different generations, races, genders, and classes, should not be overlooked as a key way to improve and learn from society – as a result, perhaps making it an immensely better, kinder, and more open world to live in.

### **EastLife and the Future City**

The question of the future of our cities is recognised as one of the most urgent of our time. By 2030 there will be ten million people living in London. How sustainable will this future London be, economically, environmentally, socially? Policy and planning agendas have long identified the challenges of urbanisation, population increase, and climate change, and fierce debates are emerging about the possible direction to be taken by local, state, and transnational policy makers. The notion of the ‘smart’ city already seems old hat: a fantasy of better living made possible by ‘big data’ collected by sensor networks and wearable technologies that became sinister after the revelations of Edward Snowden. A more radical agenda for the Future City is emerging out of a burgeoning awareness of the extent to which political promises of economic growth and a prosperous, consumerist culture rest on fundamental ideological commitments to widening inequalities and increasing alienation and fragmentation, locally and globally. Will the city of the future be ‘our’ city? Will it be sustainable emotionally, as well as economically? How will it be run? How will future technologies help govern future cities, and will this governance make cities more human places, with an empowered and responsive citizenry?

*EastLife* in part manifests UEL’s commitment to civic engagement because those of us working in London’s East, at the most socially

diverse higher education institution in Europe, recognise that we have a critical role to play in helping shape the future uses of the city we inhabit. Current accessibility agendas, and the social and entrepreneurial ‘incubation’ funded by government, are driven by the need to develop skills as identified by the job market. If Future London is to be sustainable, such work is vital. But what about the democracy deficit endemic in such schemes? Is such economic ‘incubation’ equally available to all?

*EastLife* is important, innovative, and relevant because it offers new ways of harnessing the creative skills of East London students to liberate the perspectives and stories of East London elders. If Future Cities are to be politically sustainable, such work is critical in offering models for empowering the voices of citizens. The creative and cultural economy is vital to the sustainability of Future London, and is currently worth over £21 billion to the capital. UEL’s graduates will be a vital part of that creative sector. But as ‘STEM to STEAM’ initiatives gain ground, there is a growing recognition that the arts and creative sector is valuable not only for providing economically important cultural commodities and services, but for the insights and methodologies it offers to industrial design, policy making, and infrastructure planning. *EastLife* is just the beginning.

*Tessa McWatt, Sam Dodd, Stephen Maddison*  
*Editors*

[www.citylifestories.co.uk](http://www.citylifestories.co.uk)

# Memory

# The Spanish Dove

From the life of George Lowe,  
as told by Irenee Lowe

By Craig Britton

Born in East London in 1914, George Lowe was a shipwright almost all his life. He lived in Plaistow with his wife and son, also named George, and worked primarily for ship-building giant Harland and Wolff, most famous for building the Titanic, in the now almost non-existent North Woolwich docks. As a shipwright he was tasked with the construction and repair of all kinds of boats. At the age of 14, he began his career with a five-year apprenticeship at Limehouse docks. He was a stern man, a man whose career path had made him authoritarian in leadership both at work and at home. A man who hardened during the long and stressful years of the Second World War. At the high point of his 44-year career he was the Head Shipwright. Men would queue up at the docks and George decided who did and didn't get to work for the day.

However, it wasn't until 1982, at the age of 68 after retiring, that he owned his own boat: the 25ft-long *Spanish Dove*. A ship he rebuilt from scratch, buying the shell, replacing the bad wood (a common job in George's trade), strengthening it, restoring the paint work and carving her name on the side. George was always a solitary man,

who never really needed anyone else, and had no problem working on the boat alone. When his wife died of lung cancer two years after he took on the *Spanish Dove*, George started working even more frequently on the boat.

The *Spanish Dove* was a motor cruiser, but despite being built as a workman's boat, it was never used for such a purpose; it was used mostly to travel along Barking Creek, and occasionally for George's holidays sailing around the coast of East Anglia with his friends in his retirement. They were a group of five, mostly George's son's drinking friends in their 40s. George and his friend Tom, also in his 70s, were the only men on the boat who had worked on the docks. The others included a carpenter and a tax inspector. They would spend their time on the *Spanish Dove* fishing and visiting coastal towns.

Sometimes George's natural need to lead the crew led to tension between him and his friends, even while on their trips to the coast. Working on the docks in George's time, particularly during the war and its recovery, required militaristic discipline. George's son remembers his father rarely being at home. Always gone before he had woken up and back late at night. Order was his way of life, and this sometimes led to strange rules. This was particularly true with cleanliness, which George held in high regard, and on his boat this was upheld to an even higher degree. The boat's newly refurbished and fitted toilet was out of bounds. No one could use it, not a single member of the crew, even George himself. Not even the possibility of a single speck of bacteria entering that room was allowed. These are the lengths George went to in keeping his boat clean.

Naturally, this would lead to problems and disagreements on board, and at some point while sailing off the coast, someone would need to use the toilet. And that day came in the summer of 1986, four years after George had renovated his boat, when the crew had docked the boat at Walton-on-the-Naze pier, opposite the flashy King's Hotel in Essex. Of course, you would probably think a group

of men sailing on a boat would just pee off the side if they needed to, but what if you didn't need a pee? What if you needed something... a bit bigger? This summer's day in 1986 was no different from any other, and George again said no. But he did provide the man with a plastic bin bag (he always kept them for this purpose) in which to do his business, and when the deed was done the men used a pole fitted with a hook – the type usually used to close out-of-reach windows – and flung the bag out to sea. Sorted. Job done.

Well, job done until the floating bag carried by the waves started drifting towards the beach. The crew panicked. The last thing they wanted was to be caught littering, or someone, maybe a child, finding the contents of the bag. So George and one of the crew jumped into the small rowing boat attached to the *Spanish Dove*, to collect the bag and stop it reaching the shore.

The coast guard had spotted the bag being shot off the boat from the pier and this roused his suspicions. Were they littering? And before the crew knew it, boats and sirens surrounded them. Coast guard, police and customs officers. The police suspected something far more sinister than littering. The crew's behaviour was too suspicious. These men could be drug smugglers. "What was thrown over?" they asked. Perhaps they were trying to deliver drugs to someone on the shore. This sparked what the newspapers called a 'drugs alert'. The police and customs officers searched the *Spanish Dove* top to bottom. Another police boat was sent out to recover the bag. The officers weren't sure if they believed what they were told. George's restrictions on the toilet just didn't seem plausible.

The whole crew was held, including 72-year-old George. They found nothing. Of course, the boat was clean and so were the men. They were still taken to the police station and questioned for a few hours. But, eventually, the police did recover that bag, though they probably wished they hadn't. Apologies went both ways, with the police not charging George – probably because of his age.

The men were released and, for a brief moment, George got his 15 minutes of fame. He found it hilarious. The story was told all around the working men's club near Canning Town, which has now been replaced with flats. They all found it hilarious, too, that an elderly man was accused of being a drug smuggler over a flying bag of faeces. George was contacted by local East End and national newspapers that had heard the legend and found it unbelievably funny, and so the story was printed. The *East Anglian Daily Times* found it especially amusing, and interviewed George over the phone, saying he was a very likeable man. The story became their headline news.

Despite all the hilarity, the papers were still pretty cautious to print what was actually found in the bag, with the *East Anglian Daily Times* quoting George calling it "rubbish". Another article ended: "The alert ended when the bag was found ... filled with the contents of the cruiser's lavatory."



Sadly, in George's later years he developed Alzheimer's and became less able to take care of himself. Irenee Lowe, who provided the story on behalf of her father-in-law, commented on how the massive decline in the 1990s of day centres for elderly persons led to a lack of care available, causing her husband (George's son George) to retire early from lorry driving for Citroën in his mid 50s to look after him full time. Indeed, the social infrastructure has most definitely declined in Canning Town since the 1990s. I interviewed Irenee at Canning Town Library, which has had to double up as a community centre since the closure of many community centres and libraries in 2010.

In 2014 George passed away at the age of 99, a few months shy of 100. No one is sure of the whereabouts of the *Spanish Dove*, which disappeared from Barking Creek in roughly 1992. George never visited his boat again in his twilight years, let alone set foot on it. His

son George would often talk to him about the past, to try and get his memory back. Occasionally, George would ask his father if he wanted to go on the boat, hoping his passion for boats would bring some memory back. But he always refused, and his body language projected unexplained fear and concern. Some say it was stolen, others think George gave it away, but due to his condition he could never remember to whom, or when.

But George held on to the newspaper clippings from his 15 minutes of fame, and his story will live on through his family, and through writing.

# The Way the Roses Smelled

From the life of John Wiggett

By Sam Dodd

I had the pleasure of talking to John, a lifelong East Londoner, and a mine of information on what this amazing community used to look and feel like. He paints a vivid picture of life in the last half of the twentieth century. He led me down Memory Lane, and I could almost smell the fishmongers, markets, canals and roses he talked lovingly about. Here is John's story, in his own words.



I was born in 1950, in St Andrew's Hospital, Bow. Used to live down Monteith Road, off Old Ford, and opposite our place there was a house that had been bombed in the war. No idea what happened to the family. My mates and I used to play in there, in the rubble. The bottom of our road went onto the canal, and on the other side of it was Victoria Park. We used to go and kick a ball around, play a bit of footie. My older brother Alan was the goalie, and very good he was, too. Then there's that big boating lake, where you can hire rowing

boats. Sixpence back then; much more expensive now, of course. We used to love puttering around on one of them.

You could walk along Roman Road on your Saturday shopping day, and you'd see a load of people you knew. Everyone would talk to everyone. My mum would stop to natter constantly, but of course, as a boy, I just wanted to get to the sweet shop. I loved orange jubbliies – these little triangle iced dessert sweets, pineapple chunks, sherbet dib dabs – oh, you name it, I loved it.

On a Sunday, we had the Salvation Army musicians who'd come down the street playing their instruments. They'd stop and sing the old-time religious tunes in the middle of the road, and we'd all stand and listen respectfully. There was another chap who'd come down on a bike and knock on doors, sharpening knives and scissors. For all of us – the whole road.

In the winter, we'd go over to Hackney Marshes to do cross-country, running around in the cold. It was bleak, ever so bleak, but it kept you fit alright. All these boys running around, trying to keep warm. You'd rub dubbin onto your footie boots, stinky stuff, to keep the water out. I can smell it now. Oh and the footballs – they were made from real leather in those days of course – and when it rained, they'd get heavy. It was like kicking a lump of lead around.

But you could leave your doors open with impunity. You'd never dream of anyone coming into your house and taking anything. At Christmas and birthdays people would come round to visit; your mum would push the furniture over to the side of the room, roll up the carpet, and pop some music on. People would dance and sing. And everyone would come – in and out, all day long. I look back fondly at those days. Because everyone knew everyone, it meant we were always dancing! We had a Dansette record player, all the 45s and 78s. Those were the days. Beautiful music.

There was much more of a community than there is now. No one stops to talk now. No one knows each other anymore. Everyone seems to want to just stay inside. That's why I come to Age UK, to the stroke survivor group and on other days, too. It means you're not alone. They do so much for us here; I can't even begin to tell you. They really care about us.

I knew a lovely elderly lady, back then, when I was a young one. When they pulled the terraced housing down they replaced it all with these huge high-rise blocks. They put her on the seventeenth floor. Most depressing place ever. You'd go into the lift, which smelled of urine, and my goodness the hallways were so dark. No windows. Her front door was behind a big metal gate; it looked like a prison. Absolutely diabolical. How can you expect a person to live like that? A prisoner in her own home? I went to visit her, and she wasn't herself at all. She didn't live for long, after that. They were changing our community, changing the space in which we lived and gathered and organised, changing our ability to interact with and look out for each other.



I worked for the Corporation of London. Sounds posher than what it was. I was a cleaner and receptionist. You'd get in about 6am, clean the toilets, lifts and landings, and then sit on reception. I'd get sent all over London to different big buildings. At Christmas time, they'd bring in these huge trees – real ones. Very pretty, but the decorations would play Christmas carols. On a loop. All bleedin' day. After a while it'd drive you up the wall. I feel for people nowadays who work in those stores that play music non-stop. Hold music, you know, what you hear when you call the bank and whatnot. Tinny stuff. Awful.

I used to work for the Civil Aviation Authority too. Loved planes, didn't I. Once went to the Channel Islands as a lad; I was ever so excited – pointing at all the huge majestic airplanes saying “Ooh, we'll go on that one, no, maybe that one...” and then this little thing

putters up. I thought ‘God forbid we go on that tiny plane,’ but oh yes, we did. It was an Islander. So light that we had to sit in certain seats, evenly weighted out, all the kids and adults – otherwise it would have toppled over.

Anyway, at the CAA there was a book, *The Air Pilot*, which was the flying manual. My job was to keep that up to date. The other duty there was to keep the licences updated for private pilots. Small jobs, but crucial.

Then, when I was twenty-four years old, I was helping my brother move a bed. All of a sudden I just keeled over. I’d suffered a double aneurysm. You can be born with these sorts of things, and it just so happened that it caught up with me when I was still quite young. I was in a coma for months, in Royal London Hospital down Whitechapel. The doctors told my family that they should still talk to me, even though I was unresponsive. They did, kept talking away to me, and never gave in. After some months, I woke up. I was under for a good long while. So they moved me to the recuperation unit at Homerton Hospital. The old hospital – they’ve rebuilt it now – was ancient. Talk about Dickensian. At night-time, there would be cockroaches running around on the floor. Beggars belief! Honestly, I kid you not – massive things, they were. There was a young chap, about nineteen years of age, in one of the beds. He’d been a passenger in some car, and he’d gone straight through the windscreen. There were no seatbelts in those days. He was a goner for the rest of his life. I always wear my seatbelt. Always. I knew then that I was really lucky to still be alive.

So that left me with complete paralysis down my right side, which I had physiotherapy for. Used to go to the old Hackney Hospital for hydrotherapy, too. They were great, the NHS, back then. They ain’t got the money to be great these days.

My mother remarried once, to a guy who was the Head Chauffeur for the Bryant & May Matchmakers, the factory, up in Bow. Used to drive the Top Dogs around, the bosses. I was a young man by then, still living at home, but before my illness. We lived in the flats nearby – before they got converted into so-called ‘luxury’ flats. We each had a strip of garden allocated, all the neighbours. My mother was a wonderful gardener; perhaps that’s where I get my love for it from, even though I haven’t got green fingers. I get frustrated – I expect it to have grown into a big beautiful flower the day after I’ve planted the bleedin’ thing. Anyhow, she grew all sorts in that little strip. Salmon camellia, one of them. Beautiful vivid pink flower. The colour was incredible. We had a neighbour called Gareth, lived with his male partner. They grew hydrangea. Lots of little pot plants too. Gorgeous. I’d help them out in the summer time. They need plenty of water, especially when it’s hot – so I’d have this great big watering can. The whole thing would go into this one container. I used to prune the Queen Elizabeth roses, too. The building was gorgeous – red brick, built in 1874. On the windows, everyone had the flower-boxes, with mostly geraniums. They’d glow, almost, a beautiful red colour. And nicotiana, the tobacco plant.

Of an evening time, the scent was incredible, it carried through the air. I love that memory.

I can still almost smell it now.



I’m part of a thing called The Geezer’s Club now. We meet here on a Tuesday, about eighteen of us. We put a couple of quid in each week, and have outings. Ray, he’s such a nice man, organises all of them. One of the things the lads are running right now is a campaign called ‘Save Our Boozers’. Down the Roman Road there used to be at least five. There’s now only one. And the Roman Road market, when I was young, was thriving. Butchers, chemists, greengrocers, everything.

It's all gone bust. It's mostly the supermarkets done that, I reckon. Breaks a community up, that sort of thing. On a Wednesday I do a quiz group – they ask me to set the questions, multiple choice. I write them down all week and then we use them on a Wednesday. Then in the afternoon I go to a health group; we do exercises and talk about healthy food. This place, Age UK, organises all these other trips too – picnics, museums, Eastbourne, Hastings, Kew Gardens. Oh, the flowerbeds at Kew are absolutely magnificent. I love gardening, but that is something else entirely. Beautiful. And the hanging baskets, geraniums and all sorts: wonderful. My favourite flower is a rose. Some of those scents ... something man could never replicate.

That's why I like coming here. Gives me something to look forward to. I've met so many nice people here, and done so many nice things. It gives you a goal; something to get up for.



If my grandparents came back today, they'd recognise nothing. Nothing at all.

I still leave my front door open these days, even though no one else does. Got a gate across it, so no one can come in, but I like to have it open. I placed my two-seater settee so I can see outside onto the street. I like to feel like I'm part of the outside world. My neighbour's cat walks past my door. Looks at me, but doesn't come in. I can smell the flowers outside, drifting in.

# This Is A Test

Anonymous

## Question One:

*This is a test.*

“

”

*Complete the below examples using all that you have learned this module, demonstrating your understanding of the above.*

I am fragments. The foil breaks, blisters crumple. The lips open and press on mine. A hand comes out and folds over my shoulder. I am written in a language I do not speak. I produce crude interpretations with a keyboard and with fingertips.

Sixteen years old. Sweat pours down his brown face and stings on the lesions the mosquitoes have given him. 1984. Vaucluse. The Rhone oozes between rock and branch, an idle slick. Three farm hands click together their bottles at the riverside. They are hidden, alone.

He drinks. He thinks of his dead father, the photograph of him at the Hajj. Unusual to remember him with a smile. He notes the sour

alcohol on his tongue and presses the icy glass against his neck, cooling the red bumps. When he takes the bottle away the flesh smarts. Smarts against the hot sun.

One of the boys finishes his beer and throws the bottle in a high arc through the evening air, disturbing an orb of floating flies and midges. It plunks heavily into the water, and drowns.

Dad sobbed with his arms over his head like a hostage. I'd never seen him cry before. Tears are complicated.

I sat awake with the bedroom door open to read. When my father walked past he caught the glint of my white eyes and came into the room. He said Go To Sleep

Go To Sleep

I did not want to sleep, so he pulled me out of bed by my ankles, kicked me into the corner of the room, and

---

The next morning, the bruise was enormous and black. I locked the door to the bathroom and sat on the toilet, prodding at the blue shadow with my short fingers. A trapping of blood between the layers of flesh, pulled out from inside. Mum would not look at it. She dressed me without speaking.

When I walked it stung beneath my trouser leg.

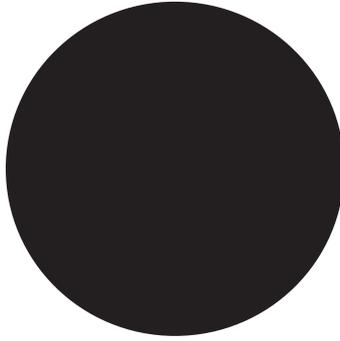
The day I saw him cry I tried to hug him. His body was stiff and hostile even then, broken. Unfamiliar. I flinched against the brick wall skin. It hurt to touch him.

Walking past the bathroom. Past the open door. My father's penis floating in the bathwater, repulsive, stuck in the brain.

## **EXERCISE ONE:**

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*SAY SOMETHING TO THIS BLACK HOLE.*



My brother teased him one afternoon, ten years old, running around with his belt in his hands. Yelling Come Here. I laughed but hurt inside.

“I never did that.” Dad refused to accept what he had done. I left the room in floods of tears. Tears are complicated.

Stomach stewing and burning when I took all the painkillers in the flat and lay on my bed while mum watched television. Waited for an end that didn't happen. Wouldn't happen.

I was fifteen. The playground slide made me shiver. The cold burnt at bare ankles. But the street lights made the words in the book legible. Golden pages fluttering in the wind. I read until they shut the park gates.

Hiding in the library at lunchtimes. Hands shaking at 3pm. Straggling behind at the gates hoping to be invited over somewhere else for the afternoon.

After school meeting. They left me in a classroom while they spoke to mum. I heard her shouting at my head of year through the wall. The pupils in detention thought I was being expelled.

A girl from my form passes me a note, written in the back of an exercise book.

***What did you do?***

---

I wrote back *Nothing* in the fat cursive of a child. In Berol Fineliner felt tip. The ink soaked through, onto the second page.

I fell in love with my best friend. She came home with me one afternoon and chipped a tumbler. I tried to glue the shard back to the glass. They would notice if I threw it away. She hid the cup at the back of the cupboard, upside down, and we went to the bedroom to talk. I shivered when she laughed and yelled and closed my eyes when she swore.

He shouted my name – he made two syllables one – and she went silent. I walked to the kitchen with my head low. I remember how quickly she picked up her bag and put her shoes on. I remember her walking out the door.

She stopped talking to me.

The silence of the time-out room. The silence of the school counselor. The rumble of a boiling kettle. The feeling in my belly of constant doom.

*Talk to me.*

I said nothing.

They gave up.

They gave up, but not before I did.

## EXERCISE TWO:

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### MAKE A CONFESSION.

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He showed me I could love men. But he liked me young. He liked the way he punctured me. He liked the souvenir of a touch of blood.

He delighted in his power. A teenager on the playground visiting him at the school gates. Buying us alcohol while we waited outside the newsagents. He fell out of love with me when I became a woman. When I began to argue. I nagged him for defending my father. But I knew that his own father had abandoned him. *At least he's stayed all this time*, he shrugged, and I started shouting at him hysterically in the street. I let go of his hand. He never read the letters that I wrote him. As he said he would, if I ever left him, he disappeared.

I think he left the country.

It felt like he left the planet.

In the dark I turned her over and asked her if I could kiss her. She lapped her tongue against my nose and laughed at me. "I thought that this would happen," she said.

Her body was so much smaller than mine. Her soft hair got between our mouths. She smelled of my bed, in her neck and under her shoulders. She had the word **Virile** tattooed on her back.

She went back home when the summer died.

She kept my secret, but I have not kept hers.

He was afraid I would find nothing to love.

He feared touching me. But he wanted to.

The influence of his philosophy was new and wonderful. I drank him in with wonder the way I read those books in the park at night. The dysplasia of his bones makes cripple walking look like dancing.

There was so much quiet with him. Our whispered conversations in the dark.

When we spoke, face to face and far away, I pulled a manuscript off my shelf, some pulpy silly thing, and read to him. He put his hands into his beard and listened to me. I read about constellations and earthquakes.

Deliberately flicking my eyes up to drink in his writhing.

The balm of the smiling and the laughing. The remedy of when the lights go out.

### **EXERCISE THREE:**

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#### *MAKE LOVE.*

**My brother said**

**Mum has had a heart attack**

**she's in**

**an ambulance**

**Hammersmith Hospital.**

I did not cry, but I tried. The heat of pulling up the covers over my head. The stifling fume of the self. Parents are not permanent. Comforted by loss. Put to sleep fantasising about little liberties. A piercing in the nose, a room of my own, the time and freedom to

read. And the ones out of reach. Someone to talk to. Someone to love.

I love her. Despite everything, always. Then and now.

Because she is my mother.

Because it takes two hundred and eighty days to gestate and incubate a life and a second to take it away.

The wound was in the centre of her chest, between her breasts. The scab was black.

Changing a cannula, blood had spilled on the floor. I tell her that I am sorry. But I do not know what for. Her hair sticks down flat to her face.

I put my hand on her head and pull back the skinny strands. I kiss her on the forehead. She tastes like disinfectant.

She drags my head along with the matted knots. I shout and wriggle away with every pull of the brush. I plead with her to stop. She brings the brush down on the crown of my head until I stop crying out. My lip wobbles and I drool, heartbroken and skull bursting with pain. I chew the insides of my mouth, eyes squeezed shut, trying to ignore the pinching. She tears a section of hair from my scalp. I feel the threads snap. When the brush comes free there is a thick twist of dark brown in its teeth. I scream, and she puts her hands around my throat.

*Why do you need to talk to strangers about me? Write about something else, she said.*

I think my mother thinks that if I write about her, I will betray her. I want to betray her, but I can't. We bought her flowers, but you cannot have flowers on the high intensity ward. I had to throw them in a bin.

Three years left. She's nearly halfway, now.

## **EXERCISE FOUR:**

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### *LET SOMETHING GO.*

We watched the box, another matriarch, slowly sink into the back of the room, behind a curtain. They played something orchestral and swooping out of the speakers at either side of the coffin. I asked why they kept the heating on in the chapel in spring.

Sadness sounds strange. The word, sadness. Limp, passive, no cut to it.

I never knew sadness could be this isolating. I never knew sadness could be this terrifying, this dangerous.

Lots of kids, they say, grow up sad.

So they say.

I grow up and leave. The nights are heavy and long and black. Trapped in a box, four walled, flat concrete layered with carpet, sink in the corner and a mini-fridge. A cold, soft rectangle in the corner, and I lie awake upon it, mad, unable to make sense of things in the dark.

The company of others terrifies me, and being alone is heartbreak. Nobody can talk about it, and talking about it hurts.

Until a breaking point.

## EXERCISE FIVE:

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*PUT YOUR PEN DOWN. CHECK YOUR WORK.*

**If you can't go back, go forwards.  
If you can't go forwards, go back.**

17th December 2012.

The weather is cold again. I am rebuilding. Standing on demolished land, screaming into a gale.

The bed isn't made. All the books I want to read are left unread.

I am an adult. A young adult. I've gone away to study and I've cut my name in half, the way my father used to, stifling the second syllable. Hiding a part of myself away.

Every cigarette takes eight minutes off my life, so I light them gratefully. Laughing it off when I drink too much.

The poet is kind. I want to hug the author. Writers and teachers understand without knowing. Patiently, gently. As if incubating a small, glowing egg.

I fantasise about being someone else. I am not someone else.

I look into a big mirror in a public toilet painted yellow on the inside. I've put something on, that I've chosen, something as garish as a public bathroom. My body is wide in it. I have an abstract body. I hear my mother in the back of my head. *What is that? It's ridiculous. Hideous.*

Her words taste sour.

Nobody is unkind. Nobody cares.

The feeling is exhilarating.

How low my eyelids sink when I medicate. Fearless until I come back home to my little grey box. The blank page berates, intimidates.

Amitriptyline thumps around the brain, crushing sprouts of fear. And everything else.

There is struggle to put something down. The lines on my palm are deep, but young. I feel myself, rub my hands over my fat arms and legs to stimulate thought and feeling. Today, there is no substance to me. My body will not comply. I am a heavy gel, oozing and contaminating. I cannot communicate. I close my eyes and think about the distant summer.

Sunshine, shimmering down his sweating head, beads of sweat pushing out of the skin under his beard. He's stolen me from the city again, and transplanted me here. A cutting, to flourish.

He takes a sip of lager and the white head of froth remains on his moustache. I look down and find he has taken my left hand. He does not smile often, but he's smiling at me now. He waves away the cloud in my head. I beam at him.

A wasp floats around my head and he laughs.

"It reckons you're a flower." I swat at it and take a sip of my glass.

We watch tourists smack their flip-flopped feet all over the town centre, taking photos of the busy tramlines. Wires in the sky.

My skin goes amber quickly in the sun. He does not call me exotic.

A car drives past the pub garden thumping hard house. Someone at another table yells a Hallelujah. One more day here, and then I go back to London.

He sees my face turn, and asks me if I am alright.

I am, by now, sleepily drunk. I take another kiss of my glass and settle back in my chair. The sunshine goes into my eyes and makes me squint.

It strikes me that I cannot bear to be cold ever again. I can't do this anymore. I wriggle my hand free from his and open my eyes to the light. Water rolling out of them again.

But he takes a breath. I've had a good time with you.

Blind, I blink. And things start to come back into focus, inverted so the outline of his head is a flashing neon halo. I nod at him. I look at his big, wide smile.

The sizzle of earthy aubergine on an outdoor grill nearby. The tang of his cologne.

Moments. Temporary moments, all imbalanced, shaking, indistinct. Too quick, or too slow. The brain pinches them out of the air and stores them, locks them away in a faulty vault. This time I take his hand. "I want to do this again," I say.

"We'll have plenty more days like this."

**[ This page has been left blank, intentionally. ]**

# My Mate Joe

By Michael Pudney

I thought it'd just be one of those Sundays where I'd go round Joe's house, kick a ball around, play some computer games and eat some junk food. Standard. However, little did I know that this particular Sunday would teach me more than my class teacher or parents ever would.

We were at our regular corner shop – *Ocean News* – to stock up on our daily dose of sugar. The name *Ocean News* always struck me as an odd choice. I didn't expect it would have made much money simply selling stories about the ocean, and you couldn't give the Thames Estuary ocean status. We passed the sign outside the shop notifying us that Ronnie Kray was dead, whoever he was, and there was a corgi tied up to it, obediently waiting for its owner. We entered and Joe went straight to the magazines as I went to the counter. The small Indian lady, who never seemed to age, looked over my shoulder to see the back of Joe's head.

“Is that your new girlfriend?” she said, smiling, hoping that I'd finally found ‘the one’ even though I was only ten years old. I turned to see Joe's long, loose blond hair. It did make me wonder why he had hair like a girl, but I never questioned it. I saved the lady's dignity.

“No, she’s just a friend.” I paid for my treats and we left before Joe turned around to reveal what would have been, to the Indian lady, a girl with extremely boyish looks.

Back at his house, where the sound of a passing car was rare, we were throwing a tennis ball against the wall in his garden, ensuring we avoided hitting the Juliet doors and dodged the potted plants. We’d turned it into a competitive game, which meant that I was going to lose. Joe was good at sports, better than I was. At school, he was the fastest, the strongest, and the coolest; I hated it when he wanted to play a game. Initially I refused because I didn’t want to come second again, then he’d call me a chicken and a gaylord, so I played. As we got into the ‘throwing the ball against the wall’ game, I realised I was quite good. A frustrated Joe began to smash the ball against the red brick, so I considered just letting him win, but then my competitive side whispered words of encouragement. As I won yet another point, Joe launched the ball at my face, almost knocking me into a coma. I would have laughed at this, but suddenly he shouted, “You’re such a cunt!” Joe was as shocked as I that he’d said it. The only sound around us came from Joe’s neighbour, a staring, frozen Mrs Skinner, drowning her beloved petunias with her hose.

Joe huffed away his fury.

“Do you wanna watch a film?”

I said I did, mainly because by agreeing with him it would mean he wouldn’t again call me a word which was as bad as turning up to school on Non-Uniform Day in full uniform. I asked what he had. He said *Trainspotting*. I asked what it was about. He said he didn’t know but he’d seen one bit where a man pooped the bed, then flicked the poo all over a family’s breakfast. I grabbed my chocolate drops and went inside.

In his living room we were armed to the max with sweets, Coca Cola, a TV on pretty high volume, and a VHS player. Joe smiled as

someone injected themselves with heroin. I struggled to find the funny bit of that particular scene. An hour or so later, a dead baby was crawling on the ceiling when Joe's dad walked in the room. I knew we weren't supposed to be watching heroin injecting, cocaine snorting, hard sex and a bed filled with faeces, or listening to Iggy Pop at our age. We'd been caught and I expected to be in trouble. Joe blew a Hubba-Bubba bubble.

"You meant to be watching this?" Joe's dad, John, asked as a Scotsman was screaming in his bed.

"Mum said we could watch it."

I kept quiet.

"Really?" I looked up at John. All I knew about him was that he worked for Essex council, always had oil on his hands, had bad teeth, and spoke so fast I could barely understand him, although I'm quite sure that most of what he said was swearing anyway.

"Yeah." The dead baby fell on the Scotsman and he screeched into his pillow.

"Well I guess it won't do you no 'arm. Alright then. I'm off out." Joe's dad was cool; my dad wouldn't have let me watch it.

The film finished and I had learnt about a hundred new things in about two hours. We headed upstairs.

His older brother's door was ajar. It was never ajar, which is why it stopped Joe in his tracks. "You wanna check out some porn?" He just came out with it. No different to when he had asked earlier whether I wanted to throw a tennis ball against a wall.

"Yeah alright," I replied while trying to recall whether I'd heard the word 'porn' before. We crept in. His brother's presence was still

worryingly apparent through the stench of stale cigarettes and damp towels. The thought of getting caught was thrilling.

Joe went to a drawer and pulled out a magazine: “Check this out,” he said.

Its glossy cover showed a lovely blonde lady bent double over a sofa, and a big red star where her vagina was housed. We looked at each other and smiled, though I’m not sure why, perhaps because we could now finally call ourselves men, or perhaps because we were both absolutely terrified and needed each other’s smile for comfort.

I noticed he’d skipped the contents. Without the contents I was lost. It made me wonder how the hell he was going to navigate his way through the magazine without referring back to them. As we leafed through the mag as meticulously as possible, boob by boob, Joe stopped at a page with two girls lying on a bed naked (except for their high heels, which made me think of my mum. She would have gone mad if those shoes were on her bed, or my bed for that matter.) I wondered why we had stopped, but dared not to look away from the page, then Joe said, softly, eyes still fixed on the girls, “Pudney?”

“Yeah?” I only whispered because he had.

“Is your willy sticking up?”

My willy wasn’t sticking up.

“Yeah,” I lied.

The back end of the mag had some stories but I didn’t get a chance to read them – I was gutted. Joe strategically placed the magazine exactly where he had picked it up. I felt like a secret agent, though low level. It was then that Joe sprung out of his whispering, quiet mood and nonchalantly asked, “Fancy a bath?”

“OK,” I found myself saying, because, after all, he was a mate.

The next weekend I was at my friend Sophie's house. We had just finished playing Etch-a-Sketch in her attic room. We were at a loose end so Sophie suggested we play Doctors and Nurses. She pulled some chairs together to turn into a makeshift bed, and she lay on it.

"OK, you have to operate on me."

I grabbed some amateur surgical tools lying around (bits of plastic and card), some broken rubber tubing, a fork sitting on our plate of mostly eaten snacks, and some tissues, obviously to wipe up the blood. I began to dab until she reminded me that it was impossible to operate through her shirt, so she took it off. I thought nothing of it; we were mates.

My operating skills were obviously very good because in no time at all Sophie had stripped down to her knickers. I was still working hard to remove that defective kidney when she suggested, "Do you think I should take my knickers off?" At this point, I knew something was up. I didn't quite know why, but I was sure that I wasn't meant to see what Sophie kept in those knickers. I mean, no more than one week before I had seen a magazine cover where the bit she was going to show me had been covered by a big red star, and I was under the assumption that if Sophie took off those knickers, a big red star was not underneath them. Although she was the one more or less naked, I felt more exposed at this awkward situation. So, after a momentary silence I chickened out.

"I'm gonna ask your dad if it's okay."

She huffed, and then reluctantly agreed.

Ian was out in the garden watering the plants in his shorts and a vest top; it was a beautiful day so why not. I stayed by the backdoor.

"Ian?"

"Yes Michael?"

“Is it okay if I take off Sophie’s knickers?”

He didn’t look up or stop watering his plants.

“No Michael, no you can’t take off her knickers.”

“OK. Thanks a lot!” I headed back upstairs and told Sophie the verdict. She sighed, then perked up,

“Wanna play Dungeons and Dragons?”

“Sure!”



Throughout my primary school days, the bathrooms were a breeze to handle. You got your individual section, safe from prying eyes, and trousers around your ankles were entirely acceptable. But at my first day of secondary school, I had never been so wrong. I treaded lightly through the corridor wearing school clothes three sizes too big for me, an oversized school bag and a churning stomach full of nerves. I needed a wee. I walked into the stinking boys’ toilet and stood myself up to the basin. Down came my trousers to my ankles, closely followed by my pants. Naked, exposed, vulnerable. As soon as I’d started peeing, a pupil who looked like a man, wearing a uniform that fit, walked through the door. He burst into laughter and then spanked my arse so hard that it slammed me up against the basin; piss exploded like a Catherine Wheel all over me. He kept laughing as he watched my trousers seep urine, and my arse cheek redden. He winked and smirked,

“If I ever see you do that again, I’ll kill you.”

If I didn’t laugh with him I would have had an emotional breakdown. I never pulled my trousers down ever again.

Fast-forward a year of using only my zip to have a wee (I now considered myself a veteran), and we were hanging out in the streets of our home town. The few hundred people that had bothered to wait around in the bitter cold cheered as Christmas had officially begun. A Z-list celebrity did the honours of pressing the button to illuminate the streets of Leigh-on-Sea. The few of us who had waited around were contemplating what to do next. One member of our gang was a Goth called Sammy. She was scantily clad but what she did have on was all black, including the black lipstick and black tear drawn on her face.

It was decided that the five of us go back to Sammy's place. She was almost shaking in the cold as she explained, "I can't feel anything. Maybe I should have worn a coat. At least then everyone would be staring into my eyes." At that point I did my best to not look at her blatant cleavage. I succeeded, and considered it a small victory in self-discipline.

Her flat was small; we went into her bedroom where she offered vodka from the bottle to everyone. It was hard to see anything in the room because of its gothic theme. There were pictures of death and the Devil. The bed sheets represented some kind of scene in Hell. Arty, but not my cup of tea. I needed the toilet. Sammy followed me. I had my fears it was going to be another bum-slap-gate. But I was distracted in the corridor when introduced by Sammy to her mum – who wasn't a Goth, which surprised me. Upon returning from the toilet, Sammy's mum had returned to her room, but Sammy was waiting. She grabbed my arm and yanked me into the coats. She began sucking my face like a plunger, pushing me deeper and deeper into the coats. I lost my bearings as she rubbed herself up against me. Her eyes were closed, mine were wide open, paranoid that her mum would walk back out of her room and catch her daughter attacking me – who would she shout at? This innocently exposed boy or her boy-eating daughter? She grabbed my hands and slapped them onto

her bum as she lifted her leg up to my waist. I was old enough to know that this was supposed to be turning me on, but I was terrified. I was scared of Goths when I saw them in the street, let alone one assaulting me in her hallway. Finally, she finished with me and we went back to her room. The others had left a quarter of the bottle for us... well, for her. She downed it in one then pulled me onto the bed. She squeezed my hand onto her breast and within minutes passed out. We all sat there for about an hour afterwards, chatting away, me with a handful of boob, then decided to leave when we knew the host wasn't going to wake up. As we let ourselves out everyone began laughing at me, but no one let me in on the joke.

When I got home I looked in the mirror and saw that my face was covered in black. It didn't bother me, though. What bothered me was the 'banter' I was going to get at school. There would be a backlash, and I wasn't looking forward to how I would be associated with a girl whose nickname was 'Sammy the Spider'. But there it was, the next day: "Did she open all eight of her legs?" I thought that one was particularly inventive, and it has stayed with me forever. I looked over to see who the jibes were coming from; it was Joe. If only the people laughing with him knew our secrets, but I wasn't to say anything. He was a mate.

# Afloat, Ashore

From the life of Charlie Burke

By Jo Lazar

*"What's the matter, Charlie?"*

*"I need help, my head's bursting."*

In Barking, in 1946, Charlie's head was the youngest in his family and it would always be. He got away with everything. To add to his numerous siblings, the community was tightly knit. There were no locks, and no closed front doors.

For a while, the railway at the back of the estate he grew up on had no trains, and the children played there every day. In later years, on days when the steam engine finally reached them, they'd smile and wave at it. "Got any coal?" they'd ask the driver, and the following day he'd chuck a bagful at them. They'd share it with the neighbours. Charlie's head was just fine.

The number of industries opening in Barking increased considerably following the First World War, with firms engaged in chemical making, timber manufacture, and metal production. Upon finishing school at 15, Charlie got a job in a wood factory with his brother.

When he was fired one morning for playing up, he found another by noon.

*“If you want help, I can give it to you.”*

Committed for twenty-eight days in the security unit at Newham Hospital: a slight cognitive problem, they said. They thought it was the drink, but they kept him for twenty-eight more days. Fifty-six long days altogether. The numbers swirl in front of his eyes when Charlie says them.

He lost his mum at a young age, before he started working. The pain never left, the way pain stays even when you want to bury it. Charlie’s driving career started off with a van, collecting bedsheets in large rucksacks from King George V Dock. He brought them to the small army of women who would clean and iron them in record time, then take them back to the ships.

Charlie moved on to drive the buses in 1974. He was happy to go to work every day. When his shift changed, he was just as keen to go to work every night. He smiles when he talks about the regulars. Butchers, chefs, bakers – Charlie drove them all. They’d bring him food; they’d stop for a quick chat. He misses it. He misses a lot of things; the sentiment floats around him when he talks. It’s a sort of sadness lit up with memories. London was different then. In Limehouse, Charlie used to stop in the station round the corner from a gay pub. He drove the partygoers to Trafalgar Square. Every now and then, one of them lifted their pink tutu and flashed their pink pants in Charlie’s general direction. “Bye bye, driver!” they’d shout. He used to laugh then, and he laughs now.

Things have changed since then; with the change, Charlie’s brow falls in thought. The tests for drivers are more lenient now; they don’t care as much. People work longer hours; they’re not as appreciated. It was the stress that ultimately drove him to retire at 60 years old, when his health started to decline.

With hands no longer glued to the steering wheel, he found himself with too much free time. The thing about free time is that it works for some: they fill it with little things, they rejoice in no longer working a tedious job. Some take up hobbies, others wait it out, and others, like Charlie, fall in it as if it were a pit. The sort of not-too-deep of a hole that should be easy to climb out of. A budding depression that starts off like shallow water at the shore. You walk it because it leads you forward, but it suddenly drops into the Marianas Trench, and you sink. For Charlie, there were no dockers who knew him in the shallow waters, there was no floating help.

The water was bitter, not salty. It came in pints, all day long. It came with loneliness, with forgetting where he left his bike, four pubs ago. The Marianas Trench is almost 11,000 metres deep; the pressure is fatal. Charlie found himself on the edge of a train platform, hooked at the collar by a member of staff. He ran with the bitter water flooding his brain, with the pressure of the world crushing his skull. He ran until someone caught him.

*“What’s the matter, Charlie?”*

*“I need help, my head’s bursting.”*

His daughter wanted to visit, but the unit was not a nice place. He rang her every evening. They gave him medicine for the urges, and for fifty-six days Charlie fought the water relentlessly. Three days after he got out, the pressure found him. The water trickled down his path. A bloke accused him of being in the nuthouse. Charlie’s smile is sad when he describes hitting the man as far as he could with his right fist.

The nights were quiet in the unit. In the stillness, Charlie found his mother one night; she stood at the end of his bed. “You’ll be all right,” she said. His mind was in overtime; he describes the devil’s voice saying, “One more, Charles, one more won’t hurt you.” The other voice would say, “No, Charlie, don’t go there.”

His partner of twenty years, the one he calls his 'rock', drew the line after treading on eggshells with him for months. Unless he sorted himself out, they were finished. His mind started thinking for the better. Angels come in many forms. Some come from inside, crawling up at the edge of the darkness and lighting candles right and left. Others physically guide you to better times. Charlie's angel was only a couple of years old and crawled onto his lap. "You've got to change," his granddaughter said. "I don't like you when you're drinking."

"So I did. First I went out and got plastered one last time. I had to give it the best I got and then it was change, or lose the people I love."

The people Charlie loves are still there for him today. AA didn't work for him. So Charlie's mind cleared up enough to seek other groups. It started off quiet on his side; he listened to the stories and pieces of advice. In time, he got up and told his story. He avoided the alcohol aisles in supermarkets. His pills kept the urges away, but sometimes, thoughts of stormy waters entered his mind. He joined more groups. Meeting people and learning of their struggles acted like bricks in a dam.

He's swum through it all and climbed out of it. Personal loss, happiness, marriage, children, grandchildren, the dark corners of his mind. The water has been out of Charlie's life two and a half years now.

He gave back to the people who helped him, the only way he knew how to. He signed up to do a course with the NHS at the Mile End Hospital Mental Health Unit. They had him scheduled to go talk to the patients three or four afternoons a week. On Mondays he played the drums with the men and on Tuesdays he sat with the women and talked their worries out. They'd go out in groups and initiate the patients' reintegration in society. Charlie knew how important support is, so he made sure he offered his unconditionally. He found his health deteriorating yet again, and this time, it stopped him from going to the unit any longer.

*"You've been an asset, Charlie. Everyone's asking about you still."*

Armed with a smile and a young soul, Charlie meets up with as many troubled people as he can. Whenever he goes to a meeting, he approaches the newcomers and offers them comfort. Some stay in touch for months afterwards.

*"Charlie, I've slipped off."*

And so he schedules lunch and packs a bag of DVDs to lend out to his friend. In others' storms and trenches, Charlie puts his hand out to catch those who are willing to grasp it. The devil's voice stays quiet now; if someone provokes him, he'll just walk away without a word. Charlie has been on the edge and he refuses to return. Before he gives in to any urge, he seeks help. Be it from within, from his doctor, or from his loved ones, he knows he's never alone. Those he's helped know it as well.

Charlie's favourite memories are in the van. Back then, the docks were thriving. Charlie has been on the big ships, the ones bringing tomatoes from the Canary Islands. The people smiled a lot more then, they all wanted to know his name; eventually, they all did. He takes the bus sometimes and walks by the docks. That water is fine; it speaks of a beautiful time in his life.

His laugh is contagious. One time, he went for a drink with the captain, and watched the shore distancing itself for a good couple of minutes before realising what was happening. "We're fucking moving!" he shouted. "Look, look, we're moving!" He had to climb down to a boat and be taken back to the docks where the van was. His laugh is genuine, happy.

*"How come you're always smiling, Charlie?"*

*"It's better than crying, right?"*

Canning Town started changing when he moved there, back in '95. The market used to be alive, pulsing with shoppers. The café was over there, he points, the butcher over there. When he talks, it feels like he could paint the past with his fingers. The development in Canning Town was fast and brutal to traditional places. The community found itself broken; people lock their doors now. Charlie smiles despite it. He's going to meet with a group in the next couple of days; he keeps busy.

# Memory: Loss

By Naomi Duffree

My mother is eighty-eight. Daytime television and a weekly trip to the hairdresser sums up her week. Confused phone calls. She is not the same person I knew twenty years ago; nor the same person who helped me through my first loss, the death of her dear friend Bobby, my godmother. And I'm acutely aware she won't be there to comfort me when she is taken from me.

*Dear Aunty Bobby,*

*I was so excited about coming home to Abbots Langley for my exeat weekend. A whole weekend in my own bed, home-cooked food and Saturday night watching The Generation Game on the television with my family; sitting round eating sausage and apple casserole (which was my favourite), catching up with everything that had happened while I had been away at school. It was also the boat race weekend and we always watched that. Daddy was such a big sports fan of most events – and this was no exception. Fiona sat in the back on that journey home. Every time we were in the car we argued as to whose turn it was in the front – but because she had a friend with her they got to share the back seat. I couldn't contain my excitement as I got in the passenger seat.*

*“Do you think Aunty Bobby will be out watching the race today?” There was a pause as Daddy stopped fiddling with his seat belt. “With her living in Putney she might go and watch from the bridge, mightn’t she?” I finished off, putting my belt on and smiling eagerly up at Daddy whom I hadn’t seen for weeks.*

*He took hold of my hand. The silence in the car was already resting heavily on my chest. He held my hand gently at first and then began rubbing it with his thumb while he spoke to me.*

*“I’m afraid I’ve got some very sad news about Aunty Bobby. She has died.”*

*I don’t remember what I said next, if anything. The tears splashed down on to my blue school coat. Killing yourself. People did that? Why?*

*You weren’t old, or physically ill – you weren’t supposed to die yet. You were funny, made me laugh, took me to the panto and theatre in London in the holidays. You weren’t supposed to be dead. Daddy explained briefly that he had wanted to wait until I got home so that he and Mummy could tell me together. I had asked about you as soon as I got in the car, and that plan was now out the window.*

*I’ve no idea how long he held my hand; just rubbing, gently comforting me with that rhythmic movement, over and over my fingers and thumb.*

I don’t remember the journey home – except that it was long. And I do look back now and feel for Gail, Fiona’s friend. How awkward that must have been. I also now feel for Mummy. She must have been sorry she couldn’t break the news to me together, at home. Being a mother myself now, I know this is such a difficult occurrence and you just want to make it as comforting as possible for your children. You’re about to shatter their illusions of this safe world – you

wouldn't want them knowing half the story stuck in a car with unanswered questions for a good three hours. But we did get home in one piece, and I did find out that suicide is a complicated, tragic way out.

*I asked many questions and Mummy patiently explained. You had been so happy when you married Ted, a man with a great sense of humour. He brought you happiness, which was stolen away on your first wedding anniversary when he died from cancer. A move to the countryside was planned, but the house sale fell through. Everything plotting against you. You decided to take a bottle of pills and finish your life. Being such a good friend, you rang Mummy and rambled incoherently on the phone to her about how I would be fine, and her nephew would be fine, and... Mummy kept you talking while Daddy went next door to ring for an ambulance. That time they were in time. The hospital discharged you. You might have been pocket-sized but your determination knew no bounds.*

*After Mummy and Daddy had been to the crematorium I was so angry about the fact that you weren't allowed a full funeral. Suicide, although no longer seen as a crime, was treated in a negative way and Mummy's description of the crematorium had been very bleak. She never wanted me to experience being somewhere like that.*

I remember thinking for years that suicide would be how I would die. Maybe because it was the first death that had affected me, I was never sure. I do remember reading an article where someone's father had died in his sleep after lunch one day – and they feared for years that this would be how they would die. It made me feel less daft about how I had felt. I recognised what they were saying even though I had given up on the theory years beforehand.

*Mummy was an old friend from your days as a nurse and she had chosen you as a perfect godmother. You always made me*

*laugh and were supportive of my love of drama. The next Sarah Bernhardt you called me – before I even knew who she was (she sounded very grand). Remember when we went to see a theatrical version of Winnie the Pooh in London? It was so special: the lights, the colourful costumes and those loveable characters. You gave me money for the opera glasses. How huge Tigger looked, even before he'd eaten all the honey.*

*One January when I was nine, we all went to the Wimbledon theatre to see Cinderella. Jimmy Tarbuck invited me on stage to sing part of 'She'll be coming round the mountain'. I couldn't sing then and I can't sing now. It must have been excruciating. But I had a new coffee-and-crème coloured long dress on so what did it matter? I was given a Freddo chocolate bar from Jimmy and when we got back to your flat in Putney we put it in the fridge to rescue it from my hot little hand. When we came to leave later that evening we left it there and you promised to look after it until I saw you again.*

*Do you remember when I had the measles and was stuck in bed? You came up to say goodnight and I asked for a tune. So you sang to me, 'You are my sunshine'. After you finished I explained that I had wanted a 'Tune' lozenge. Your warm chuckle was the best soother. That incident was a running family joke for years. I could see why you had been such a successful nurse – your bedside manner was excellent. Quirky – but excellent.*

*I missed you so much when I was growing up. We would have laughed about many things. It was a tragedy that for someone with this amazing sense of humour you had such a sadness exploding inside you.*

*I hope you know what I have been up to in the years since you have been gone. Whether you have approved or not – I'd like to*

*think you have been laughing along with me, because I'd like to think you are happy now. X*



Letters are important to me. I attribute it to being at boarding school. The whole mood for the day would pivot on whether the pigeonhole B was lined with letters. While it was, there was hope that the day would be a good one. We would stand around in a huge semi-circle, flat brown shoes on the end of grey socks, tapping anxiously, while the fussy secretary sorted the piles of post into the dark brown wooden boxes. We had to write letters home twice a week – they were vetted for spelling mistakes, although I expect it was really for signs of ‘unhappiness’ or ‘monstrous lies’ winging their way through the Dorset lanes out into the big wide world. I loved letter writing so it didn’t bother me – and would usually write more than twice a week anyway.

My mother purchased an iPad a few years ago. She has learnt how to send emails; it has become a lifeline for her and she is always checking ‘this thing’ to see who has written to her. She gets frustrated when the technology doesn’t go her way – as we all do. Many an email is signed off with “I’m sending this now before I throw this contraption in the bin!” It is great that she has this form of communication now when other ways, such as her hearing and sight, are slowly failing her.

Walking has become difficult and painful, not that I see her enough since moving down to London. She won’t come down to this “dreadful city,” which is “far too busy”. And besides she couldn’t sit in the car “for all that time”. The annoying thing is she can sit and watch *Deal or No Deal* back to back for longer than it would take to nip down here – but some people you can’t argue with. She is occasionally showing glimpses of the mother-in-law that we weren’t allowed to let her turn into. “Tell me if I ever get like your Grandmother.” I made that mistake once; she didn’t ring me for days.

I guess a great deal changed when she lost her husband, my father. She was fairly reliant on him; they had what might have been termed traditional roles.

And I guess when I lost my father she was the one who needed looking after.

*Dear Daddy,*

*This is a weird one. You are still so present, yet you suffered a heart attack 24 years ago. Fiona rang me. I had to confirm with her that you hadn't survived.*

*I suddenly am looking down at myself and your granddaughter, not yet one, standing clinging onto my leg by the phone starting to laugh because she thinks that's what I am doing. Then uncertain at watching her rock crumble, she starts to cry too. I am wracked with grief; my chest is emitting sounds I'm not familiar with. It brings Grace, my neighbour, to the door who takes Poppy off to hers, away from this distressing scene while I do all the things I have to do to sort out this situation. I sit on the stairs and sob. The shock hits my body as if I'd been slammed against the wall. I start to think about Mummy, alone in London at Bart's hospital, not knowing anybody. Fiona was on her way to collect her, but it would be a few hours. I had to speak to her. I found the number from the operator and I rang explaining the situation. I felt so helpless though. Mummy talked about how after offering you a Murray mint on the train as it pulled out of King's Cross, you slumped forward and she just knew. A heart attack. That's a nurse's training for you. Passengers had tried to revive you but she knew you were dead. They had to wait for the next station and then the ambulance took you away. Two passengers accompanied her. I remember she wrote to them weeks later, thanking these two strangers for their kindness. (See Mummy, London isn't all that bad.) She was in shock and*

*talking about how she wouldn't cope without you. We knew she would though – because she had to.*

*The next month was extraordinary. Our thoughts were with Mummy who couldn't think straight. I was due to move house the week you died, thankfully as it turned out nearer to Melton Mowbray. How cruel that you had only retired there two years previously. Everyone rang to ask how she was coping. You'd been married over 30 years. I can't remember an angry exchange between you. I did on occasions want to shout. "Hello – can anyone hear me? – I've lost my father?" I had Poppy to look after though, as well as Mummy, so I just kept busy and saved those moments for myself.*

*I miss you. I've finished my degree in Creative Writing, in London, which I inherited a love of through you. The discussions we would have had. I would be sending you my published articles and waiting for your critique. Mummy reads them from her iPad and says how pleased you'd be with them. "I don't always understand them, but I think you are very clever." Good old mother's love. I'm not clever, I just enjoy writing – and I've got you to thank for that.*

*I would smile so broadly on reading your letters at school. They were pages long and full of funny anecdotes; the best one being when you set off on a Saturday to walk up to the village at Abbots Langley. You went into the shed where Mummy was planting some pots up and kissed her goodbye, telling her you'd be back soon. Out of habit you then walked out of the shed, fixing the padlock so that no one could get in. Or out. I chuckled when I read it. I bet Mummy did too – eventually.*

*You received so many junk mail letters after you died. I used to reply on your behalf. Severn Trent wrote thanking you for saving water over the drought. 'You' wrote back saying it had*

*been easy – what with you being dead for the last two years. You also promised to pass on a little trick you'd learnt, about turning water into wine. The director wrote back thanking me for seeing the funny side and for taking it so well.*

*To be honest, how else was I supposed to take it? It was a computer error – they hadn't meant to offend. Mummy used to ask me to reply to them all, so at least it was stopping her getting upset with these reminders, as if she needed any, that you weren't around anymore.*

*Your absence made me think differently about my own life. Selfish and childish though it may seem I thought, "I'm half way to being an orphan." I don't think it matters how old you are when you lose a parent – it hurls you back to being a child again; the vulnerability and denial seep in. Standing in a shop angry that people are arguing over their change; accidentally breaking precious ornaments and questioning what is actually precious. What is important? The other change, after the anger died down, was that I realised death is part of life. If you can't accept it then that's the future pretty much screwed. Death changes your everyday. Life goes on but differently. It didn't matter that I was married with my own family, Christmas would never be the same. Watching Monty Python would never be the same; giving your granddaughters Just William books to read was not going to be the same as if I'd been able to say, "Grandpa once suggested I read these – here, see what you think." They wouldn't have listened to me. But they would have hung on your every word.*

*Mummy tells us that all the time. "Wouldn't Michael have been so proud of all his grandchildren?" And yes, you would. I sometimes wonder, though, if you'd lived to be eighty-eight, whether you'd understand all they are up to. The world has moved so quickly in twenty-four years. You had a word processor, which was a novelty, and only a few channels on your television.*

*I hope you are smiling down on us all. I always tell Mummy you are looking out for her. And I'm always thinking of you. X*



My mother gets impatient with the television. The digital ones need patience. I guess when you've been active for the greater part of your life and then things take longer to do, such as putting your tights on and searching for a book of stamps you'd just bought, patience flies out the window.

"It has a mind of its own," she tells me over the phone. We chat regularly. I miss her. I miss having the mother that understood what was going on in my life. Don't misunderstand me, she comprehends most things, but that's because I filter out thoughts that will worry her or which she won't fully appreciate.

Sometimes I can't help myself and I just have to share with her, because deep down I pretend she'll get it. I still have a strong bond and I want her involved with my life. Yet I know she has been battered by old age and can't always understand this strange new world she finds herself in.

I was speaking to her the other day about someone I wanted to interview; a Paralympian who had been in the 7/7 tube bombings. Before I'd finished my explanation she interrupted, "Oh, she's going to walk around Britain or something... I'm sure I read that somewhere."

"Who?" I asked, "The lady from the Paralympics?"

"No! Not her!"

"Ah, maybe you mean the one who tackled the marathon?"

"Yes, it was her. Yes, come to think of it, it was the marathon lady. Anyway, what's the point of these interviews?"

I began to explain as I've explained before, just wishing the explanation would come to an end quickly as I knew she didn't she fully grasp the reason.

The keyboard blurs.

This is what I have lost: the warts-and-all communication with my darling mother. And I'm sure I'm not the only child to have this going on. My own children will be doing it with me one day... if they're not already. And I'll have forgotten what it was like with Granny, and I'll be telling them, "If I ever get like Granny..." And then I will.

And I'll be bloody proud too.

Memory is strange.

I remember having races along the carpet with our fingers one night when we were lying on the floor by the fire. Mummy was really quick. I must have been about twenty and we were having one of those moments probably fuelled by a gin and tonic. We laughed uncontrollably. Daddy had to turn the television up. And all the practical things: constant clean clothes, warm fresh sweet baking smells, I've even forgiven her for constantly waking us up with the Hoover droning on downstairs so she could get the housework out of the way and make time for us. It was far more than we deserved. She would always put us first and do without so we didn't have to. We didn't even think about it at the time. It comes into sharp recognition now when her memory is playing tricks and taking away the mother I had from my childhood.

Losing you, Mummy, is something normal that comes with old age. And maybe as happened when Aunty Bobby and Daddy died, it's something I have to accept so that life can go on. But differently.

# Support

From the life of Kevin Flannagan

By Lydia Morris

*“...and you’re not expecting it, some people you only meet once and it has that instant effect on you, you know?”*

- FLAN

Hand on the steering wheel, he takes a left turn. The sleeve of his coat is still wet from the rain that fell earlier that morning as he left his home in Leytonstone. He drives on.

The street is lined with houses, houses that seem to have been roughly sewn together into a patchwork quilt and displayed on the street with a small sign next to them saying ‘Finchley Road’. They are united only by their front doors, with unknown worlds behind them, unknown except to those like Flan. Flan’s job is to watch over those that no one else looks out for. Every day he meets new people who have pressed their alarm because they are in need of a helping hand. Flan is a guardian and each day his role is different, as are the people in need, but each day he chooses to listen.

The car moves through the traffic lights, he drives a little more, remembering the call he had earlier with Catherine as he looks for the driveway that she had instructed him to park on. Slowing near a

hedge that peeks out onto the road, he muses over the outstretched branches that wave him down. Following the line of the steep drive beside it, he looks up towards the house. On first glance, it looks like the house is grounded by a line of shrubbery that circles the building, stopping it from escaping into the blue sky above. The drive juts out onto the main road at an angle so steep that passing children would memorise its location for the coming snowy days, eagerly awaiting the chance to impress their friends with the sledging opportunity they had found. Looking closer at the house he feels his breathing grow shallow over the stillness that looms. There's no movement in any of the three storeys of windows, just the silent waving of the garden in the breeze. Glancing back to the drive, he shakes his head.

Finding somewhere to park a little way around the corner, he gets out of his car and walks back to the house. Taking brisk, long steps up the driveway he approaches the grand oak door; there is a black cast-iron knocker between two panes of stained glass. He reaches for it. The wind rustles over the flowerless rose beds in front of the bay window to his right, and he knocks twice. The house remains still. Looking up at the windows above, he notices the vines that run up the side of the house, separating around the large panes of ice-like glass. There is movement from behind the door, just a few feet away from him; the aged wood separating their worlds, just mere blurred ghosts behind the panes. It opens.

A strange sense of secrecy passes by him from the hallway, like a treasure trove being opened, and there, standing before him on the wooden floorboards, is Catherine.

He looks at her for a moment. She is a small elderly lady with wispy white hair and pale skin that creases around her mouth and under her eyes. Her lips are thin, lining her mouth firmly as he watches them tighten.

“Hi Catherine. I called earlier. My name’s Flan, I’ve come to check your alarm, I’m from the...”

“Where’s your car?” She stares out onto the driveway.

Flan follows her gaze out towards the sunlit driveway, and the sounds of the cars on the road outside seem to drift further and further away. He looks back to her again and she returns his gaze with a blank stare that wades through him, the corner of her lip curling ever so slightly.

“I parked it just around the corner.” He nods to his right.

Face dropping, her forehead furrows. “I said you could park it on the drive.” She gestures to the open space behind him.

“Yes, but your driveway is so steep I wouldn’t be able to get back out onto the road again.”

“Pfft, I do it all the time.” The back of her hand flicks through the air as she bats him off, her 83 years of age going with it like long locks over a teenager’s shoulder.

“What, you back out onto...”

“Yes, people let me, people just stop,” she says to him blankly, her face harbouring confusion.

A smile breaks out across his face.

Sitting on the edge of the velvet trim sofa, he holds his tea in his left hand, fingers tightened around the handle of the cup. His right hand remains motionless as it holds the small china plate below it. He stares at her, his face not moving, holding its expression, his lips slightly parted.

She is looking back at him from the seat opposite. Her wrinkles have now softened across her face and her lips have loosened. He thinks of how content she seems: her face is gentle and still, her breathing

light, and her eyes humble. Sitting back in the armchair with a cushion propping her up, she smiles ever so slightly.

Contemplating what she has said, his look unfastens, his eyes still moist from the laughter some eternal moments ago. Their gaze is locked but for the first time he notices that only one of them can see the other; she sees him, but he sees only the ripples, not the creatures below the waves.

“You ... you are a holocaust survivor?”

“Yes, my dear,” she says. His gaze drops to her sleeve without him realising, it sits gently below her wrist, palm upwards. He half expects a group of black spidery numbers to crawl from beneath her cotton sleeve. Nothing happens. She smiles at him again.

*“I was meant to go in there for 15 minutes, just check the alarm, and I was in there for three quarters of an hour, just sitting there, hearing about her stories... That was about five years ago now, and she is no longer with us. It is the nature of my job.”*

\*

Iris is transferring to the Gold Service, which means she'll be able to call Flan or his colleagues directly should she have a fall. Flan has been sent out to collect her keys. Also built on Finchley Road, the house is enriched with time; old bricks against trimmed hedges and a luscious welcoming carpet of a lawn greets him. The windowpanes are the colour of ivy and the glass gleams in the sunlight, blushing over the vintage blinds they conceal.

The doormat, untrodden, sits perfectly angled upon a recently swept step. He knocks on the door and she answers. Before him is a lady with short thin hair that frames her plumped cheeks, which seem as white as snow under her gaze. But then those eyes ... those eyes that swirl rich turquoise within softened shades of pale blue. And with black pinheads for pupils, holding all the shades of the sky to her

glance. Eyes as youthful as the flowing waters of a spring that eagerly seeks the exploration of vast oceans.

She greets him with a single smile, the rising of her cheeks reflecting the blue in her eyes. She invites him in. Turning back into the house, her gaze unlocks and his forehead furrows as he tries to make sense of the small ninety-seven-year-old woman with her floor-length skirt and buttoned-up blouse.

Collecting himself, the door shuffles to a close behind him and his body is submerged into the preserved silence, the world outside evaporating. He breathes. The hallway is lined with wooden paneling against a vibrant but delicate design, still clearly detailed as though William Morris himself had stood there to paint it mere days before. The ornate features, which seem as old as the bricks that hold them up, carry a tickle across the back of Flan's neck, ensuring he knows that he is privy to something special here.

*“Well think about it, when you meet somebody and they’re in their seventies, eighties, nineties, they’ve lived a whole life: They’ve been independent, they’ve raised families, they’ve worked, and I think we can forget that sometimes. All you see is someone old, rather than someone who has had this incredible life.”*

Iris notices him admiring the wallpaper, his eyes tracing the lines of the decoration as though they were his fingertips. “It went up in the twenties, if I remember correctly. Never once desired to change it.”

“It’s stunning.” He muses over how the museums would squabble over the paper if they knew it was here, defended in its time-lock. Soon his gaze is swallowed back into her blue one, as he looks back to her before following her into the back room.

Entering, the room seems to have paused for just a moment, eighty years prior. Dust particles hover mid-air and the spirits of children frozen in play tease him in the corner of his eye. Iris walks ahead

as he tries to get back in touch with reality. She clutches her small frame tightly with her arms, and there is barely any distance between her footsteps. The thousand beams of light that hold still through the windows quietly soften all the surfaces around her, preparing to catch her fall.

Invited to sit, he takes a seat on the dark green sofa noticing the tapestry that lines the length of the room. She catches the direction of his attention as she walks towards a chest of drawers, "I made it."

He looks from the delicately stitched embroidery to her. "It's magnificent." Meeting her eyes, the magnetic blue perforates him. This is how he'll remember her.

Breaking her gaze, she moves towards a chest of drawers and her arm outstretches, light travelling down the contour of her arm and onto her hand, peaking at the bones that wind around each other like the roots of a willow tree. She opens the drawer.

Flan looks to the coffee table in front of him. It's perfectly parallel to the sofa. On top is today's newspaper, a magazine and a worn book; each arranged in line with each other and with the edge of the coffee table. The table is gleaming under a stack of wooden coasters.

"Is that what you used to do for a living, Iris?"

"Oh no, it was just something I loved to do. I used to work in hotels. I'd be in charge of cleaning the bedrooms." She giggles girlishly, "Oh, the things I would see!"

Flan chuckles and they both smile to themselves.

Iris's hair falls over her forehead as she glances up to the material that covers the pearl-coloured wall. Flan watches as her smile rises, and the colours leap from the embroidery and funnel into her eyes, swirling like an artist's palette. Flan imagines her stitching with beige

threads, and wonders if it was her past tears that seeped colour into each fibre.

The house sighs from the rooms above as it leans in to watch her comfortingly, and she moves around silently in the corner of its grandeur.

“It really is a beautiful house you have here, Iris. How long have you been here now?”

She moves towards him. “Let me see, I moved in here when I was seven, my father bought the house, and ... we just moved in. He was a chauffeur.”

“And you’ve lived here all your life then? Did you never marry?”

Her eyes dart to him as a lively laughter jumps through her from her stomach; her eyes darken and dance with melancholy. “Don’t be silly, I’ve never needed a man. I’ve always been happy with myself.”

She lowers herself slowly to sit opposite him. “Yes, ninety years I’ve been in this house. All the furnishings are the same, and the walls.” She raises her aged hand to gesture to the immaculate paper around the fireplace. “I dread to think what will happen to all of this when I go.”

Flan looks around the room, “Do you not have any relatives that it could go on to?”

“Just two nephews now, but I don’t see them.” She pauses.

“I don’t want those modern people coming in and pulling everything out.” She jolts her body forward in her chair. “It’d be like we had never even been here.” She looks to the window, watching the trees outside move in a breeze, before gently placing the keys on the coffee table in front of them.

Flan stays for another hour. Like Catherine, he never sees her again.

# Betty

From the life of Betty

By Sandra Wilson

I remember, I was six years old and we got driven to the train station. I don't recall which one it was. Me and me sister had little brown parcels. Mum had packed them a few weeks before going to the station and told us not to open them, but I had snuck into her bedroom, opened the drawer of the shabby wooden dresser, and carefully peeled away the thick brown paper. Three pairs of knickers, a toothbrush, a nightie and two old dresses. Where were we going? I got caught anyway and Mum gave me a good hiding. My younger sister Ann looked on in silence even though she was supposed to have been my lookout.

The morning we left home London was cold and the air was thick with smog. The smell of smoke, devastation, and dead bodies surrounded us like a deathly cloud. It was frighteningly still, almost ghostly, after the barrage of bombs that had been released by the Germans the night before. We had spent the night in the communal bomb shelters. I had snuggled up to Dad and my sister snuggled close to me wiv er fumb in er mouf. Mum sat with the boys.

Mum hadn't even come to wave us off at the station, not like the other kids' Mums.

"You're going on 'oliday," she said standing at the front door, coughing and spluttering but refusing to remove the manky fag from her mouth. Her hair was rolled up in big pink plastic rollers and she wore a flowery dress.

"How long are we going for?" I asked.

"Shut ya bleedin mouf Betty," she responded.

"How long is we going Mummy?" whispered Ann with tears in her eyes.

"Not long luv," said my Mum all sickly sweet and kissing Ann repeatedly on her forehead and chubby little cheeks.

Why didn't she kiss me like that? She hated me. I had always felt it. Was it cos I was lippy? She'd always treated me different to the others. Belting me and hollering at me down the street wiv er 'air in rollers, barefoot and a fag at the side of 'er mouth. She told me I was bad every opportunity she got. I often told her I hated her. I suppose that didn't 'elp.

Dad had left for work around 7am while we were still in bed. He gave us big hugs and kisses "Be good and look after each other," he said.

"We don't want to go, Daddy."

"It will be okay, Princess. Be sure you take care of your little sister."

"I will Daddy."

We arrived at the village in the countryside several hours later. Hundreds of us gathered in the town hall. No one knew where us kids were supposed to go or who with. Some bright spark decided we should line up on stage and the adults would take their pick of the child they wanted. I held onto my younger sister's little hand tight.

“You,” the man with the long pointy nose shouted, “get up on stage.” I dragged Ann with me. “No, not her, just you,” he said.

“She’s me baby sister; me Mum said we ’ave to stay together.”

I marched up the steps and strode onto the stage with her, my lips pursed in defiance. A woman at the back shouted, “I want both of them.” She came up to the stage and looked us up and down. She walked up the steps. She stood in front of us and ran her hands through our unkempt hair, just like the nit nurse at school. She smiled. She seemed warm and friendly. We followed her. Ann put her thumb in her mouth. When we got in the truck the woman introduced us to her husband. I decided I didn’t like him. He smelt of sweat, grease and muck. When we arrived at their home we were wide eyed because it was so big. My excitement grew at the thought of living in a castle, just like the princesses in the story books.

The maid gave us a bath in a big metal bath in front of a blazing fire. Then she gave us a tumbler of hot milk and a wedge of bread. Ann was too tired to finish hers. I devoured mine like a wild animal eating its prey. We were then taken to our room, a stable which was situated on the grounds not far from the house. I was too tired to complain.

The next day we were dropped off to school. Our new teacher, Mrs Harper, introduced herself and reassured us that if we were unhappy in our new homes we would be found another place to live.

I told Miss Harper the next day about our sleeping arrangements and she cracked up laughing. “I know Mr and Mrs Graham extremely well and they would not allow any child to sleep in the stables. Oh Betty, you are such a hoot.”

“But Miss.”

She continued to laugh uncontrollably.

I moaned and complained so much that Mrs Harper decided to pay the Grahams a visit. They spoke in whispers and that evening we packed our meagre belongings and left the castle.

Mrs Harper drove us an hour away to a small village. We were introduced to a big cuddly lady with rosy cheeks. "Oh they are so cute," she said. Trying to pinch our cheeks. I pulled away and looked at her with suspicion.

My older sister and brother came to visit us at our new home. They brought jam, sweets, freshly baked bread for me and Ann. Mrs Arthur made a fuss and baked cakes and served lukewarm tea. Her teenage son Ted looked on sullenly.

When my family left, Mrs Arthur took our gifts and we never saw them again. Every morning we were woken at 5.30am to wash the clothing of the men that boarded there. In the afternoon after school we had to clean the rooms.

"You have to earn your keep, little ones," chimed Mrs Arthur.

"We shouldn't be doing this, we're just kids," I complained.

"Shut up and do as you're told or I'll make the chickens bite you," laughed Ted.

He knew we were afraid of the large chickens that ran around in the yard. He often took great pleasure in holding them and chasing us around.

Life was hard, and I was relieved when I was about twelve years old and we returned home. Things were not any better there. So many people had either moved or died. The streets of London were a mass of rubble and destruction. The smell of death and acrid smoke circled the air like vultures.

I was twenty-two years old now, been on a few dates, nothing serious. Mum kept trying to fix me up with different lads but I wasn't interested, especially if she had a hand in it.

My best friend Doris invited me to a party so I made a dress for the occasion. I had saved what I could from my wages at the sausage factory. I left work that Friday, excited. I had it all planned: have a wash, do my hair. I had nicked a pair of Mum's stockings. Well, I was entitled to them cos she never gave me my share from the ration book.

I got ready and knocked at Doris's house a few doors down.

"Blimey Doris you've been home all day and you still got your rollers in." I walked in and helped her with her hair and make-up.

"Are you sure your Mum won't 'ave a moan about you going to another party?"

"Who bloody cares. She's already half cut."

"I feel sorry for her. She never drank like that when your Dad was alive."

"What you wearing tonight?"

"I'm wearing my yella dress," frowned Doris.

"I love that dress it's so pretty. Ooh are you wearing ya black dolly shoes?"

Doris smiled. "Yes."

We arrived at the party around 8pm and I was introduced to the owner Maisie. She was a bubbly welcoming woman with bright red hair. Doris handed her a bottle of wine.

"Thanks Doris. I love your dress. Who is this?"

"It's me best mate Betty; she lives next door to me."

"Okay," replied Maisie, looking me up and down.

The music was loud and there was plenty of food and drink flowing.

“She is married to a coloured man,” whispered Doris.

“Oh!” I exclaimed.

We walked into the large living room and there were people dancing, laughing and enjoying themselves.

I felt a tap on my arm and turned around and looked up to see a handsome young black man. He was gorgeous and I couldn't stop staring into his beautiful big brown eyes.

“I want to dance wid you,” he said in a thick Caribbean accent.

“That's a nice way to ask me,” I replied sarcastically. I couldn't believe I just said that.

He took my hand and tried to pull me up out of the padded seat.

“Get your effin hand off of me.”

“Eff you too,” he replied and walked off.

I stood there with my mouth open. I couldn't believe he had spoken to me like that. His friend walked over to me smiling and extending his hand.

“Will you dance with me?”

“I'm not a good dancer.”

“Neither am I,” he laughed.

His hand was soft and warm. As he circled my tiny waist I saw his friend glaring at me.

“I tink you upset me friend,” he said, trying to talk over the loud music.

“Well he upset me.”

He laughed. I laughed too, whilst trying to remember the dance steps I had seen those evenings when I would peer through the hotel window waiting for Mum to finish work.

His friend strode over to us and Carl thanked me for the dance.

“What do you want?” I asked.

He handed me a glass of brandy.

“Thanks,” I said sipping daintily,  
all the while wanting to down it in one.

“My name is Winston. Will you dance with me now?” he asked sheepishly.

“I might do.” I smiled coquettishly. I didn’t recognise myself. Why was I behaving like this?

We danced till the end of the party.

“I know we’ve been seeing each other for a few months now but I’m going back to Jamaica,” he said to me one day.

“So what about all the ‘I love you Betty’ and ...”

“I only planned to stay a few years and my family are all back home ...”

“You can’t go.”

“So what, you gwan stop me?” he replied in annoyance.

“No, but your kid will.”

“What do you mean, kid?”

“I’m pregnant, you idiot.”

“You will have to come to Jamaica with me.”

“I ain’t going nowhere.”

I returned home feeling anxious and afraid. How was I going to tell my family that I was pregnant? In fact I was effin terrified at the thought of pushing out a sprog. Doris had described in vivid detail what it was like to give birth. She had been forced to assist her Mother during at least three births.

“Mum, I need to speak to you.”

“There’s a coloured man at the front door,” interrupted Mikey.

“Tell ’im ta bugger off,” shouted Mum.

“Mum the thing is ...” I said.

“For gawd’s sake spit it out will ya,” she said impatiently.  
Mikey ran back down the hallway stomping on the cheap lino.  
“Mum, Mum, Mum,” screeched Michael, “He’s in our house.”  
Mum and I ran out to see what the commotion was.  
“Mrs Carter, my name is Winston.”  
“Oh shit,” I exclaimed.  
“You better get the eff out of my house before I call the police.  
I’ve ’eard about you lot,” Mum said.  
“I came to ask fe your daughter ’and in marriage.”  
“Over my dead body,” said Mum.  
“You want to marry me?”

My Mum was just as stunned as I was.

# Stories

By Megan Slade

## One

### *Daniel*

“You know, I read today that it’s common for children to have imaginary friends,” were the words my mother echoed to my father when I introduced them to my best friend Daniel; the red dragon from the Ready Brek adverts, which, now that I think of it, was peculiar, as to this day I still have never tried Ready Brek.

Daniel would go everywhere with me. On long car journeys he would float out of the car like a dragon angel and skate along the telephone wires as I’d enviously watch, wishing I could be imaginary too.

Every evening I would remind my mother to make sure she had cooked enough dinner for Daniel, and other times my mean older brothers would say, “Oh Meeeg, where’s Daniel today?” And I’d point to the empty space next to me on the sofa where he’d be sitting peacefully until my brothers would simultaneously begin kicking the air, where in my head sat Daniel, in agonising pain.

Whenever people tell me that they, too, used to have imaginary friends, a wave of excitement overtakes me as I feel that, finally, maybe there's someone similar to me. I always ask if they remember when the imaginary friend went away.

"Mm, nah," my friend Louise would say. "I just grew up and realised he wasn't there anymore."

"Me too," I'd agree.

But that isn't the truth. This is the truth. I was in year two at a new school and for the first time in my young life had made friends because I had the shoes which flashed when you stamped heavily on the floor. As I clumsily trod on the grass performing a tribal-like dance, I looked over to Daniel, seeing he had a tear falling slowly down one cheek, his red scaly skin now a salmon colour, like a painting faded by the sun. I held out my small hand to him: "Daniel, come and play," I said, but he just sadly smiled and told me to play with my new friends. When I got home I looked for Daniel everywhere; at the bottom of the garden, in the Wendy house, under my bed, behind the television set, but he wasn't there. "Just use your imagination," my mother told me. I squeezed my eyes tight and tried to picture him but it wasn't the same. He had gone. That night my mother held me as I cried and told me that it was because I had made so many friends and wasn't lonely anymore and he needed to go and help another little girl who found it hard to make friends.

Sometimes, these days, when I'm on a train and feeling lonely, I still try and find Daniel skating along those telephone lines. I can just about see him, but he's now older, overweight, his blue t-shirt is too small for him, and his hat has stains on it. If I really try I can still see him, but it's like when your favourite book is adapted into a film – it's never the same.

## Two

*Fatherhood (Or, before you were born your father looked like Jack Kerouac)*



As a child you would watch as he'd style his hair like Morrissey and walk to the local pub, leaving his wife to dream about a life where she had never met him. He'd drink with his friends until he couldn't feel his legs, then stumble back home at 2am where his son would wake up to hear him singing 'This Charming Man' at the top of his lungs in the garden.

But none of this matters to you any more as you sit and eat spaghetti bolognese. After you finish, feeling bloated and sleepy, you play the 'What do the knots in the oak table look like to you?' game. He says mouse and you look down, you know for certain these knots aren't natural, that the man who made this table secretly put them all in especially for you and your dad.

When you feel the sadness sink into your bones like water absorbed into a sponge, he is there. He doesn't try to understand it and he doesn't say anything but he is there. You are happiest when you are together, driving for miles and miles because he has free petrol and

every Thursday off. You coast along over the South Downs as he compares cyclists to wasps.

“It’s the helmets. Their helmets look just like a wasp’s head. Don’t you think? And they’re arrogant like wasps too.”

“Yes! That’s so true.” You laugh.

After a few solitary minutes of you gazing at the fields and the tiny lambs which inhabit them, he shouts over the Ministry of Sound CD constantly playing in his car;

“Megsy!” He has suddenly remembered something. You turn to look at him. “I didn’t tell you my dream last night! It was fucking scary. I never have nightmares but oh god I was in the sweats when I woke up.”

You tell yourself there is nothing worse than hearing another’s dream but you decide to listen anyway.

“You will not believe this.” He turns down the music slightly as if it were to build tension, “I was at the dentist, the one I used to go to when I was a nipper, but instead of looking at my teeth he just told me my future would be found in my mouth so I went home, looked in the mirror the next day and guess what...” He waits for you to guess.

“Er... you had no teeth?”

“No! I had the word ‘death’ written on each tooth like tattoos. Spooky shit Megsy. What do you think it means?”

You don’t reply, you just laugh, and in your head you realise he is the most important thing in your life.

### Three

*“I want to kiss you until your lips fall apart like wet paper and it’ll look like you have huge gums.”*

You’re the Thom Yorke weird I’ve been waiting for. Your voice is the rippling waves in the winter months with unpronounced t’s, choked utterances and stutters as you start then stop and I’m on the edge of my chair waiting for the end of your sentence but instead an anxious sigh cascades out like a passing cloud and it’s the most wonderful sound I’ve ever heard. You nervously laugh and your teeth are all different sizes and colours like a beautiful painting only I can see.

I knew when I saw you at your front door, black eyes and broken bones, that when I am with you I am alive. Before you jumped from that window I always thought I was just an observer, gathering emotions from books I half read and films I fall asleep in, never knowing how I was meant to feel. But with you everything feels both real and magical and I hardly even read when I’m with you because it’s all so fantastic, like when we’re outside on your roof in the dark and I tell you the story of Cassiopeia and how I wouldn’t mind being shot up into space for eternity if you were up there with me.

### Four

#### *Family*

My family tree is one of those leafless great beasts cruelly shaped by the wind. It’s the type of tree you only see when passing by in a car, all by itself with no nests, just sap stains which have left their scars throughout the years.

## Five

### *On Guard*

You don't know this but I spent so many months inside a castle of empty prawn cocktail crisp packets, bottles of wine, cat hair, and dusty books trying not to think about you. Like fighting off disease, I blocked you out. Even these few lines tell you too much. All you need to know is that it is possible to find yourself without losing.

## Six

### *Mind Maps*

Most of the time my brain feels like a toddler's first scribble. The paper is carelessly torn from where so many crayons have been scrawled over one another like penny machines in arcades. I tried telling this over the phone to a careers advisor.

"Okay," she said, "It sounds to me like you're a visual decision maker, let's make a mind map." I grunted and I told her I wasn't any kind of decision maker which is why I fuck everything up and then like a bin bag holding too much rubbish these thoughts-turned-words began to gush out down the phone to her.

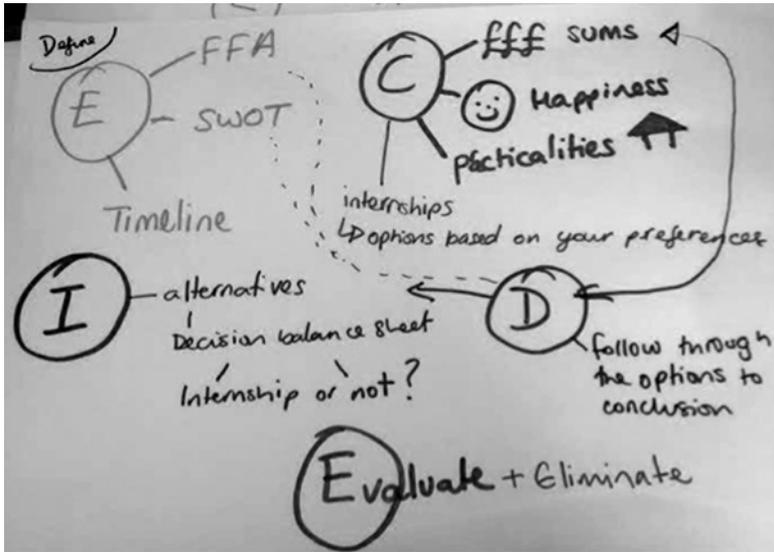
"It's not like I don't know what to do. I just want too much. I want to be everything, do everything. I want to be a lecturer, a writer, an editor, an antiquarian bookdealer, I want to go travelling and teach abroad, I want to live in the countryside where I am now but I miss London maybe I should move back there, you know? I just need to make a decision and stick with it. I mean really, all I want is to just be happy." I paused. We both simultaneously sighed. "Maybe I could be a careers advisor. I'm good with people. Do you like your job?"

"Hm. Well, Megan, this is more about you than me, and I'm sorry to say our half an hour is up now so I'll email a little mind map I've drawn for you and I'll call in two weeks to see what progress you have made."

“Okay, I saw a Sylvia Plath quote on Twitter yesterday which completely sums up how I feel, it’s...”

“Okay Megan, good luck I’ll call you in a few weeks.”

She never did.



## Seven

### *Written in the Crabs*

On my way to work I would have to walk past an overabundance of clothes shops, each with those faceless mannequins enticing me in. I tried to walk past, but it was the first day of the year that I didn’t need to wear my coat, so I decided I needed some summer clothes. In the sale I spotted a pair of trousers with little crabs printed over them. I love anything with animals on it, and they were, after all, in the sale. I quickly bought them. As I walked up the high street I began singing to myself a little song: “Crabby crabby crabby.” I sometimes do this when I’m in a good place, you know, sing little jingles, mainly about animals. For instance if I see a bloodhound on my walk I’ll make up

a little song about him. This is a tangent. I was walking along the high street, thinking of crabs when BANG. I stopped what I was doing. I think I even stopped my own heart from pumping, as a real-life crab was staring at me. His tiny black eyes like peppercorns looked straight into my blood shot ones. He was on a mountain of ice at the fishmonger's stall.

"Can I help you love?" the fishmonger asked, with his white hat and his smile.

"Is that a real crab?" I asked.

"Yep. Last one, want me to bag him up?"

"Oh no, sorry, I've just never seen him here before."

After a few more pleasantries I remembered I was late for work so quickly rushed up the street to Crabtree and Evelyn, the shop I worked in. I stopped outside the shop, looking at the word 'crab'. My manager waved from inside and I walked in and quickly told her about the crab coincidence. She laughed gleefully as I went to put my apron on. That whole day, all I thought about was what it could possibly mean. It wasn't every day you find a pair of crab trousers and then see a real crab minutes later. I then began to think I was being silly.

After work I took a train to London to see the boy I think I will always be in love with. He had texted me previously after I had explained the coincidence, saying, "I know what it all means. Come see me and I'll tell you."

As I arrived at his place he smiled suspiciously as I showed him my new trousers.

"Have you not figured it out yet?" He smirked.

"Tell me please! It must mean something."

“I’m a Cancer. The crab star sign. It’s all meant to be, Meg!”

“That’s it!” I put my hand over my mouth. “Do you think that’s it?” I questioned, my voice muffled. He laughed and kissed me before I had time to move my hand away.

“Yep,” he paused, looking at me, and sighed, “It’s definitely all meant to be. Look at you. Look at us.”

“It’s written in the crabs!” He laughed, and I laughed, and when I wear my crab trousers I always think of him.

# Good China

From the life of Irene Low

By Jo Berouche

*Back before glass and steel, stood brick and mortar.*

*Thin terraces, chimneys pluming,  
the midday clouds long and white.*

*Lean, bright and beautiful.*

*Tiny feet in little shoes.*

*Fidgeting on the kitchen floor.*

*Polish. Clock-ticking.*

*The smell of the carpet at home.*

Irene plucked Maria's chequered coat off the hanger and bunched up the sleeves; pushing small hands through folded felt. Maria squirmed against her mother, against the neat wrap of a thick scarf, against the little wool hat. She wanted to put her thumb in her mouth, but her mother took a pair of gloves and, one at a time, wrapped them over Maria's hands.

Safe. Incubated. Irene put her hands on her hips and looked at her Maria, who bopped in place, teetering on her newly walking legs. Gently breathing into her scarf. Heart pipping beneath the felt coat.

Her mother Irene pulled open the thick front door, and the frost-tipped air bolted in. Stray wisps of blonde from underneath the hat flickered against her face. The little girl scrunched back the way snails do in their shells.

“Well, we’ve got to go, Maria – you’re in the nativity.”

*White hair, golden wings. Nativity-play angels, tiny people singing hymns. Irene perched on a child-sized seat, recording intently with a quiet gaze.*

Maria looked up at her mother, the long legs up to a small waist, close hands on the ends of tapering arms, up to a halo of blonde hair on her far-away but brilliant face. The first face Maria had seen in the world out of the red dark.

Her bottom lip folded down. Her chin puckered. Irene did not wait for the tears to begin.

She put her fingers around her daughter’s hand, enveloping and then closing tight. They walked down the thick slabs, shoes slapping. Echoing off orange brick.

Those terraces, humming like hives. Windows shut but lights on, the radio a muffle underneath curtains. Prattling pop guitars and crooners. Conversations spilling under the doors. Irene looked down at her side to Maria, shuffling, wobbling, barely able to keep up with her stride.

But walking now. Saying *mam*, in a drooling, toothy mouth.

Pumping her legs like machinery, the routine took her away. Maria held on to her mother. Cub.

A canopy over the end of the road, produce lined up in red, yellow, and green, boxes with paper laid out underneath them, and hand-written signs in blue ink. Condensation on the waxy skins in the Christmas air. Irene walked the stones and then felt resistance

in her wrist, felt Maria's feet digging in, then skipping the pavement, struggling to anchor her. She looked down.

"Mam, mam, mam." Bleating, like a lamb. A cherub face edged in red, one hand out desperate for the counter. "Apple!" Irenee squinted into the shop, her hand hovering between Maria and the greengrocer shop.

The grocer inside raised his eyebrows to her. Then he grinned and held up his hand to her in greeting, recognising Irenee and her daughter.

The fresh smell of picked fruit, clean like perfume. Maria trembled next to her in the coat.

The war had meant rationing, and when the war ended, the rationing did not. After so much chaos and demolition, there were fewer things to go around. Irenee had been eight before she was able to eat her first banana. And then, in the space of a few years, there were so many good things. Maria being one of them.

"David, can I take this?" Irenee asked. He bent at the knee to wave at Maria, but the child bowed her head to the floor. "I haven't got the money on me." He gave a nod, and Irenee picked up an apple, mahogany and dark, polishing the flesh it against her coat. David knew she kept her word, even for a few pence.

A wobble of sinew and brown haunches on the edge of her eye. Irenee looked up from the fruit, and found herself eye to eye with an enormous bull. It snorted through black dribbling nostrils, a tangle of saliva on its bovine lip.

She dropped the apple. It crumpled with a snap when it hit the pavement. A mist of juice sprayed Maria's shoes. Irenee cried out, flinching back in horror at the animal. "David?"

The inside of the shop was empty.

She snapped her hand out, feeling through the air for her daughter's arm. She seemed yards away. The animal hovered over the infant, casting a shadow. Maria's eyes looked up in fascination.

Irenee found her by the felt coat collar, ran her arm down the sleeve to Maria's wrist. She grabbed and ran.

They bolted down Carson Road. Without missing a beat, the animal began to follow them.

*Cranes sinking into the walls, pneumatic drills grinding down the orange bricks. Tearing up the radiators to be repainted and resold in four decades for an upcycled Shoreditch designer apartment. Hammers slamming walls that used to hang a family history, replaced with multi-storey and mega-mall facilities. The town hall will be a Wetherspoons.*

The bull surged behind them, clattering like a tank. Through the backstreets, Irenee ran, feet skittering. It was hot beneath her coat. Maria floated off the ground, feet hovering and making no sound. Her scarf had unravelled over her shoulder, dragging on the floor.

*The docks were closed and the markets peeled off, washed away, scrubbed back. Sanded down for varnish and glass and international banks. Moated, exclusive, but barren compared to what they once had. The war needn't have bothered to raze the city.*

The huge eyes dilated. It charged forward, muscles rumbling, hooves clattering and skidding beneath bulk and strain. Irenee breathed hard, feeling her daughter struggle behind. Her eyes searched the pavement. The streets were empty. She raised Maria higher in the air and against her breast, the scarf wrapping around the pair of them.

*Ocean-smell on the docklands, winkle-men and fishmongers, kids at the lido; replaced with piles of rubble-abandoned roadside, along motorways and A-roads. Big expensive cars shooting down residential streets for*

*shortcuts on the commute. Enormous sprawling branches, breaking up the city into fragments.*

Irenee raged down the street with her three-year-old in her arms, through the primary school gates and into the playground. Wrapped up children dotted the asphalt, wobbling their clumsy feet over the painted sports pitch. Their mothers watched Irenee with concern.

“Get the kids in! There’s a bull!” She shouted at them, exhausted. Maria fidgeted against her hip, her shoes digging into Irenee’s back. There was a rumbling through the concrete.

Irenee dragged her daughter forward, arms heavy, despair pouring out of her. When she turned to look back, the bull snarled and drove its feet harder against the ground. It crunched down on grit and paving stones. Pacing.

*Empty dock warehouses. Gulls shrieking over upturned takeaway cartons. Trinity Church at the end of the road plucked apart, stained glass windows splintered down their middles. Replaced with a McDonald’s. The allotments were churned in on themselves. The land was sold, and kept for a car park.*

The children squealed at the commotion, running towards their teacher. Maria let go of her mother’s hand and ran forwards, and Irenee stared in horror as the animal charged into the playground, and then in looping circles around her. Toying with her. Irenee caught sight of her little girl, still tucked into her chequered coat, clambering the step into the nursery with her schoolteacher, red scarf wiggling loosely around her neck. Red hat, red and black coat. The crimson speck went out of sight. The bull snorted. So did Irenee.

*The twenty-four-hour supermarkets came up. But then so did the food banks. The people on the floor asking for change, sitting on the curb near a library. A shopping trolley at the side of the road, with a mattress in it,*

*abandoned on the brand new pavement. Smashed bus shelters; a fragment of fury, frozen in time.*

Irenee watched the bull circle, muscles in her neck taut, lungs aching. She noticed then that she was frightened. Her hands were trembling. The bull clamped its jaw and bucked its horned head to the left and right. It charged.

*There wasn't enough to go around, but then some had it too good. The gap got bigger; a great big wound. A diaspora. And then a smattering left; an echo. That bounced back and forth of the walls. Until it came to a crescendo.*

Irenee galloped around the animal, surging herself through the nursery gate shoulder by shoulder and pulling the gate closed behind her. The bull stared at her, the long-lashed eyes full of defeat.

“SOMEONE CALL THE POLICE!”

Her body went into shock. She felt herself shuddering, teeth chattering in fear. She clung to the iron gate, afraid she would fall to the floor if she let go.

*Night shifts and leftovers by fridge-light. Bill-posts peeling from the sides of closed shops. Mastercards cut in half on landfill. But somewhere, on the floor of the china shop – porcelain, intact.*

The bull had jumped the truck on the way to an abattoir. Leapt from the back, stumbled down the A13, onto a pavement. Wandered down the roads as if it owned them, looking for a paddock to graze.

*When the police arrived, they shot it.*

**Culture**

# Body Politics

By Sam Green

I had black feet, and blacker eyes, when I was six years old. I shuffled towards my friend Moisree one day in the searing heat of summer and spotted my foothold in her trunk; the shape of my toes slowly becoming worn into her rough bark smoothly, from the countless times I'd climbed her. I lifted my foot and, just in time, saw the butterfly caught in a web.

I crouched, interested and frightened. Keeping an eye on the spider, which had sensed the delicate structure of its web vibrate and was now moving towards the catch, I quickly broke each of the threads holding the butterfly captive. Almost in disbelief, she stretched her wings slowly and fluttered off into the sky, brushing a few of Moisree's leaves on her way.

I imagined that she'd come back to see me one day – touching down on my nose for a moment to thank me for saving her life. I waited for a long time for that to happen, before adulthood and cynicism lassoed my imagination, and I forgot the pattern on her wings. Before death became something I understood, and was less afraid of.

Perhaps by releasing her, I imagined that in some way, I was liberating myself, too.



*"Why've you got that sweater on? It's boiling hot out here!"*

The walls of a building tend to soak up the energy within it, where it remains, murmuring quietly in the night time, to be hissed at by a new tenant's cat decades later. My mother's delusional depression tore her apart, and she imbued the pieces directly into my body. Our house was silent, lonely, and short on food. I was reminded with each mouthful how much it had cost, and she'd cry if I finished a meal, as that meant none left for her. My body took on the politics of a woman who had been consistently and systematically abused, degraded, and left powerless. She used mine as a way of denying her own; the body that she had grown to hate because she did not know it, or even look at it. She taught me to hate mine; I always hurt. We only had one mirror; it had a crack through it, and if I looked into it at just the right angle, I could see two of her coming through the door behind me.



*"I should have had an abortion."*

She met him in 1984 at a West London house party thrown by a mutual friend. Tottering around, aged 36, in brightly coloured spiked heels and clutching an even brighter cocktail, she squinted through the pot smoke in search of a sugar daddy. She spotted his 52-year-old moustache and polished shoes, and made her way across the room; chin strong and juttied out, bee's nest hairdo leading the way. She wanted his money, but did not want his children. Children were nothing but pain and sadness.

I was conceived that night...

...and nearly entered the world nine months later onto a car seat covered in cigar ash in a petrol garage forecourt on Edgware Road. He'd already started celebrating, but had forgotten to fill up the tank. She made it to St. Mary's Hospital just in time, and almost died in labour.

In 1986 we moved to the edges of the city, a run-down and dilapidated no-man's-land where all the council blocks were grey, and no one earned an entirely honest living, because honesty was a commodity that no one could afford. London had become too expensive, rents soaring and council homes being sold off in the boom of Thatcher's 'Right to Buy' days. He had less than zero in his bank account, lived alone with whisky, and owed a lot of money to blackmailers who kept his secrets. She had virtually no high heels left, because she'd sold them to buy nappies. She kept the best ones in the back of the cupboard secretly, sometimes bringing them out to touch and feel, so she could remember what her life was once like. Once the stitches healed and she was able to get to the off-licence, she bought the first in a long line of bottles of vodka. I'd go with her, and she'd stuff tins of food into my pram, smiling at the shop lady while paying for the bottle only. We'd come back through the peeling door, on the road behind the shops and next to the ditch, and she'd crack it open. She never took ice, or a mixer.

The shop lady had always known my mother stole. She still gave me free sweets each time I ran away from home, as soon as I could walk. She'd pick me up, sit me on her chair, and through the cracks in the leather a sigh would escape, my weight causing the yellow nicotine-stained foam to burst forth. It made me think of my flesh, and I often tried to match my scars with those on her old chair. We found maps of countries in that leather, and in the patterns on my skin. We'd wait for my mother to notice I'd gone, and eat sherbert flying saucers together quietly while I played with her headscarf and necklaces.

She always smelled of spices and earth.



*"They're very nice, don't worry – they've had loads of your  
sort through their door."*

I spent a long time as a Child of the State, shifting from one foster home to the next, and smashing nearly every one of them up. My body belonged to the government; I was fed by them, clothed by them, schooled by them, and monitored by them. Routine measurements, weight-taking, inspecting new self-inflicted scars, and probing my head. It's interesting, seeing people pull and prod your body, as if you're not really in it. Watching from the outside. They never understood why mirrors frightened me, or why I'd always leave a few mouthfuls on the plate, no matter how hungry I was. When I was fourteen I ran away; moved out on my own and lied about my age to get a room. This time, there were no search teams sent. They'd already spent enough taxpayer money on me as it was.

But I loved it. I could do what I wanted. Autonomous. Independent. Grown-up.

Free.



*"You're just a kid, man – are you sure you want to try this?"*

Cocaine, weed, ecstasy, speed... they released me. Bliss. Alcohol did too. I loved escaping from my body; I wanted to disappear. I was homeless for a while, looked after by four men in the park who gave me their blankets and stole me wafer cones from the ice cream van. They never ate anything themselves. Too much sadness in their bones for food. When you give up living, it's quite easy to starve yourself to death.

Forty-eight pounds a week. That's how much my first box room in 1999 was, in a house-share with many others. I cleaned office toilets and sold drugs by night; pot-collected, waitressed and mended shoes by day. I was the first girl in town to get a job at the shoe shop. Only took boys, they said. I kept walking in and yelling that I'd work hard, till they gave me a job out of sheer frustration, paying £2.00 an hour cash.

I learned to reject high heels there, and every time I mended a pair I'd do it a little bit substandard, hoping the owner would reject them too. High heels let men know you're coming. Plimsolls are silent; men don't know there is a female nearby.



*"I'm going to make you understand that you want men."*

They would see me often; when they came to get their work boots mended, when they ate at the café, when they had a drink at the local, and when they came to pick up their fix. They'd say, "You're a good worker you are, you'd make a good wifey." I'd say, "Yeah, to your sister." I dated boys by day and girls by night, and ate leftover scraps from customers' plates so I could spend my wages on drugs.

They spotted me kissing her goodbye one night, and shaped my face to their fists. The next week, when I was still swollen, one of them 'showed me what I needed'. It was difficult to get out of bed the next day – hard to even get home, that night.

I had so many street fights that I lost count, until I was beaten with a gun one evening and needed six stitches in my head. I never saw it coming. I nearly lost the inside of my nose that year from the coke, and then my life from the gun. I was seventeen.

My body was not my own then, nor before, nor for some time after. It was not my own when a man got me pregnant at twenty, and tried

to tell me not to abort. Life, growing inside a queer body, was a queer thing. I knew that I could never love him. Not the way that I was supposed to.



*“So you’re a dyke and a feminist. You basically hate men.”*

My body became politicised the day that I was born. I am a woman. I exist to reproduce. Except that I don’t, because I will never give birth. Does that make me less of a woman? Does that mean I am not part of society? What it means to be a woman, to be human, to live and to breathe, to love, and to determine what you do with yourself and with whom, is all skewed when you have a politicised body. A body that belongs to other people. A body that has been knocked down and rebuilt often – each time to suit a new interpretation of what it means to be a woman. Someone else’s interpretation. I was someone else’s daughter, someone else’s girlfriend, a potential incubator for new life, something to stare at or grope in a pub. I was defined by the shape of me, judged on what my body meant to the viewer, and assessed for what benefits could be reaped from it. Told what I should and shouldn’t do with it. Expected to present myself in a particular way – socially, at work, in a relationship... even when alone at home. They can seep into your mind, those expectations, and change how you view yourself in relation to the rest of the world. You are never just you, anymore. It’s strange how possessing hips and breasts can do that.

I am depoliticising, and repoliticising, my body.

On my own terms.



There is only one thing I know for certain, and that is that I will die one day. When I see myself backlit, cheekbones visible but

not my flesh, I know that is how my bones will look when I die. Impermanent. Skeletal. If this is the case, then why don't we do what we like with our bodies? What are we scared of, and why? Does the transient, impermanent nature of this flesh and blood terrify us? Do we want to live forever? I don't. The world can be a difficult place. When I come to moving on, I will choose when it happens. The last radical act that I can do with my body will be to decide when it stops breathing.

There will be a lot more radical acts before that.

Do we hide from our bodies, not knowing how to make them into what society expects them to be? Do we try and disappear if we don't fit in? Is existence painful for everyone? My body is my home, not a country or a postcode. I have taken measures to make sure it doesn't get broken into again. One of the most beautiful things we can do for ourselves is radical self-care.



*"What are you thinking about?"*

It wasn't until I was thirty, and examining the intricately crafted wonder of a spider's web up close one day, that it hit me. Stood next to my friend Moisree almost a quarter of a century earlier, in my quest to free and liberate the butterfly, I had completely destroyed another creature's home.

My mind flashed back, with breath-taking detail and clarity, to the quick glance I threw the web before climbing the tree to watch the butterfly cut her shell-shocked way towards the clouds. I remembered seeing the spider, sat motionless on the edge of the web, looking in at the destruction. And I remembered instantly blocking that image from my mind.

I returned from my memories, and observed myself from outside of my body, watching the new spider feel its way over the iron-strong threaded map that was its home. And I thought of Moisree's spider, feeling tentatively into mid-air for a thread that was no longer there.

Moisree is gone now, cut down to build more grey flats for poor people to hide their bodies in.



Perhaps the spider moves the way it does because of how we have labelled it. With mistrust and fear, and the suspicion that it is after something that belongs to us – our home, our identity, our body. Perhaps the butterfly, knowing as a wildflower does that it is beautiful, moves assuredly – confident of its standing, and what it means to others. Both of these creatures know what their bodies represent in the world. But both of them are insects. They are the same.

I never considered the spider's survival mechanisms. Why it moves so jerkily in the darkness, and why it seems, so often, like it is the hunted – not the hunter. If you label a person as bad, if you say that what they do with their body is unnatural; that their skin, their ability, their brain, their beliefs, are unnatural; then they feel unnatural. They act from a place of fear, not love.

It is time we use our bodies for revolution.

# Poppies, Communism, and Stitches

By Jo Lazar

1989. I wasn't even a plan then. I was all the ovules a woman aged thirty-four had bled along with her uterus lining month after month. I was a shadow of a thought of an idea of an impossibility. I was my father's greatest wish and hardest achievement.

He-Who-Was-Executed-On-Christmas-Day, Nicolae Ceausescu, the half illiterate dictator, leaned towards the microphone on the dirtiest balcony in Romania. Filled with the atrocities of forty-odd years, the concrete ledge carried the filth of an oppressive regime. It was where he stood half slouching, clad in rich peasant clothes, his voice trembling as he struggled to read his speech.

It was December, mere days before his death, three years before I was conceived. Europe was hosting the Revolutions. My mother added another layer of clothing to both my brothers. She smoked in the kitchen trying to convince herself that the steam of her breath was smoke. On the 13th Taylor Swift was born. On the 22nd my

mother thanked whatever God she believed in that my father was on a ship in the middle of nowhere and couldn't get killed.

The Hard-Working Leader, The Patriot, the creator of the slime that spread throughout the beautiful fields of a proud country, stood and promised the people a pay rise. An insignificant pay rise given the economy of the time, the lack of purchasing power, the monopolised and corrupt market. The people – estimated to have been 100,000 – who were dragged by the Communist Party to attend the event and applaud the leader, were not appeased. They started shouting. His wife, Elena, sharing a name with me, tried to silence the crowd. Her husband shouted to silence her. Their voices were both covered by the crowd. Days later, they were silenced by a firing squad.

The people were trained to clap in a particular way. To march in a particular way. To smile, to talk, to queue in a particular way. Years before, in Romania's brief affiliation with Hitler, they had been trained to give the Nazi salute. Trained to accept whoever it was that was leading them; they saw no other way out. My mother used to put a towel around my torso when I was a toddler. She held on to the ends and supported my incipient attempts at walking. I'd be close to falling and she'd pull me back, patting my head. She never called it training, but teamwork.

In her stories, my mother always claimed she fell in love with my father when she heard his voice over the phone. They met because of two women who went to prison. My mother's aunt was there for trafficking roof tiles. She met a woman who was there for trafficking cooking oil. Elvis was big at the time; the woman would later sublet a room to my father. He had no intention of marrying, but put together a complete uniform – took the shoes from a fellow navy student, the hat from another – and went for the food and wine. He asked for her hand in marriage the following day. He was blushing because he hated the local traditional version of polenta; he ate it anyway. They have been together thirty-five years. A gypsy woman

sang at their wedding in my grandparents' garden; back then gypsies were disliked, but not hated. They also couldn't be deported from France, because few people were allowed to leave Romania in the first place. Those who left were either sold to the Communist devil, or never came back. Nadia Comăneci, to name one.

No romcom garden, no barefoot bride, no wedding dress, no vows, not anything that would make this romantic. In 1979, in an underdeveloped communist Eastern European country, two people who had known each other two months got married in a peasant house in the countryside, surrounded by people who didn't care for them. They looked miserable in their photos. They were miserable together as much as the next couple. They love each other more than I thought two people were capable of loving.

In 1992 my father called and asked my mother if she was willing to have another child. They were both thirty-seven, struggling with my father's new job in the much welcomed capitalist times. The president of Romania used to be one of the executed dictator's right hand men. He went on to be elected three times. My mother queued for an entire day to vote against him. Sixty-something per cent of the population queued for an entire day to fuck the future generations' lives. One of the jokes about him was that if he didn't have ears, his smile would go around his entire head. To this day, his lips break in the most disgusting, most sadistic grin I have ever seen. I promised the day he died, I would fly back home from wherever I lived, put on a red dress and dance at his funeral.

She left my brothers with relatives and travelled from a small town next to Bucharest all the way to Greece, where my dad's ship was. I was conceived outside of Port Sudan, in the Chief Officer's room, on a tiny old commercial ship. It broke down a couple of months later – they had no food, no money, and floated aimlessly for a while. My father fished for all of them. They had alcohol and cigarettes and my mother probably infused me with those tastes when I was developing

fingers. She travelled on a bus, in a lorry, and on a boat to have me, together with two other sailors' wives. One of them was a gypsy and she sang to the driver to keep him awake. My mother and the other one fed him crackers and cheese triangles. She had no medical care on the ship, but was lucky enough that one of the wives was a doctor. When she started showing, the kind woman smiled and told her she would be having a girl. I will believe until the day I die that I am her proudest achievement and her greatest disappointment.

She had gained so much weight that my dad had to physically push her up the steps of the Acropolis. She had to change shoes three times a day, depending on how swollen her feet were. She was superstitious enough not to tell anyone at home she was pregnant (it was pretty much impossible to communicate anyway) and scarred my brothers for life when she showed up six months into it. I am convinced they loathed me for the longest time. Sometimes I think they still do. My father was drunk for a week; he got all the gypsies in the market drunk as well. I was two weeks over term and my brother thought I was the ugliest thing he'd ever seen: red and wrinkled. My father left for work when I was two months old and returned when I was two years old. He hated having me around the house, I was loud and obnoxious, as all toddlers are. He brought me a doll called Elena; out of spite I cut her open with a pair of scissors some years later.

My oldest brother confessed to me only after his daughter was born – when I was almost sixteen – that he was too embarrassed to take me out for walks when I was young because the stroller we had was old and ugly. I don't think I'll ever forgive him for that. My older brother told me over a drink or fourteen that I used to poop as soon as my mother left me with them for no longer than thirty minutes. I think he forgave me for that. They both had long hair, one of them blond and the other bright red – they'd let me blow dry it and comb it. They have always been, and always will be, my pride and joy.

I was meant to be daddy's little girl. I am, but not how he expected. I curse like a sailor and drink more than one. I cared little for dolls and frilly clothes. I accepted them just as I accepted everything else in my childhood. My mother would sigh and hug me close, her voice heavy with regret when she explained that was all we could afford. Hand me downs from my brothers. Their wooden blocks, their old socks, their books. This meant that when I was six or seven, I had an Iron Maiden t-shirt that I wore as a long dress.

I accepted everything they gave me. I accepted that some things were unattainable. The only tantrum I threw was over an astronomy book. I stomped my foot and kicked the metal shelf it was on. It was coloured in shades of blue, covered in saran wrap to protect it from the rain. It must have been late November, because the man standing behind the tiny outdoors stall was complaining about his arthritis. I grabbed my mum's jeans and pulled and pulled. She grabbed my shoulder and stilled me; got down to be at the same level with me and explained I couldn't have it. Her eyes – the bluest I've ever seen – turned grey, the slightly sagging skin on her face turned ashen. I took her hand and we went home.

She tried her best to hide her crying, but I always knew. She'd go and sit on the old wooden stool my dad hammered new nails into every time he came home to make it last another year. It was always in the corner next to the heater. She was smoking Assos cigarettes then. Ashing them in an Assos ashtray. That night I walked up to her and threw my arms around her neck. When asked as a child what my favourite colours were, I'd say brown and blue, because of my parents' eye colours. The red around her irises brought out the pain in the blue. I held on, I held on until I fell asleep.

A week or two later, she handed me the book. My older brother glued the sole of his worn-out trainers that day. The cover said the book was for teenagers, and after my mother explained what a teenager was, I smiled for days. I was six and I explained to her everything I

could about the Solar System. I liked Jupiter and its massive storm the best, I wanted to touch a black hole. I put on the Prodigy CD and we danced together in the small living room. I kept the book under my pillow, next to the cow toy that made a broken moo sound; it was a symphony of dying batteries held in worn-out plush. I used to roll over it in my sleep, she told me years later. We were sharing a bed because we had a one-bedroom apartment where my brothers slept. She would wake up and move the blasted thing every night. I woke up next to it every morning and hugged it to get it to moo.

In 1996, my mother dressed me and we walked to the closest school, where presidential voting was organised. I asked her when the next one would be and she replied with my age. I believed for the longest time they waited for me to turn six to have new elections.

She cried four years later when the post-communist-still-communist plague returned to rule the country. We watched Rocky on VHS that night and she cheered for Sylvester Stallone from the hallway, where she sat on a stool to smoke. Thirty years before, she had sat on the cold floor of her father's peasant house, listening to Free Europe on an old radio. The Beatles, or Jimi Hendrix, or The Moody Blues. She can't remember, but had she been caught, her entire family would have been punished.

She tried to fight the system in a micro-political kind of way, by talking back to her teachers when she was a teenager. The principal of the small village school used to play poker with my grandfather. It was illegal, so they barricaded one of the classrooms and spent the entire night drinking and gambling. My grandfather was caring but cold; he explained what was right and how not to talk about it. She told me the suppression became worse but easier to cope with because she expected it.

In November 2014, I queued in Central London for seven hours and then for eleven hours to vote for the first time in my life; I had voted

for the local elections, but never for the president. I was unable to do so both times. The humiliation will probably never go away.

In 1999 as I was running after my older brother, I tripped and sliced my palm open on broken glass. He was nearly seventeen; I showed him the blood river and he rushed me upstairs. The lift wasn't working and we lived on the eighth floor. My mother paled and cried hysterically as she was cleaning my wound. She was too shocked to move so my brother and I took the tram to A&E because we had no money for a taxi, and an ambulance would take forever to come. She gave him two packs of cigarettes to bribe the doctor: that's how things worked back then. That's how they still do. By the time we got to the hospital, blood was seeping through the thick cotton, the handkerchief and the towel mum gave us. I remember the pinch of the local anaesthetic. The doctor told me to not look, but I was almost six. My brother tried to distract me, but the skin around my open cut had swollen and I was fascinated with the way it was being stitched together.

That was the first time I had seen my brother's crazy-angry eyes. We both take after our father. None of us remembers what sea he was sailing on, but months later when he came home, he kissed my palm all the way from the airport to the apartment. The doctor was meant to use the newer type of stitches, the ones that wouldn't require a follow-up and painful pulling of the remnants. He didn't. My brother bought me ice-cream on the way home and apologised. He took me to the park and that night I fell asleep cuddled up to him.

I have embedded my family into my skin. The red ink on my left shoulder is for my mother. The building we lived in, a communist tower of gloom and misery, ironically plastered with tiny forest-green tiles, was one of the last ones in the Northern part of town. Behind it there were fields – unkempt and wild, with thousands of poppies emerging from the dried weeds. The fields are now full of gaudy villas with few windows, painted in neon colours. I hope

every summer that the poppies will grow in the foundation of the monstrous houses and ruin them a little more.

My father has calloused hands, big and difficult to hold. He would pat the side of my head, stroking my hair down and call me his princess. He'd do it while we watch the football and I'd jump and shout at the telly then get back to his side. He and I are too alike to get along. He is everything I want to be and nothing I want to become. I often think I miss him more than I actually do.

In 1995, my mother encouraged me to learn how to write on the walls of our small apartment. She practised with me until I was sure I could move to paper. The walls I write within now are covered in little notes she insists on hiding in my luggage and clothes whenever I fly back and forth. Covered in scars and freckles I have named on long train rides. Covered in birthmarks and eye colours. Covered in my life. Covered in the lives of those around me.

# Before Getting Out

By Martin Clarke

They took to the bed,  
bred,  
three weeks: never bled.  
It doesn't look good on you  
the stepfathers said.  
They wanted me dead.  
After the birth  
the medical notes read:

*Promote good mothering*

*Promote good mothering*

*Promote good mothering.*

Zero six zero three. Easy to remember.  
Take out the one from the area code.  
First home just off Dereham Road.

It was nine days overdue  
when it finally and silently came  
bursting through  
her fattening and aching and shaking

cunt.

He asked them to sew her up an extra notch and they did.

## **Pauline**

is what I call my father. His real name is Paul. It was something I started when I was a teenager, which he never questioned. I guess, initially, it was for the amusement of my younger brothers and it sort of stuck.

In the same vein, my mother – who is called Donna – has been renamed Donald.

## **Kent**

is where I had my first holiday. We went with Dianne and Alan, my grandparents, as though Pauline and Donald were too young to make the journey alone. I've seen photographs of us on the beach: of me with dirty blond hair cut into a bowl, brandishing a yellow spade; of Dianne in her great floral skirt, reading a magazine on her lap. There is a memory of me browsing this particular photograph and calling out to my mother, "Is Nanny pregnant?" at seeing her bulging stomach, round as a beach ball.

But I don't remember this. Rather, it is a memory of a memory. What I do remember is the living room of the place we stayed, and me sitting on the cold, hard floor, and Pauline placing a new toy down before me, larger and louder than anything I'd played with before, a train, choo choo chooing towards me...

## **Hilda**

was the old lady who lived downstairs. On Friday evenings she often looked after me while Pauline and Donald went food shopping at Roy's. I went with them, sometimes, and it was there I first learned to roll my tongue. We laughed at Pauline because he couldn't do it.

But it was good at Hilda's too because she had a perfectly round wart on her hand; if I pressed it, she pretended it made a beeping noise. For the rest of the time, I clambered about on a cushioned foot stool she owned.

"Basil bought me that to rest my feet on," she'd say.

She always watched *Play Your Cards Right*, playing along at home with a game she'd picked up from the newsagent. She shouted "Higher! Lower!" at the television as Bruce Forsyth upturned each card in succession.

Years later, sometime after we'd moved, I was walking along Bowers Avenue and saw Hilda putting some rubbish in the bins outside her flat. I said, "Is that you, Hilda?" Only she had no idea who I was.

## Julie

was the woman Pauline had an affair with. All I remember about her appearance is that she looked exactly like Mariah Carey – a Mariah Carey of the early 90s, that is, with dark brown and permed hair reaching below her bra strap. Later, I overheard Donald saying that was why Pauline liked her. Donald had similar hair but didn't look like Mariah Carey.

Donald worked evenings in a nursing home back then, and this was when Pauline and I went over to Julie's. He had to take me with him and I don't know how they met; perhaps it was at one of the discos Pauline did at weekends for someone's wedding or birthday party. Often we'd arrive at Julie's and sit in her front room, which was warm and brown, but before we left I was usually left alone to amuse myself for a short time while Pauline and Julie went to a different room.

It was just as Pauline was dropping Donald off at work, one evening, when I asked, "Are you gonna put your arm around Mum like you did Julie, Dad?"

Later, I'm told, the conversation went something like this:

"I didn't have sex with her, she only gave me a blowjob!"

"That's even worse!"

## **Shadow**

was the name of our Shetland Sheepdog. My parents and I took her for walks. Once they sent me off with her to look for sticks around Mousehold. Whenever they told me off she growled at them; when I cried, she nuzzled her wet nose into my face. She was going to have puppies but Donald said she lost them. There was a bloody tissue around her paw when the vet clipped her nails too short.

When we moved to the house, I made a path for her in the back garden out of fallen apples. She didn't use it.

It was around two-thirty in the morning when Donald woke me up.

"No, no, no! She can't be!"

I found her curled up in the back hall, her black fur just visible through her blanketed body. My mother went to throw her collar away but I wouldn't let her. I loved her and she loved me and now she was gone.

## **Fish Diddies**

is what I called fish fingers. When I first started school I had to see a speech therapist. According to my mother, I was like a stuck record at times, in that I would stutter so much on a particular word and never complete the sentence. To this day it comes out whenever I'm incredibly agitated or angry or uncomfortable. There were other words: Cornflakes were 'Cockies'; Hoovers were 'Woos'; Kangaroos were 'Kangagoos'; Lions were 'Yay-yars'.

I was always better at writing words than speaking them.

## Champagne

once got me in trouble. It was a gift my mother was planning to present to my father for some occasion and she told me about it. I'm not sure whether Pauline's affair came before or after what happened next but, as it was, neither Pauline nor Donald had yet learned that I couldn't be trusted with their secrets.

"You can tell me; you won't get in trouble," Pauline said. We were driving back from somewhere; it was late because it was dark and there were orbs of fuzzy light as we passed the streetlamps.

"Martin, *don't* say anything," Donald said, turning around in the passenger seat and giving me a hard, knowing look.

It was after Pauline had parked and pressured me some more that I revealed, in front of Donald, everything I knew.

## Joseph

was who I played in the school nativity. Here the issue was that, to their cost, the school never held auditions for the part, and I never mastered exactly *when* to present the baby Jesus to Mary. I remember an exasperated Mrs Davies giving specific instructions to hand Mary the baby after so-and-so had finished speaking. In one rehearsal we filed into the hall, me with my arm around Mary, and as soon as she sat down I slid the doll out from underneath her seat and thrust it into her arms.

We prayed and sang hymns in the show. My favourites were 'Away in a Manger' and 'On a Starry Night'. There was a boy I knew, in one of the other classes, who never prayed or sang hymns with us because he was a Jehovah's Witness. He was already called Joseph, so why didn't he just give Mary the baby? Donald and Dianne always came to these shows, watching with all the other proud parents, but Pauline never did because they were during the day when he was at work.

As for Jesus...

I was prodded in the back with a stick, on the day, when the moment came to deliver Mary's baby.

## **Maxine**

was the only Empson girl remaining once the mother died. That we knew about the Empsons at all was mostly because I hung around with the son. Matthew said something one time about putting a card on his mother's grave, which seemed odd to me, thinking that it would get wet or simply blow away. The thick slick of gel in his hair hardened his curtains. He once, in anger, bound his arms tight around me, squeezing the air out of me, for revealing something he'd said to me about a girl he thought had nice legs. To say sorry he told me I could have any item from his bedroom. Only the Empsons were poor and didn't have nice things, so I took the only book he had: a miniature, pocket-sized thing about history. This was in spite of the advice from the other kids from the estate, who reckoned I should have taken the glue stick.

The Empsons lived across the road from us. It was late morning, and Donald and I had been to the city to find me something new to wear for my cousin's birthday party later that afternoon. I was at home, modelling my matching light-coloured shorts and t-shirt, when I insisted I play outside in my new outfit. There was one condition:

"Make sure you don't get dirty."

And so I found myself in the Empsons' front garden, talking with Matthew, when Maxine appeared and stood in the doorway. Her blonde hair was long and straight, rattail-thin and dirty; she wore baggy clothes and dressed like a boy.

"I mustn't get dirty," I said. "I've got to wear this to a party later."

Maxine didn't say anything, nor did she acknowledge that I'd just spoken. Instead she went inside the house for a moment and returned with a saucepan of water. In an instant it happened, and I knew that it would the moment she appeared with the pan balanced out in front her and I made to get away: the entire cold contents, poured down my retreating neck – a slick splash down my back – and I burst into tears.

“What did I tell you?” Donald said.

## **The Police**

is who I called during an argument between Pauline and Donald. It was mid-morning on a Saturday and the lounge was bright. Dianne was there.

“I'm calling the police!” I said, picking up the handset and punching three hard nines on the dial pad.

“Look!” Dianne said, pointing.

My mother said nothing and replaced the receiver.

In the evening Donald explained to me how, earlier that afternoon, someone from the emergency services had telephoned back to check everything was okay – all because of what I'd done. I wasn't sure if she was telling me off.

## **Wayne**

was the man my mother had an affair with, and the man who later became my stepfather. He had straight, black hair past his shoulders; he played squash on Tuesdays and pool on Thursdays. He lived off Bowers Avenue in a block of flats called Seaman Tower. I stayed there once, after Pauline and Donald had another argument.

At school I was friends with a girl called Bernadette; her mother, Sasha, became good friends with Donald and so we spent a lot of

time in each other's company. Sasha was Wayne's sister: that's how he and Donald met. I first knew of him when I needed to use the toilet at Sasha's one day, only I couldn't because he was in the bathroom washing his hair and I didn't want him to see me wee.

## **Turtle**

was the name I gave to Pauline's friend, Ian. I was in the bath when I came up with it, talking to my mother, and it was something Donald and Pauline began floating about which caught on quickly. And it came out of nowhere, for Ian didn't really look like a turtle at all, but had a face like a brick and dyed his hair with Just For Men.

After Pauline and Donald officially separated, Pauline spent a lot more time with Turtle down at the The Artful Dodger. Turtle, it seemed, had never really had a girlfriend or a family, and could be found in the pub most Friday and Saturday nights. It was 1995 and whenever 'Back for Good' by Take That played, my father stepped outside until it was over.

## **Moving**

was a collective effort the day my father left: myself, Pauline, and perhaps his new girlfriend; definitely Donald, Wayne, and Dianne; maybe my uncle made an appearance. Pauline wasn't the only one, you see: while he was moving into a flat on Half Mile Close, Wayne was leaving his flat on Bowers Avenue to move into our house the same day. Once I knew about Pauline's leaving, I referred to it as 'getting out', until the day of his departure came, when I said, 'You're getting out today, aren't you? Go on, get out then.'

He forgot things, mostly records and tools he would try and persuade me into retrieving for him later. While Pauline was moving into an empty place and mostly took his personal belongings with him, Wayne was moving into our already furnished home, so he had

things he didn't need or couldn't bring. This meant Pauline took his cooker; in exchange, Wayne got a wife.

## **Leaving**

was something my father, at some stage in the process, had to explain to me as something he would be doing. We had an audience: Donald, Wayne, and Dianne, all watching as Pauline sat me down in the lounge. It was evening. Pauline's voice cracked when he spoke; I remember fragments of a talk he gave about how he and Donald didn't love each other anymore. No one else said anything. He cried, then I cried, and then we cried together.

# A Day On The 'Ill

From the life of John Besagni

By Erica Masserano

(Special thanks to Clerkenwell  
community historian Olive Besagni)

His first memory is the wail of the sirens; his second of everyone running for cover down to what he didn't know, couldn't have known, was Chancery Lane. Sometimes the bombs never came; they missed and they went, and they could have hit anyone ten miles away, but it wasn't him, so he didn't know, couldn't have known. Johnny was one, two years old, the baby of eleven. The tube station is dark, packed with people. They will tell him about his grandfather, Nonno Pietro, who spent the nights sleeping there, the shellings shook him so bad. Johnny thinks about those days of endless night sometimes, but mostly he doesn't. He is a sprightly, dark-haired ten-year-old now. The war is over. The mothers and sisters of the dead Italians have dressed in black and cried and then they have stopped crying. Johnny's father is not an enemy alien any more, and has a new job in a café in Hammersmith; though it's not outdoors and not in the asphalt trade which is his profession, it helps put food on the table. Slowly, the rubble is being carted away, the craters filled. Half of the neighbourhood is still in ruins, but that's okay. That is where Johnny and his friends go to play.

Johnny gets up at dawn, downs some tea, then goes to St Peter's church next door to help serve morning Mass. He likes it there. He likes the quiet; he likes the Latin, though he doesn't understand it; but most of all he likes the clothes. Before each service, he goes into the sacristy at the back, sheds his hand-me-downs and throws the black cassock and white cotta over his head, so much softer, all smooth, clean cotton, with lace at the edges. He is only slightly self-conscious about the Father. There are several boys in the room, so he doesn't need to worry. He is ready for the show, and if he is good, maybe the Father will let him ring the bell when he lifts the chalice and wafer up high for the people to adore; and if he rings the bell, he is the boss. Of course, Johnny is not always good, but the Father doesn't need to know. Last week, the boys were behind the altar putting away the holy wine as the Father was talking and didn't know, couldn't have known; and Johnny said, let's have a little bit, *un goccino*. Silently, he brought the bottle to his lips. A couple of hours later, in school, Johnny still hadn't been struck by lightning.

"I swear," he giggled to his friends, "that is not God's blood. That's just wine."

St Peter's school is tall and narrow. The boys kick their football hard on the sloping rooftop terrace during recess, scaring the girls underneath with its sound of thunder. After a daring pass, a goal, they shout Mercer!, Lawton!, but most of all, they shout Bacuzzi! Joe Bacuzzi was born in the Quartiere too, olive skin and all; signed with Fulham, and played for England thirteen times. That was before the war, when the Sunday football matches stopped and the pitches stood empty, not a young man to run on them or brawl with the opposing team's supporters in the break; but now the games are on again.

"And if he made it," Johnny thinks, all the boys think, "I can make it too."

Then the school kids come back in to the smoke and the small heat of the coal fires, and hope that they don't have to use the lavatories, because it's winter and they are frozen. As much as their homemaker mothers try and try to keep them warm and clean, someone is always ill, and someone has always got lice. Johnny's class, like all others, is mostly Italians and some Irish children, so he feels safe there. He went to Mass today, so he doesn't get the cane from Mr McKay, but some of his mates do. The kids learn their arithmetic tables, they write, they read. Sometimes they throw a piece of chalk at Mr McKay's back, to see him turn around all red in the face and screaming:

"Who was it?"

"That was Reppoli, sir!"

It wasn't Reppoli, but Reppoli doesn't speak a word of English, so he gets a proper caning from Mr McKay as the other kids try to keep a serious face. Johnny and his siblings speak excellent English; their family has been in London for longer than most. They speak dialect at home, the language of their peasant families who crossed the Channel in the 1890s because all they had was a cold stone hearth and some trees to chop; and English with kids from similar families, to bridge the gaps. Italian, they learn from books, and they speak for a week or two in the summer, when the Government sends for them and ships them all to the Ligurian coast to breathe salubrious air and remind them of a motherland they themselves never knew. Johnny likes the sea, the sand, the space. But he likes London most.

On the way home, he scampers past The Coach and Horses. Through the gratings, he can hear the River Fleet, the stream catching a breather before it disappears underground again. He pokes his nose in the pub, where the gangsters are sitting amongst the wafting smoke of cigarettes, exchanging Darby Sabini stories from decades past. He was the most feared and revered, but these days he lives

out of a hotel in Hove. The times of the Italian bookmakers with the stylish hats are gone: there's easier money to be made than from the horse and dog races.

"Johnny!" shouts the young gangster they call Bananas. "Come here, boy. Here, go buy me some baccy."

Johnny knows the men in the pub; he is not scared of them. He is more scared of the raised fists and knives that may meet them outside the triangle of their own streets, because of his complexion, his attire, the signs that betray him for a boy from the 'Ill, Clerkenwell, the Italian Quarter. Stuck between East and West, he rarely ventures in either direction. But within the Quartiere, he is safe; and these men, protecting people, avenging wrongs done on women when the police won't listen, surely cannot be all bad. Of course they ask money of shops and businesses for their services. A man's gotta eat, and they're no exception. Johnny runs to the off licence, and comes back with the tobacco.

"Good boy," says Bananas, and gives him a penny. They always give him a penny or two, but whatever they give, he has to work for. One day he came to the pub, to ask if there was any work at the market down Leather Lane, and the Falco man made him pull a barrow of goods all the way from the garage to the market in the morning and from the market to the garage in the evening; it was heavy, but he had a job and he did the job and got paid like a man. If he had continued working for the Falcos or the Nataros then maybe someday they would have given him another kind of job. And then, he reasons, he would have made proper money and wear a clean collar-bar shirt every day and eat lasagne for lunch and dinner and be rich and powerful on the 'Ill. But there is something about money that he does not understand past the fact that it can get him nice threads and a Lambretta, something about how he has nothing except his family and yet he is happy. And the men working for the Falcos and the Nataros, they always have a boss, and the bosses are heavies and

Johnny doesn't care much for them. He always thinks, *they live the good life, but it's not the life I want*; so he always does the work, and then he leaves again, and goes back home.

When he gets home to Victoria Dwellings, Anita is already busy dishing up the lunch, and has no time for ceremonies.

"Johnny, sed zo e mangia," she says in Piacentine.

She is filling a bowl with soup as she speaks. Johnny sees there is an extra chair at the already crowded table; his mother has invited in a beggar from the church again. They live next door to it and she does housework for the Father, so it's a regular occurrence. Some of them Johnny only sees once, then they disappear again to a life of wandering; others he sees several times a week. Johnny smells the earthy, warm soup, and the heat and smell burn into his nostrils. Ingredients: bones, all the bones Johnny could carry home from Mariani the butcher's on a big sack on his back: pork, beef, snout, leg, whatever there was; with vegetables, all the vegetables the market couldn't shift: potato, carrot, cabbage, whatever there was, all boiled in the pot for one or two days.

"I'm not that hungry," says Johnny.

Anita looks up imperiously, ladle still working, and passes him the bowl. Johnny looks at the slight circles of fat floating on top of the brownish minestrone, squashes a few with the spoon. His brother Bruno passes him a slice of bread and nudges him:

"Eat."

Johnny knows there is no point in arguing. If he gets hungry later, *la suppa* is still what he's going to get: it's the only food in the house. The wallpaper is creased from the damp here and there, the water from the scullery tastes like pipes; in the bedroom next door Johnny's people sleep four to a bed every night. But the doorstep

is immaculate, the room lived-in but tidy, their clothes and faces scrubbed clean. Were there not rich people in the world to confront them with it, they wouldn't know, couldn't have known they were poor. And there are many other families in the tenements that are worse off, lots of them English. When Johnny goes to their door to ask if his British friends are in, he knows to wait outside, so they don't have to show the dirt, the lack of furniture, the bundles that are their beds.

After lunch, while the girls are helping to clean up, Bruno and Johnny go for a walk. It's not the season for the ice cream vendors that normally dot the streets, but there are a few men roasting chestnuts on flaming barrels, selling small paper bags of hot nuts for a few pennies. The boys look for cigarette butts and talk about the future. After the munitions factory where he worked during the war, Bruno, the eldest brother, discovered he had his father's hands. He started working in the statuette trade and opened a struggling business; he doesn't know, couldn't have known that in a few years he would have his own cast factory and workshop in Stratford.

"Everyone wants the same things," muses Bruno. "Cats and dogs and Davids and Cupids. Sometimes a few Shakespeares or Julius Caesars."

"I like your statues," Johnny says.

"Mom says you should find a job in a café in a couple of years", says Bruno.

"Mom says a lot of people should find a job in a café."

"That's because people will always eat."

Johnny shrugs. Johnny has seen the statues, and is fascinated by their smooth plaster curves, their delicate spray colourings. He would very much like to make Shakespeares or Julius Caesars, to feel the

levigated surface under his fingertips. His hands itch just thinking about it, like when he draws, or makes mud cakes. Every year he sees the floats at the procession of Santa Maria del Carmine, Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Every year he walks behind the statue of the Madonna or a float depicting the Nativity or the Last Supper, dressed in white amongst all the neighbourhood children, carrying a lily, through the streets packed with people in their Sunday dresses, on the cobbles strewn with petals, while the Irish Pipers play for the neighbourhood and its god. He doesn't know all the ins and outs of the work that goes into making every detail of those scenes; couldn't have known that he will learn all it takes to fashion huge white doves out of wood, to sculpt every ripple on seas of papier-mâché.

When his brother leaves for the company of the older boys, Johnny still has a couple of hours of sunlight left. He walks to one of what the kids call their camps, a razed bomb site. Debris piles up all the way to Old Street and all the way to the Barbican: a huge playground, uncontaminated by adults. Johnny and his friends meet there, play knock-down-Mary, kick around an old football stuffed with newspaper, stumble, run some more, climb along the wreckage of a house. It's hard going, but he puts his foot on a dislodged brick here, a windowsill there. When they come to the top, lungs heaving, he looks down. Some of the buildings have been crushed to nothing; some have been purposely torn down, to avoid the risk of them tumbling down later; some walls are still standing, bereft of roofs or floors, gaping at the sky in astonishment. The ruins are dusty and unstable, and under them lay unexploded bombs like sleeping giants. It's dangerous. It's abandoned. It's perfect.

"Johnny!" shouts Razzy Tufano. "Make a jump!"

Johnny looks to the spot where he is supposed to be landing. They have done it all before; they vault over the disappeared rooms, the places of someone else's life. They were too young; they don't remember; they are free.

“It’s too far,” Johnny says.

“It never is!”

“It is.”

“You chicken?”

“I’m not!”

“Jump! Jump! Jump!” call his mates.

The wall is tall. Johnny takes a deep breath. He coils and he springs, flying through the air like he’s never going to land again. He doesn’t know, can’t know that he is; but he has to believe he will.

A vibration runs up his body; his feet have hit the ground. Johnny looks up at the smiling faces of his friends. The kids scatter about, laughing, running green and wild through the neighbourhood, and he runs with them. The ’Ill, London, the world may still be scarred and burned; but they’re the ivy growing on the ruins, stronger than any fire, climbing on every stone.

# The Perspectives of Angur

From the life of Angur Miah

By Michael Pudney

## The New Life and Wilson's Equal Opportunities

*Everybody should have an equal chance – but  
they shouldn't have a flying start.*

- HAROLD WILSON, BRITISH PRIME  
MINISTER 1964-1970, 1974-1976

In the small town of Sylhet, around 200 miles north of Dhaka, Fate was catching some sun. It had been a busy week for her, keeping a mindful eye on the Liberation War in Bangladesh, ensuring that fate would help bring that to an end – as was her job. But she also had a few 'odds and sods' to attend to. Today, Fate was to ensure that fate was on the side of Angur as he was leaving for London, and her omniscient presence was required. She'd seen the itinerary: he needed to travel 10,000km to meet his uncle on the other side and start a new life. She lifted herself away from the peaceful beach and headed over to Angur's humble home just in time to watch him pick up his suitcase and hug his mother and father goodbye. It was

precious moments such as this in which Fate knew she would try her best to ensure fate was on the person's side. Fate had helped a rising number of Bangladeshis move to London in recent years, and Fate would help where she could. Through the connection of his uncle already based in London, a Principal as a matter of fact (Fate remembered helping him out with that one), Angur was set up to see The Big Smoke (Fate had heard all the nicknames over the years). A large contingency of Pakistanis and Maltese were also making their way to the industrial smoggy concrete block that was East London.

Fate got Angur over to the UK safely and as his uncle embraced him at the station, she knew she could leave Angur to it. Of course, she would check in on him every now and again; she took pleasure in her work so wanted to visit the people she had helped. Angur's uncle set him up in Aldgate, and within a year Angur had found himself a job working at a factory which produced men's blazers. The Pakistanis were a nice enough bunch, but there seemed to be an ongoing dispute with the People of Malta. Fate had helped many of the Maltese people move over to the UK, and there had always seemed to be conflict with those and the Pakistanis. Fate didn't know why all this horseplay occurred, but it wasn't her job to manage that, it was up to her colleague, Destiny, to decide how all of that would pan out. When Angur's uncle advised Angur that the streets of London could be a dangerous place, Fate knew he was in good hands. Her work here was done.

## **The Skinheads and Thatcher's Bleak Society**

*There is no such thing as society: there are individual men and women, and there are families.*

- MARGARET THATCHER, 1979-1990

"Paki! Oi, Paki!" they shouted from the other side of the road. Angur was now accustomed to abuse from the group of boys and men in Doctor Marten boots, skinny jeans and white t-shirts. Usually it would subside, but today they were in the mood to cross the road and further intimidate the seventeen year old.

"Where you off to, Paki?" Angur looked to the ground and tried to maintain his path. "Back to Pakiland with any luck," one of the gang joked to his mates as he tugged on his braces. Angur continued to focus on the pavement and the shuffling of Doc Martens circling him like vultures. Angur sub-consciously clutched his bag tighter, which didn't go unnoticed. "Oi, Paki scum, what you got in there, eh? Curry?" The four predators laughed at this one. Another gang member, no older than Angur himself, stripped him of his bag. Angur made a feeble attempt to get it back, until one of the older skinheads shoved him in the chest, knocking him to the floor. Angur watched from the floor as the younger skinhead rummaged through his more or less empty bag, only holding his empty lunch box. The one who shoved him had the word **ENGLAND** tattooed on his forehead, accompanied by a thick Swastika printed on his Adam's apple.

They threw his lunch box and bag on the floor when they realised there was nothing of value, then they got a call from the other side of the road, beckoning them away, to Angur's relief. Another of the skinheads lit a fag then flicked the match at Angur's face, "get out of my country, Paki," were his parting words; all Angur could think as they walked away was that he wasn't a 'Paki' at all – he was from Bangladesh.

## **The Mugging and Major's Respect for the Law**

*In housing in the fifties in Britain and the sixties, we pulled down the terraces – destroyed whole communities and replaced them with tower blocks and we built walkways that became rat-runs for muggers. That was the fashionable opinion. But it was wrong.*

*It is time to return to core values, time to get back to basics, to self-discipline and respect for the law, to consideration for the others, to accepting responsibility for yourself and your family.*

- JOHN MAJOR, 1990-1997

You pull your coat closer around your shivering frame, reminding yourself that you've had this coat for years – the only item of clothing your dad has actually picked out for you and you've liked; Angur's never been much of a fashionista, you smile to yourself. The thirty children you dismissed an hour ago still make the classroom stuffy and uncomfortable, so as you step outside, it makes it even colder than you are prepared for. As you head off home, you watch your own breath scatter away into the night time.

You remember that you owe a tenner to your dad so decide to take a quick detour to the cash machine. You're not overly cautious, but Angur has always taught you to keep one eye on your surroundings, always harking back to the 'Skinhead days' as examples of being street smart, so you casually do a quick sweep of the street. The street is as empty as it is dark. You push the card into the machine and the grind of the plastic is the only noise in the street until the flick of metal and the words, "don't fucking move," fill the air. You freeze because it's the only thing you can do. You feel footsteps edging closer and something sharp press up against your thick coat, enough for you to take an educated guess as to what it could be. As the knife digs further in, a boy comes into sight. There are two of them.

“Take out your money, bitch. All of it.” You recognise instantly that they are Bangladeshi from the accent, the way they look, and that you recognise these kids from the neighbourhood. It’s another insult to you when you realise they are almost half your age, 17 and 21. You try to control your pulsing heart rate to not show the fear that’s crawling all over your body; you decide that the older one is in charge of the knife while the younger kid is the negotiator. You have to moisten your throat; otherwise no words can come out. “What you waiting for? Give me your money!” He leans in close enough for you to smell stale vodka in his breath.

“Okay, okay,” you finally squeal. You panic that you suddenly can’t remember your pin number, and can feel the boys smirking at each other. Luckily, your fingers move instinctively across the pad and then you realise you have to tell them something. Terrified, you mumble, “I can only take out a maximum of £250.” The older one leans in from behind, piercing the knife through your coat and into your jumper.

“Well I suggest you get out £250, then.”

There are breathless seconds of silence as you pray for the machine to do its job. Never before have you wanted the machine to work so much faster – those few seconds are taking hours. The boys’ visible breath surrounds you and no sooner does the money come out than the younger boy snatches it from the machine. However, the knife still remains, and so you stay, pressed up against the ATM, which is now thanking you for your visit, and telling you to have a nice day. “If you ever tell anyone about this I’m gonna fucking kill you. Get it?” You just nod as they back away. It’s all you can do. They disappear around the corner, and your legs give way. You sink to the ground to breathe for the first time.

## **Stroke Life and Cameron's NHS Promise**

*Our NHS should always be the best. That means getting the best care and making that care available for everyone - free - wherever they are and whenever they need it.*

*Let's assess the NHS over the last 5 years. Thanks to the incredibly hard work of our NHS staff, the Commonwealth Fund ranked our health service as the best in its recent international study.*

- DAVID CAMERON, 2010-PRESENT

I'd done it a thousand times and, as ever, the shopping felt as light as a feather. Heading back home from grabbing some shopping for dinner, from nowhere, the bags began to weigh down on me like I was hauling rocks. At the same time, my legs slowed down, almost to a stop. I tried to grip the bags as I struggled to stay upright, but my brain wasn't getting the message to my body in this very out-of-body experience. My world closed in on me in a messy blur. I caught the vague image of a man asking if I was okay. I don't know what I said, but I knew he then caught me.

I woke up in a bed with a nurse, doctor and the man who caught me standing over me. I asked where my shopping was, and the man joked that my apples were probably still rolling down the street. I was later told that another girl called an ambulance for me and in two minutes, the sirens were taking me to hospital. Any longer, and I could have died.

I'd had a stroke, and 21 days later, was released from the rehabilitation centre in Mile End. I lost control over the right side of my body and my speech was slurred. I could only describe it as my body being abducted, but my mind still remained; it made it all confusing and frustrating. I had to learn to walk again, to use my hand again, to speak again. At 57 years old, this was now my life. But it wasn't just my life which had been affected. My wife and close family needed to

adapt to this 'new me'. They truly were a shoulder of support I have been so lucky to be able to rely on.

As I slowly improved, I felt it a valuable privilege to help those in a similar position to me. I attended, and still do attend, rehabilitation groups; events which are set up to improve the lives of stroke patients. It makes me feel connected, a sense of giving back. I felt it important to do what I can for Tower Hamlets NHS Community Group – the team that saved my life and built me back up to the man I was before my apples rolled down the street. I visit the ward and give hope to others. On one of my regular trips I was confronted by a young lady, frustrated with her new life.

"I can't do this anymore Angur, I can't go on living this life."

"No, no, no." I wouldn't accept it. "Look at me: I've had a stroke, and I'm fit again. You've got your whole life ahead of you. My god, girl, you have to get married, get a career. You can't give up."

There were the low points, naturally. At times, I doubted myself that I'd ever be the old me again. I once asked the Doctor, a man I trusted and followed, whether I would ever make a full recovery.

"For every hundred people, five people fully recover. You are eighty per cent recovered. Most people range from forty to seventy per cent," he explained. He quoted like a politician which reminded me of all those people at the top I'd seen come and go, Major, Thatcher, Wilson, Cameron and all the other lot, and what had I learnt from them at this time of reflection in my life?

Patience. You have to be patient. I replied to my Doctor, "When you make tea it takes you five minutes; when I make tea, it takes fifteen minutes."

I have had many experiences, many lives. But this is now my life. This is my stroke life.

# The Dorni

From the life of Nessa

By Nacima Khan

Her eyes flickered over my bump and she asked me how many months I was.

Eight.

She nodded. My first?

Yes.

‘She’ was Nessa, a sixty-year-old Bangladeshi woman I had met sitting behind me one day at the local mosque. She, like many of her age, had adopted the mosque as her second home. Every day Nessa would shuffle into the large women’s prayer hall with her rosary beads in one hand and a plastic bag containing her possessions in the other. The month of Ramadan had hit which meant Nessa and the regular women who would haunt the mosque on a daily basis were in their element. They knew the best places to pray and where the air conditioning worked. They knew where to stash your possessions so that no child could get their hands on them, nor any occasional thieves taking their chances. They knew their way round the mosque management and the volunteers. With a prayer

hall which was heaving at the doors during each night of Ramadan, with many people having to pray outside – it was guaranteed that these women would be standing, without fail, right at the front of the hall. This particular year Nessa and her gang had scored the ultimate – their very own private room. Well, it wasn't really meant to be theirs exclusively but a room had been cordoned off as the 'chair room'. Those with disabilities or who were pregnant were to use this room. And so, being eight months pregnant, I was ushered in by a volunteer one night. As soon as I spotted a seat and sat down, I got the distinct feeling that I had just interrupted an exclusive club of some sort. Nessa's club. The smell of beetle-nut hit me and I felt a hand poking me from behind. Turning around I met very light eyes on a small face.

"You need to move."

I blinked and stared at the many empty seats around the room.

"Why?"

She paused and studied my face before replying.

"This is someone else's seat. There are other seats you can take, just not this one."

Annoyance built up in me but I was too tired for a fight. I shifted to the chair next to it and exaggerated the inconvenience it had caused to my health. Breathing heavily, I sat down again and began to rub my bump. She was still watching me but had begun to hum a prayer.

After the two-hour prayer had come to an end I sat on the carpeted floor, exhausted and hot. Nessa moved her chair close to me and bent her head near.

Her eyes flickered over my bump and she asked how many months I was.

Eight months.

She nodded. My first?

Yes.

“I have had five children. Three in Bangladesh and two here.” She paused as the rosary beads in her hand clicked together. “It was very easy in our day. Now you women can’t even cope with one.”

I smiled politely as I knew this was a common notion. I started to like Nessa and wanted to hear more. We had made a connection. Meeting with her on another day she related the story of the first time she gave birth. Nessa was a young bride. She couldn’t remember her age but it was whilst she was still at school that she got married.

“Your uncle was a ‘Londoni’ and how the girls in the village became jealous.” Nessa chuckled at this.

“But you must’ve been so young?” I asked. I was pretty sure that she was a lot younger than 16 years old.

Nessa shrugged.

“Girls would get married at 12 years old. It wasn’t a big deal and I didn’t mind as I knew it was going to happen soon... but I would have loved to have finished school.” I watched Nessa as she glanced briefly into the distance. Nessa had fallen pregnant within a couple of months of being married, and her husband was a migrant worker who would travel back and forth from England. He happened to be in the village on the day she gave birth. Nessa sighed at the memory of it being the hardest day of her life. “It was the first time I really missed my mum. I couldn’t cry for her, I couldn’t ask for her, but I couldn’t stop the tears from rolling. It was hard – very hard.” The season was just before the monsoon and the air was incredibly hot and dry. Nessa had been getting pains for a couple of days but was too scared to tell anyone, and didn’t understand what was happening.

That particular day she was panting and feeling out of breath as the contractions took hold and paralysed her at times. She recalls being in the kitchen with her mother-in-law.

“Make sure that you stir the dhall properly. It will stick otherwise.” Nessa wiped the sweat dripping from her forehead and stirred the dhall frantically with the wooden spoon. Her mother-in-law bent over the open fire to lay more wood into it, the fire burned more ferociously, and Nessa pulled away, nearly losing her balance as she crouched over the dhall. She felt a sharp pain travelling across her back and cried out loud. Her mother-in-law cleared her throat and continued crushing red chillies next to her. The day had consisted of one order after another from her mother-in-law. From washing the household clothes, to standing up for four hours and pounding the wheat from the fields into ground flour with a tall clay stick which was as thick as a tree branch.

Nessa was to learn later that her mother-in-law had purposefully set her these tasks to get her ready for childbirth by helping the baby to get into position, but Nessa had cursed her throughout under her breath. Nessa looked at me and chuckled again. “I’m sure that I wished every kind of illness and calamity to befall my mother-in-law. How shameful of me!”

“Have you put the rice on yet?” Nessa stood up, stumbling to get her balance, and walked towards the store room where the rice was kept. As she reached it, she felt a sudden pop inside her and a wet sensation pouring down her legs. She froze on the spot, horrified, and in the next moment heard her mother-in-law shout for her daughter. She could recall the smell of the dhall burning whilst she was being pulled from the spot by her sister-in-law and into her room.

The next hour was a blur of her mother-in-law frantically covering all the windows and shouting at various people coming in and out of the room to fetch this and that. Nessa was laid on the bed and

the pain coming now was intolerable. She was moaning loudly and didn't care who could hear. All the men from the village including her husband were sat in the local bazaar waiting for news. Men didn't come near the village during labour. Nessa recalled the first time her Dorni (local midwife) walked into the room.

“She was so petite and her face was so open and friendly, she brought me comfort straightaway. As soon as she laid her hands on my back and began to massage, I could feel the pain going down and I started to cry quietly. She reminded me of my mother so much.”

The Dorni was not a professional midwife but someone who had acquired years of experience in delivering babies. Dorni literally meant the ‘one who holds’. This was the Dorni who would deliver her other two children in the years to come. Nessa doesn't recall the Dorni saying much to her but her small, soft hands seemed to speak to her as she began taking deep breaths and calming down. She had forgotten about her mother-in-law running around frantically and her sister-in-law who stood at the foot of the bed staring at her open-mouthed whilst holding an empty bowl in her hands, until she was scolded out of the room and sent to get the water ready. The window covers were twitching and Nessa knew that some of the village women had come to have a sneaky look. She was guilty of this herself, as she too admitted spying on other women giving birth. “I never did it again though.” Nessa pursed her lips and leaned back in her chair. “It was wrong to do that and I hated the fact I was being watched like cattle.” Three hours later, Nessa heard the first cry of her daughter. The Dorni then took over and pushed her mother-in-law to one side. Nessa remembers feeling overwhelmingly tired but the continuous cries of her daughter kept her on edge. “I remember feeling useless.” Nessa sighed. “It was my child but I didn't know what I was supposed to do. I didn't hold her till an hour later.”

I asked about her husband and how he must've been happy. “Happy?” Nessa snorted and tugged at the beads in her hands. “He

stood at the doorway, nodded when they showed him the baby and was then ushered out by my mother-in-law.” Nessa sighed heavily and I detected a feeling of loneliness in her tone. “Two days later he flew back to London but I didn’t see him much before he went.”

A hundred other questions went through my head but Nessa had begun to stand up and collect her things and I realised her story had come to an end. Muttering about needing to get on with her reading, Nessa paused and looked at me. “I think of her often. My Dorni.” I asked if she was still alive. Nessa snorted before walking out of the room and back into the prayer hall. “Don’t be stupid.” Nessa never spoke about her story again and would acknowledge me from afar whenever I happened to see her praying in the Mosque. It was a month later, having given birth to my own daughter and sat in the warm room of the birthing centre, watching my husband cooing over the baby and holding onto her tight that Nessa came to mind. My own labour had been calm but fast with my husband holding my hand all the way through. I leaned onto him when I needed strength, my cries of pain were met with his calmness and he respected my wishes all the way through the process. Watching him with our daughter gave me a feeling of serenity and pride which I had never experienced before and I thought of Nessa. Nessa, whose husband was banished from her side due to the ‘shame’ of seeing her state whilst in childbirth. I thought of Nessa as that young girl who looked for comfort and familiarity in the face of a stranger in place of her mother.

I thought of Nessa and the tone of loneliness in her voice as her husband left without being able to say goodbye properly. I relished the few moments I had with my husband and daughter before the doors opened and my family came pouring in with smiles, presents, food and collective noise and I watched my daughter – nestled in a bundle of white towels – being passed from one person to another and my husband being pushed to the background as the women of

my family began taking over my daughter's care. I thought of Nessa, losing control of her situation as her daughter too was passed onto the care of others and how she felt 'useless', as I had begun to as well. But I thought of Nessa's fond recollection of her Dorni and how befitting the name was – the 'one who holds'. Nessa's Dorni had held her physically and emotionally as she provided not just the maternal support but I suppose the support of her absent husband – she stepped in briefly to fill that space full of loneliness. I caught my husband napping quietly on the sofa, with his head leaning awkwardly to one side, and I realised that I too had my own 'Dorni'.

Watching my family milling around and the guests who were to pop in that day, the one unacknowledged fact was that it was my husband who had played a part in the labour. And I realise now that just as I wasn't able to express in words to anyone how much my husband had played a role in the labour, Nessa was not able to express how much she missed her husband in her labour. Both our stories had come to an abrupt end.

# Be With Me Still

By Christina Barrett-Jones

Tick by tock, by tick-tock, with me she wanders still. Born inside each other, past and future lives colliding, I am she who is me myself and I, the sum total of all the things I did and did not do.

The echo of a small young voice asks me: What did you want to be when you were little? The reply is a reverb. “*A good girl*” is all I hear.

And she who is me throws sand up in the air and takes note of where each grain falls, and like sandcastles in the rain, they sink where they land, melting and changing the lines written in sand, creating figments made from memories. And I can see her again in profile, picture and sound. It is my mother as she stands over me demanding that I take heed.

*Pay attention, she says, and listen good.*

A woman, she, my mother, having flown free from Jamaica like a bird escaping a cage to land on an isle that captured her for over 50 years. She flew up so high and so fast to step beyond the bars of her childhood story. To fly away and come and taste the newer, fresher fruits of opportunities which had been promised. Not once did she think

that life would betray her again because she had flown up and out to a new land to become master of her fate.

*Don't talk to people.*

*Don't follow people.*

*When you finish school come straight home.*

*Life is too short to get blamed for someone else's crime.*

*Don't get yourself mixed up in other people's business*

*Do your work and come straight home.*

She could do anything, my mother, just not change the world.

*When you work hard, you will be rewarded,  
because the world never forgets.*

*Don't give the world a reason to fail you.*

*Make sure you work so hard they can't find fault.*

*Work harder and deeper and longer and stronger and  
make sure your work is good.*

*Give them twice what they ask for and look them  
straight in the eyes.*

*Don't look down, look up, hold your head high.*

*Respect your elders.*

*Save your money.*

*Make sure you get a place that belongs to you.*

*Rely on no man, and make sure you put something aside  
for the family you will have.*

*Are you listening? Are you listening to me?*

Yes Mama ... yes I'm listening ...

And her words linger with me still.

Did she mean what she told me all those years ago? Does Mama truly believe them even now?

All good girls do as they're told, I tell myself, just as I did at eighteen years old.

I've been working since I was fifteen because I decided I wanted more. To move from the world of the small and safe, of school and home and college and home again, getting back home in time, just as I had been told to do. A world seen only from the window of buses and occasional strolls along well-walked streets. I moved from the world of simplicity and anonymity into the world of the vast. A world of curious side streets and alleyways, red lights and broken bottles, of languages heard and new slang uttered and so many great people with so many strange ways.

I sold books on a Saturday for two years; then knock-off fake perfumes door to door. I settled naturally into retail because that was what was available at the time, and went from working in a little shop selling specialist men's shirts in Chelsea on the King's Road, to being prepped to work in the highest and largest retail business in the known world. It was a world of fashionable clothes with confusing price tags but I learned fast. So fast, in fact, that they wanted to move me, to send me to Knightsbridge and to the building of twinkling rich and the famous stars wearing garments of wealth that I quickly learned to recognise with ease.

I got noticed, not for being the trendiest mannequin on the shop floor, but because I helped. I always loved to help and to listen. They, the other workers on the shop floor, would come and tell me their stories of drunken escapades, confused passions, and bad nights out and they would make me laugh so loudly that the floor manager would lift his head, frown, and pretend to look annoyed.

And I made friends. Good friends. I learned to drink disgusting bottles of beer and dance in nightclubs with strange new rhythms and beats and continuously smiling sweaty faces. Camden punk and Camberwell reggae parties now joined with Soho disco and

Hackney raves. London expanded beyond home and work and home again to that of new zones and night buses and strange street names and freedom. I had money in my pocket and could say yes to invitations. And I discovered other people's stories.

*Don't follow people. Don't trust them.  
You don't know who they are.  
Stick with your own.*

Tick follows tock follows tick-tock, tick-tock...

I, who am her, stare into a picture of myself as a child.

I look just like my daughter does now, six years old and full of anticipation.

The girl in the picture is looking back up at me shyly but not yet confined to the possibilities never to be spoken.

My daughter tells me she dreams of dancing and becoming a builder of houses with nine kitchens and seven bathrooms. She says she wants to be a nurse and an artist and a teacher and a designer, a writer and gymnast and a hairdresser and maybe go into space from time to time. My older self tells my daughter that the world is hers to be anything and everything she wants to be. But my younger self says otherwise. The younger me throws the grains of sand into the air and says again and again: "Not always."

The younger me wants to tell my daughter that sometimes the world is not ours, that it does not belong to us. "Be satisfied with the small and the simple: that way she can never be hurt by it," is what she says. But I cannot find it within myself to repeat those words any longer, so she comes and stands close to me, the hair is still cut short and unlocked, the body still taut, not yet changed by childbirth, her face is of my own only finer. My younger self takes my hand and it fits

perfectly, symmetrical lines and heartbeats matching, she brings my hand up towards the bruise over her heart and speaks:

*“Did you know that every grain of sand comes  
from a lost civilisation?”*

*They come from ancient kingdoms ground down and  
made soft by the hard falling of wind and rain, becoming nothing  
more than simple grains of sand.*

*Did you know that every single one of us has within the  
blood ancestry of kings and giants? We are of royalty,  
rulers, and conquerors but it was the immeasurable time  
that diminished our size and reduced our memories from moun-  
tains into rock into crushed stone. Would you like  
me to retell it?” she asks me.*

*“Would you like me to retell the story of how I came to be?”*

*Of what it was that made me the way I am,  
diminished specks of sand?”*

So she speaks and tells me again how it started with the whispers, those low, hushed voices. Concession workers, staff from other outside companies being plucked out and discarded. How any staff member who was working in, but not part of, Harrod's staff, were being re-vetted.

Re-interviewed.

Questioned.

All for quality control.

To be sure that all workers were suitable of course.

For excellence and outstanding service.

For the image of Harrod's.

For the greater good of the world's greatest department store.

It started first on the ground floor and worked its way up.  
The whispers becoming rumours.

“They are getting rid of everybody,” they said. “It’s a purge, a purge. Be careful, Christina, they’ll be coming after you too.”

“But I’ve done nothing wrong,” that’s what I said to them. And they nodded as they always did.

Except ...

The Indian lady on the chocolate counter on the ground floor.

The black guy who sold the gold watches.

The Asian girl in jewellery.

“Have you heard, Christina, have you heard? There was a woman on the first floor working in the clothes dept, but they didn’t want her to work here anymore. She was Asian too. Then that African guy—”

“He’s gone as well? I really liked him. He used to sit by the window in the canteen.”

“Be careful, Christina, they’ll be coming after you.”

“What for? I work hard, I do well. I have nothing to worry about.” And besides, I was being reassured by my colleagues and my managers.

“Just be yourself and let them see how great and knowledgeable you are. You’ll be fine,” they said. “Just fine.”

And I was, until my time came and went. Until I was called into the office a few days later and told that I had not passed the interview.

The way you look, they said. Holes in your clothes ...

... clothes?

Seen to be coming to work late ...

... late?

Never being at your station ...

... station?

They've been watching you for some time ...

... watching me?

They say you stand around chatting and laughing ...

...laughing ... but—

—don't worry, the main boss of Ted Baker is going to appeal and fight on your behalf. He knows you're a good worker... don't worry about anything, we're going to sort this thing out ...

But ...

...there will have to be changes just so they don't have anything to come back to you with. You will have to change the clothes you wear. You will need to be more formal in this informal space. You must not talk to the other assistants who stand chatting nearby. You must make sure you are always seen working and looking busy even though we are in the heart of a recession, a recession which sees no customers on the shop floor and most importantly: you cannot laugh so loudly that you bring attention to yourself. They will be watching because they don't like to be challenged so make sure you give them nothing that makes it easy for them to be right.

Later they rest of the department told me how lucky I was.

“If it wasn't for your manager and boss, they would have got rid of you,” they said.

“Just like all those other workers ... workers of other colours.”

My younger self takes my hand away from the bruise covering her heart.

Our mother came. She gave birth to us here, she taught us here. We were educated and raised here in the civilised Kingdom, but still, the betrayal goes on? How hard did I need to work? How much did I try? How much did I listen and respect and obey? How much did I not gossip or speak badly of people? I spoke like everyone else. I

worked like everyone else. I took pride like everyone else. I turned up day after day after day like everyone else. I respected my elders, I made sure to listen to commands, and yet I cannot change the way I look.

I am a black woman who did as she was told but this world does not match up with the world I was asked to believe in. I have done nothing wrong. I have hurt or injured no one. I have insulted or cursed no one yet my face causes offence. My hard work insults, and my laugh is offensive. What can I do in a world like this?

What are you going to tell your daughter when she asks about me, your younger self? Will you tell her the truth? Tell her about how the world broke your heart? Will you tell her our mother's story and then ours, that we are a living replication? Are we destined to turn into our grandmothers watching each generation go through the same stuff again and again and again?

Tick by tock by tick-tock, with me she wonders still. Born into each other, past and future lives colliding, I am she who is me myself and I, the sum total of all the things I did and did not do. I am the result of you.

# Memories, Losses and Gains

From the life of Eileen Wade

By Naomi Duffree

There is a strong resilient spirit running through the East End. Where does it originate from and in this era when the phrase, “They don’t make ’em like that any more” is often heard, do we have a need to worry that this East End mentality is wavering? I had the privilege of talking to Eileen Wade whose family have lived in the East End for a few generations. Wavering? No, I feel it is as strong as ever.

When Eileen agreed to meet me at London Bridge her first words after a cheery hello were, “I didn’t realise how busy this area was. We East Enders don’t normally come south of the River.” Eileen spoke to me about her parents and grandmother; their upbringing being an influence on how Eileen sees the world now. Society has changed a great deal but the family love and bonds run deep and are something that Eileen passed on to her two boys as they grew up in an ever-changing world.

One of the first photos that I saw of Eileen’s mother, also called Eileen (Jones), was taken in 1940. I commented that she resembled Queen Elizabeth and Eileen laughed. Apparently she was mistaken for her

fairly often, even having a Nigerian man staring at her while she was on the tube one day. “As if the Queen would have been sat on the tube!” her mother replied. Her mother was a republican so I imagine she wasn’t best pleased. In the photograph she is walking along Barking High Road. Behind them is the civic hall where she and her friends would go dancing. Along from this is the library which she lived behind – and a hundred yards from that was her school and church; the music hall and the market just across the road. “How small my Mum’s world was.”



*‘Eileen Jones (centre) with two friends in 1940’*

All this changed when war broke out. Canning Town was targeted in the blitz.

It started on the 8th September 1940 and the following day her Nan's house in Malmesbury Terrace was hit. Eileen, with her positive outlook on life, reckons it was probably one of the best things that happened to her Mum in the sense of building her future. When the family came back to London they could choose where they lived as there were so many empty houses. They chose East Ham, which her Grandad hated. It was 'quite posh', having had a Conservative MP before the war, and it was inhabited mainly by shop and office workers. Her Grandad called it "kippers and curtains".

"Later on in life my aunt got the chance to buy her house as she was a sitting tenant... When she died my mum and aunts got the legacy. So, getting bombed, since no one got hurt, was good for them. Otherwise they would have been rehoused in Canning Town."

Her mum, Eileen Jones, had been born in 1924 and passed her 11+ to St Angela's but she didn't take up her place as her family could not afford to send her there. Her mum had never had much foresight in her children's careers according to her daughter. After Eileen Jones left school she got a job making tea in a factory. Eileen sighs, "She could have done so much more."

Eileen Jones's grandmother had been widowed at an early age and left with three young children to care for. Having no help in those days she decided on the spur of the moment to take the children to the local orphanage at St Anthony's church, Forest Gate. She explained her situation to the gate keeper and he remarked that he would take the boys but why didn't she keep the young girl, Catherine (who later became Eileen Jones's mother), for company? She returned home with her daughter. A few years later she remarried, had another daughter, and was able to have her sons back living with her.

After the boys had been home a while, Danny, lying about his age, joined the army but was killed in the First World War. John never forgave his mum for keeping his sister and for sending them away. He became a jack-the-lad type, with many different women friends, who never settled into a family life. Even when he visited home, Catherine would have to go out since he carried the resentment with him.



*'Nanny Jones' with her husband, believed to be on their wedding day.'*

One can only assume that this trauma in her and her sibling's lives had an effect on them throughout. Maybe it gave them strength and a degree of stubbornness, but also maybe a defensive mechanism

when it came to expressing their love for their family. Catherine was a kind woman by all accounts, but she was only ever known as Nanny Jones to Eileen (Wade). *“She wasn’t a cuddly Nan... My other Nan was different. She would come around and get sweets out of her bag. I can’t imagine Nanny Jones – and there’s the difference, my other nanny was Nanny Laura; last name, first name.”* Perhaps having seen her brothers disappear to the orphanage she was protecting herself against becoming too close to others.

Catherine remained in Canning Town until the blitz. On her mantelpiece were two vases which contained family papers such as birth certificates and insurance documents as well as her jewellery. When her house was bombed in 1940 and everything was on fire it was these vases that were top priority. *“There were flaming books flying through the air, something that remained emblazoned on Mum’s mind.”* The family had to run for it. Interestingly, though, she hadn’t let her children be evacuated in the first place; they were the only children left in the street... *“She was strong minded about it. ‘If we go, we all go together.’”* ... Her stubbornness was also evident in not letting her children be vaccinated... *“She was very strong willed.”*



*‘Photographs showing the bombing in Canning Town during the blitz – from the VE Day 70th Anniversary Special 6/5/2015 Recorder.’*

After the bombing the family had to be rehoused. “They had lived in a ‘jerry-built’ house that had been put up quickly due to the docks being developed.” Her Nan and Grandad lived there with six children – and another family upstairs. When they were evacuated they went to Devon to live in a semi-detached red-brick house. It was a complete contrast.



*‘Eileen Jones with her sisters in Devon.’*

After she married in 1946, Eileen Youles, as she then became known, worked an array of jobs while fitting them around her children, Eileen and her brother; firstly at a laundry and then a factory, just along from their house. She was adamant that she wouldn’t work afternoons so that she would be home at the end of the school day. She got a morning position fitting handles on tins at the factory. To challenge herself she used to see how many she could do and try and find faster ways to fit them. She knew she was destined for better things. After a friend got a job with the London Electricity Board (LEB) she followed on as a clerical worker – and her books always balanced. That was when she came south of the River to work.

Eileen's dad joined the Navy, worked in the docks and then as a clerk for the shipping federation, signing people on and giving them railway warrants. He was quite bright but left school early. He would often regale people with stories of his time in the navy. Eileen wishes she had listened more carefully now as he was involved with the North Atlantic runs to Russia. He received a medal from the Russian government following a newspaper advertisement from them asking sailors to come forward if they had been involved. "He got a letter of thanks along with his medal for taking supplies to Russia. When you see the films of it now with the ice and water..." Eileen stops, chilled at the thought. Water and Eileen didn't mix for a while, a result of a childhood experience. "What I can't understand is Dad wanting to go into the submarines. He didn't pass the test... But submarines? The thought of being in the water..."

Eileen was telling me of her childhood family holidays when I discovered her fear of water. She had been staying at a B&B in Southend for a week's holiday, aged five. "I was sat on the breakwater and Mum was looking after my brother further up the beach. I must have tried to see if I could touch the bottom with my foot, but slipped on the sea weed..." The next thing her mum saw was a man coming out of the water carrying someone with the same bathing costume as Eileen. Her mum took a moment to realise it was actually her daughter. "And I remember still that feeling of being under the water... I never learnt to swim at school."

When Eileen herself became a mother, she was determined to learn to swim in case she ever had to save her son. She took herself to adult swimming lessons, which she admits she enjoyed, although, "The smell of the water made me so nervous." Taking no chances she used floats *and* armbands, despite there being a choice... "And if the float had a chip in it I wouldn't have that one." She learnt to swim, progressing to back stroke and to her Bronze Survival Award. "But I

used to have to count to three before we set off. I would always have a couple of threes at least before I kicked off!”

Eileen’s determination shone through even as a young girl. Before she met her husband, Eileen had ventured off to Italy and Majorca with friends. Her father was not happy about her travelling to Italy as he’d been there during the war and “knew what the Italians were like.” He refused to sign Eileen’s passport. She was 19, so her mum had to do it. He was not happy. As for Eileen – she never even got her “bum pinched”, so she was very disappointed.

Putting this determination to good use, Eileen began attending Adult Education classes. Her first class was at Beckton, where she began learning computer skills. She had promised her boys she would attend, but once on the bus she was terrified. However, not wanting to let them down, she never looked back. Not only has she taken up swimming, computer skills, the guitar and walking football, but she is now learning bowls. I asked her what her mum would have thought of her partaking in all these clubs?

“Mum would be thrilled. She was happy with her children and grandchildren, but it’s not enough for me.” The more she does, the more she wants to do. “I’ll go once and if I don’t like it I won’t be back.” She believes in trying. “I think my mum taught me that. I also have my Nan’s spirit in me somewhere. I’ve never been that girly girl – so I want to have something more interesting to talk about than what tomatoes I like.”

Her boys have always played an important part in her life and when she gave up work, having moved to Plaistow with the boys to look after, she was quite lonely. Without the toddler groups and socialising that is now encouraged, Eileen missed the people at work. “There was no choice in keeping your job open and no maternity leave.” One thing that hasn’t changed down the years though is the wide gap between expectation and reality when it comes to motherhood.

Eileen had many ideas of what she would do when she gave up work, but in reality, her baby didn't sleep day or night and some days she barely had time to run a comb through her hair. "Mum said I was the same when it came to sleeping, so she called it revenge."

The community in Plaistow has changed, though, and according to Eileen not all for the better. She blames the rental market. The houses are occupied for six months at a time and no one gets a chance to know who lives there. Following a burglary in their road the police appealed for the neighbours to look out for each other. Eileen admits this is difficult in today's society. "Everyone's nice but if they are only there for six months; people can't get to know you. You just don't know your neighbours anymore. That's what we miss from the old days."

Of course in her mum's childhood many would have been playing out on the streets, all together. They'd be skipping or, if someone had a piano, they'd push it out and have a sing-song. There was a definite community and family spirit which didn't always go down well with Eileen's mum as a child, especially when it came to church... "She always had to take the younger ones – it used to drive her mad – I think that's why she had a small family. My Nanny Jones made the children go to church three times on a Sunday... and Mum swore it was to get them out of the house not because she wanted them to be holy!"

As her grandad's family were from Wales and her grandma's from Ireland she reckons this is why they became Catholics. Her mother, however, became disappointed with the church after having been told by the priest, regarding problems in her marriage, that she just had to get on with it. God would sort it. His attitude had been, "You will never be given a bigger burden than you can carry." This wasn't enough for her mum. Eileen herself became disillusioned, but has since returned to it again, finding comfort in being at the convent and church where her mother used to go.

Eileen's mum passed away about six years ago having made her home in Dagenham. They had been living in a three-bedroomed council flat but her dad had always wanted a garden, so they put in a transfer and got a three-bedroomed house, which they got the chance to buy. Many hadn't settled out of the East End as they were used to the communal aspect of the tenement blocks, so felt lonely and isolated. Not so Eileen's parents. "My mum and dad had a car so they could get out and about." Then when her mum's elder sister died they were left some money and had an extension built. "She then used to joke that she'd gone from no toilets to two toilets!" Eileen laughs, her eyes lit up, not for the first time, as she remembers her mum. The East End humorous spirit continues to live on.

As our conversation drew to a close we began to walk back to London Bridge station through the 'trendy' Borough Market, which would have amazed the late Eileen Jones. As Eileen soaked up the atmosphere she remarked, "I think I might come here more often." ...and I believe she will. Eileen will try anything once – and if she likes it she doesn't give up.

# 22 Thoughts

By Craig Britton

1.

*“Seventh floor.”*

How did I get here? You can see the Thames, the London Eye, The Houses of Parliament. I’m sitting in meetings. They’re talking about million dollar deals. I’m getting paid to read Tolstoy; I’m getting paid to judge submitted work. I don’t deserve this, not at all, I’m not like these Oxbridge types. I don’t belong in an office; all I do is drink ridiculous amounts of coffee. I’m just a boy from a council estate who can’t even get his grammar and punctuation right.

2.

*“Billy.”*

There he sits perched at the end of the kitchen table. He never looks at me and will not respond to my presence unless I acknowledge his first; even then it is brief and reluctant. The radio or his cigarette offers him more amusement than me. Picturesque depression. He looks deep in thought, hopefully that thought is to jump off a bridge. I make breakfast and leave, not uttering a word. It’s better that way,

discussion leads in one of two directions, argument or a lecture, and I have heard all he has to say.

### 3.

#### *“London is diverse.”*

Elitsa is Bulgarian. Sam is Bangladeshi. Inga and Virginia are Lithuanian. Jozcef and Veronika are Hungarian. Monika is Polish. Alvaro is Spanish. Francesca is Italian. Loukemane is Mauritian. Andrea and Paolo are Italian. Magda and Patryk are Polish. Marlene is German-American. Juan and Louisa are Spanish. Peter is Slovakian. Laert, Namó, Anastasis, Rustem, Eddie and Edmond are Albanian. Rosa is Chilean. Lillianna is Columbian.

### 4.

#### *“Work is Easy.”*

I run around collecting glasses, wiping tables, and delivering meals. Smiling, making eye contact, “Please,” “Thank you,” “You’re welcome” – acting. If you pretend to be happy you are happy. A smile is contagious. It’s good exercise being on your feet all day. Only smoke a cigarette when she offers. “We’ll be five minutes max.” We sit out on the steps in the sun, using her cigarette-making machine. Conversation about family, politics, and psychology. “How long did that cigarette last?”

### 5.

#### *“This is your mother’s house!”*

She calls me up a week after we make love. Her landlord is creepy and perverse. She moves into my room. I move my mattresses into a double bed and we drink each night. She tries to connect with Billy; he takes his anger out on me. I have intruded on his territory. I have to get out of this house before I get sent to prison for murder, or get incarcerated in a mental asylum.

**6.*****“Alright mate.” I***

Jono has a van. He delivers for Amazon. He tells me about Lilly – she’d be two now – and how he needed anti-depressants after Nicola. Farm life exhausted him, but family nearly killed him. He tells me how he makes extra money fly-tipping, and how he almost got caught. How can two people from the same neighbourhood, same social background, same school, and same age live such different lives? I can keep asking. Are we really the same?

**7.*****“Alright mate.” II***

Aidan meets us in fluffy pink slippers and dressing gown. We chill in his illegally rented flat above a gated garage. The area looks like the set of a mafia film. Next door is the studio. Renowned for drum ‘n’ bass music, today they’re doing something different, a live competition for recording time. It’s an industrial estate but it doesn’t matter. We grab a sofa and lie in the sun listening. It’s by far the best day of the year. But at the back of my mind are those same questions.

**8.*****“How many cranes can you see?”***

The twenty-fourth floor had the most spectacular view of London. Facing west, you could see the whole of Canary Wharf, the Shard, that ‘Walkie Talkie’ building, the London Eye, Heron Tower, and the Gherkin. The best thing was when the sun set over them all. When I first arrived I was scared of Tower Hamlets, influenced by all the stereotypes fed to me all my life about inner-city parts of East London. Convinced I’d get mugged, stabbed, killed, or all three.

**9.*****“Please mind the doors.”***

The end of summer is approaching, and so is our time together in Balfon. She'll go back to Sofia; I'll start renting in East Ham. From the seventy-nine beer cans we have we build a teddy bear. We call it the 'Caring Bear', dropping the 'I'. I depart, suitcase in hand, walking into the DLR carriage. Before the doors close I stick my head out and kiss her one last time. Although I can see her, we are separated. She looks so sad. I keep eye contact, trying not to cry. That was a terrible way to say goodbye.

**10.*****“I live in East Ham.”***

Never let a suburban cowboy drive you through the city; it scares them and you will get lost. We arrive at 11pm. Parked in the street we block traffic to carry furniture up a pitch-black staircase. Dump it all in the kitchen. Documents signed and bills paid only a few hours earlier. This is all mine now, if only I could turn the lights on or have a hot shower. I'm drunk and alone, and in the morning I have to go to work.

**11.*****“Happy Christmas.”***

A homeless man walks into the bar and begins to eat a half-eaten meal left on a table. A station security guard and a policeman start questioning him. I'm called over. They ask me if he bought the meal. I'm not sure, and I'm frustrated that there's only two of us on the bar making coffee all day, so I just say, "I don't know." When I get back on the bar I realise what's happening. The guard and policeman struggle to take him out. At one point he sits on the floor and refuses to get up. I feel guilty for not just saying 'yes'. I stopped a homeless man from eating.

**12.**

***“Wouldn’t happen to know when the job centre shuts?”***

An elderly woman approaches me at a bus stop in Newham. She is frail and worn out, pulling along a raggedy trolley. “Excuse me.” She asks about the job centre, her voice is as strained as the rest of her. It shocks me that a woman of her age would still need to work or claim money. She reminds me of my mother who hasn’t worked a day since she was pregnant with me over 23 years ago after being diagnosed with a severe form of depression. She makes me worry that she’ll have to claim money for the rest of her life just to live.

**13.**

***“It’s going to be busy today.”***

Typical rush hour. Guys in suits, bankers, drinking Peroni, the most expensive lager we have. I often think they choose it because the pump is the most phallic looking. The way they handle their money offends me most. Some hold their money in the air, or at least in a very obvious way, until they are served. Completely blank faced, emotionless. I view it as some kind of status symbol, as if they could be saying, “Look, here’s money, that’s what you want,” – like a dog owner holding a biscuit.

**14.**

***“A place where people choose to live, work and stay.”***

I don’t like the phrase ‘culture shock’. To me it suggests some form of fear, a disbelief that people’s lives are different to your own. But it is the closest word to describe my reaction to East Ham. Only there was no fear, more a fascination with the aesthetic of the streets, the small businesses and terraced houses. This was a true working-class community. It was different to what I had known as working class

back home in the suburbs, what I had identified with. These people were poorer than I was, but I was beginning to learn that this is actually what most of London looks like, nothing like the paraded tourism image.

## 15.

### *“Little Servants.”*

Over time you identify customers with their drinks. There’s the Symonds man who always replies with a “yes please” when you ask him if he would like a Symonds. The two-Stellas man who simply raises two fingers. Half-a-Peroni man, who is ironically short. The two-Heinekens-one-with-a-head-one-without man who is repulsively pot-bellied, and whom I have named the human slug. Another Heineken man who always stinks of urine, and will sometimes hand you a wet bank note. The tequila man, whose deep voice and Mediterranean accent makes “double tequila with ice” sound as suave as hell. And the Chilean Sauvignon woman, who is always surprised that I remember her drink.

## 16.

### *“Hi there.”*

Is it possible people do not know how to communicate any more? How can you order a drink with headphones on? Or worse, not even give the bartender eye contact because you’re too busy playing with your phone. Not even listening to the questions they’re asking. Or possibly even more offensive, leaving money on the bar, not your hand, the bar! Especially when it’s coins! Are bartenders simply machines like your phone that don’t even have the most basic human elements? Does technology just make people more ignorant of each other?

**17.**

***“You must make good tips here, don’t you?”***

No, but you would think that. Especially when more than half the customers are career bankers working in huge offices in Liverpool Street – the biggest gangsters this country has ever seen. The richest people in The City. But that’s why they’re the richest people, because they don’t tip, they keep every penny. Take, again, Peroni: it once cost £4.95, meaning if you paid with a fiver there would be 5p change. It really shocked me how many of these ‘suave’ suited men would wait so long after paying for their 5p. Now I don’t expect to be tipped, but is that really worth waiting for when you earn so much?

**18.**

***“No, no, no!”***

Men shout at the accidental drop of soda in their wine, women on the verge of tears because you didn’t realise they didn’t want coke with their JD. Why? Take it with a pinch of salt, they’re the customer, you’re in the wrong, they get to be passive aggressive. Unleashing their built-up anger from the day onto someone of a lower occupational status. You’re on the wrong side of the bar. Of course, I say this, but I am lucky I don’t work in a call centre.

**19.**

***“Thanks... Craig!”***

Name tags and I.D. cards are demeaning. They can make you feel powerless. The customer knows your name, but you don’t know theirs. It’s embarrassing when they call your name for attention, or when they want to thank you as a joke in front of their friends, scanning your badge for a name. They give the customer the impression that working at a bar is the only thing you do with your life. Like it’s your career, and that there’s nothing else you can do because you’re so thick you can only pull pints.

**20.*****“Got any change please?”***

When you spend a lot of time around Liverpool Street station you come to realise there are a lot of homeless people in the area, and they all have their distinct ways of asking for change. One young man not much older than I am sells lighters with designs on them. Another man with bruised knuckles sells poems. A much older man with a tattoo on his face like Mike Tyson sits on the floor and opens the door into McDonald’s for people. A lot of the time I do have change in my pocket and I say, “Sorry man.” It fills me with shame. Maybe I’m becoming like these bankers.

**21.*****“Head down to the LP Café.”***

Free time in July consisted of drinking coffee and trying to write. I would always bump into man called Nick who loved to talk about politics. We would talk for hours about it. One day I mentioned one of my past girl friends from a couple of years ago. A girl who got me more into politics in the first place. She was an anarchist, and brought me to societies like LARC, tried to involve me in the creation of an anti-fascist magazine, and she always attended anti-English Defence League protests. It was unbelievable to find out that Nick used to date her before me, and had influenced her enough to make her go from being a religious school girl to political rebel. Nick radicalised her; she radicalised me.

**22.**

Reading about history and politics can be damaging to the soul leading to frustration and depression. At some point, you need to ask yourself how far do you want to go with this? How much do you really want to be angry about? What if you can’t do anything? Do you seek to change the world knowing you might try your whole

life and achieve nothing but unwanted stress? Or do you take the easy option and decide to enjoy life and live in ignorance of what you know? There are some things that once you know you'll never forget them.

# Home Sweet Home

By Nacima Khan

“Home sweet home, hey sis?”

My brother had, for the first time in twenty-four hours, regained his usual cockiness and beamed at me whilst flicking his overgrown hair, nearly walking backwards into a petite woman pushing a pram with one hand and dragging a child with the other. I pulled him away as we stepped onto the escalator and glanced around. There were people milling around in every direction, and I couldn't stop looking at the many white faces all around me. My ears picked up on all the English words being spoken so hastily against the noise of squeaks and the dull murmur of wheels as luggage of various shapes and sizes were being dragged along the white polished floor. I gripped my black, battered suitcase and drew it closer to me as the escalator rolled forward. There was an echo as the speaker blared into life every now and then, announcing flight details, the occasional lost person looking for a loved one, or sudden cancellations.

Names and signs seemed to overpower my eyes with their loud black and yellow colours. I looked away from them and unconsciously caressed my stiff neck. Sleeping on the plane between a mother with a screaming baby and a big man who seemed to lean into my space

all the way through caused me to force myself to sleep in whatever way I could. My neck had paid the price.

Two girls stood awkwardly in front of me and I paused to look at them as I recognised them from seven hours earlier at Dhaka airport. Over there they were catching looks of admiration from onlookers as we had sat in the small lounge. They were confidently tossing back their shiny hair and digging their hands into the pockets of their jeans, chatting insistently with excitement. But here at Heathrow, they stood silently and closely behind a man who looked like their father, and they seemed to have grown darker. Their hair had lost its shine and style, and their eyes looked fearfully around at the airport. As I walked past them they disappeared into the mass of people but their eyes haunted me. I had seen that look before and another face emerged in my mind, the face of my father. I had seen that same expression on his face thirty years before I was even born.

It was during a general clear-out of my father's steel cabinet when I happened to come across his old documents. I picked up a tired-looking passport, dark green and curled around the edges, and nestled it in my hands as the sharp smell of mothballs and old leather hit me. I flipped through the pages and it opened onto a picture of my father. There was a strand of hair falling over one sixteen-year-old eye, and a glint of youth and energy in the other one. His mouth was slightly open as if staring at something in wonderment and his head tilted slightly to one side. My father has never told me the story of how he arrived in England, but my mother has told it many times, especially on the days when they had argued over money again. Strangely, after his death, she never told it again. But I still remembered it and, as I walked through the airport, I could see my father in front of me as a young man about to make his fortune in the world. The story began to unfold.

Stepping off the plane at Heathrow, Monjur Khan was met by white; pale faces all rushing in different directions. He approached a man

in uniform, who said something, but Monjur could not understand until the man pointed him in the direction of the arrivals gate.

Walking slowly, with a large brown suitcase tugging behind him, Monjur Khan walked through the gates and into a stream of people, feeling bewildered. Faces stared at him from either side of the barriers and his heart started to beat fast. How would he know where to find his father? He hadn't seen him for nine years. Would his father recognise him? His hand gripped tightly onto his grey woolly jumper given to him by his aunt to protect him from the "English cold". He remembered the photo of his father stuck up on the wall in the main bedroom, a tall man wearing a green army uniform with medals on his left breast. His mother would proudly point out the picture to the women of the village when they came round in the evening for their usual tea and gossip. "See?" she would exclaim, "My sons are so proud of their father; he lives up to his name as a Khan."

"Monjur Khan, Monjur Khan!" He spun round towards the sound of the booming voice and searched wildly amongst the many faces for his father's. A hand grabbed his arm from behind him, and he met the eyes of a man he didn't recognise.

"Come!" the man barked at him, as he pulled him to one side. A younger man wearing blue flared trousers with a fringe of hair covering most of his face, rushed to his side and shouted "Brother, how are you?!" He pulled him into a hug. Monjur recognised his cousin's goofy smile and high-pitched voice and hugged him back laughing, taking in the strong smell of aftershave. The older man next to him laughed, and said, "Don't you recognise your own uncle?"

Monjur Khan took in the small and stout man with his gruff voice, wearing a grey cap perched on his head, and smiled as he hugged him. "My dear uncle, forgive me." Stepping back, he paused before asking, "Where is my father?" Without answering him, his uncle shouted at his son to grab the suitcase and led Monjur Khan out of

the airport, pushed him through the shivering rain and into a waiting cab.

After a couple of hours of driving through the dark and wet streets of London, the cab arrived at the flat shared by his father and his uncle. The two-hour journey had mainly been in silence as his uncle dozed off for most of the time, and spent the times awake shouting at the cab driver for taking the long way round and driving too slowly. His cousin asked incessant questions about everyone back in the village, and then trailed off when Monjur began to feel sleepy. Looking up at the tall block of flats, Monjur Khan could feel his heart beating fast. He gripped hard onto the banisters as he climbed up the dark staircase to the top floor and his head began to spin. The staircase smelt of urine and he could hear loud music blaring from one of the flats. His uncle came to a sudden stop in front of him and rattled his keys into the lock to open the brown wooden door. Entering a narrow hallway, Monjur Khan was led into a dimly lit room. There was a strong smell of gas and beetlenut, and he didn't notice the figure sat hunched near the fire-place until he heard a wheezy cough. Standing closer he salaamed loudly but the figure clad with a grey cloak didn't respond, sitting motionless.

His uncle shuffled over to the man and stooped down to shout in his ear, "Old man, can't you hear? It's Monjur Khan, your son." Monjur Khan stepped closer, and felt a pain in his chest as he suddenly couldn't breathe. The figure lifted its head to look at him and he saw the aged and wrinkled face of his father. The red-rimmed eyes blinked and then looked away back at the fire. In a low, steady voice he whispered "I don't know this man and I have no son." As Monjur Khan looked over at his uncle, who suddenly turned away from him, he began to remember the hushed whispers in the village bazaar about how his father, the famous and successful Harris Khan, had lost his mind in England.

Monjur Khan began to understand the pitiful looks which were shared by the women of the village when his mother bragged about his father. He collapsed onto the floor in a heap, exhausted and tired, and realised that he had come to England to replace his mad father and, as his mother had whispered to him when he kissed her good-bye, to “live up to the name of a Khan.”

My father’s sixteen-year-old face lingered in my mind as I continued to pace myself through the airport. I often wondered how he must’ve felt that first night in London. Was he horrified? Scared? Did he feel betrayed? How did he find the strength to carry on? Questions which always danced on the tip of my tongue but were never uttered for fear of upsetting my father.

“Excuse me!”

I jolted as a burly-looking man wearing a suit pushed past me, muttering under his breath as he rushed towards the crowds. The smell of cigarettes lingered behind, and I had to stop briefly to regain my balance. My brother had stormed ahead towards the arrival gates already and my mother followed closely behind me, suddenly very quiet and lost in her thoughts.

I looked at her and suddenly saw how frail she looked in this place where the language was not her own and her history was lived through her children. I thought that I was happy to come back. Three months of being stuck in a village with no newspapers, no TV, and limited conversations had driven me crazy at times; I had wished to be at home so badly. But there were other times there when I felt a sense of belonging, which I had never felt before, and looking around I realised what I had come back to. I was a foreigner again.

I saw eyes staring at me as I walked in my ‘Bata’ branded sandals and green cotton dress made in Bangladesh. I peered at the pale faces, unfriendly, and the formal way people greeted each other. Our arrival in Bangladesh was met with my mother’s large extended

family waiting for us at the airport, and coincided with a celebrity arrival, which meant drums and bells were ringing everywhere in celebration. It felt like we had walked into a warm hug. Here, I couldn't help but feel the cold shoulder and the feeling that I didn't belong.

I felt a hand tug mine as my mother's tiredness began to overtake her and she leaned onto me. Slowing my pace to match hers whilst dragging my suitcase, I realised that I owed my life to my parents. My father had taken these steps many years ago so that I could walk here freely today. I walked taller, with firmness in my steps, and made a point of staring back at anyone who dared to look my way. Everything I had in my possession was not accidental, and a sense of gratitude followed by humbleness came over me. Looking at my mother, and remembering the long battle she had ahead of her to continue fighting her cancer, it dawned on me that I too was replacing the role of my father, and that I would have to live up to the name of a Khan.

# The Best Thing Since Fried Bread

From the life of Ellen Shrimpton

By Sam Dodd

I met with Ellen with the intention of talking to her about her grandmother, Vesta Fay. I'd heard tales about the old-time East End wartime music hall performer, a woman who dressed as a man and smoked on stage, entertained the locals and gave the bombed-out homeless something to smile about. But as we were talking, I learned so much about Ellen's own life, through her thoughtful commentary and close-watching of others. Ellen does not mince her words; she does not suffer fools, and she states – categorically and passionately – what she believes in. She is everything you could wish for in a community leader, a mentor, and a human. She would make a great politician – which is probably why she has never been one. She has a huge smile, an addictive sense of humour, a cheeky glint in her eye, and boundless compassion for other living creatures. I left her house, which she'd welcomed me into so warmly despite not knowing much about me at all, feeling speechless.

So, here is what my quest for a story turned into. This is Ellen. Her own words, in snapshots.

## Childhood and Family

“She had reached that period in her life when the soft candlelight was distinctly flattering...”

Can you believe that? They wrote that. That’s what they used to say if you got wrinkles. That only candles could make ya look good. I found that story – the story of Vesta’s – in a book my neighbour lent me. Kind fella. I never knew anything about her till then.

My mum died when she was thirty. Already had four kids. Lost one, too. I was only small when she went, but I remember things about her. One time, we were in Canning Town station – that was on the other side of the road then. We were going to see Vesta; her mum. My mum must have been ill then, cos I remember her saying to me, “Put your hands on my head darling, I’m very hot.” My hands were cold; it was nearly winter. She died in the November. Septicaemia. An abortion. She’d had so many kids. People were pig-ignorant years ago; you couldn’t abort back then. She was so desperate that she went to a back-street woman. Afterwards, Vesta went round there; near enough killed her. Terrible times to live in really, I think, back then. For women.

I remember little bits of my nan, Vesta. Not a lot. When she moved from Canning Town she went over Hackney way. She died of a heart attack, three years after my mum left us. Anyone would, if they lost their daughter that way.

Vesta’s husband was on the stage with her, one of them funny fellas with the big feet. Clown feet. Comedian and actor. He was up in Yorkshire doing a play one day, where Vesta was from. She was 19, him 22, from Poplar. Her dad – my great-granddad – didn’t agree with it, cos he was on the stage. Not a good enough living for his daughter, he said. Still, she came back to Poplar with him – ever the

rebel. They lived with his mum until they got married. The eldest son was born some time afterwards, which proved that he was a decent bloke, as it wasn't a shotgun. Then they were on the stage, the two of them. For years. My mum and her sister went with them, when they performed, listed as artistes – but they were five and one year old each! They couldn't have done it otherwise.

She was funny as anything, was Vesta. Bit of a con artist, actually. She went to Edie, my sister, and said she wanted to give her the piano for her wedding. That she couldn't afford anything else. But only provided she could come round and play sometimes. Edie felt bad, but agreed.

Vesta gave her the piano. And the payment book.

She'd bought it on the weekly, and Edie had to pay the payment book each week! What a wedding present. What a con artist. Oh, she was a good 'un.

There's an 'istory in my family of women having shotgun weddings. My parents did, cousin's parents did, the list goes on. Course, back then, they'd chuck the women out wouldn't they. What a terrible thing to do to a young girl. That's when they need your help, isn't it? When they're young and scared, and pregnant? When we moved in here, oh it was awkward. Bob's parents were still living downstairs. So you couldn't make any noise, if you catch my drift. I was married a long time before getting pregnant. Not by choice!

So I've got all these marriage certs, death certs, photos, clippings, everything – of my family tree. My Mary, lovely Mary, she did all of this for me. She goes to different meetings, joins all these clubs, does the whole family tree internet thing. Dedicates herself to it. She could make a business out of it, really. Such a lot of work. My whole family history, centuries of it, and all in one book.

## Evacuation

My dad was left with four girls, so he was a bit strict. Especially with the smoking. Everyone smoked when they were fourteen, but we had to do it behind his back. When you were at a party back then, you handed your fags around; it was the normal thing to do. Sharing. “Anyone want a fag?” We had a party at ours one time, and he got to Edie. He put a fag behind his back and turned around for her to take it. “Go on, take it, do it behind my back like you always do.” So he’d known all along. Yeah he was strict. But he was lovely. You can understand it, with that grief.

My sisters went to the Gracie Fields Home in the January after my mum died. I wasn’t old enough to go. They were there for years, till they came back and we had that party. We never had that close sisterly connection, the one you make when you’re kids. I was three when they left and fourteen when they came back. Lost eleven years.

I was evacuated not long after they left. Newport, Wales. Place called Mapham Palace. I lived in the chauffeur’s cottage and helped the maid, doing the washing. The owners were living in India – must have been, cos they knew the Raj and had a tiger carpet. Still had the head and claws. Horrible people. That must have been what they did when they were there. Shot wild animals.

## Creatures

I’ve been vegan since 1986. I’d see lorries going past and know they had cows in ’em. Off to the slaughterhouse. A fella I know once said “Cor blimey Ellen, you’ll never believe what I saw in the abattoir today.” He’d been to visit for some reason. I told him, “No, and I don’t want to know.”

He told me anyway, and I haven’t eaten any of it since. None of it. I’ve always said if they tell me, “You’ll die if you don’t have a steak tomorrow,” I’ll say, “Well ta-ta then, I’m off.”

We go to a show sometimes in Woolwich – it used to be in Brick Lane. Music hall thing. We sit with the same couple each time. The old fella will have the veggie option whenever he can. We chatted about it for ages one night. Great way to bond – talking about how to save a couple more animals, just by thinking about what you eat.

Got my cat, Charlie, from Celia Hammond. Cat rescuer. Used to be a model, years ago. Would go out 3am each night to Waterloo, pick up all the strays, get them neutered, and release them. She's given her whole life up for cats. The vet was holding Charlie when I went. I started stroking him. She told me, "He's not one of the lucky ones, doesn't sell himself well. No one really wants him." I took him straight away. He had to have an operation first, was on a drip for three weeks. I used to go in there and talk to him so that he trusted my voice when he came home.

I like to feed squirrels. They come running up to me, and just sit there and stare. I ask them not to come nearer – cos I don't want them to trust humans. I've found the right bit of the tree, the broken fence bit, to push the nuts through for 'em. There's another tree over the other side of the park with a big dent in the trunk. I leave them there as well. Then I watch them eating, breaking the shells. I read somewhere you can now get squirrel on the menu. Just another excuse to destroy. Cos it's fashionable. Worst animal ever? Humans.

I used to go to this place for a couple drinks, maybe food. Loved it. Local place, well known back in the day. One day they were selling veal on the menu. I said that's my lot, I'm done. Baby cows? Not coming in here any longer. Haven't been since. And I won't preach and not practise. Vegan, till the day I kick the bucket.

## Community and Neighbours

West Ham FC. I love 'em. They're moving the grounds to Stratford. I refuse to go there. It's against my beliefs and a bleeding cheat. All that money they make off normal working-class fans. Friend of mine went over to there, to see where his new season ticket seat would be. We have good seats right now. Been with them for years. He asked for the same seat in the new grounds: £200 a month!

It's not about the fans no more. It's a sin. Poorer people, locals who have loved West Ham all their lives; they won't get a seat. So I told him I won't give 'em my money. They can go sod themselves. But I do hope they make a go of it, the team. I said to myself, maybe I'm living in the past. But back then, they used to have two jobs; their wages weren't what they are now. Harry Redknapp used to teach my son football, at his school. They all used to work in schools. It was a lot more personal. All this money comes in, they've all got agents, and the kids don't see 'em no more. Crying shame.

We had the travellers here once, round these parts. One of the Herberts got to hear about it. Herberts were the men in the community who looked after ya. Kept an eye out. So he went down to them. Told 'em, "You're moving on tonight, aren't ya." It weren't a question. They didn't respond. He repeated it. No reaction. He went, "Listen to me. You're moving on tonight. Else you won't be here tomorrow." And they went. That's what they was like, the Herberts. Mind you, the travellers were no trouble. We had the Greenway, as they call it now. Used to be the sewer banks back then, but now the Greenway. They'd arrange to meet the other gang up there. Sort it out. Have a fight, then probably buy each other a drink down the local. That's how we used to do it in the East End. Not stabbing, killing, and all that what you have now. They're all a load of cowards in my eyes. Sort it out without being toolled up. It's horrible. We're losing our community.

My son Peter, he's a road sweeper in Redbridge. This Christmas he got six bottles of wine, seven boxes of chocolates. From people in the community. Cos he's such a hard worker. And when he was on 'oliday they kept phoning up the office asking where he'd gone! We're not wine drinkers, so we took it all up to the charity he works for – he does a lot of charity work. People with dementia. They liked the old time music halls. They need the money to get to them though. So they have raffles. One woman, most terrible dementia. Doesn't remember a thing, used to be terrified all the time. But she knew the words to every single song the first time they took her. Turned out she used to be a music hall artist. Just like Vesta Fay. So now they put the music on instead of doping her. Soothes her, and it's no harm. They do some good work there, they do. They're beautiful people. It brings the community together, that sort of thing. You know?

### **Back To The Present**

I'm not a religious person. I think all trouble begins with religion. The things people do in the name of it. Had to go to church three times on a Sunday as a kid. Once in the morning, Sunday school in the afternoon, and back in the evening. Sung the hymns, did what you were asked. As I got older, I started asking if there really was a God. Looked around me, and saw the pain. It's worse now than it's ever been, I think, and you just wonder... well, what is he doing up there then? Prove it.

So, anyway. I've been and ordered me funeral. All paid up. Said to the girl, "I don't want a church service, I want a comedian. No hymns, no songs – I want laughter throughout." So she booked it. My son done the same. That's just who we are.

I don't even want flowers. Gonna ask people to donate that cash to my sanctuaries instead. The flowers only die, and who wants more death during a death?

## THE BEST THING SINCE FRIED BREAD

Vesta died on 18th January 1938. There was a write up on her in the local weekly theatrical newspaper. They called her “of the older school”. That’s what they used to call us oldies, back in them days. Pillar of the community, she was.



Just like the woman telling her story.

# Wolf Beats Wolf

From the life of Adrian

By Martin Clarke

Saturday morning, a little after eleven. Late October. Warnings of sub-zero temperatures and snow, as other parts of the country have already seen. Adrian, a man in his early fifties, lies naked in bed inside his Bethnal Green house, one hand holding his iPhone directly out in front of him while the other closes firmly around his erection, safe in the knowledge that the rest of the family are tucked away in their respective rooms as the light, a valiant autumn, breaks the gap between the curtains, and the patches where the material is wearing thin. He thumbs through the catalogue of boys and scrolls all the way to the top, where he refreshes the page once more.

Before the popularity of Grindr, rarely were there opportunities for Adrian to pursue young and slim and twinkly boys, like the one he spots now. Not in the same way, at least. Congress never used to be so instant. The ones who are interested will generally respond quite quickly, those who aren't won't say anything, anyone who's closed the app is soon replaced by someone nearer and looking to chat or more, and the pursuit can take place twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It used to be that Adrian would have to make a particular trip at a particular time to some appropriate club, swimming

pool or sauna before he could even browse. The boy in question, whom he messages now, has the headline “Give Me Virginia Woolf” on his profile page, and the photo of him shows a sweeping, floppy fringe down to his lips. The large and bright eyes are a turn on for Adrian; give him a piggy little eye, and he runs a mile. Twenty-one years old and blond: a specimen of fuckable youth, he thinks. He’s hopeful for a reply, his own profile picture being that of his naked self, cropped to reveal his brown chest and stomach, round as a barrel, but warm-looking.

Weekends in London often find themselves filling up with visiting boys. Adrian organises them into categories: it makes it easier for him to arrange appointments around Vanessa and the children. They are sorted as follows:

1. Local boy who can accommodate.
2. Visiting boy who can accommodate.
3. Local boy who doesn’t mind fucking in the car.
4. Visiting boy who doesn’t mind fucking in the car.
5. Visiting boy who’s now going home.

The last category is always the most problematic, seeing as it usually means that Adrian has missed his window of opportunity, if ever there was one. Only that’s not the point: if he’s bored and the boy has yet to travel outside the radius of the nearest one hundred profiles – it’s worth having a go. And then he hears it: the four rapidly ascending notes of a xylophone, like a robot farting. The sound of a new message. And it’s from the boy.



Adrian learns that the boy comes from Norwich, works full-time in Asda, studies Literature part-time with the Open University, and continues to live with the man with whom he recently ended

a two-year relationship. A classic case of category five, and usually a complete waste of time. Typically the profile and conversation in these instances is lost when the boy returns home, except it seems that both have favourited one another's profiles: it means that communication continues despite the fact that hundreds of profiles fill the space between their corresponding locations. To Adrian, this is not the unusual part. Rather, it is when he adds the boy on MSN Messenger and the portrait of Virginia Woolf appears in the boy's display icon. Clearly Virginia is the way into this boy's pants.

Adrian is not a huge Virginia Woolf fan, but he doesn't reveal this to the boy. Instead he helps him with his own writing, with what might be potential if there was something to read other than scraps and fragments. The most accomplished work so far barely spans a page, a truly sentimental and not-at-all heartbreaking piece called 'Brogues by the Door', where the boy laments the decline of his relationship with his ex lover and his inability to write like his beloved Virginia, whose collected letters are under the bed. The boy has said to Adrian before about how he now spends as much time as possible in his bedroom, reading. There's a reference to *A Room of One's Own* in his story.

Writing is not the only thing that Adrian helps the boy with; the Open University plays a large part. The boy often sends over an essay he's written. Adrian reads one now, due in eight hours, and is freeing up the word count by cutting out the verbiage. It is three o'clock in the morning, and Adrian rubs his eyes as he squints harder at the computer screen. He would like to go to bed and wonders, just for a moment, whether he'd be up this late if the boy wasn't beautiful. Then he shakes the thought. True, he enjoys the boy's profile pictures as they change from one day to the next, but he also enjoys the conversations they have about the books he's studying, and the ones he's reading for pleasure. Their shared love of literature is a redeeming feature for the both of them: the boy, from domestic

disquietude, menial work, and working class life; Adrian, from being a dirty old man.



In a dim corner at the back of Waterstones, Adrian sits in one of the leather armchairs, weighing up a book in each hand: *The Time Traveller's Wife* and *Kafka on the Shore*. A quick glance at his watch tells him that it's just after half past ten. He has an appointment at eleven with the boy, who's in London to celebrate his twenty-second birthday and staying in a hotel near Liverpool Street. Adrian knows it's true: ever since the boy arrived yesterday morning, his Grindr profile has at times shown him to be as little as a few miles away. Apparently the boy and his friend have to check out at twelve, after which he'll be returning home.

For a Saturday, Westfield doesn't feel so busy. As soon as Adrian has paid for his book and left the shop, he takes it out of the plastic carrier bag. Curling back the cover, he retrieves a pen from his inside pocket, holds the lid between his teeth and scrawls "Something for the weekend" on the first page. Not this weekend, Adrian thinks, as he walks towards the Underground. He wonders what it is that made him choose *Kafka on the Shore* in the end. Something about the boy's quest is all about literature changing his life. He supposes it must be the way it had moved him when he read it. Books, after all, are very close. The boy will read it and they will have shared the experience; they will have been intimate. He knows by now he won't be fucking him.



When he takes the seat directly opposite him, Adrian is surprised to learn that the boy just isn't as cool as he thought he would be. He has that look: boy in a club, probably somewhere like G-A-Y, immediately placed drunk among the wash of gay clones. The boy looks tired, but he smiles nevertheless. Something about the encounter is

strange for Adrian: here he is having coffee with this queer lothario, and sex is off the agenda.

A sharp burst of steam, then a loud click. Two bangs on the side as the barista shakes the ground beans loose. They sit in the Caffé Nero that stands beside the station, at a small table that has yet to have the remnant-stained napkins, empty sugar sachets and wooden stirrers cleared away, the place gradually getting busier as a long queue of mostly luggage-laden tourists forms at the counter, some with their backpacks on back-to-front. Yet Adrian scarcely notices any of this, for his eyes never leave the boy's while they're talking: he doesn't realise that more boys are coming in as this one is about to leave.

"Happy Birthday," Adrian says, handing the package over to the boy. He takes it from him, peels back the cover and, reading Adrian's words, smiles once more. Closing the book, he looks at Adrian with an almost shy smirk.

"I have something for you, too," the boy says.

From underneath their table, the boy pulls something out from his striped canvas bag. A black folder, which he slides across the table towards Adrian, who reads the title 'S/He' and the boy's name underneath. A book of his own. They have now exchanged gifts, Adrian thinks, opening it up: stories in place of bodily fluids. Each clear plastic sleeve has been delicately inserted with a crisp, white sheet of A5 paper, smothered in words. The boy's words. He wants to hold it tightly at his chest, for nothing else he finds as moving as the two words on the inside page, perfectly centred in an italic type with capital letters reading, '*FOR ADRIAN*'.

**Change**

# The Lonely Phoenix

From the life of Crispin Janolo

By Naomi Duffree

I had the honour of meeting Crispin, a Filipino East London resident who is recovering from a stroke that has brought on aphasia – a communication disorder that limits a person’s ability to express themselves when speaking, understand speech, and causes difficulty with both reading and writing. It is not a disease but a symptom of brain damage. Crispin has the most amazing smile, accent, and mannerisms that made him a joy to speak and listen to. His stroke did not take away his sense of humour or his courage.

I have crafted our conversation into a poem to try to convey Crispin’s everyday struggles, but also his everyday joys. I will never forget his warm smile and his ability to affirm the best things in life.

## **Skyward Kisses**

I’ve been here before  
When things were clearer  
Can I tell you?  
I can tell you  
It won’t be easy

Trapped in a tube  
train, training for 2 months  
Going through the gears and motions.  
1,2,3,4... *(clenched left fist, imaginary gear stick)*  
40 mph  
Boring. Underground. Blackness. Loneliness.

We had the best economy in the 1980s  
Thatcher.  
It was the best. The best *(a skyward kiss)*  
Now it is rubbish, rubbish.  
Cuts. Cuts.

I worked at Harrods,  
HGV, driving the lorry  
Beautiful, tall,  
The best, the best *(a skyward kiss)*  
Prince Charles – those ears! *a laugh)*  
The little princes  
at Kensington Palace.

Floral scent at Buckingham Palace  
So many. So sad.  
Diana – Mohamed's son  
The Best!

Driving the lorry  
Smart suit, no earrings  
1983. £800/week. The money was the best!  
1989. £50,000 mortgage  
– it was cheap!

Not like today.  
It is hard.

In the Philippines, cheap food:

Burger £1.50

Coke 10p

Prawns, fresh, grilled, rice and salad £1.50

Now...

£10.

Restaurants are dear.

Work work work

Harrods

Philippines once a year.

Philippines holidays are the best

Britain is the best place to work.

America? Police, shooting

English police – are the best

The buses, the police, MPs.

American government is corrupt.

I was driving the bus in London

For 25 years.

“Hello, how are you today?”

Loving the people.

Work work work

Learning the knowledge

2 years – 10,800 streets.

Taxi!

Private cab

In London. On my bike, memorising the streets.

I use a Tom Tom now

Visiting Edinburgh and The Isle of Wight.

It was the best money.  
8am til 8pm. Worked  
to pay mortgage  
My wife's solicitor  
I work, work, work.  
My wife left with her boyfriend.

Lonely

A newsagents at  
Elephant and Castle  
Working, working for two mortgages.  
I am for the people.

Then, no money.  
No people.  
Business sold.

Language can be difficult  
American – attorney  
Filipino – attorney  
English – solicitor  
America – vacation  
English – holiday  
The best is English.  
Professional people.

My children work hard  
Studying in the Philippines  
my son Briton, soon to be a dentist  
my daughter Brittany is training to be a doctor.  
They are British  
The people here are the best!

My daughter and son are British  
They went to private school.

I made £400/day... *per day* on the taxi, which cost me £1800  
I would have runs to Heathrow and Gatwick.  
I speak English and  
Spanish.

England has a history  
America is at war  
Scotland – it is the best and cleanest! *(a skyward kiss)*  
London can be grubby.

Briton's girlfriend is a dentist.  
They want a private practice  
Kensington, Notting Hill. There are 10,800 streets.  
Golders Green is a Jewish area. *(He takes a pen and draws a star)*  
The bread there ...  
The best! *(a skyward kiss)*

The Jews are rich;  
Marks and Spencer? Jewish. Barclays? Jewish  
Work, work, work hard  
Then restaurant for a week! *(laughing; memories surface)*

I like to eat broccoli  
It is the best.  
One head, boiled for 3 minutes.  
Crunchy.  
In the morning a yoghurt with strawberries  
(a little Complian sprinkled)  
Coffee. Only one a day.  
For lunch, a sandwich; smoked salmon from Marks and Spencer  
Then later  
Broccoli, apple, grapes and bananas ...  
All mixed up

No drinking. No beer – too much sugar  
But walking for half an hour  
Pull ups every day  
Doctors' orders.  
My daughter tells me, broccoli is best.

My girlfriend Rida  
And I got to Scotland  
6 hours by train  
It is the best! *(a skyward kiss)*  
Shopping is cheaper in the Philippines.  
Trainers £5  
Here £40.

Cuts. Cuts.  
The economy suffers  
Japan has risen infinitely *(a financial graph emerges on the paper)*  
We go up 2 points  
We go down  
Japan has gone high, my daughter tells me  
Cuts. Cuts.

I speak on Skype every day  
It used to be monthly on mobile, *(miming a massive phone,*  
It was so expensive. *laughing)*

This afternoon I will walk my dog, Lulu.  
Snuffling, barking from under the Christmas tree she emerged  
A gift from my sister,  
Eyes wide with surprise and kisses all round. *(miming kissing from*  
*Lulu – a friend for life.)*

Cut.

2008. Holiday. Philippines.  
I'm dancing. *(as if there is no tomorrow)*

I collapse.  
Will there be a tomorrow?

Lonely  
Frustrated.  
My Rida is crying.

Six months lying in the hospital  
Lonely  
Static mouthed while tears ran.

Moved to the hospital in London three months later.  
Slowly gaining speech  
A cardboard rectangle  
Explains my restrictions *(holding up the card in the wallet)*  
I can laugh at that now.

I was lonely.

Every week I visit the stroke club  
Hard at first, unable to communicate.  
Can't hear clearly...  
...then... an appointment!  
Waited 4 months since the letter in April.  
This Thursday I have two hearing aids fitted. *(the smile reaches  
across the sky – they can possibly see it in the Philippines)*  
Soon I will hear; I long to hear clearly  
People, the birds, the Philippino eagles  
Flying high.

And I have new friends *(the smile broader...*  
The stroke club  
Brings me friends and coffee. *... the laughter stronger...*  
I am flying high  
They are the best! *... and kisses)*

# The Arc of Joan

From the life of Joan Barham

By Suzie Champion

It has been said that when our environment changes, when the familiar buildings and the outline disappear, and people move or are moved away, our memories, those unique histories, gradually diminish along with those reminders and nowhere is that eradication truer than in the East End of London. The politics of profit over-ride the welfare of the people. Some call it corporate vandalism, others, gentrification. Its official title is 'redevelopment for regeneration'. An interesting note: according to a leading academic, the 2012 Olympics brought over nine billion pounds to the East End, yet Newham still remains the second most deprived local authority in England. Neighbouring Tower Hamlets picks up the Bronze.

But the true riches are the people themselves. Their stories reveal the wealth and one such person, Joan, is a diamond, pure East End. Her sharing opens a portal into an intimate view of the places that are now ghosts in the machinations of progress, because many of those places, fundamental to Joan's early life, no longer exist. Moreover, as she reminisces, it becomes apparent that as dire as life sometimes became in the early twentieth century, there was always support and

a cohesion that ran through the family and community; a rare thing in today's society. So, let's follow Joan on a journey into *her* East End.

Born at home in the then newly constructed West Ham Buildings on Manor Road, eight years before the outbreak of the Second World War, Joan claimed ninth position of thirteen children. She is proud of the fact that her brothers and sisters never argued and they all "pulled their weight". Her mother was relieved of housework as her daughters had that covered and the sons did the errand runs. You could say, thirteen was a lucky number for them, more, because 'The Buildings', as they were known, had a bathroom and separate toilet that houses didn't have. The typical sanitary accommodation was an outside toilet (frozen pipes, and human parts, in winter) and the usual visit to the local Public Baths, or if you were semi-lucky, a galvanised tin bath.

Joan lived at 'The Buildings' until shortly after her father's death. She was seven at the time and had many warm memories of that place, but one in particular stuck out for her. She told me, "Mum had him [father] laying out in the front room in the coffin, without the lid, while me and my sisters ran around the coffin playing games and thinking nothing of there being a dead body in it. He couldn't hurt us 'cause he was our dad." Even in death, there was a familial closeness.

A hangover from the Victorians, it was customary for families to have their deceased loved ones laid out in the front room or parlour until the funeral, allowing for the paying of respects. This intimate and powerful ritual of mourning and honouring the dead is now lost to us. Maybe Health and Safety has something to do with it, or maybe we regard death and dead bodies as anathema to our current style of living as we try to stave off growing old, both surgically and chemically.

Having fought in the First World War, Joan's father had been exposed to the chemical weapon of choice at that time, the vesicant; Sulphur

Mustard, or Mustard Gas, as it was commonly coined. Added to his debilitated condition was the arduous work of being a stevedore at the docks. He was in his early forties when he died. On the day of his funeral, Joan remembers an upstairs neighbour looking after her and as she looked out of the window at the horse and carriage carrying her father's coffin, she says, "I remember thinking, a horse and cart. I'd love to have a ride on that."

Innocent as to the relevance of his death, Joan was protected by having a large family surrounding her, easing the space left by his passing. It's only now, when others talk about the activities they shared with their fathers, that Joan wishes she too could have had those memories. It makes it doubly poignant to know that Joan has no photos of him either, as no family portraits were ever taken. Without some form of evidence of a life lived or a building built, all becomes a little mythical, like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. However, by putting herself on the map of life through this story, Joan will surely not go the way of myth; although, contemporaneously, she could pass as a Demeter or a Penelope.

From 'The Buildings', Joan's family moved round the corner, to Brighton Road. She speaks fondly of the hours spent on the street with her friends, chalking hop-sotch squares on the pavement or playing Knock Down Ginger (presumably, nothing to do with flooring redheads. Apparently, the name originates from the colour the council painted their doors, as it was an 'estate' game.) Then there was skipping. The rope stretched across the street and all the kids would join in as they ran under, jumped over, or just plain skipped in the middle.

This is testament to the few vehicles on the roads and to the lack of parental fear of their children's safety while playing out. Trust and security in the community was phenomenal as Joan highlights, "... 'cause, them days, you could leave your street door open. You could leave it open all night. My mum had a string in the door. You

just pulled the string and you was in. We never had a bolt on any door.”

The children used to look forward to their annual jaunt to Marden, Kent, where they would hop pick with their mothers to earn a few pennies, and at weekends, the husbands would arrive and the atmosphere perked up as they all rallied together to have a good time. On one occasion, Joan’s brother-in-law stole a lamb and slaughtered it, because food was in short supply, but when the farmer came looking for his lost animal, the carcass ended up in pieces, down the toilet, which was a hole in the ground covered by a tin hut. Considering sugar on bread was a meal, potato skins were deemed a luxury and Christmas presents were a tangerine, two nuts and some dates in a stocking... the discarding of a whole lamb’s carcass doesn’t bear thinking about. Luckily for the brother-in-law, the farmer never discovered him.

Joan’s next move was courtesy of the Germans. Along with her mother and sisters, she was evacuated to a little house in Cheshire. Nearby was a butcher-cum-delicatessen. One day, she went to buy her mother some pastries and in the window saw a sign for help wanted. She was fourteen years old, and decided to apply for it. Much to her joy, she was taken on and she worked in the bake room, making meat pies. “Out of the back door,” she says, “I could see the windows of our house and when he wasn’t looking, I’d shove pies over the wall to my sisters.” Maybe he did know this, because not long after, he gave her bags of pies and sausages to take home.

Joan’s mother was listening to the radio one day and heard that Brighton Road had been bombed out. She immediately decided to return home. The family would surely have perished had they remained in the house and continued to use the Anderson shelter. There’s that lucky number thirteen again. Joan told the butcher of her mother’s intent, and he went straight round to the house to ask her if he could adopt Joan, because she was such a good worker. In

her fear of her mother handing her over, Joan threatened them both with running away. The story makes her shiver. “He even paid our return fares, thinking we would be back, but we never did.”

On their return to London they temporarily moved in with a friend of Joan’s mother until they secured a house in Steele Road. When they went to view this house they noticed a large hole in the wall of the kitchen, but this had nothing to do with Hitler. The previous occupier had kept a pony and this hole was apparently its entrance! They found someone to brick it up and eventually moved in. West Ham Buildings had a bathroom, but this house and the one in Brighton Road didn’t, so Joan’s family would walk the short distance to the Public Baths in Church Road, which incidentally is now home to Newham Amateur Boxing Club.

By now Joan was around seventeen and her first job was working for a place called Freeman’s, where she sorted donated clothing. It was a dirty job, and she left after three weeks having found human excrement in some underwear. She then went on to become a machinist and tailor, making men’s shirts and suits at Horne Brothers, a well-known company renowned for its quality goods. When she got her first week’s wages she took her two sisters to Pollards (Pollard W. Waide & Sons), like Primark, only cheaper, and bought them each a coat and hat and her niece a signet ring the following week; such is the generosity of this woman.

Still in Steele Road she met Reginald, and here romance blossomed twice. First, when Joan’s brother married Reg’s sister; Joan was chief bridesmaid and Reg was best man, and the second time was when she and Reg tied the knot. The first matrimonial home saw her back to her place of birth, West Ham Buildings, but this time she didn’t like it, so she managed to secure a house back in Steele Road at the other end. It was already condemned, on the list for demolition, but it was habitable and they wanted it so much they paid the rent arrears from the last occupant. Not a silly woman, Joan knew the

council would have to re-house her when the time came to pull it down and so settled in and she and Reg started their family.

One of Joan's next-door neighbours, a milkman, let it be known to her that her own milkman was overcharging. She said, "I used to sometimes get eggs too, but the amount would always stay the same. I didn't think about it until he said." When it came to the next Saturday, she challenged the milkman about it and he got uppity and said, "You've been talking to him next door, ain't ya?" Joan laughs and says, "After that I got my milk free for the next couple of weeks." It sounds as if you'd already pre-paid him Joan.

'The Buildings', and both Steele and Brighton Roads, no longer exist. The flats were demolished in the 1960s when the area became run down, and now occupying that original site are Star Lane DLR and Star Lane School playing fields. As for the two roads, they've been swallowed up in the widening and rerouting of the A1011, Manor Road.

Joan moved to Meredith Road, to a four-bedroom house where her family grew up then went off to have families of their own, before settling where she is now, a stone's throw from where she entered the world. Reg died in 2006, just after their 50th wedding anniversary, and since then, Joan has expanded her social life and is enjoying every moment of it. She talked about her four children, who have given her thirteen grandchildren (there's that number again) and seven great-grandchildren, and she says there are more to come. Joan not only has this extended family, but they were a cyber-family too, her children having set up a Facebook account for her to stay in touch. Unfortunately, Joan was diagnosed with macular degeneration some years ago and gradually she has had to give up her social networking as her eyesight deteriorates. But the spirit of this woman will not let her stop living her life to the fullest.

Only recently, she appeared on the promotional video for the West Ham United Foundation's 25th Anniversary. They are supporting Friends of the Elderly as part of their engagement in the community. The video was shown on the BBC's Match of the Day programme, where Joan can be seen playing football, giggling with a friend, and being interviewed. Moreover, she could teach our footballers a fair game, because you won't see Joan diving for sympathy. Her type had the mould broken long ago.

# Everyone's Talking About It

By Sandra Wilson

## 2012

The police arrived within two hours of me making the phone call. “When did you discover you had been broken into?” the young officer asked as his two colleagues stood outside the house, dusting our bay window for fingerprints and footprints.

“I went downstairs at 7am this morning and the top window was open. The curtains were pulled down and the lower window was open,” I replied. The officer scanned the living room.

“Have you noticed anything missing?” he asked as he made notes in his little black notebook.

“No. Oh, er, the batteries are missing from the remote.” My husband laughed. “It’s a pity they didn’t take any of the catering equipment; they would have done us a favour. We wouldn’t have to find storage for it.” He laughed again.

“We’ve just moved out of our business,” I apologised, embarrassed at the state of our lounge, one half stacked with dinner plates, cups,

cutlery, and all sorts that we never realised we had until we had to move out of our premises.

“It’s funny; most people break into your house and they want to nick stuff but these criminals must have felt sorry for us and left with nothing because we don’t have much of value to take.”

The young blond community officer smiled. “Maybe one of you disturbed them and they panicked and left.”

“I did go to the toilet at around 2am. What I don’t understand is how they got through the top window; they must have been the size of a monkey.”

I remember the excitement we felt when we got the invitation to a meeting which was potentially the biggest opportunity we had received since we started our catering business. We were suited and booted for the meeting with the Facilities Manager. We arrived at the entrance of the site, there was a small security hut with no security man to direct us. We drove in, unchallenged.

The mountains of tarmac and mud stood proudly, high like they were trying to touch the fluffy white clouds. The air smelt of wet mud, the earth was dry and the day was hot. There were mounds of dirt piled high as far as the eye could see and I could not envision the end product predicted by so many in the country. How were they going to create a historic event from all this dirt?

We met the young blonde-haired woman at the front of a brand new grey and blue two-storey portacabin. She introduced herself as the Facilities Manager. “I’m in charge of organising the catering on the site as well as other projects.” She was warm, friendly, and chatted incessantly about the plans for the derelict site. We warmed to her immediately. “Eventually we will be building across here, here and here,” she said, and pointed as she showed us a large map. “So there will be many more opportunities for you.” We looked at each other

excited, our hearts beating faster and faster, not believing our luck. “This is the kitchen; it’s only for the white collar workers. The workmen will eat from the jiffy truck or from the window of the kitchen until we can get another canteen.” The kitchen was compact but was kitted out with all the necessary equipment, all shiny and new: griddle, cooker, oven, hot cupboard. “You will provide all the other equipment, like plates, cutlery, pots and pans and staff of course. We will need a varied menu for breakfast and lunch. Also, drinks and snacks.”

“Yes of course,” we responded.

“I will email the contract by tomorrow,” she said as she took us on a quick tour of all the offices, where staff were either having meetings or sat at their desks in front of their computers.

The contract arrived as promised. By the next week we had moved in and our jiffy truck was servicing the workmen around the other areas of the site.

“Why can’t we eat in the canteen?” they would complain. Our driver would explain it was because of their muddy boots and new carpets.

The Facilities Manager rang to inform us she was leaving in a few weeks. “Office politics,” she said.

We were disappointed and apprehensive, concerned about who we would be liaising with next. About a month later the new manager was appointed. We met her at our request. She was cold, frosty, and feigned warmth and a fake smile. She was like a snake wrapping itself around you, pretending to be friendly, but really waiting for the opportunity to lunge at your neck and expunge the life out of you. We both felt it. She introduced herself and gave us a limp handshake. She was short and plump with cropped black hair. “I don’t get a good feeling about her,” I said.

“I know, but we have to work with her,” my partner replied.

The next big opportunity arrived in an email. They offered us a second canteen in a portacabin. This canteen was just for the builders. It was much bigger than the current canteen. They did not want to sign a new contract. The boss, whom we had insisted on meeting, told us that it would be included as part of our first contract. We sensed that he really didn't want to be there. He was distant; he was in the room with us but he seemed uncaring with his thoughts wandering elsewhere. He dismissed us as quickly as he could, unwilling to amend the flimsy contract.

By then security had been upped, passports were needed, security tags, staff references, men on the gates, induction courses. The whole project was beginning to take shape. Where there were once less than one hundred men on site, there were now a few thousand.

We organised the new canteen, built the kitchen and storage cupboard. Interviewed new staff, ordered equipment, planned menus. The list was endless. We somehow become embroiled in a mini feud of teething problems and complaints by email from the new manager. The laying of the expensive flooring created an issue. The unfinished electrics, wires hanging out of the ceiling, no water. A trail of emails from the snake with more and more requests. Our jobs became more pressurised as we dealt with other aspects of our business. Corporate lunches and other building site canteen set-ups across the other side of London.

Her continuous, daily, weekly, spiteful, hissing, snide, bullying remarks were ignored, because we had a job to do.

“You're making a lot of money out of us,” she commented one day. What did she mean? We needed to have a meeting for this, a meeting for that, for, every, bloody thing.

There were many other comments about us to our staff. They were asked, “How did they manage to win this contract?”

On reflection, we realised she wanted more money from us. A back-hander, some people said. We were too honest and would never have considered doing anything that was not above board. How could we even consider such a thing? The rent was being paid into her personal account. That was strangely unethical, but her bosses had okayed it.

One day she snatched our dreams and left us in a sea of devastation.

She rang and said, “The large building you are working from is going to be demolished. You have two weeks to move out.”

It was a lie, I could just feel it.

“Can I have that in writing, please?” I politely asked. The lie was confirmed many weeks later. The portacabin was moved one hundred yards down the road and a new company was moved into our dream.

Suddenly everything crumbled around us like a badly played game of Jenga. We stumbled blindly trying to put the blocks back together but it was too late. We had been crushed by a greedy slimy manager who was clueless as to what it had taken for us to do this, what it had taken financially and emotionally to create this, just focusing on her blind underhanded ambitions. We wandered blindly in a dark strangling maze, which held us imprisoned and captive like frightened mice, afraid and unsure of how to get out.

We finally made the decision to fold our business, cash flow almost zero and corporate payments coming in too late. We moved out of the premises feeling disheartened and lost.

We couldn't talk about what had brought us to this point without breaking down, it was too painful. The fabric of our lives had been torn like a flimsy piece of muslin. Our very being had been snatched

and stamped on. We didn't discuss our feelings too often to each other but we felt each other's pain. The pain lingered like a deadly smell which followed and circled us, laughing, taunting, and eating away at the shreds of our existence. How would we recover from this? Our sense of trust had been destroyed. We looked at new friends with suspicion. I became a stranger to myself, no confidence, afraid to go out, deeply depressed and completely lost.

We watched the rest of the site go up from a distance. We slowly, cautiously, created new dreams.

Everyone is talking about the 2012 Olympics.

# Dragons Destroy Stratford

By Erica Masserano

*(Names within have been changed.)*

There is an ash cloud in the sky, says the paper. The man hands it to me in Stratford Station. It informs me in letters taking up the best part of the front page: VOLCANIC ASH FROM ICELAND SHUTS ALL AIRPORTS LEAVING ONE MILLION AFFECTED. Beside it is a picture of the Eyjafjallajökull, or maybe some other volcano they found on Google Images and forgot to fact-check. It is black and white and crimson, and above it hovers a malevolent tower of smoke.

I am on my way to a Ryanair flight to Italy. I turn around and walk back under the shadow of the dozens of cranes building future Olympic sites, along piles of cement sacks like trenches, through yawning rows of curtained bow windows, still and silent and unlit, to my room in Vicarage Road. I spend the rest of the evening thinking that the world is finally ending, and that I won't have the chance to say goodbye to the people who really matter to me. Except for that, I think, it's just as well. I can't be arsed to roam the earth forever. Then, I fall asleep.

A thumping sound through the thin walls of my room wakes me. It's the ceiling caving in; it's the ambulance, it's the civil guard.

It's the postman knocking on the door. He is delivering a bank statement.

I sit in bed, which is the only space in the room I can sit, and look online for updates on the world situation. To be sure, the sunset yesterday was the same as any other April sunset this year, navy with a touch of chrome yellow; the dawn this morning, which I've personally inspected, was an even less remarkable peach.

Everything seems to be fine. In fact, it appears that in terms of global warming, the 10 million cubic meters of glass-rich volcanic dust from Iceland presently floating through the air are nothing when compared to the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> produced by the planes that are grounded because of it. I am ashamed of my overreaction, and of my cheap ticket. I did not really want to go back anyway, not even to visit, but sometimes this city makes me fold my arms in fatigue. However, there are a couple of things that can cheer me up anytime, and that I'm able to afford.

After a few months of solid friendship, confused semi-romantic exchanges, and questionable activism, Jack and I have settled into a comfortable pattern of spending lots of time together for no particular reason. Of course we like each other's company, but there is another thing I seem to share with the people I bond with these days: we all think home is a four-letter word.

I ring Jack, and tell him to come down. Meanwhile, I drink a cup of tea and get dressed, so that when he gets to Stratford we can go to the chippy. Because, I've discovered, what I really want when I'm feeling down is something that London holds aplenty and is generous with: golden, greasy fried chicken.



When I first walked through the blue door of the chippy a couple of months ago, I must not have made the best of impressions. Coming

from years of skipping and collective meals meant I was finding London's widespread lack of communication between flatmates expensive and inefficient. I was determined I could bring some of the solutions I had from elsewhere with me; in Denmark, we had a loose agreement with our local supermarket, and they left bruised and unsellable veg neatly stacked in a box at the back for us to retrieve. Here, I had already made friends with Majid, a warm, often slightly tipsy man in his forties who owned the pound shop next door, so he occasionally knocked a pound off my bill and let me pet his kitten Whisky every day.

I walked on the black and white chequered tiles to the formica counter and approached the man behind it with what I thought of as an extra dose of charm one evening at closing time, my Icelandic sweater hanging on me like a potato sack.

"Good evening."

"Hello," he said from behind the counter. He had a well-kept grey beard, swarthy skin, arresting green eyes, and was about my father's age. "Yes?"

"Hi. I live down the street. I was wondering if you have any food you're throwing away."

A long moment of silence passed between us.

"You what?"

"I was wondering," I said, "if you have any food you, you know, won't be selling," I started to stutter, "what with it being closing time and all."

Another long pause.

"No," he said, looking at me as if I had suddenly grown horns.

“Ah,” I managed to reply, suddenly perspiring, “in that case, could I please have a piece of chicken, please.”

“Chips?”

“No chips.”

“One pound.”

“Yes. Sorry.” I handed him the coin and looked away. I had made some kind of massive cultural misstep, and probably offended him. There went all my hippy plans for good relations with the neighbours.

“Here you go.” He handed me a big box. I opened the box to squeeze some mayo into the corner.

Inside the box were three pieces of chicken, breast and thigh, and six wings, all perfectly coated in crunchy breadcrumbs, smelling to high heaven of re-fried vegetable oil.

“Excuse me,” I said. “There must be a mistake. I think you’ve given me someone else’s... Oh.”

The shop was empty. He kept looking at me, his lips an impassable straight line.

“Well. Thank you, sir.”

“What’s your name?”

“Erica. You?”

“Vijay. You live down the street?”

“Yes. On Vicarage Road.”

“But you’re not from here.”

“I’m from Italy. Are you from here?”

“I’m from Kashmir. You know Kashmir?”

“I know of it,” I said, another ignorant European.

“Very beautiful. Very complicated situation,” he said.

“Why?” I asked.

Vijay started to tell me.

I sat down and ate my chicken, then hung out for another half hour.



This time, I am prepared for the banging on the door.

“Hey, buddy.” Jack and I greet and hug. His straightforward, American-inflected Irish English is a welcome distraction from the intricate reservedness of a lot of the Brits I meet. With Jack, you always know where you stand. In fact, there is no chance in hell he is not going to let you know. He also has a healthy interest in radical politics, history, and factoids. “What are you reading?” he asks.

“Marco Polo stuff,” I tell him. “About how in the times of Marco Polo, a trip would last for years and years, right? You would leave the country a kid and come back a young man. You would fucking amble through the desert for ages. On a camel’s back.”

“But then they invented machines that could make us fly,” he says.

I stop in my tracks; my head is spinning. I am writing a short story, we are both characters in it, and in the new section I wrote yesterday, we have had exactly this exchange. Should I tell him?

“Yes,” I say.

“How about we go to the chippy, then,” I suggest.

“Alright.”

Alright. We get out of the house, walk at the pace of residents and weed dealers, pass the usual men hanging in front of a pile of tyres at the local car shop. The chippy is just around the corner; when we get there, Vijay is sitting in the kitchen, on the phone with the plumber.

“I am not a robot, you know,” I hear him say. “I am in the shop all day. I am very, very busy.”

He turns his head and winks at me. The shop is deserted, and he is leisurely eating lunch. I smile and nod.

“Hello,” Jack and I greet him when he’s done.

“Hi,” he says, deadpan as ever, “How are you doing?”

“Pretty well, pretty well. Just hanging out with my friend Jack here, you know. You?”

“Good,” says Vijay. “Bit slow, but good.”

Jack puts his wallet on the counter, then takes a few steps back. He is staring intently at the backlit menu overhead, his nose firmly raised in the air, though he is a vegetarian and will have no option but to get chips. His attention is fully diverted from the wallet. Vijay and I look at each other.

This is an unrepeatable opportunity.

I position myself between Jack and the wallet, seize it, and sneakily pass it to Vijay, who hides it behind the counter. Then, I turn to Jack, an ear-splitting grin on my face, and ask him: “Have you decided?”

“Ah. Yeah. I think I’ll have some chips. Can I have some chips, please?”

“No problem. And you?”

“One piece of chicken, please,” I smile.

“One pound eighty.”

I give Vijay a pound coin and turn to Jack. He is patting his pockets. Increasingly baffled, he looks around.

“You haven’t seen my wallet, have you?” He asked.

“No,” I say.

“Maybe I left it in the house?”

“You had it with you,” I tell him. He nervously re-examines his pockets, the counter.

“Excuse me,” he says to Vijay, “you haven’t seen my wallet, have you?”

Vijay dishes out for him a long pause and an ice-cold stare.

“Mate,” he says, “are you implying something?”

Jack’s strong eyebrows shoot a mile up his forehead.

“No!” He says. “Not at all! I mean, I was only... I thought maybe...”

“I think maybe you want to say something to me.”

“I don’t, I really...”

“Are you being racist?”

Jack’s very white face turns purple. He opens his mouth and brings up his palms, wordlessly begging for mercy. Then, from the abyss of guilt he has been plunged into, he somehow manages to notice that I am starting to crack up. Even Vijay is smiling a little. I burst out laughing.

“Oh, my god. Oh, shit. Nice.” He dries his face with the back of his hand, as Vijay hands him the wallet.

“I was gonna wait a little bit longer, but I thought you were gonna have a heart attack,” I tell him, tears poking at the corners of my eyes.

“Well played,” says Jack, who appreciates a good prank, but is also visibly lightheaded.

“Your chicken and chips.” The shadow of a smile still lingers on Vijay’s face as he hands me the usual huge box.

“Thanks.” We say goodbye and head out. From the pound shop next door, Majid’s kitten slips onto the street to rub against my legs.

“Whisky,” I stroke him, “You can’t have any of my chicken. It’s not good for you. Now go back inside, it’s past your bedtime.”

The night is falling. The foxes will come out to fight their ancestral war against the cats, search for treats in the garbage, reclaim the city as theirs; the reflectors at the Pudding Mill Lane construction site will shoot cones of light through the dark, antennas raised to the sky; the boroughs will sleep under a linen of orange. I don't care about the ash cloud anymore. In fact, I think it's a ploy.

I sink my teeth into the chicken. It's everything I want it to be.  
 I think maybe London wants me here.  
 I haven't felt this good in months.



It's been three years since I lived in Stratford. I have a new house, a new job, new friends. I don't laugh as much as I used to, but I've wormed my way in. I don't write as much as I used to, but at least I pay the bills. I put my head down; I worked hard; I played it right. Of course things change. Jack is gone. Many more of my old friends are gone. I haven't been to Vicarage Road for a long time; today, I'm going on a pilgrimage. I need to remember. My memories are going grey.

Getting out of Stratford station has become an experience I dread. I am mired in a multitude of stressed-out people, shooting in all directions; preachers shout in my face that Jesus is going to save me, whether I like it or not; and the new Westfield shopping centre dominates, perched atop of its huge staircase, its sheer size filling the air and stealing the light. I dive into the crowd and emerge on the other side unscathed and a bit frazzled. Walking to my old house only takes ten minutes. A low-pressure front is stifling the atmosphere; I feel sweaty and irritable, and the vibe on Vicarage Road is gloomy. I take a picture of the house with my phone, being careful not to be spotted by the tenants, who might think I am preparing to rob the house, or that I'm a terrorist. When I've loitered in front of the house as long as it's acceptable, I walk away. This is kind of emotional and bullshit. Luckily, I know what to do.

A spring in my step, I walk through the blue door of the chippy.

Vijay is not there. In his place, there is a younger man, clean-shaven and with gel in his hair.

I stare at him uncomprehendingly.

“Can I help you?” He asks.

“Is Vijay here?”

“Vijay?”

“Vijay who owns the shop.”

“I don’t know him. We bought this place six months ago.”

I remember to say thanks and goodbye before I stumble out. I light a cigarette and take a look around. A lot of the shops are closed. No wonder I found the street depressing; there’s no real activity. I must have come late. I look at my phone.

It’s 3pm.

The Mediterranean café with the purple walls is now just a red shutter. Calabash is still there, but no one has bothered to put out the blackboard with the meal offers on the street. One of the two pound shops has closed too, and a dodgy-looking student bureau has popped up beside it. Sweet wrappers and cans of drink litter the street.

Suddenly, I hear a meow coming from the ground. It’s a friendly-looking tabby cat with green eyes, its fur the colour of autumn leaves, rubbing its side on my leg.

“Whisky!” I shout in surprise. He’s grown to a full-sized adult cat. I bow down to pet him. He lets me pick him up; I bury my face in his fur. Together, we enter his owner’s pound shop.

“Hello!” I send an enthusiastic greeting into the room. “Majid?”

Majid is sitting at the counter, watching the small television he keeps under it. Majid looks up; it takes a moment, but he recognises me, and gives me a weak smile.

“Oh,” he says, “Hi.”

I have never seen Majid like this. His eyes are red and streaked with broken capillaries; he is unshaven; a cloud of liquor sweat emanates from him.

He is shitfaced.

“Hey,” I say, more quietly. “How are you?”

“Yes, not good.”

“Something happen?”

He points at the window. The sign says in big letters, SHOP TO LET.

“You are going away?”

“I am.”

“How comes?”

He motions at the outside. The sky is clogged, the street deserted of people. This doesn't look like summer, or like Stratford.

It took a few years, but the ash cloud is hitting the ground. It's happening, and it's no volcano.

“And Vijay?”

“He is also gone away.”

They have answered the call of the reflectors on the construction sites. By land, sea, and sky they have come. They look at us flee from under the beating shadow of their wings.

“It's because of that thing.” He makes a swooping motion with his hand. “No one comes.”

“The new shopping centre?”

They've built labyrinthine halls where they rest their scaly bodies on tall piles of loot, cast glammers to make themselves charming.

"I am giving the shop away. I am moving to a rented room. With my wife. To a rented room," He says. He takes his head in his hands.

He is weeping.

"I am so sorry," I tell him, knowing it doesn't change a thing. "I am so, so sorry."

I put down Whisky and stroke him for the last time, quietly say farewell to Majid.

They've come to Stratford, and they're taking over.  
I run towards home. I can already see the headlines.

# Irene

From the life of Irene Pasquini

By Megan Slade

Irene enters the Age UK courtyard, a large patio garden with tables and chairs, on her new mobilised wheelchair in a bright yellow summer dress and leopard-print coat. She greets various friends, support workers, and nurses in the facility.

“Check out my new Harley Davidson,” she grins playfully and tells us how she travelled from Isle of Dogs to Bow on her wheelchair, and everyone in the garden cannot help but smile. If I were one to read auras, I’d tell you she has a powerful, magnificent one, one which you couldn’t just see but could feel. Yet at this very moment, this warm July day as Irene asks me where I’d like to sit, I know as little about auras as I do about Irene and her life. In fact, that is why I am here, and could stay here for many more hours talking with Irene. To overuse the cliché, she really has lived quite the life. Starting with her birth and growing up in the fifties, travelling around the world, living in many countries and owning a number of properties, to suffering a stroke which led to her coming back to almost nothing; just a homeless shelter in Hackney.

Irene, who looks much younger than her years, was born in 1941, in the midst of the Second World War. Blackouts and rationing: she has many vivid memories of her childhood, “There used to be a man who’d tap on all the windows in the town if he could see any light at night. I remember we had to use roof felting to cover up our windows.” She doesn’t keep on the subject of the war long; instead she laughs about the memories of siblinghood, “Oh my brother used to keep pigeons, and birds, all sorts of birds he had, and sometimes he used to stay at his friend’s and mum would whisper to me, ‘Go get two of his pigeons; we’ll have them for dinner,’ and it didn’t matter how many pigeons he had there, he always knew when one went missin.” We laugh as she tells me games that she and her siblings played and the changes the war had on her family. “It made us appreciate things a lot more, turned us into mini adults I suppose. Me and my brother would help out on the farm daily. We would drink all the cows’ milk, collect all the eggs. Yeah, it was hard work but we never moaned.”

“As I turned twenty-one I thought, I gotta get my own house.” To buy a house without any support must have been difficult? “No, I just saved and saved. See it isn’t like today where there’s all of these shiny new things you can buy in an instant, so when I got to twenty-one I had saved up all my pennies and had enough for a deposit on a house in Croydon and moved as soon as I could.” Was there any pressure for her to get married and settle down? “Never. My parents knew I would always go my own way. I have always been very independent you see, so nothing I ever did really surprised them, and my brother and sister both settled down and had children; I was always the rebel...” As she finishes her sentence she smiles, and lights a cigarette.

“After grammar school, I trained to be a nanny, so I did this for a while, and I was always fond of children, but never had my own.”

She takes time to reflect on this, as I ask her more about what she did after she bought her first house.

“I knew I wanted to do something fun, but I still needed to pay my mortgage, so I put up an advert in the local shop for a lodger. As I got there all these other signs read, ‘No blacks, no gypsies’, you know what I mean? I thought to myself, well, why shouldn’t they come and stay with me? I hate that, you know. To me, everyone is the same, always have been and always will be. So I still remember my advert now saying ‘Room available, anyone welcome.’ And I have to admit I’m glad I did as this lovely man from the West Indies came and stayed. He told me all about the weather, the beaches and beauty of where he came from. So, as young people do, I thought, why the bloody hell are you in this country?” We both laugh, as the sun goes back in and I reach for my jacket. “So I thought, yeah, I wanna be there, sunning myself on a beach. Now.” She begins to laugh, “Obviously I didn’t quite understand the politics back then, so I just got on a plane headed for Jamaica, all the time my lodger paying off my mortgage for me. That was when I was... twenty-two? Yeah. I worked over there as a secretary for a Scottish company for a few years.”

I ask her what the West Indies was like. “Yeah,” she pauses, “It was nice.” Again, we both laugh. Her simplicity in the extraordinary captivates me, as boarding a flight by yourself to a country you know nothing of seems daunting even now, but Irene shrugs as I comment on this, saying “Well, I suppose I could call it a bit of a life experience.”

After the West Indies, Irene sold her house in Croydon, bought another property near Heathrow she rented out to pilots, yet she wasn’t back in England for long.

“Then in 1980 I went to Qatar for twelve years doing similar work to when I was out in the West Indies as a secretary...” she pauses as she sees me smile, “You see, nothing’s planned. If you stop and

plan things, nothing happens, and it was just a coincidence a friend of mine called me up and said ‘What you doing Irene?’ I said not a lot really, just keeping my head above water. He asked me to come to Qatar, and I hadn’t even heard of it. But I thought why not, so he simply said, ‘Get your passport, go to Heathrow, your ticket is waiting for you!’”

“You know what, in my time I’ve heard a lot of people say, ‘If only I had done this, if only I’d done that,’ and these are the people who at the time thought I was mad for leaving everything behind, but if I didn’t like it, so what, I could just come back couldn’t I?” At this point more members of staff come through the courtyard, greet Irene with warm smiles as she makes jokes.

“So, where were we, yes, I was on the plane to Qatar, which at the time I had no idea where it was, just thought it was somewhere near a desert – how naïve was I? And anyway it was there I met my husband. How did I meet him? Well there was a beautiful big marina, and he had a deep-sea diving licence... I’ve got one as well.” She nods slightly at me and chuckles, “...and they were building a dam to stop the oil, so I saw this little man coming up, and I was with this girl who was the secretary of the Doha club who knew him, and you had to be working a certain salary to visit one of these clubs – expats weren’t allowed in. Anyway I looked at him and said, ‘Ooh, look at that pair of legs,’ and she said that’s Alf, and she introduced me to him... that was thirty-five years ago. We stayed in Qatar for a few years until his job came to an end, then we came to England as I had bought a house in Lincolnshire that my parents were living in; however, they didn’t really get on with old Alf so to speak, so we just packed the tent and went in the mini, you know one of those old minis, and went to Italy. We began by camping anywhere we could until we started looking at various properties in Italy. We ended up buying a beautiful house in Tuscany, then I sold the houses I owned in Lincolnshire and Heathrow, just before the recession which had

hit Italy. We bought it for hardly anything, now it's worth about €800,000! I want it to go to his grandchildren though. I don't need anything."

I asked Irene how her marriage ended. "I think, you know, you've got to compromise, and there can't be two bosses in one house, and I've always been independent and done what I wanted to do, and there ain't room for two dictators." She laughs again, "So I ended up back here. We are friends, mind, I still phone him every Sunday and Wednesday."

Despite meeting in a stroke awareness support group, I noticed she had yet to mention her experience of surviving a stroke, "It happened when I was out in Italy, at a christening," is all we touch upon, yet it seems to be the catalyst for her new life experiences.

"After my stroke I had come back to England, and at the place I was staying, I got everything stolen from me, all of my things, my money, my credit cards, all stolen. I had no house so I stayed with a friend of mine, and she only had a bedsit which wasn't enough room, so I decided to get help. That's when I first started coming here. The council, they sent me to a homeless place. I quite liked it actually, down Well Street in Hackney. It's a well-known hostel you see. There was this guy, he'd been in there for years – refused to move; he was in the army for a few years then, did you hear about that Brinks-MAT gold robbery at Heathrow? Well, he was the main instigator of that and he done nine years. Anyway, he introduced me and said 'Everyone, this is Irene. She's had some strokes. She's an old age pensioner, don't any of you ask her for anything, or you'll be seen to by me.' And some of them in there, they were the biggest criminals you could ever imagine! I got on with them all though." I widen my eyes at the concept of Irene, having lived in Qatar and Italy, now adjusting to life with absolutely nothing in Hackney.

“No, it weren’t that bad at all. Anyway, I weren’t there for long, I got a call and was told to go to this homeless hostel. Well, it was down near Whitechapel, you know, and I thought, what am I going there for? Anyway I go down; they told me I had a home in the Isle of Dogs but it needed new carpets. I was glad I finally had a place and only had to spend a week in this hostel. And I could write a story about that place, let me tell ya! The room was... basic, you know, but I didn’t care, I had a roof over my head. Beautiful kitchen, but oh, the state of it. I think for the ten days I was there the same pot of rice stayed there too, oh god. On top of this you know all the girls had been going out down the lanes to... well, you know. And I kept saying to myself, you’re only there a week Irene, but I couldn’t help thinking how much I missed my old criminals from Well Street! But I can’t complain, at night Pret a Manger and Costas used to bring us great sandwiches. Oh it were lovely. They brought it to the sitting room, and I’d be thinking I’d read my book, settle down, then all the girls would be getting ready to go out, working for a fiver, tenner – now that was an education.” She begins laughing again.

“Yeah,” she looks past me to reflect, “You know, what if I hadn’t experienced this? Life is life, you know, and I was the eldest one in both the shelters, and they found it interesting to talk to me, and I found it interesting to see another side of life, to them – an everyday existence, and to me I was fascinated by these criminals, prostitutes – they were educating me about things!”

“But after my ten days there, I was glad to get to my new home. Okay, it’s not what I was used to, but it’s a roof over my head, and I have some lovely friends there. We have BBQs on the lawn, and with the Age UK I get to go on all these trips. Did I tell you about Kew Gardens?”

The sun again goes into the clouds as we stop and listen to a plane fly overhead.

“I suppose what I mean is this: you get these opportunities in life, and let me tell you, you just need to grab them with both hands, because you never know what they might lead to, and at the end of the day, if you don’t like it, then you can just drop it like a hot potata.” And with this she sparks another cigarette, not knowing just how relevant those words are.

# My Scarlet Letters

By Emerald Wild

## #1

Dear Scarlet,

My mother is incredible. I can only hope to be as phenomenal a mother, and if I am halfway there I will count it a personal victory. She is the oldest of four, and since her parents worked full time for most of her young life, she also had to care for her younger siblings.

I hope for you to not have this responsibility, as I think it is too much of a burden for someone so young.

It was just she and I for a number of years, and I worry that this has fundamentally formed the way I view parenthood. I cannot imagine raising you with anyone. Whenever I picture having children, I picture doing it on my own. I would love for you to have a father who loves and cares about you, or another mother, but when it comes down to it, I imagine that it will be just you and me. This scares me, mostly because I worry I will not be enough for you in the same way my mother was for me.

She was always very careful about who she allowed me to meet. I only discovered on the night of her wedding to my stepfather that

she'd had other boyfriends between him and my dad. My aunt said she didn't want to introduce me to anyone she did not think would be a permanent fixture in my life, and I respect her hugely for that.

## #2

Dear Scarlet,

I'll begin with a Neil Gaiman quote, because he knows more than he thinks he does.

'I've been making a list of the things they don't teach you at school. They don't teach you how to love somebody. They don't teach you how to be famous. They don't teach you how to be rich or how to be poor. They don't teach you how to walk away from someone you don't love any longer. They don't teach you how to know what's going on in someone else's mind. They don't teach you what to say to someone who's dying. They don't teach you anything worth knowing.' –The Sandman.

I don't pretend to be able to teach you much and, if you are my daughter, I'll have already tried to teach you all I know. But I'll still try and tackle this list regardless.

1. How to love somebody. I don't profess to know this well, but I will love you endlessly. As I write this, the only person I love as much as I'll love you is my mother, who in return loves me the way that someone who's drowning loves a lifeboat. And I will love you fiercely. You cannot save people, little one, you can only love them. Love them without guilt or shame or asking anything in return.
2. How to be famous. As I am not, nor will hopefully ever be, famous, this is a hard one. I would say be humble. And be kind. And don't ever forget where you've come from, or where you're going.

3. How to be rich; see above.
4. How to be poor. Do not be afraid to ask for help. My little one, if you are ever in need, I will always help you. I will fill in forms for grants, and always buy you toilet roll and baked beans when I come to visit. My mama had to watch her friend swap the light bulbs around in her house and pick which rooms could stay in darkness, all the while raising three kids. I will not allow you to go through that. I will teach you the value of money, and I will help you to understand that it is not everything to you. You will not have a hole in your heart that can only be filled by material possessions. My stepmother has never written a thank you letter for any Christmas present that I have bought her. Please bear in mind when you think this sounds trivial, that my father had an affair and left my mother for this woman. And yet my mother still found it in her heart to help me buy Christmas presents for her every single year.
5. How to walk away from someone you don't love any longer. This one took me too long to learn. It will not be an immediate thing, but more of a slow fade, and one day you will wake up in the morning and you will gasp and shake your head and refuse to accept it, because they've not done anything wrong. It doesn't matter, love, it doesn't work like that. Once you've realised that, you can't go back. Not immediately anyway. Maybe in ten years' time when your foundations are less affected by the swaying of their tide, but not right now. Tell them you need to be you, and you alone. Don't assume it will be easy; it will not.

6. How to know what's going on in someone else's mind. Don't. Stick with trying to know what's going on in yours.
7. What to say to someone who's dying. Nothing you say will change things. When my uncle was dying and started to smoke, someone ask if he wasn't worried about the health risks. They meant it in a caring, concerned way. My uncle deadpanned them, and said "Let me live long enough to die of lung cancer." I saw his widow some years later, still smoking, and when I got my pack out she said, "It's very bad for you," in an absent-minded way while she handed me her lighter.

### #3

Dear Scarlet,

Some days you will feel like you are drowning. I will have taught you all I know about anxiety, but I fear that some information will slip through the cracks in your smile. I hope you will smile, but I hope that it will not be a smile you force, smeared across your face like cheap lipstick.

I have spent too much time smiling to be polite, smiling to make other people comfortable, and smiling because I am constantly told to cheer up. I smiled at funerals because people told me that my speeches were beautiful. I smiled when men told me that we could still be friends. I smiled after I was sexually assaulted when I told my friend because at least someone believed me. I hope you will not smile as though the world depends on it. I hope you will smile because your heart is too full of joy, and you are not sure of how to express it.

I was in and out of mental health care from the age of ten, and it will break my heart if I have to see you go through the same thing. But

I will be there. Regardless of anything you do, or go through. That's what a mother does.

Whenever I think about depression, I think of it as a lake. People without it are on lilos, or rubber rings, or even boats. They might experience divorces, or lose their jobs, and that might mean they have to get a new floatation device, and spend a couple of days in limbo, but they will always find their way back to one.

Then there's depression. It takes away your life-line. Some days you'll be able to float, just like everyone else, and no one will even realise you ever struggle. On most days you'll have to swim around, put effort into continuing to stay afloat. People might assume you're doing this on purpose (see well-meaning phrases like "but you have no reason to be sad!" or "but you're so pretty/funny/clever!" or, my personal favourite, "but there are people STARVING in Africa!").

And then there are the blue days: deep blue funks, my stepdad used to call them. On the blue days, you will feel like you are being dragged under water, that you are drowning. Sometimes you will fight it, plaster on smiles and defiantly refuse to accept that anything is wrong, even when the water is slowly filling your lungs. Other days you will struggle, and that will hurt even more. Especially the looks people give you when they see your scarred and flailing arms.

It will hurt.

The first time I undressed in front of the man I would stay in love with for far too long, he grimaced, and told me I had too many scars. I should have pulled my clothes back on, propped up the corners of my mouth with my two middle fingers, and walked out, even if I had already missed the last train. Instead, I went downstairs and curled up on the sofa, the scent of the dinner I'd cooked him lingering in the living room.

A lot of the time it will be the people you love most who look at you with cold eyes. Some of them will not understand what possesses you to drag anything across your flesh, and they will not understand what it is you are trying to exorcise.

#### #4

Dear Scarlet,

There is only so much you can write down in letters. The rest will be told in poems, songs, glances, hugs, whispers, and yells. Ultimately, the rest is up to you.

You are a wonder. I haven't met you yet, but I am already so proud of you. I never really thought about having a daughter when I was younger, but right now I cannot imagine loving anyone more. I always thought about having sons, had names picked out for five of them, but no idea how to deal with a daughter, worried about being a bad example, worried that you'll be too much like me.

I worried too much about most things, and tried to ignore the fact that I wanted children, just like my mother did. I worked too hard, had a part-time job while I studied full-time, and tried to make everybody else happy. I hated myself, and I thought that if other people needed me that the depression would get quieter in my brain. It didn't. It just made me want to claw my way out of my own skin, to exorcise whatever was in there until I was nothing more than a red mess smelling of sulphur. I thought the more educated I was, the more I'd understand myself. In a way, it worked, but by the time I was twenty I had such bad eyesight from staring at screens and books that the optician had to triple-check my date of birth when she read my prescription.

You will probably have my freckles, and need glasses. That's okay, you are from a long line of short-sighted women, and none of us have let it slow our lives down. I'm sorry if you get my height and feet, but on

the plus side, you will never have any problems with seeing the stage at concerts, and they'll always sell Doc Martens in your size.

I wonder what music you'll like. I like to think that you'll love Queen as much as I do, and as much as my father does. He once told me he expects to be dead before he sees me have children, but I want him to love you as soon as he sees the first ultra-sound photograph. I hope he frames it, and puts it in his office, and smiles when he looks at it. I have never seen my father cry, but I hope the first time he holds you his eyes well up, and I can see raw love reflected in them. I have watched my father flirt, shout, and argue, but never cry. Not out of anger, or grief, or joy.

My father could sell ice to the Inuit, and I have lost count of the number of times that his silver tongue has turned into a forked one. I hope that no criticism will ever hurt you as much as my father's hurt me. I would nod as he spoke, and inhale slowly while I smelt expensive cologne and disappointment coming off him in waves.

I want so much for you, sweetheart, you have no idea.

I hope you will be kind. I know you will feel the same wanderlust that my father and I feel, and you will not know a home when you see one. My dad never knew when to settle down, and I worry that I will be the same.

I hope that you will be braver than I am, and plan much less. I can imagine the nights I will spend waiting up for you. I'll make you black coffee before you go to work, and try not to think about what could have happened because you never worry about that.

I'll buy you an anchor necklace for your tenth birthday, a reminder that you'll always have somewhere to return to and ground yourself. Maybe a compass would be more appropriate, but I'll never tell you where your home is, just let you know that I'll always be there in case you need me.

My sister and I are split souls; we never shared a womb, but our eyes laugh the same, and we will always want the best for you. Your uncle is my boy wonder. I was fiercely protective of both of them, and I hope that hasn't changed by the time you read this.

You will have aunts. Not just my sister, but others. Ones that I love like family. Your aunts will be there when you won't let me be. Some of them I have known since childhood, and some of them came into my life much later. They will be terrible influences, and I know for a fact at least one of them will buy you whiskey and cigarettes. Your Auntie Jo will love you fiercely. When I fell in love with someone I couldn't possibly have children with, she drunkenly offered to be a surrogate mother. Then she repeated the offer when sober. I worry that you will love her more than me.

I do not yet know your father, but he would think I encouraged you, and I would be happy to let him complain about telephone bills and his worn-out travel bags. You will be the best thing he ever gives me. You will be the best thing that anyone ever allows me to know.

Sweetheart, I will love you. And that is the beginning and end of everything.

# Thus Spoke the Songs of Love

By Naida Redgrave

## Yesterday

*"I am a forest, and a night of dark trees: but he who is not afraid of my darkness, will find banks full of roses under my cypresses."*

- FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA

I woke up to a beautiful spring afternoon. Birds chirped in the distance and the house felt still and empty. Memories of the previous evening trickled like sap and stuck to every passing thought of all the chores I'd been ignoring. I tried to read, but the words danced off the page and tangled into meaningless sentences. I sat for two hours, listening to the birds and watching the world sway in the gentle breeze, feeling peaceful and uncertain. On the kitchen counter the unpacked shopping sat in the sunlight. I have nothing to give you, my dear.

Whenever I look at you, it's like I'm looking at you for the first time. It's as if my brain cannot retain the scope of your beauty. You smile and my heart feels warm.

I can't believe we got to here.

I don't know if you'll ever know what that means, if I'll ever really be able to explain how much I mean in those seven words. But I want to try so that you know how much I fought to find you. One day I will be old, and I won't remember to tell you about following your heart as fast and as far as your feet can bear.

## When I was three

*“Man is something that shall be overcome... Man is a rope,  
tied between beast and overman – a rope over an abyss...  
What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end.”*

– FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA

Back in the eighties, small kids were fine to ride up front in the car without even a booster seat. These days there are laws about disengaging air bags and rear-facing car seats. I'm not even sure our car had airbags, but dad would always make me wear a seatbelt after mum's accident. She lost control of her car down a winding lane on a winter night. The car flipped over three times – I remember seeing her in bed with multiple casts. I was only three so at the time didn't realise how close we came to losing her, but I always remember being told how the seatbelt saved her life. My memory of early childhood is comprised of several unconnected snippets of moments, which are not complete scenes in themselves, but tend to play on a repeating loop like GIFs. Whilst I know there were many journeys in the car with my dad when I was little, I only have the specific memory of one day in particular, when he took me to get something to eat. I remember it being a fast food place but I don't know what I ate besides chips. I know we sat on stools facing out of the front window. I remember it was crowded – I was holding my dad's hand and felt engulfed, like I was drowning in everyone else's height. The thing I remember most from that day is my gold necklace. I remember crying because of it. A man grabbed at it, and dad caught him just in

time. I was terrified and started to wail, and he tucked it under my t-shirt and jumper. When we got to the car and I'd stopped crying, I asked him what would have happened to the necklace if he hadn't been there. I knew, of course, that I would probably no longer have my necklace. I can't remember what he said, but he had a look on his face like disappointment. I didn't realise at the time that it wasn't directed at me. I didn't realise what he felt actually, until I had you, and the badness and sadness of the world took on a new meaning.

## When I was five

*"You must be ready to burn yourself in  
your own flame; how could you rise anew  
if you have not first become ashes?"*

- FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA

There are things that nobody can control – social situations and circumstances that we boil down to bad luck. There are others that we do, but often we still find that same injustice. People can be mean and cruel. Mostly, when I think back to this time, I remember the soles of my shoes getting stuck in thick mud and later scraping the dry chunks from the crevices with a twig from the garden.

I climbed trees and made wishes to the sky at night.

I don't remember much of the start of primary school. I know my first teacher was Mrs Willoughby, and she gave me my first taste of kiwi. I pretended to like it because I liked her, and I wanted her to like me. Proper school was when I really started to feel like I was different. It was the early nineties, and although there were other black faces around outside of my own family, it was still a novelty. A pretty blonde girl, Sally, once asked me why I was brown. I told her that when I was a baby my parents had left me in the sun too long. I knew that this wasn't true, but I didn't really know why I was brown, except that my parents were and that was how it worked. I knew my dad had told me many times that I would have to work

harder because I was black; that it wouldn't be enough to just be good, I had to be the best. In subsequent years my parents would get a real kick out of seeing me win the prize for English each year end. "You're better at English than the English!" I remember one of them saying. When I asked them where I should say I was from, as it was a question I received constantly, they were adamant that my answer must always be that I was born in England; therefore I'm British. Entertaining anything else was not an option. I didn't tell them that saying this only prompted a further question, "But where are you really from?" To which I was always quite proud to respond, "My dad is African and my mum is Arab."

"How exotic!" people would say, and it would make me proud, but that pride came at a cost – the resignation that I was always going to be different, no matter where I went.

We spent alternate summers in Tanzania and the Middle East, where I became very familiar with the term 'mzungu', which means English person but, more loosely, it is the word in Swahili to describe a white person. In 2000, the year I turned thirteen, I started a fresh diary on the plane to Africa. "I'm going home from home," I wrote, "but I belong in neither." That was the year I started collecting love songs, and noticing boys.

## When I was fourteen

*"Silence is worse; all truths that are kept silent become poisonous."*

– FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA

When I was a teenager, all I ever wanted was to fall in real love. I would cycle a couple of miles from home to a park tucked away behind one of the A-roads towards Stansted airport in Notley Green with a packet of cigarettes and my notebook, and I'd write terrible poetry about nothing at all. The summer I turned fourteen I became obsessed with smells – the sharp but sweet smell of freshly cut grass,

the deep, dry smoke of a barbeque in the distance. I would write about a love I had yet to experience, about the aching and longing that took up so much of my time. March of that year I'd become withdrawn. I could feel the pain and the weight of the world in everyone I knew. That summer I listened to 'Last Goodbye' by Jeff Buckley and wrote the words out into my notebook. I circled lines and scribbled in fountain pen that dribbled onto my fingers, 'find that'. A solitary duck skimmed the pond and I had no bread. I threw a cigarette butt beside me and reached for another in the pack. The duck flew away. I wrote on my hand, 'Find the truth in Love Songs', and it stayed there all afternoon until the cycle home where it disappeared into the rubber of the handlebars. Many years passed by quietly. A stillness surrounded me that I filled with the noise from my heart. I often wondered when my life would start. I watched sunsets where the sky faded from peach to blue to black, and I couldn't connect the purpose of the world's beauty to experience.

## When I was nineteen

*"The lonely one offers his hand too quickly  
to whomever he encounters."*

- FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, THUS SPAKE ZARATHUSTRA

My first love was like my first bicycle with stabilisers. Every now and then, when it tilted just right, both stabilisers hovered off the ground and I was riding on two wheels for real. I could feel myself doing it and I was proud and excited, but I knew that if they weren't there I'd fall. It was as real as real could get, without being quite right.

One day a boy on pills stumbled into my room. I was nineteen and had never had a boyfriend. His girlfriend was in my living room. "You know," he said, inviting himself to a seat, "you're actually really pretty." I had no makeup on and had just finished a late shift at Blockbusters. I did not feel pretty. We talked a little until someone

called his name and he left. I put on a song I'd heard a thousand times and fell in love with him to it.

A week later we were together. The first time we held hands I felt a shock run up my arm and down my spine. His lips were thick, the bottom one flat, right in the middle. His eyes were wide and set close together, and his long, dark hair was dreadlocked. He looked like I'd pictured the love of my life to be, and often I would think about what our children would look like.

"You're drunk."

"I'm not."

"You are. Look at you, you can't even stand up!" I'd been in his room alone long enough to read half of *Never Let me Go* that his mum had bought me.

"It's Christmas. Why don't you—"

"Because, Matty, I've got the appointment tomorrow." I was careful not to shout. His brother's room was next door, and he and his girlfriend were still up.

"That doesn't mean you can't drink. I mean, you can drink because—"

"I know I can drink. I don't want to. I don't feel like it. I feel sick, and upset, and you're just fine and carrying on like everything's normal."

"I don't know how you want me to act."

"I don't want you to act like anything. Look, I don't want you there tomorrow, okay? I just want to be on my own."

I left his parent's house just before sunrise, and walked the two miles to the train station in the snow. Amber lines warmed the road ahead from the street lights, and the ground was white and untouched. Just before I arrived at the hospital, my mum called to tell me my

aunt was pregnant, and I threw up right there on the pavement. Afterwards, a friend picked me up. I got into the car and burst into tears. “I thought he’d come,” I said, and we drove the rest of the way in silence listening to NOFX.

In all the ons and offs, the years, the birthdays, and Christmasses, when I try to remember now all that time, there aren’t a lot of exact memories. If I really force myself, I remember two things the most. Early on, the rose petals leading to him on one knee, with Canary Wharf in the distance like fairy lights, and years later, seeing a picture message flash up on his phone of a lady’s body, wearing the kind of sexy underwear that looks expensive and uncomfortable, with the words, “Thinking of you,” followed by three kisses. After Matty, I was a shell, choosing to wallow in the injustice of rejection over recognising the situation for what it was. Everything was scooped out of me except a need to be filled with something of substance. I was hollow. There’s something soothing about pain felt in the company of music. The melodies skimming your ears somehow dull the hurt of a troubled heart. They sing your rawness when your voice can’t speak.

## **When I was twenty-four**

*“Become who you are!”*

– FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, THUS SPAKE ZARATHUSTRA

When I was 24 I met a guy who had freshwater blue eyes and dirty blond hair.

### ***1st December***

Dear N

I have assembled a questionnaire (below) – please don’t be intimidated, but I have masked my intentions with a series of questions so cunning that even Poirot himself couldn’t see through them.

## THUS SPOKE THE SONGS OF LOVE

1. Do you like food? If yes, move to question 2. If no, move to question 9.
2. Do you find the company of others enhances your enjoyment of food? If yes, move to question 3, if no, move to question 9.
3. Have you any desire to eat some food in the near future? If yes, move to question 4. If no, move to question 9.
4. Do you like going to places where they cook food for you? If yes, move to 5. If no, move directly to 9.
5. Do you like Piña Coladas? If yes, move to 6. If no, move to 9.
6. Do you like walks in the rain? If yes, move to 7. If no, move to 9.
7. Are you not into yoga? If yes, move to 8. No, to 9.
8. Do you have half a brain? (It's clear Rupert Holmes was only looking for a modicum of intelligence in his significant other – I hope he found it.) If you answered yes then congratulations, you have completed the examination. Please supply me with your answers and I will get back to you with the results. If you answered no then move to 9.
9. WTF? Despite the questioning being largely subjective and of the yes or no format, you seem to have answered incorrectly. Go back, re-read, think long and hard, then give the opposite answer to the one you gave. M

That was the best text ever. N x



When I was twenty-four I had nothing to lose. I told a guy that he had kind eyes – that the pale blue reminded me of a lake and when his face lit up every word I spoke gravitated towards them. He exuded happiness.

A year later he asked me to marry him. Between the ceremony and reception we snuck off, us two, and we laughed. He held me and my whole body melted into his arms.



## Today

I've been back at work for a month, and at the end of each day you've grown more sturdy in your movements, more versed in your mannerisms and babbles. I ache for you when you fall asleep, and for all the smiles I missed. I ache at the thought of giving you nothing today, except a vague promise of working towards an uncertain tomorrow. Weekends with the three of us are my happiest place.

"If you could do anything in the world right now, what would you do?" I asked your father, with you asleep between us as we napped after breakfast.

"Anything?"

"Anything in the world."

"I'd buy a motorhome and we'd drive around Europe."

"Forever?"

"For as long as we wanted," he said.

I want you to take your first steps adventurously, courageously, on unfamiliar soil in magical lands. I want you to see that beyond the closest clouds, there are hidden mountains to climb and secret paths to explore. I want to walk along with you.

Today I handed in my notice. In six weeks we leave for France, then Spain, then wherever. So much of my journey so far has been internal, so closed and close. Whenever I look at you, my girl, it's like I'm looking at you for the first time. It's as if my brain cannot retain the scope of your beauty. You smile at me and my heart feels warm. You have such life behind every interaction with everything around you, and I want to show you the world. I want to show you that there are wonderful adventures around the corner, if you choose to have them, wherever, and however, and I'll always be here with you, sharing my secrets and playing you love songs.

# Aged 22

By Lydia Morris

## Sheffield, 12 February 2015

The sheet has left the duvet and seemingly spent most of the afternoon trying to see how many things it can swallow without the two of them noticing.

“Babe, where are the scissors?”

Her eyes, as wide as her smile, glance up from the bed. Pricking her shoulders up she lets out a childlike giggle, throws her naked body into the duvet, arms spread, and pulls the covers into her chest, willing it to swallow her too. “But I love the duvet,” she shrieks.

Harry’s eyebrows furrow together and the left corner of his smile peaks at the spot that’s reserved just for her: “You’re crazy.”

She beams.

Lying now with her back against the mattress and the duvet held tightly up against her bare chest she watches him, grinning at how whimsical he looks from upside down as he stands by the bed. With her smile undisturbed, he curves his body to the side awkwardly to parallel his head with hers and their gazes lock.

“What you doing?” he whispers, standing by the side of the bed, chin jutting out provocatively.

She lets out a high-pitched cry and leaps from the bed clutching his skin with force. His body goes limp beneath her touch, a smile crosses his face. She clammers against his body and leans over him. Her upper lip brushes against his lower. Swimming in each other’s flesh she leans in further. Her hands still clasping his skin, she moves her hips lower into his, her leg sliding over his body, and as if in slow motion he inhales forcefully through his nose and scrapes his bottom lip against his front teeth as he yells, “Fuck.”

Like in a cheap rendition of *Cats the Musical*, she pounces off him from all fours directly into the air, facial expression frozen. His hands glide through the air to his crotch, and his body creases and rolls across the bed, knees into his chest like a foetus.

Retreating to the opposite side of the bed, she pulls the duvet up to her chin, dropping the corners of her mouth, her teeth peeking though like Wallace and Gromit, and she does what social convention tells us all to do in these situations; she bares her teeth, loudly inhaling through them and lets out a low ooo-ing sound.

He looks to her through the corner of one tightened eye; she doesn’t say anything but drops the corners of her mouth in an overly sympathetic frown and creases her forehead worryingly like a blanket over her amusement. He rolls away leaving her with a lasting glare.

She giggles.

## **Rhiw, Wales, 16 April 2015**

Moving along the narrowing sheep path she looks down to the thistle pit below, and up toward the slope above. She walks closer to her Granddad ahead, eager to reach the beach. Her gaze wanders to the possessive blue above, as she watches two seagulls glide over their path.

“You alright there, Lydzi?” Granddad shouts back without turning his head.

“Yes thanks, Granddad,” she answers from right behind him “Are you?”

“Oh yes.” He lowers his volume.

Eyes to the ground, she taps each section of grass with the tip of her shoe cautiously. The distance between them is slowly building.

“Granddad, what shall we have for tea?” She is waiting for him to say stir fry. She waits. “What about that stir fry?”

“Oh yes. Wait ...” He turns back towards her, slapping his thigh. “We didn’t get the sauce in the end did we?”

She stops in her tracks, metres behind him, staring. “Oh God, no you’re right; they didn’t have it.”

“We could just have the ol’ chips, beans and eggs,” he says, rubbing his hands together.

“Did you bring the beans with the little sausages?”

“I think there’s some in my boot, two tins if I remember right.”

“Oh that’ll go down nicely.”

Granddad looks up towards the sky rubbing his roughly shaved chin and mumbles, “Now did I put it in the basket...?”

Shaking her head she continues along the path until she reaches him. “Come on Granddad, let’s keep going.” She places one hand on his woollen sleeve. The texture feels tough against her flustered fingertips; her other hand rests on the coarse poly-blend of his backpack.

“Eh, eh, Lydia, look at that!”

“What?” She follows the line of his arm, blue veins jutting out over his once strong muscles; she imagines him as just a mere boy pointing to the fighter jets that sliced through the sky. His battered finger pins a dark spot in the distance.

She squints. “That’s a hawk isn’t it Granddad?”

“Yes,” he whispers excitedly, “Oh look at that, isn’t it magnificent?”

Her ears rise with her grin.

“Is it holding a branch or something?”

The bird’s glide grows unsteady as it flies toward them.

“No, it can’t be.”

“Well, I haven’t got my glasses on so you’ll have to tell me,” she says, relaxing, and watching the event unfold in his expression.

“Eh, Lydia,” the back of his hand whips against her upper arm without fracturing his gaze, “that’s a snake!”

“Is it? But it’s black.” Her eyes dart back to the sky, a scowl emerging over her face as her hand rubs the burning patch on her arm left from her granddads slap. She furrows her forehead around her squinting eyes. “There aren’t any black snakes in England though are there Granddad? Or Wales even?” she mumbles.

The hawk struggles with the snake in mid-air. Trying to straighten its flight, it clamps its grip and tussles with the animal. Within seconds the bird is over their heads and the two of them have become landscape to the skies. The bird falters as the snake fights for freedom, and within a second, the thud of the snake to the ground reigns over the ocean and the wind from the hills.

Silence stills everything; the bird is gone.

Granddad looks to her; he is grinning. “Let’s get it.” Within a blink his rucksack is on the path in front of her and his once creaking body is running like water down the steep hillside.

“Be careful Granddad!”

“Come on Lydia.”

“Oh bloody hell.” She drops her bag, rolling her eyes.

Looking down to the path edge, she pauses before mumbling to herself and crouching, her clammy hands grabbing at clusters of grass as she tips one leg off the ledge and taps around for sturdy ground below.

Granddad looks up from swimming through the brambles, “Oh come on Lydia!”

“Oh for God’s sake.” She falls to her bum and slides down the bumpy slope towards him. The once seemingly dangerous drop has become her uncomfortable decline.

“What type of snake is it?” she says as she tries to find her stance.

“It’s a black adder. They’re very rare.”

She moves the bramble with finger tips, the arms of her jumper stretched over her hands protecting her fragile skin “Aren’t black adders poisonous Granddad?”

“Yeah. The only poisonous snakes in the UK.”

She bolts upright, “Well bloody hell Granddad why are we looking for it then?”

“Oh blumin’ heck Lydia, it’s not going to kill you. Just don’t get bitten.”

“Ugh.” She bends back over looking for their needle in the haystack, the thorns and thistles crunching below her boots as she fights the undergrowth with her feet.

## London, 18 June 2015

There is a huddle of people standing on the patio in the garden; the sky is becoming light behind the ascending trunks of smoke stemming from the orange tips of their cigarettes and reaching up into the cooling night air. Their laughter is breaking up the silence of the neighbourhood.

“What, are you joking?”

“No honestly. It was hilarious. She was gone for like two hours and we were all looking for her and...”

“Yeah, Lyd. I told you she was in the toilet.” Carina appears through the patio door, her heavy Portuguese accent smothering the recently adopted London tones of Lydia’s.

“Yeah, fair play, she was there; I’m sorry. But I didn’t exactly expect you to get the bouncer!”

“Fuck, you got the bouncer? Was Ellie okay?”

“Yeah, she was fine. She just fucking went to the toilet for a nap didn’t she,” she yells with laughter, wobbling.

A deep voice passes over. “Mate you got a skin?”

They ignore it casually.

There is laughter erupting from inside. Mia is shouting, “Ed, for fuck’s sake, not in the sink. If you’re going to throw up go to the toilet.”

“No I don’t want to go up the fucking stairs,” he slurs. His face is pale and the corners of his mouth are drooping.

“Well you can’t throw up in the sink. Go outside!”

Ed groans towards her before shrugging off outside, knocking a can of beer over with his elbow, against the knitted jumper he wore to work in earlier that day.

“Ugh. Are you going to clean that up?” Fran shouts, pausing her dance.

The liquid glugs out of the can, onto the counter and seeps down the cupboard door. Someone picks it up and backs out of the scene without saying a word.

Ed throws his body towards the door, again letting out a loud grumble towards the crowd he leaves behind. A boy on the sofa grabs the DVD covered in several little discoloured lines of powder and hold it steadily as Ed speeds past.

Laughter erupts outside as he stumbles up the steps and hits the nearest flower bed, not quite missing the freshly planted seedlings.

“Aw, Ed man. They’re my fucking sunflowers,” Lydia shouts from the patio.

He ignores her.

Her hand is raised in the air like she is drunkenly imitating a Shakespearean actor; the invisible skull drops with her hand and she mumbles, “For fuck’s sake,” knowing that eyes are on her.

The sky is growing grey rapidly, the light forcing some people home.

The goodbyes seem few but the space opens like a jaw, a jaw of impending shards of glass, damp rugs, and the ash-covered cans clattering the floor.

The loud music disturbs the now grounded girls, faces drooped, eyes tired as they stare up at their invited guests wondering when they will tire.

### **Chester, 27 June 2015**

His fluffy hair softens beneath her hand like strands of silk. She pushes her face toward him, his front paws lift off the table, and he pushes the top of his head towards her lips.

She kisses him like she has done every day they have been together, since he was a kitten. His paws drop back to the varnished wood once more and his body rubs up against the back of the chairs that border the table, his thick black tail curling friskily in the air.

She runs her palm over his coat, cupping her fingers gently over his thin spine.

A loud clap cracks the air and his eyes dart to her father at the other side of the kitchen. "Come on Nero, off the table."

"Aww, Dad, he's so cute," she says through clamped teeth and pursed lips.

She continues to stroke him.

Another clap splits the room and the cat leaps to the ground with a high-pitched 'Umphh'.

"Aww baby." She watches him waltz over to his food bowl, arse in new heights of attitude. He knows.

"So how is London? Is work okay, and the house?" The cabbages swirl red behind the wooden spoon as his wrist churns.

"Yeah Dad, everything is fine, how are you doing?" Her hand grips the back of the chair.

“Yeah I’m doing good, I’ve finished another canvas and been working on some sketches. I’ll show you them after dinner.”

“Sounds good. How is everyone else? How’s Hannah and the baby? And how’s Granddad?” Her body faces him as she watches her toes curl.

“Granddad’s good, he came round for tea last Sunday and he had a great time, all joking with Ben.”

As Ken peers into the oven the smells dart out, escaping before settling to decorate the room like hanging bunches of dried herbs, all swimming in the heat of roasting chicken.

“Have you seen much of Harry recently?” he says, taking a tea towel and attempting to waft the heat.

“Yeah I went up to see him not so long ago, he’s doing really good.”

His voice strengthens as he lifts the oven dish by one side through the gathered layers of the tea towel. “Is he still doing the music?”

“Yeah he’s getting really good now, doing a lot of gigs.” She walks towards the fridge and reaches for the gathered rolls of bamboo on top, leaning on her toes.

“Well it sounds like you’re having a great time.” He smiles glancing at her.

Nero’s meowing pierces through the sounds of BBC Radio Two.

“Yeah I just wish I could see everyone more, especially with Hannah having the baby. It’s annoying not being a part of it, it’s just with work and seeing Harry it’s hard to get the time.”

He turns to her. “Hey Lydzi, you’ve got your life now, just like Hannah and Ben.” He grabs her far arm, his arm wrapping around her as he gives her a gentle shake. “Eh, I’m proud of you girl!”

He returns back to the chicken resting on top of the oven. She rolls out the place mats and lays the cutlery on top. Ken scrapes the last bits of onion into the gravy boat while she places the bowls of roasted vegetables onto the table. The chicken takes centre place, juices seeping down over the skin, the aroma rising into the air like a small explosion. The cat goes crazy.

“Ahh Nero shut up,” her dad says, opening the back door and shooing him out with the inside of his foot.

Cath enters the room and lays out the glasses and Lydia takes her seat as Skeeter Davis sings ‘The End of the World’ on the radio.

Ken goes to the counter placing the tea towel down and picks up a small golden bell. Moving towards the kitchen door, he pinches the tip of the handle as he rings it, little finger outstretched. The jingle skips out of the room. “Alice,” he shouts, “Tea’s ready.”

“Ha Dad! You have a bell for Alice!”

“Yeah,” he chuckles. “I have to get her down some way.” He gives Lydia a cheeky look over his smile, checking Cath’s gaze is averted. Lydia smiles.

“I’ll text her,” Cath says, reaching for her phone.

They join Lydia at the table as feet thunder down the multiple flights of stairs.

Ken sits next to Lydia. “Well,” he says to her, “It’s good to have you home Lydzi.”

# His Beautiful Angel

From the life of Jane Boyle

By Emerald Wild

Jane Boyle was born in East London, and has always felt a strong tie to the place. Her parents already had a son, and would go on to have three more daughters after her. By the age of nine, Jane was filling the maternal role of primary caregiver for her siblings. Their father worked away a lot, and this was particularly hard on their mother, who struggled to cope with five children all aged five and under. Her siblings all helped with the housework, but the majority of the cooking was left up to her. Jane claims, with a smile, that this is because she was the only one tall enough to reach the stove.

When Jane met Pete, she was going through a rough stage in her life. Her home life was turbulent due to her and her mother not getting on. They regularly argued, and it caused a real rift in the family. Another stress factor was her current boyfriend, who was not a suitable match for the sixteen-year-old girl. Jane was volunteering at St Mark's Church, Beckton, in connection with the youth club that was based there. This gave her a sense of accomplishment and stability, and she was already more than capable of the culinary tasks being set for her.

It was clear that she fancied the young man before they started seeing each other. Pete was cute, tattooed, and around her age, so the two quickly become friends. Things were complicated slightly by one of Pete's friends thinking it was him that she liked, and not Pete. This was obviously enough to urge Pete into action. While standing outside the church having a cigarette, Jane said goodbye to the boys for the day. In front of her youth worker Andrew, Pete circled back and kissed her goodbye, full on the mouth. Those who know Jane know how rarely she is lost for words, but it seems that this was one of those occasions.

They started courting, but Jane's relationship with her mother did not improve, and eventually she had to move out of the family home. There was a scheme that was running at the time that helped young people move out of home if they were not welcome there. For Jane, one of the hardest things to cope with at this point was having a meeting with her mother and one of the scheme employees. The meeting was to establish what to do about her situation, but hearing her mother discuss how they did not get on and how she did not like living with Jane was very difficult. She was given a flat, and was living on her own in Stratford by the age of seventeen. This is where she was raised, so moving back gave her a real sense of familiarity and comfort.

When he was fresh out of school at sixteen, Pete had joined the armed forces. By the time Jane was living in her flat, he was stationed at a military base in Cambridgeshire. He would come down every week on the train to visit her, and would always do her shopping, as well. The long distance made things difficult for the two, especially since they were now engaged.

Jane is a woman who knows what she wants; she always has been. She had been talking for ages about wanting a necklace, and had finally worn Pete down. They went into town together to a jeweller's, where she started looking to find the one she wanted. After a while,

she realised that he was not looking with her, and was over by the engagement rings. She went over and asked him who was getting married. Finally, the penny dropped, and she sulked and said she didn't want one at all, she just wanted a necklace. After a bit more of a tantrum, she said she didn't care, and pointed at a random ring, not thinking that he would actually buy it. He called her bluff, bought it, and the two became engaged. Jane knew that Pete was the only man in the world who knew how to handle her when she was being like that.

When Pete was not with her, he would phone. She would wait down in the foyer of the building she lived in for him to call. Their conversations would normally go something like this ...

Pete: Can we please just get married soon?

Jane: I'm not ready to get married! I don't want to move out of the flat and have babies yet.

Pete: Oh pleeeeeeease?

Jane: No!

At that time, the army discouraged young men from having girlfriends because of the potential distraction from duty. Pete told Jane that regardless of this there was no way he was ending it with her. She found this very endearing, and it made her feel like he was the first person to ever see her for who she was. Not as a burden. Being part of a large family can sometimes feel like you get lost in it, but Pete just saw her as her.

After some months of this long-distance, Pete had a few weeks where he was finding things very tough. He would always try to make light of it, but Jane could tell that he was having a bad time on the base. One day when they were talking on the phone, he told her about how much better he would feel if she was there for him to come home to, just to be able to see her and hold her. When he asked that time if they could get married anytime soon, she said yes.

Her mother planned her wedding because their relationship had improved vastly since Jane moved out, and they had a small registry office union because Pete could not get any time off work. Jane's oldest younger sister was her matron of honour, and she had two of her cousins as bridesmaids.

A few weeks after this, she moved to Cambridgeshire to live with Pete. She loved how beautiful the kitchen was at the house they lived in on base, but was only allowed to take a few things with her from the flat when she moved (she says that she still has the saucepan somewhere because she is a self-confessed "sentimental old fart"). There was a clique of army wives at the base, but Jane was never part of it. She was only nineteen when she married, and had no interest in joining the knitting club they were running.

In the September of 1997, after the two had been married for only six months, Pete was posted to the Falkland Islands. He bought Jane a puppy in case she got lonely; a Jack Russell called Knasher. This ties in with the Dennis the Menace tattoo she made him get when they were younger.

While Pete was away in the Falkland Islands, his grandfather passed away. The two men were very close, so Pete's mother did not think it would be a good idea to tell him. She also did not allow Jane to inform him. This meant that by the time Pete returned to England, his grandfather's funeral had already been held and he had missed his opportunity to say goodbye. This was a really difficult piece of information for Jane to keep from him, especially because they were writing to each other regularly. Jane still has all of their letters, but doesn't read them.

Upon his return to England, Jane bought Pete a Staffordshire bull terrier that the pair named Leah. This turned out to be a fortunate choice. A few weeks after he had come back from the Falkland Islands, life changed permanently for the couple. Pete is a man who

likes things organised; he enjoys structure. Jane does not, and so, when she was a few days late for her period, she thought nothing of it. Pete was more realistic about the situation, apparently telling her she was pregnant before she had even checked the calendar.

One day when Pete was at work, Jane put on some chips to heat up. In a fit of what she refers to as “pregnant brain”, she left them in the oven for too long, and by the time she returned to the kitchen the smoke was overpowering. She fell to the floor, unable to breathe or move from the kitchen, but luckily Leah was there. The dog proceeded to pull her across the kitchen floor and into the living room, saving her life, and the life of the couple’s first son, in the process.

Danny was not an easy birth for Jane. She had to have an emergency C-section (with her mother in the operating theatre with her, claiming that her insides looked better than her outsides), and the baby came out a dark blue colour. Due to the huge amount of anaesthetic that was used during the procedure, Jane has not fully recovered feeling in her stomach, and claims that there are still areas that she would not be able to tell if they were being touched.

A few weeks after the birth, she felt something wet on her legs, but assumed this was a normal side effect of the anaesthetic used for the operation. Continuing on with her day as normal, she only realised something was wrong when she went to the toilet and discovered her entire lower torso and legs were covered in blood. Her stitches had opened, and parts of her that she knew shouldn’t see the light of day were hanging out of the wound. She tried to remain calm, and gently poked whatever section of organ it was back into the cut.

She then dressed the opening with some gauze that the hospital had given her, and stuck it all together with sanitary pads. She picked the sleeping Danny up, and walked to the doctors on base. This journey should have taken five to ten minutes, but instead took her over an hour. When asked how she managed it, she simply replied

“I’m a Cockney, what can I say?” Danny stayed asleep throughout the whole ordeal. A while after this, Pete bought himself out of the army, and the family moved back to London. They then had another son, Donnie.

Pete has always been very protective of Jane, and it is obvious that she loves him for this. He’s never liked her smoking, even though she picked up the habit before the two met (she has recently given up completely, and chews a lot of gum). Upon moving back to London, he would not allow her and the boys to move into the house they had bought until he had cleaned and whitewashed the whole place from top to bottom. It took him three days to do.

Back in London, Pete found employment as a PSCO. This was a position he maintained for around five years before becoming a postman, a traffic warden, and finally a bus driver. His previous job in the army means that he has a full driving license, and is legally permitted to drive any type of vehicle. Jane has been working at a café in East London, and knows that she could not have asked for a better man to spend her life with. Every single day Pete tells her he loves her, and that she is his beautiful angel. He is covered in tattoos now, and has their right-handed son’s name tattooed on his right arm, and their left-handed son’s name tattooed on his left arm. Jane will not let him get her name tattooed; she feels that the wedding ring he wears is proof enough of her existence, although he still keeps asking.

Being somewhat of a sceptical romantic (I think it comes with being a writer), I wanted to know what advice Jane would give on the topic of marriage. She smiles at me when I ask her how she knew that Pete would be the man she would marry. She said that she loves everything about him, that he was her first everything, that she had never wanted anyone like she wanted him. She told me that the key to a lasting marriage is to not expect too much from the other person. To be prepared to grow together. The beginning of your relationship should not feel like a chore, it should be easy, effortless even. She

told me that you don't have to have anything in common to be in love. The most important thing of all is to have consideration. To understand that it is not just about you anymore.

I am a firm believer that there are some things in our lives that are pre-destined, that certain events have to occur in order for us to become the people that we have to be. Jane Boyle is positive that meeting the man who became her husband was one of her pre-determined, set-in-stone happenings. The pair celebrated their eighteenth edding anniversary in April 2015, and their sons are turning fifteen and seventeen this year.

# Scar Tissue

By Elizabeth Colville

## Skin

Basal cells form in the prickle cell layer between the dermis and epidermis. They contain fibrils within the cellular cytoplasm that helps strengthen the skin. These cells actively divide and ascend through the granular layer replacing those at the cornified layer. When damaged, the regeneration process breaks down at the site of injury. The immune system activates, protecting and cleaning through bleeding. Threads of fibrin spread out from platelets in the plasma, trapping and clotting red blood cells that scab once dry.

## Newbie

I was eleven when the phagocytes rushed to the scene of the crime: my left shin. It was lunch time at Eltham Green School. I'd been there a couple of weeks. A tiny speck dwarfed by a gargantuan building. A pathetic little figure in oversized first-year blazer, 'V'-neck jumper and regulation pleated tunic: bottle green. A snot on the landscape.

## De-tagging

I'd already been de-tagged. This is when the tie-maker's tag is ripped off—with force. The older boys and girls worked in packs. A lot of kids cried. I didn't. Not outwardly. It was a ritual all first years went through, unless you were lucky or clever or both. I was neither.

## Cell Block 'H'

The building: an 'H'-shaped construction, like a sprawling foal. Seven floors with two wide staircases at either end of the central cross building. A vast comprehensive in South East London, housing 2,500 children. It was a Darwinian environment. Apart from surviving, we were classified into houses. The first six spelled the town and the last two the initials of the remainder, E L T H A M G S. We were allocated a house according to the initial of our surnames. Mine began with 'B' so I was placed with those whose surnames began with 'E'. I don't know the logic behind this taxonomy, but 'E' stood for Endeavour, and as I'd been told I always tried hard, I was aptly placed.

## Assembly Hall

Joining the cross building at lower ground level was a glass-sided assembly hall with stage and balcony. Every morning at 9am the first three years would gather for morning prayers and the daily haranguing. Fourth- and fifth-year assembly didn't start until 9.30. And if you stayed on until the sixth form, which I did, you were absolved from this diurnal ear-bashing.

## Impact

I was standing between the assembly hall and the building that housed languages, history, and geography. There was a group of four fifteen-year-old girls standing behind me at a short distance, chatting. Some boys, a mixture of ages, were playing football in front of me, also at a distance. The din from kids running around

was indescribable, full of life with differing pitches of scream and squeal. The boys were navigating a football between three randomly placed tree-seats. I was standing on my own in the middle distance between a seat and the school buildings when the ball arrived at my feet. Mother had always told me to put others first. I picked it up to hand it back to this barrel-shaped tank of a kid when he kicked me, as if striking out for a goal. His steel toe cap sank into my shin.

“Fucking leave it alone you little cunt,” he yelled, snatching it off me, his eyes black with rage.

I stood dead still, my body trembling, my leg bleeding. I wanted to cry, but didn’t because my parents used to say, “you carry on and I’ll give you something to cry for.” So I never cried. I just felt scared and stupid, and wanted my mum. I could hear the girls behind me laughing. I didn’t know if it was at me. I just wanted to disappear into the ground. But I couldn’t just let him get away with that. I had to say something to him.

So I said, “You didn’t have to do that. I was only helping you.”

“Fuck off. Cunt.” he barked, toeing the ball back to the laughing boys.

## **Survival**

Where others fight or flight, I fright.

## **Skin 2**

Wounds leave scar tissue. Mine’s an atrophic scar, taking the form of a sunken recess. This occurs because the underlying structures supporting the skin, such as fat or muscle, are lost during impact.

## **Skin 3**

Melanin is produced by the amino acid tyrosine that synthesises proteins. This amino acid oxidises then polymerises; small molecules combine chemically to produce a large chainlike molecule

called a polymer. The pigment is produced in specialized groups of cells called melanocytes. The melanocyte-stimulating hormone intensifies along with estrogen during pregnancy causing increased pigmentation of the skin.

### **Discovery 1**

I was four months pregnant with my first child when I noticed this dark spot on the inside of my left knee. It was around a millimetre in diameter. I tried to think if I'd noticed it before but couldn't be sure. Over the next couple of months I noticed it growing in tandem with the unborn baby. I knew the body changed during pregnancy, so thought no more of it.

### **Presentation**

Immediately after my daughter was born, the customary round of showing off the baby was expected. My family came to visit. His family expected our visit, not concerned for my stitched and swollen bits and leaky tits. I argued my point, but like royalty, when they called, we served.

And this thing was growing bigger.

### **Discovery 2**

Five months later, my husband, daughter and I visited his father for a meal. I thought I'd mention this thing and showed him. By now it had doubled in size. He told a story of an aunt who'd had something similar growing, but had done nothing and after a couple of years, had died. The autopsy showed it to be a malignant melanoma. Enquiring as to what that was, he told me: a tumour. I'd always thought tumours were gristly things, not smooth and flat. He urged me to get it checked out soon. I remember thinking, Shit! I've got cancer.

## Nightmare

My head spun. I couldn't think of anything but death and dying. The baby was crying but I didn't want to deal with *her*. I eventually changed her nappy while hubby and his father sat drinking beer.

I couldn't wait for morning. I needed to get to the hospital now, but that wasn't going to happen.

Night-time covers despair. Death is comfortable in darkness, while the heart trembles in fear. I had watched this thing blossom into a black dahlia in the summer sunshine, unaware it was my nemesis. I was only twenty-six.

I got through the evening as best I could, their joviality alien to my dilemma.

## Darkening

The fear suffocated me when I thought about going to hospital.

Better you know than to die—surely?

I didn't want to know. I know I didn't want to die.

I WAS ONLY TWENTY-SIX.

I wanted more children. I wanted to see my daughter grow into a young woman.

What had I done to deserve this?

I was giddy, felt sick, my heart pounded, my breath was short, I felt sweaty and cold.

I cried and stroked the dahlia, like a cat, through the tears.

My eyes wandered to the atrophic scar that had formed fifteen years earlier.

## Lightning

Thor struck!

*Of course: the trauma to my leg. My body's way of telling me something.*

I was excited.

I researched books, consulted alternative practitioners. The black dahlia was a messenger, directing me to a deeper level, which needed heeding.

I stared hard at this thing—

No, not a tumour, nor a mole, but a sign.

I smiled. A feeling filled me. A reassurance that cast away gloomy thoughts. I went to the phone, picked up the receiver and booked an appointment.

## Hospital

To the right of the open-plan foyer were the lifts and staircase to the wards. To the left, the day clinics. Two main walkways, the length of the hospital, bestrode the appointment desks.

The oncology check-in was the penultimate station. I took my seat in a spacious, yet cozy, eau-de-nil waiting area with its chrome and maroon leatherette chairs in facing rows. I'd gone thinking they were going to look, pass verdict, and that would be that. I sat in silence watching other people and wondering about their fate. Someone called and I realised they were calling me. It reminded me of Cell Block H.

## Investigation

Ushered into a side room with a curtain drawn around a bed, a young man in a white coat sat at his desk. He asked me questions like, how long had I noticed it and did it hurt. Then he stroked it

with his thumb checking its texture and squeezing it gently between thumb and index finger.

“Okay, jump up on the bed and we’ll have that out.”

“What are you going to do?” I said.

“We’re going to take a biopsy. It won’t hurt.”

“You’re going to cut it out?”

“Yes. We need to do tests on it.”

“Is it cancerous?”

“That’s what we want to find out.”

The bed was in lounge position. I eased myself onto it and leaned back. It was covered in light blue paper. I faced the inside of my knee towards the ceiling and with my hands gripped across my chest, I closed my eyes. Metal clunked. I imagined a kidney bowl and scalpel. The smell of surgical spirit made me shiver. Something cold touched my leg. The nurse was swabbing it with anaesthetic. I wondered if they would use a 10A Swann-Morton blade like I’d used at college. I remember two types of handle. A thick one, taking larger blades, and a thinner one that I’d used for card-cutting and scoring. I’d made a Tarkus model out of card. Tarkus, from Emerson, Lake and Palmer’s second LP of the same name, was a cross between an armadillo and a tank. The caterpillar tracks were particularly tricky to make as they had to be individually crafted into letterbox-shaped treads to look authentic. I’d learned this shape originally from cutting button holes in needlework class at school.

“All done,” the nurse said, plopping a bloody segment of flesh into a specimen jar.

She bandaged a large square gauze over the wound, told me to keep it dry and not to remove it for a couple of days. That meant no baths

or showers; or at least, showering without the left leg, which would call on my balancing skills. I was ushered out in mirror fashion to my entrance and was told to give it a few days before ringing for results. But before I could call them, they called me.

## **Verdict**

Greenwich District Hospital; where, twenty-six years earlier, on the same site, but in the original St Alfege's Hospital buildings, I had entered the world.

I met with Mr Harrison, the oncology surgeon. Suave, early forties, short dark hair peppered with tiny flecks of silver. Greying sideburns emphasising his deep brown eyes. He reminded me of a young Christopher Lee. I think it was the oval face and slightly aquiline nose. He smiled at me as I entered the room. My backside had hardly touched the seat.

"I don't want to wait," he said.

"We've caught this in time and I want to make sure it's all out. This Sunday. You'll be in and out for Christmas."

"That's short notice. I've got a seven-month-old daughter to look after."

"What about her dad? This is your leg we're talking about. I don't want to take any chances."

I dreaded asking my husband, knowing he would not want to leave his precious metal mistress, the printing machine. I was even more gutted when he recruited his mother, much to my chagrin. Nevertheless, on the 5th December 1982, I entered theatre.

## Solo

Fast forward eleven years to 1993. It was the worst of times; it was the best of times. I was thirty-seven, relieved to be separated, a single parent of four young daughters living in a detached chalet bungalow in a beautiful corner of Sidcup on income support. We had ten rooms and a park for a garden. Twenty-two trees and a vast lawn. From the mega beech that turned five colours in a season before laying down her golden rug in November to the Hadean Ficus, a fruit-bearing fig tree of epic proportions to which I played Persephone every morning from July to late September. The children were at their happiest. We played roadways, ran races, had ten-foot-high bonfires that lasted all night and the foxes even came to lay on the warm ashes. Life was good.

## Return

We were two days past the Vernal Equinox. The daffodils were opening; the beech was unfurling its deep green leaves from its winter buds. I was sitting on the edge of the bed clipping my toenails when I saw it. A black thing on the sole of my left foot. It was Tuesday 23rd March. Mardi. Mars day. The day of the war god. The battle was on... again. The dread, pervasive. I wanted to cry but didn't. Instead, I measured it assiduously.

Using a reflexology map of the foot, I noted that the melanoma and this new one were both positioned on the spleen line. I plucked up courage to visit the surgeon. I didn't want to hear what he had to say. He told me to come back if it changed size. *Changed size?* I'd been watching it change size for two months.

## Alternative

The left-hand side represents the feminine.

The spleen, biologically, makes defence cells, breaks down old red corpuscles and creates bile. Symbolically, it is concerned with obsession.

Cancer metaphorically represents a long-standing resentment, a deep grief or secret eating away at the self, carrying hatreds and a 'what's the use' outlook.

The skin is a sense organ that protects our individuality. It is our personal boundary.

I was full of bile, over the rancorous fallout from the separation and sick of being everybody's property. However, I was being shown where to work on myself.

I had to love me and protect me. That was paramount.

Without love, what was the point of anything?

It hadn't grown in a year.

The last recorded measurement on 9th January 1998 showed it had doubled in size. I was now 41. What kept me going during these times were my girls, the garden, my interest in homoeopathy and astrology, the cosmos, the physical stars and planets. All the while I stayed close to the meaningful; things would work out.

This was not blind faith, but a depth of faith – in my connection to something that was not manmade. My youngest was seven, my eldest fourteen. This was a period of engagement with all things wondrous.

Comets: portents for good or evil.

Through the telescope we viewed the transit of Hale Bopp, recreating it on black sugar paper with chalk.

## **Crossroads**

I had made a decision that I would not have this thing cut out, not even as a last resort. If I had cancer, I wanted to know where it was so I could have a relationship with it. Most importantly, to love it. I was, after all, married to it; a marriage no man could put asunder.

I believed having the melanoma removed pushed the cancer back into my body to resurface. I'd read about Dr Max Gerson's cancer patient success rate with carrot juice therapy, but had no means of travelling to the States, so I created a raw food therapy of my own to support my body's immune system.

This was it. No more fight, no more flight, no more fright – just love and a healthy respect for life and death in all its guises.

# About Our Writers

*All of the writers that worked on EastLife graduated from the University of East London, and studied the BA (Hons) Creative & Professional Writing degree or the MA Writing: Imaginative Practice degree. They all show exceptional talent in their work.*

## **Christina Barrett-Jones**

Christina is always seeking new ways to make interesting things happen within her writing. Since completing the first year of the MA writing programme she has written a number of short plays which have been performed in London, and is now working on a full length play.

## **Jo Berouche**

Jo is a gloomy millennial, attempting to reclaim others and herself from the blurring in-betweens of past, present, and future. She is pretentious, scarcely finds the time to write, struggles to love herself and is deathly afraid of the future, despite harbouring a fascination with it.

## **Craig Britton**

Craig's interest in writing is to indulge in something he does not know. To be immersed in a culture he has never seen, or one that is in front of us every day, but that we never truly acknowledge. The

aim of his writing is not so much to entertain, but to open debate with the reader.

### **Suzie Champion**

Suzie is an Independent Psychotherapist with a passion for writing. But passion doesn't equal talent. So, she decided to check onto a creative writing course to test herself, and having just graduated from a three-year BA Honours Degree course at UEL with a First, she thinks she might well be onto something.

### **Martin Clarke**

Martin was born in Norwich and left school at seventeen, when he worked full time in Asda while studying with the Open University before attending UEL. Having completed his degree, he is now enjoying not reading, not studying, but would prefer to also be not working. He currently hangs on the precipice of complete idleness and literary brilliance. Any other time is spent either sleeping, or sitting in bed wearing only his pants, watching Mariah Carey videos on YouTube.

### **Elizabeth Colville**

Elizabeth has a love of chocolate... and genealogy. This combination isn't as odd as it appears, considering her research has uncovered a distant Swiss ancestry. Her interests also include astronomy, all things unconventional, and gardening with botanical overtones.

### **Sam Dodd**

Sam's areas of interest are human rights, freedom of expression, rehabilitation through the arts, queer politics, poverty issues, community organising, and the environment. She co-runs a small East London poetry evening called 'Mouths Wide Shut' with Lydia, and founded UEL English PEN society. Sam falls in love with most people she meets, usually immediately, and likes to re-tell their stories. The personal is always political.

## **Naomi Duffree**

Naomi graduated from UEL in 2013. Now a freelance writer and Editor of Frivolity for [kettlemag.co.uk](http://kettlemag.co.uk) she also writes under the name Harryat Hornet for her blog about Watford FC home games, and for *Golden Pages*, their unofficial fanzine. Lives in Kent. Misses London, especially the underground – and buses.

## **Nacima Khan**

Having studied creative writing, Nacima discovered an interest in the connection between writing and history and is currently looking into oral history in different cultures. She loves the power which creative writing can have on an audience, and in particular would like to bring back the love of writing and expression, particularly in the younger generation, through community projects. She is currently working on a historical fiction novel which is based in the 1971 war of Bangladesh.

## **Jo Lazar**

Jo was born and raised in Romania before adopting the United Kingdom as a home. Although a poet at heart, she has great love for all things prose. Her biggest wish is to write a book series so good that it scandalises the Church.

## **Erica Masserano**

Erica didn't get the memo about settling down in one place and doing only one thing at a time. Freelancer in anything involving the written word, two Masters degrees, fully at peace with her inner cat lady. Believes in fiction, loves prose, and has a soft spot for games.

## **Lydia Morris**

Growing up in Cheshire, Lydia comes from artistic roots. Taking her passion for writing to London to study, she specialised in creative non-fiction and life writing at UEL. Lydia co-founded 'Mouths Wide Shut' with Sam Dodd, and performs her own poetry as well.

## **Michael Pudney**

Michael fell in love with writing at eight years old, when his unfinished and ultimately terrible first novel sparked the beginning of an exciting journey. Michael has since moved onwards with his writing, making it a rule to write across as many genres as possible, particularly honing in on horror, creative non-fiction, and comedy. Although an Essexian at heart, he moved to London in 2009 to study at UEL. He lives in Stratford with his inspiring girlfriend, to whom *The Perspectives of Angur* is dedicated.

## **Naida Redgrave**

Naida is an MA graduate from UEL. Most recently a deputy editor for a national magazine publisher, she has written for a number of lifestyle and craft titles after beginning her career in B2B journalism. When not writing, she likes to read, make her daughter laugh, and drink wine.

## **Megan Slade**

After graduating from UEL, Megan has worked at various jobs, from teaching children with autism to catering at funerals and selling luxury soap, all whilst trying to find time to write. She has thankfully now found her calling working in a little second-hand bookshop in Chelsea, where she is constantly inspired and surrounded by mountains of books. She resides in Hackney.

## **Emerald Wild**

Emerald suffered from a poetry affliction at a young age and has never really recovered. She moved around a lot as a child, so is under the false impression that she is good at mimicking accents. She doesn't believe in God, but definitely believes that Father Christmas hates the patriarchy.

## **Sandra Wilson**

Sandra began to take her writing seriously in 2009 whilst at UEL. Since then she has been studying for her Masters in Imaginative Practice. She had her short play *Yellow Balloon* performed at Theatre Royal Stratford East, and collaborated again with them to take her full length play *In Da Mix* to final draft. She has had several articles published.

### ***A Note to the Reader:***

*Some of the contributors to EastLife – both writers and the community members that the stories are about – chose to remain anonymous or adopt pseudonyms, in order to protect the identities of the people depicted within those pieces.*

# Thanks and Acknowledgements

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## **Age UK East London:**

Alya Rashid – Senior Community Development & Outreach Officer

Nurul Chowdhury – Community Outreach Officer

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Sumala Hassan – Community Neighbourhood Senior Officer

Sarah Dodd – Community Neighbourhood Manager

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Thank You.



[www.citylifestories.co.uk](http://www.citylifestories.co.uk)

