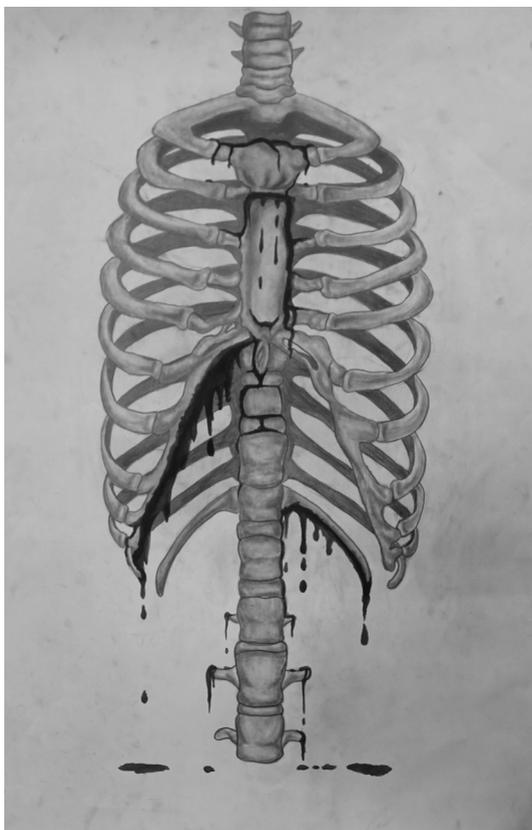


ASCHAM INK



ASCHAM SCHOOL 2011

Edited by Elise Dempster

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THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

1. *Thou shalt not have strange gods before me*

Gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous! Yes, Jonathan is beautiful... so perfect... and the words that slip from his tongue are absolutely divine. His voice is velvet. He sits close to me in church: two pews in front, on the left side. I know it's sinful to fantasise about boys at all, especially during Mass... but I just can't help it! Certainly John must realise the extent of his good looks. Every girl in our town worships the ground he walks upon. We'd do anything to please him, with his piercing blue eyes, soft dark hair and sharp jaw line. Not that he'd ever notice. In fact, I don't believe John has ever had a girlfriend. He's always preferred to stick to himself. Oh how poetic!

2. *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain*

"Goddammit! Jonathan Fowler, what the hell do you think you're doing?" William screeched at his son, yanking him up by his ear.

"Nothing, I wasn't doing anything," said Jonathan, who was only seven, as he attempted to hide his prayer book and stuff his rosary down the back pocket of his jeans.

"Don't you dare lie to me, son!"

"Daddy, please, don't be mad... I just thought... maybe if she knew... we were thinking about her, she might... come back," he reasoned faintly. Jonathan's heart raced as his father's face turned red. He knew all too well what was coming.

"Jesus Christ! She's dead, you idiot. Dead. The last time I checked, no one who has died has ever come back."

"Jesus did," Jonathan said timidly.

"Jonathan! I did not raise you to be a fool. How dare you be so disrespectful to your mother's memory? I prayed for her to stay with me. But that's what they don't teach you in church, prayers make no difference," his father snarled, his hands in fists and shaking violently.

“But Daddy, Miss Hunter read to us today... about a place called purgatory... I thought, that if Mummy is stuck in there... she needs us to pray... to...” But Jonathan was unable to finish his sentence because his father thumped him, turning the skin above his left elbow the colour of a ripe plum.

3. Remember to keep the Sabbath day holy

For as long as I have known young Jonathan, he has come to Mass every Sunday morning. He never fails to listen intently to my sermon or place a few dollars in the collection plate. John always arrives one minute early and slips out after Communion. When he was younger, he asked me a lot of questions, about death and heaven. But now he doesn't speak to anyone. He's smooth and silent, like a ghost.

4. Honour thy father and thy mother

I, Jonathan Fowler, murdered my mother the instant I entered this world. My first breath had come at the price of her last. 'Death by childbirth' all the documents said. It tore my father apart and he was never able to love me properly.

He ruined me; but I hate myself, more than I hate him.

His drinking problem turned him into a violent man. I learnt to cover my blotchy skin discolourations and lie whenever teachers questioned them. I ran laps around the oval, until I felt sick, when my physical education teacher noticed my bruises and punished me for being so clumsy. I deserved the pain.

One night, I decided to end my father's torment and suffering and reunite him with mother dearest. Honestly, I think my parents should thank me. Now they live in eternal bliss, together. Meanwhile, I'm going to hell.

5. Thou shalt not kill

Getting away with it was easy. No one ever suspected me. I left no fingerprints; there were no bloodstains, witnesses or mistakes. I was quick. The blade was sharp. I'm a carpenter, you see, and I always remember to sharpen my blades.

He saw me coming and started to beg for my forgiveness. I tried to explain to him that it was for his own good, that I was ending his suffering, as well as mine. I tried to tell him that I was sorry, for killing my mother. But I don't think he heard me, over all his screams.

6. Thou shalt not commit adultery

I could never love another woman. Martha Dawson was the most beautiful woman in the whole town, and the day she married me was the happiest day of my life. Trying to fall for another woman, well... to me that is just as bad as being unfaithful. No, no, I'll ignore my masculine desires and I shall love Martha for as long as I live. I will never break the promise I made to her the day she walked down the aisle in a crisp, white gown, and told me, in front of everyone, that she loved me. I'll never forget the last thing I said to her, as she screamed louder than little baby John's shrieks – that my love for her would never end.

7. Thou shalt not steal

Dear Reader,

I am the consequence of running across the road without looking and binge drinking and slitting your wrists. I'm the bullet that plummets through your chest and the disease that controls your body. And I stole Martha Dawson, mother of Jonathan Fowler, from this world and into the next. I'm the reason she left her distraught husband, William, helpless. I'm the reason young Jonathan has never known what love is. It's rather interesting, isn't it? You must be thinking that surely everyone has experienced love of some form. But not John. His father ignored his birthdays, never read to him as a

young boy and beat him on a regular basis. He never once showed up to Jonathan's school piano concerts or saw him read at church. John's coping mechanism was silence. He stopped talking. Today, he only ever speaks if it is required of him. But his mind is always whirring. For years, I observed him devise tactics on how best to kill his father. He was determined. It was inspirational, really. You might think that I am cruel, as William, Martha's husband certainly does; but let me assure you, I only ever do what I am told.

Sincerely,
A Thief

8. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour

"What happened John?" Mrs Maloney gasped, as she arrived at my front door. Naturally, the police cars surrounding my house had caused my curious neighbour to undertake her own personal inspection.

"I'm not entirely sure," I began, smoothly. The lies rolled off my tongue easily, out of habit. "My father, he's.... he's..." Tears welled in my ears. I wasn't sad or remorseful, just good at acting.

Mrs Maloney nodded like she understood and embraced me in her soft, flabby arms. My eyes cringed as she shook me gently. This was obviously her idea of comfort. Perhaps it would have been more pleasant if I were not enveloped in her overpowering scent of musty clothes and lavender. No matter, she believed my lies, just like the police had and the judge soon would, and that was all that mattered.

9. *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife*

I wish that Mrs Daldry would marry my Daddy. She's so gentle and her perfume always smells of sweet lavender. And I like how she calls me 'Darling Johnny!'

Last night, I was huddled under my thin blanket and shivering, because the heaters were broken again. I watched the Daldrys dance through my bedroom window. I saw Mr Daldry spin Mrs Daldry around their lounge room. Mrs Daldry looked so happy. I wondered whether Daddy would be able to spin Mrs Daldry like that. I wondered whether he could dance at all. Maybe he could, a long time ago. And for a moment, I imagined Mr and Mrs Daldry dancing in my lounge room, only they weren't Mr and Mrs Daldry... they were Mummy and Daddy.

Mrs Daldry's frilly frock had whirled around her legs like a swirling icecream sundae. I thought that surely if Daddy could dance like Mr Daldry, Mrs Daldry would be happy to be my Mummy.

10. *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's goods*

John is so lucky. His bruises make him look tough, so that no one ever teases him or pushes him around at school. Today I spent my lunchtime with James and the other kids in my year, plunging off the yellow monkey bars, desperately trying to break my arm or get dark bruises just like John's. Maybe then Max would leave me alone. He thinks it's funny to slam his fist into my jaw or ram me up against a wall, demanding money. I can't help but think that if I looked dangerous like John, that he'd be scared of me... just like we're all scared of John.



12TH STREET

Wichita Falls, Texas

‘Beware lest thou lose the substance by grasping at the Shadow.’

Summer’s untiring rays hit each naked surface, each uncovered shoulder, each immodest midriff. It did not scorch but nor did it tease; it was the perfection in between. Each open expanse, be it grass or pavement, bathed in the glow of the lethargic summer. No chink or crack that could inhibit its light was spared. It breathed onto the necks and into the ears of all who had the mind to feel its settling warmth, and all those who didn’t. It basked complaisantly on the roofs of the shops and on the upturned eaves of the mansions on 11th Street.

Around the block was 12th Street, shaded by Mountain Ash trees, the road on which the local junior high school was built. St Peter’s was a prison-like structure, but was undergoing renovations to look more like a place where children went.

“Then Jesus said, we shall all dwell under the tabernacle of God. Those who live under God’s holy tabernacle shall reach the place where we may greet the Archangel Gabriel; Heaven.” Mrs Toomey sighed, closed her Bible and broke into a wide smile. Peter Turret licked his lips and, from the back of the room, flung a paper plane at Simon Mason’s head. Mrs Toomey ignored the disturbance. She paused, waiting for a response from the class about the touching passage.

A small, straw-haired boy raised his hand.

“Yes, Joseph?” Mrs Toomey sang.

“What’s an archangel, Mam?”

“Well Joey, the term refers to an angel of high ranking.”

Joseph nodded his head slowly, earnestly trying to process the ranking order of angels in his head.

“Was Jesus an Angel?” he added softly.

Mrs Toomey's docile air turned swiftly to one of anger. She stared menacingly at the young lad, picking up the Bible and advancing toward him. Joey began to apologise on seeing her terrifying expression of disapproval.

"Sorry Ma'am, I'm sorry." He shook his head, hands outstretched, leaning away from the burly woman.

"Sorry, ain't good 'nough Joey," she growled. "You know, corporal punishment is still legal in this state." With that, she smacked him over the head with her Bible, and Joey screeched as the corner scraped his pale forehead.

Nathan Felton was fourteen years old. He stared out the window, thinking about sex. His eyes were glazed over, his hands holding up his lopsided head, and he hadn't been listening for the past half an hour. Mrs Toomey eyed him down with rage.

"Nathan, what did Joey just ask me?" Nathan's head snapped up, he opened and shut his mouth.

"Ahm, what?"

"Don't be a petulant little worm with me young Nathaniel, tell me what Joey just asked."

Nathan gulped. "Ahm, Ma'am, I was not listening," he admitted. Peter Turret took some deodorant out of his schoolbag and began to spray it whilst holding up a lighter at the same time. He chuckled. Mrs Toomey rolled her eyes and grabbed Joseph and Nathan by the ear. "You boys do not love the Lord."

Joseph and Nathan sat in the principal's office, trembling. The principal sauntered in after a few minutes, giving them a soothing look as he planted his beefy behind upon the chair. His face fell as soon as he was settled. He slammed his hand down on the desk and narrowed his eyes. Joey and Nathan sprang back, wide-eyed and clutching the sides of their seats.

"Do you boys love God?"

Joseph and Nathan nodded fiercely. The principal's fists balled up and

he began to quiver in fury. “How much?” he snarled.

Outside in the corridor, Peter Turret sat on the Year 9 lockers, scrawling over number 42 in red pen.

“Hey, Drew,” he called out to a girl who was passing below him. “I can see your bazoomas from up here!”

The girl squealed and tottered off. Peter snickered and then proceeded to draw a large penis on locker number 43, lying on his belly with his tongue curled up at the edge of his lip. “Best one yet,” he murmured, admiring his artwork.

Then, he picked the lock of number 44 and acquainted himself with its contents. He found an iPod, amongst other worthless things, and scurried off with it, past the principal’s office where Joseph and Nathan still sat.

“Listen boys,” the principal began softly, scowling at Joseph and Nathan. “If you don’t believe in God, you won’t go to Heaven. If you don’t put trust and faith in our Lord and devote yourself to learning his ways whole-heartedly, you will be cursed to damnation forever.” He sat back up, looking as though this was all that needed to be said. “Now, I’m going to give both you boys a notebook in which you will write to the Baby Jesus each night before you go to sleep.”

Nathan and Joseph took their respective notebooks and put their names at the top of them diligently. They then looked back up at the principal, awaiting further instruction.

“Now, it’s 3.30, so you can probably both head off,” he concluded.

“For how long should we write to Baby Jesus, Sir?” Joey peeped.

“Well Joey, you should write about 1000 words, I’d say.” Joey pictured himself on his pillow that night, counting out the words on each page. He felt tired just from the thought.

Peter Turret had skipped all of his subjects that day, save for religion.

“So,” the principal said as he walked out of his office, “what did you learn today in religion, son?”

Peter smiled dutifully. “Well, Daddy, I learnt that we should all live under the tabernacle of God.” The principal smiled. Peter wondered what a tabernacle was.

A small girl with dark, beady eyes approached Peter timidly. Her name was Sara, and she wasn't well off. She wore the same, scuffed shoes every day and it was a known fact that she had to walk on foot to get to school, even though she lived far away. She couldn't afford a bicycle and her parents didn't own a car.

"Payter," she said in a strong accent, "I caint find ma iPod, have you seen it?"

Peter took a step away from her and shrugged.

"No," he replied. Sara turned away. The principal shook his head at her disapprovingly.

"Negligence of the great gifts that the Lord provides us with is simply unforgivable. I'm glad you never lose anythin' Peter. Anyway, let's go home. You know, it's probably a good idea to start going to some of your other classes too. Our dear Lord tells us that the followers of Jesus are better people than those who do not follow Jesus, including in terms of intellect, but I dare say son, going to a math class everyone now n' then'd do ya no harm." He draped his arm over Peter's back and they headed towards the Principal's intrusively large Range Rover.

"I will. I just don't wanna distract myself from thoughts of the Lord's teachings, ya know dad?"

Nathan and Joseph walked down the hallway, keeping a large distance behind the principal, still shaken from their firm talking-to. They relaxed a little as Peter and his father exited the building.

"Hey there boys, I was just wonderin' if either of you had seen an iPod with a green case?" Sara asked them, looking desperate. "I found my locker open and some of my stuff is missing. I think it's been stolen, I do. Sorry to be a bother."

Nathan felt pity for Sara. To steal from her, of all people, was terribly unkind.

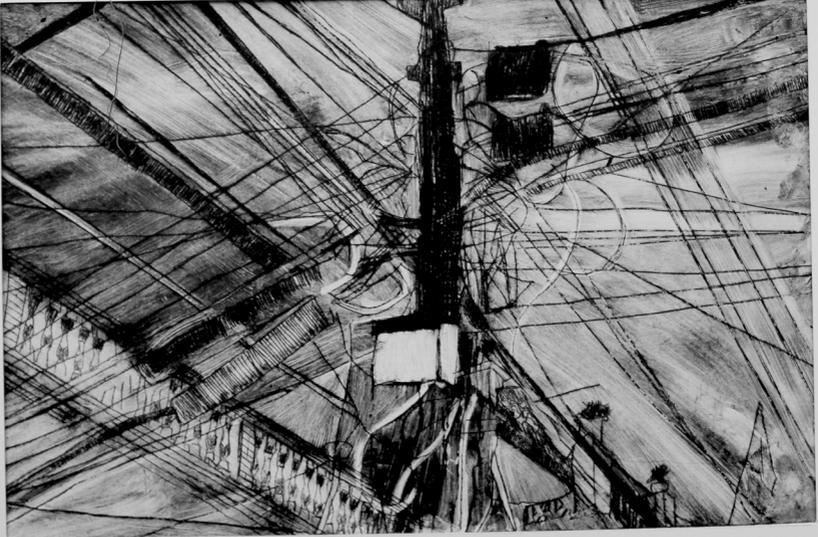
"Here, I don't really use mine, you can have it 'til that mean person who stole it gives it back t'ya. I ain't gonna miss it."

"Gee thanks, you're a real sweetheart," Sara said, smiling. "Keep on the lookout for it, will ya boys?" Joey nodded. Nathan said, "Of course." Sara turned around and winked at Nathan, plugging in his white earphones and skipping off down the hallway.

Joseph sighed. “Well, I guess I’ll seeya tomorrow Nath. I’m headin’ off that-a-way, I’m going to the city for the afternoon with ma parents.”

Nathan nodded. “Alright, well, seeya tomorrow then.”

Nathan hurried out of the building, pulling his bike out of the rack, the last one left. He mounted it quickly and rode out through the gates, off down 12th Street, turning the corner into 11th. The day was still temperate, the sun still lighting up his auburn hair as he cycled home. He looked up at the sky and wondered where God was, and wondered where he’d been and what he’d been doing when Sara’s iPod was stolen. If God loved her so, why hadn’t he been there for her?



LIFE AFTER DEATH

The bullets arch through the air, each one a bloodhound chasing down its target. The air, thick with the stench of blood, is filled with the ear-shattering sound of screaming as men, friend or foe, crawl in the mud towards their deaths. He runs, never fast enough, fighting the urge to collapse to the ground, clasp his hands over his ears and allow his screams to join the cacophony of agony, as souls, black with the tarnish of having killed, flutter upwards toward Heaven, or downwards toward Hell. The explosion that goes off is so close that he is knocked off his feet, but he clings grimly onto life, despite the stabs of pain rippling deep within his body, so deep it seems he shall never be free of them...

Suddenly his eyes opened. The nightmare stopped and another began.

Heaving himself out of bed was a terrible ordeal, dragging his aged body from the bed and gently easing himself into an upright position. Just walking took effort as he shuffled towards the door, clinging to the wall as tightly as his arthritic hands would allow. He avoided looking at his hands, the pale, translucent fingers bulging with blue and green veins. Then he caught sight of her face out of the corner of his eye and for one precious moment, he allowed himself to believe that it truly was her. Then, he registered the wooden frame surrounding her face and the truth hit him in the chest, as cruel and relentless as ever. With fingers that no longer seemed able to be steady, he stroked her cheek, hoping beyond hope that his fingers would meet her soft flesh. Instead, they met nothing but cool glass.

He hobbled over to the mirror. He loathed mirrors and the truth they brought him, but he felt he had to know, if only to remind himself that he was no longer young. His own face revolted him. He had aged, shrivelled and wrinkled as time had whisked his life away. However, he felt a strange detachment from the man in the mirror, as though it were merely a man he had seen from across the street, a stranger whose face would be lost among so many others. Behind him, he saw Susan, frozen in the frame, unaware of the tragedy that would take him away from her, and the greater tragedy that would send her soul to join those slaughtered on the battlefield. How unfair it

seemed that she should be allowed to maintain her youth forevermore while he was forced to wither away in his cage of a body

His heart gave a little jump in his chest, seeming to remind him that it still beat. When it finally ceased, the dark stain upon his soul, the same dark colour of the bloodstains that had covered his victims' chests, would drag him downwards towards eternal suffering. It could not be worse than what he suffered now. Strangely, he did not fear death as he once had, did not grasp at the strings of life which brought him nothing but loneliness and anguish. He forced himself to turn away from his reflection, from the small brown eyes that peered back at him: the eyes of a killer.

He tottered down the stairs, each step so small he barely moved, the monotonous repetition of walking all he could focus on. Reaching the bottom sent a wave of pride through him, pride his actions did not deserve. The room was littered with photographs of Susan and him, his youth and her beauty shining out like the rays from the sun he had not seen for so long. The couch and armchairs were old and tattered, except for Susan's chair. Susan's chair was pristine, one clean object in a room of filth and grime, like a rose emerging from a bed of weeds. The floor was concealed beneath a layer of discarded newspaper, plates he had not washed, debris accumulated over the years. He attempted to turn on the light, but the bulb did not so much as flicker. Nothing worked in this house. He sank into an armchair, now devoid of stuffing and eyed the flecking yellowish paint that had once been white. The doorbell ringing shocked him unpleasantly; his heart was too old to handle surprises. More than anything, he wanted to remain in his seat but he knew that she would continue to ring until he answered. He reluctantly made his way towards the door and fumbled with the handle to let in his neighbour, Mrs Preston.

Mrs Preston was an old woman who tried desperately not to appear so. Her wrinkles were not quite hidden by powder and grey roots peered out from underneath the blonde sheen of her hair. Her mouth was as small and puckered as a prune. She bustled inside, clucking disapprovingly at the mess

as she did everyday. She had a habit of coming by, to keep an eye on him, she claimed, but he suspected she merely wanted to talk to someone who would not interrupt her.

“Come now dear, you ought to give this place a good clean. Whatever are you doing standing up? You should be in a comfortable armchair, with a nice cup of tea.”

He scowled, fighting the urge to tell her to leave. Doing so would have meant talking to her, and he made a point of never speaking in her presence. She assumed he was no longer able. Mrs Preston pulled him towards his wife’s chair and tried to seat him, but he refused, dragging himself to his own chair as she tutted and strode into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. Loud criticisms ensued as she noticed for the hundredth time the dismal appearance of the kettle and he struggled not to listen, looking instead at one of the few clean objects in the room, the urn on the mantelpiece. He had wanted to return it to nature instead of allowing it to wallow morbidly in his house, but he could never bring himself to get rid of it. It disconcerted him that all of their memories, her wild laugh, everything that he loved in her was reduced to that single pot. He looked down at himself, fully aware that everything he had done, all of his dreams and loves and pain would all end up in a pot like that one, which no one would cherish as he treasured Susan’s.

When Mrs Preston returned, two chipped mugs in hand, she followed his gaze to the precious urn, pursing her lips.

“Really, dear, you ought to get rid of that awful thing. It’s terribly morbid to have Susan just lying there. Tell you what, let me...”

Her long nails, like crimson claws, approached the urn, her hand outstretched, ready to take away the last thing he’d ever loved. His voice slipped out from his cracked mouth before he could prevent it.

“No.”

His voice croaked and broke, but the word resonated in the dark room, almost knocking Mrs Preston over in surprise.

“If you’re sure dear,” she said dubiously. “Although I left my Albert safe and sound below the ground, best thing to do if you ask me.”

He settled down to tune out her unimportant words, which glided around him, filling the surly silence. She was a leaf falling in the calm pool of his life, setting off ripples where he wanted no disturbance. Her news reminded him that life had moved on after the war, after Susan, after he had resigned himself to this condemned half-life where he wasn't truly living, but was not yet dead.

After a few moments of contemplation, a strange and unpleasant feeling seized control of him. His head began to spin and nausea welled in his stomach. Shooting pains seemed to be arcing upwards towards his broken heart, but he could not seem to move anymore. Mrs Preston did not notice any difference, continuing to prattle on about the insignificant details of her mundane life. The mug in his hands shattered as he dropped it, shards dancing spectacularly through the air, the dark liquid staining the floor like a bloodstain. A pressure unlike anything he had ever felt pressed down upon his chest as he slumped backwards, unable to control his body. He no longer seemed able to breathe, a choking feeling invading his throat. Hearing Mrs Preston's scream, he wanted to block his ears from the shrill sound, but he could not. But beneath the agony and the pressure, he felt an underlying sense of peace. Was that not what he had always wanted, peace? He had fought for it, begged for it, killed for it. Now, finally, this was his reward. It did not matter whether he went to Heaven or Hell, whether there was a God, whether he would ever see Susan again. He closed his eyes and welcomed the darkness with open arms.



BEWARE

The sky was a bright, uncompromising blue; the sun shone with unwavering brightness. Wisps of cloud dotted the sky, looking as though a painter's brush had lightly swept across the horizon. That was the day she had to bury her husband. Return his bones to the ground that they came from. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. That was the day she had to maintain her composure, hug strangers who gave their condolences, and weep silently. Once she was home, and by herself, she could cry until her eyes swelled with pain, until her sobs could be heard no longer. All she could do was sit there and rock silently, head pounding, and stare into space, her heart aching with a loss that would always be there.

He went to bed complaining of a headache, a pounding pain that tapped at his skull all day and left him clutching his head in agony. She kissed him goodnight, never knowing that she would never again feel the rhythmic beating of her husband's heart. She would hear the doctor's pronouncement the next day, yet she would not listen; the words floated through her body. Even though she closed her eyes and hoped otherwise, the inescapable truth would not go away, as much as she wished on stars and eyelashes and four leaf clovers.

Yet he came alive in the house. She could hear his melodic voice whispering through the hallways, feel his heartbeat in the floors, and smell his sweet cologne as she sat in their room, her eyes concentrated on the striped pillow where he had once laid his soft, wavy hair. She could still feel his arms holding her around her waist, his gentle kisses on her forehead, his breath tickling her as he whispered in her ear. She couldn't believe he had gone. That she would no longer lean her head against his shoulders, or hear his out-of-tune singing as he sang along to the radio. She would never again smell his freshly washed hair, the fruity shampoo filling her nostrils and making her heart ache with tenderness.

How could she do anything but long for her husband, the constant feeling of loss so strong that it overwhelmed her and made her break down? How could she live her life normally, knowing the one person she loved more than

anything would no longer be there? She saw his face everywhere. She saw him in windows, in mirror reflections, in puddles of rainwater. She heard his voice whispering to her as she cooked dinner, as she brushed her hair, as she lay in bed. She could see his reflection in spoons, in glasses, in car doors. He was always on her mind, and she could not let him go. He was her first and only true love. She was solitary, confined by her grief, unable to escape the memory of her husband. He was in the table that they ate at together; he was in the couch, the pillows, and the chairs. He was in everything she did.

He would stare at her as she dined in coffee shops, his lifeless eyes never leaving her face, his impenetrable stare unwavering. He whispered in her ears, words that buzzed around in her head like angry bees, words that stung. He would talk to her until she stood up, until she left the shop, until she placed her hands over her ears and ran. He followed her, never leaving her side, always two steps behind. She saw him in the mirror, his face looking back at her. His eyes, as dark and limitless as the night sky, drilled into her until she looked away. He went to work with her, watching as she typed meaningless information, watching as she photocopied hundreds of papers, the pieces fluttering down. He was there as she ate breakfast, watching as she spread toast and gulped hot tea. She saw him everywhere she went, his constant presence filling her heart with both happiness and loss.

She saw the seasons change; the leaves turn from green to orange to brown, floating down like snowflakes on the soft winter ground. She saw her friends grow older, have children, move away. She saw the years change although her heart did not. She lived in the same house, with the same cushions and blankets and couches. Friends came and went, no longer able to sympathise with her grief. Her family stood by her, yet, in the end, they too could not continue to cope with her unfathomable sorrow.

Eventually, her husband began to fade from spoons and car doors and glasses. She missed his presence at cafes, shops, while she brushed her hair. He no longer followed her around the streets. She waited to hear his voice as she lay in bed, eager for his soft whispers of love. But his image was ever present in the mirror, never ageing, always staring at her with eyes as murky as the deepest oceans.

“Darling.”

She looked up. She saw him at the table, his gaze so strong and powerful, hands twisted at his side. He got up and walked away, and she followed him, her pace quickening. He suddenly stopped as he reached the bathroom, his stare now directed towards the mirror.

“Darling, look.”

She saw her grey hair, lank and tangled from years of neglect. She saw lines, which never before existed, scribbled across her forehead. She saw her own eyes, now dull and lifeless, dead and spiritless.

She finally saw herself.

HOOK, LINE AND FORGET

The thinning of his grey hair is obvious to all except him. He seems almost unaware of his appearance, as if he has slowly given up over the years. He wears what he feels like, what is comfortable to him. The usual attire is a singlet, shorts and white socks that sit much higher than his hiking boots. As he trudges his way from his bed to the bathroom he does not take a second look at his reflection. Instead he quickly brushes his dentures with a pink thin toothbrush, pushes his earpiece into place, turns up the volume to maximum and makes his way to the shed. As usual young, strong rowers offer him help and as usual he rejects them. He is much stronger than many would suspect and even though it may not look like it now he was quite the athlete in his day. Even though he has his father's height he seems to have attained some pudge over the years, but this is far from a concern on his mind. As he heaves the dinghy into the water he grabs his famous fluorescent yellow rod, his packed cooler and with one tug he jets off into the sunrise.

The lake is peaceful during the day. It is inhabited by the local rowers, the occasional swimmers, and of course the fishermen. The fishermen are the kings of the lake. The lake is their realm, and the dinghy is their round table. They each own a section of the water. Day after day they return to their spots, in the hope of catching the fish of the day. Even though they are the kings on the surface, the fish control the water. The fish dictate who is victorious and who is left defeated.

Waking up, going to the shed, setting the dinghy up and driving off has become his ritual. Ever since he retired he has spent most of his days sitting in the dinghy. This was his world, a world that he could control, away from everyone and everything. The ripples of the lake that rock the dinghy up and down comfort him. He finds the repetition and consistency appealing. They allow him to sit back and relax. That is until he gets a tug, and then the games begin.

It is a constant battle between man and fish. Both strong, and both willing to put up a fight.

"Oh, you've got a big one today Hazza," yells a watchful fisherman. He

does not register the comment; this is war, and his focus is on himself and the fish. They follow Newton's Third Law of Motion down to the wire. With every pull from the man there is an equal but opposite pull from the fish. But of course there has to be a winner, slowly one will tire and accept defeat. Today the man is more determined than ever, but it seems the fish is as committed to living. Their duel attracts the eyes of every fisherman on the lake. They gaze at him, watching his every move, critiquing his tactic. Then it snaps. It is all over with one pull. His fluorescent rod is in two. Half is left floating towards the ocean, where the raging waves meet the calm water of the lake. The other half is left stationary and broken in his trembling hands.

Everyone and everything has fallen silent. All staring in disbelief. As he sits there grasping onto what is left of his rod a wave of memories washes over him, launching him deep into the past, a place where no one wants to be. He cannot help but remember the day he received the rod. It was a gift from his wife.

Fishing was always his hobby. Ever since he was a little boy his father used to take him out every weekend. That was men time. Now it was his alone time. His escape. A watch is not an object he believes is necessary. "Watching a clock is a waste of time, and I don't have time to waste," he would always say. So as always he would get lost in the world of fishing and arrive home when the moon was his only source of light. His wife would be silently sleeping on their firm mattress while his dinner sat waiting in the microwave. As months went on and soon became years, his wife grew tired of eating alone. So one birthday he received a fluorescent yellow fishing rod and on the card it read, 'When I begin to glow, it's a sign that it's time to go.' From that birthday on, his rod had become the fishing watch. Every day fishermen would keep an eye out for the glowing rod and when it began to glow they would know it was time to return home to their waiting wives.

But no more. The rod was lost at sea. He would not buy another one; even if he did it would not be the same. It had been a gift from his wife, a link between the two. Every time he jetted off into the lake he took along with

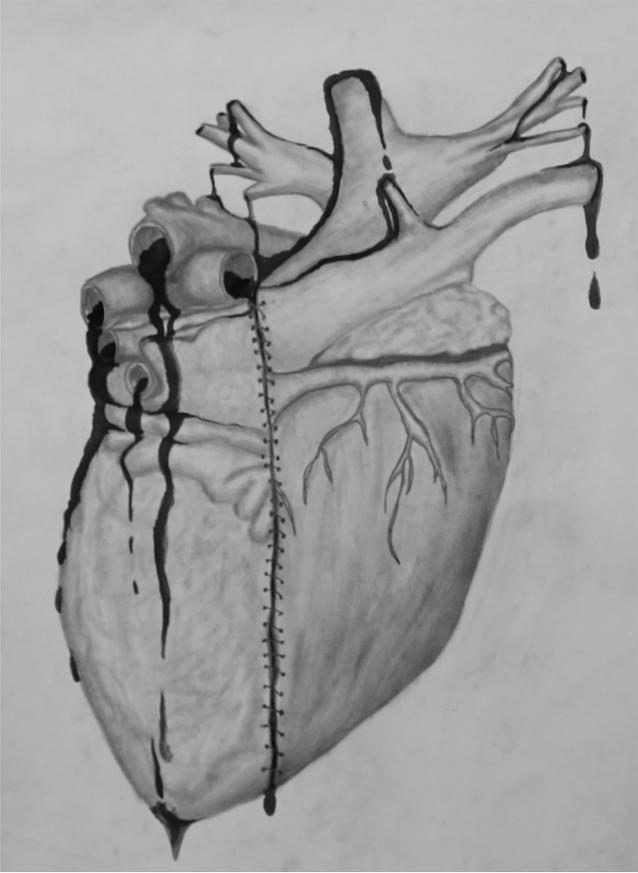
him a piece of her, a reminder. His wife was his love, his whole world. He would have given up anything for her, even if it had come down to fishing.

Before he could grasp for air another wave of memories crashed over him, pushing him further and deeper into the past. He was reminded of what it was he loved about his wife, her charm, her smile and her laugh. He was no good in the kitchen and that's why he married a woman who was. But that night was their night and he was determined to cook. He was the type of man that once he set his mind or heart on something it must be done and he would not give up until it was. That day he did not plan to go fishing; instead he was the king of the kitchen. It would be a slow process, there was no doubt about that, but he could not care less. With his reading glasses placed comfortably on the crescent of his nose and his finger placed in prime position to trail across the page, word by word, he was ready to begin. Throughout the day he had denied her access into his kitchen and even set up a snack table outside so there were no excuses for her to enter. By dinnertime the kitchen was a war zone, sauce splattered on every surface possible and it looked as if a bomb of food had exploded. She did not understand how a simple recipe for spaghetti bolognese could cause such a mess, but the look on his face as he carried out the dishes wiped the concern from her mind and they dug in.

With a launch of the boat, the memories were lost and he was brought back to the surface of reality. His hands were now a peachy colour and he noticed that many fishermen were packing up and preparing to return home to their wives. Without a rod his time there was useless and he too followed the school of men. As he reached land he pulled the boat out of the water. And as always the rowers offered him help; expecting him to say no they were already beginning to walk away, but he did not have the breath so he accepted. There he stood, watching them carry his boat to the shed. He was defeated.

On his way home, he stopped off at the local corner shop and retrieved the ingredients he knew like the backs of his hands. By now spaghetti bolognese was a dish he had mastered. He no longer needed a recipe, it was stamped into his memory, as he had prepared the dish year after

year on their anniversary. While he waited for the water to boil, he set the table. Two candles. Two placemats. Two forks. Two glasses. One plate. He prepared the meal, recounting every step. He made sure he did not mess up, made sure it was perfect. It had to be, had to be perfect for her. As he lowered himself into the chair on his side of the table he stared. Stared at the empty chair, still unable to understand why? Why her? A greater force had caught her and reeled her in and it was yet another battle he had lost. Another thing he could not mend. Then he realised that he was truly alone.



THE PRINCE AND ALL HIS PRINCESSES

Once upon a time (really, I can't remember when) in a land far, far away (how far, I do not know) the classic story of 'handsome prince saves beautiful girl' came to pass. Everyone knows the story of the stunning girl but only I know the true story of the 'handsome' prince. Before I tell the tale of how this crime of infidelity became uncovered, we must start from number one.

Sleeping Beauty: Number One

It was the twenty-first birthday of the most attractive and handsome prince in all the land, if anyone still calls them that. He had tirelessly devoted the first twenty-one years of his life to earning such a title as 'handsome prince' and as a result was self-obsessed and more self-conscious than a thirteen year old in a room full of supermodels. His ego bulging at the edges and a stomach full of mead, he pronounced to all those at his wild, off-the-hook party that he was going to save a beautiful woman in distress.

Days later, he was forced to live up to such a promise or risk losing being the most beloved prince ever. He found one castle where a beautiful princess lived but she had been asleep for a hundred years. The only problem was that the entirety of the castle was completely engulfed in a mass of magical thorny rose bushes that guarded the castle. Being fearless (and a teensy bit dumb) he set out with his most trusted sword to cut through the bushes and save the girl. Too bad that he was almost torn to shreds within the first few steps, but he was not going to go back to the castle defeated. He was a resourceful prince and had many contacts. He made his way to a well that was a magical passage to the evil witch. He and the witch went way back so he simply asked her to remove the enchantment. She did it as she liked the prince and he would turn a blind eye to all of her evil-doings.

You know the rest of that story. The prince loved all the praise and attention

from everybody; they even gave him the nickname of 'Prince Charming'. He wanted to do it again, so he went down the magic well and saw the witch once more.

"Oh please dear witch, can you put an enchantment on another beautiful girl? Oh please," the prince begged the witch.

"I have one girl who you could have, I guess... But what about your wife?" asked the old hag.

"She's so stupid and I'm so bored of her. While you enchant, I'll stay with Uncle Oncle!"

The prince and the witch chatted for hours about how they would plan their next evil scheme.

Cinderella: Number Two

The prince had packed his bags and said his farewells to everyone (even his drip of a wife) as he "Absolutely HAS to go, darling. No darling, they can't just send the king," he had explained to his wife. The cover story was: There was a competition and it was men only and that he HAD to represent the kingdom.

In actuality, he would only be staying with Uncle Oncle for a couple of days before heading to the enchanted castle that the witch had created for him. This castle was tall and high, there was no forest surrounding it but instead green rolling hills. His next girl was Cinderella, a pretty but poor girl who, as you know, was the maid for her evil stepmother (who, might I add, was a good friend of the witch). Their next plan was played out as such: the evil witch would be the 'fairy godmother' and with the help of the stepmother Cinderella would be saved from a horrible life and become the perfect trophy wife. He had decided on her as she seemed to be a little more interesting. You know how it ends; he tirelessly tried to find his love and of course she became his bride.

It was not even one month before the prince had found this new bride was even more tiresome than the last. She would never shut up about how thankful and grateful she was for him taking her away from her evil life, blah blah blah.

Snow White: Number Eight

This finding of new princesses went on for quite some time. He now had seven wives, one of whom used to be a mermaid. For one, he even persuaded the witch to turn him into a beast-lookalike for some sympathy. But this next companion was different. She was awfully smart; she knew of this prince and his adventures. He did not know what was ahead of him.

It started the same way; the prince returned to the witch for another try at finding his 'perfect sweetheart,' whom I must add, would be his eighth.

"This wife is boring, dull and drab. I want a princess with personality!" he complained to the witch.

"May I remind you, young prince, that you do have multiple wives already. Plus it has only been a mere day since your last marriage."

"I do not care, I need a change. What young maidens do you have for me today?" So the witch went through her large book of contacts and found one she thought would be ideal.

"She has a wonderful personality and is extremely attractive. You will love her. Her name is Snow White. My elder sister sent her into the woods about a month ago, actually, just for being too beautiful and I know you will like that. She lives in a cottage with seven dwarfs who all adore her."

The witch failed to explain that this lady was not as air-headed as the others. But, the very next day, the prince set off to find his next beloved princess. He ventured into the woods to find this Snow White. When he arrived she was asleep. He was told that she had been poisoned. The prince leant over and kissed Snow White, and as we all know, she awoke. The official story claims that they lived happily ever after, but no one knows the actual happenings. Snow White questioned the prince as to his true identity, as any smart girl would before they got married.

"So, 'Prince Charming' is your title. If you are really him, aren't you married to Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Belle, Ariel, I could go on? Many people are married to this 'prince'."

"No, no, no," replied the prince nervously. "That is not me."

Snow White was an intelligent girl. She had organised for all these princesses to be brought to the woods as soon as the prince awoke her.

Snow White showed the princesses the prince and that he had been the same one all along. The princesses were devastated and could not believe that their darling husband had been deceiving them!

The princesses revolted. They warned every lady in the country against this manipulative prince.

The prince was distressed as he was now hated by the whole nation. He had only one person to turn to and that was the witch.

The Witch: Number Nine

When the prince was but a little star unto the night's sky, he was a-wandering around the palace gardens, throwing rocks at birds and stomping on ants' nests when he came across a magical well. Being a curious young bugger, he jumped down the well where he was saved by the witch. From then on he often visited the witch and they became friends. As he grew older and more stunning, the witch began to like him, a lot. She had a big crush on him but didn't want to freak him out or ruin their friendship. Her time, at last, was now.

He went down the well to talk with the witch and drown his sorrows in some wine when the witch spoke out of their awkward silence.

"Ummm, you could stay here for a bit longer... if you want to..."

"Uhhh sure, but you're a little ugly... no offence..."

"How about now?" said the witch as she waved her magic wand and transformed into a vision of beauty.

She knew all of the traits he despised and all of the qualities he loved. She was perfect for him and together they lived happily ever after.

THE END

THE SUBSTANCE AND THE SHADOW

The screams echoed in my ears long after they had ceased. The high pitched sound, piercing like mosquitoes at night, bored into my brain until I thought my head would split. I shook my head like a rabid dog, but to no avail, I could not rid myself of the tormented cries.

“Are you with us sir?” The voice broke through the screams, bringing with it an empty relief. Despite the simplicity of the question, I found myself turning to the philosophy classes that I had attended as a young man. Was I really here? Was this world only a precursor for that to come?

“Mr Lewis!” the voice said a little more forcefully.

I opened my eyes, not realising that they were ever closed. I felt the retinas in my eyes adjust to the focus of my glasses, growing clearer and clearer to reveal two rather stockily built men watching me with the beady eyes of magpies, attentive and dark, boring into my innermost thoughts, trying to find the information that would help feed their already overgrown egos. I peered over the rim of my glasses, refusing to be intimidated by the two men who had kept me for the better part of three hours in a room that could very well have been a sauna.

I shifted a little, desperately wanting to slide myself onto the floor, when I noticed that my shirt was stuck to the back of the chair. My sweat from the wretched heat had acted as glue and had pasted me in place on the chair, in the most uncomfortable position too. The table in front of me appeared to wobble. Shit, I thought. I’m going to die from an earthquake in this room with a pair of goons who are only focused on getting me to confess something I didn’t do.

I guiltily glanced at the men wondering if they could read my thoughts, and if they were just as worried as I was about dying here. I looked back at the table and noticed that it was bolted down, as were the three chairs around the table.

It couldn't have moved then, I thought. No... I was sure it had moved. I shook my head; no it wasn't possible for it to have moved. I noticed the goons were still intently eyeing me, waiting for an answer.

"You've had my attention for long enough," I said, almost exasperated. "Do you have any more questions or may I go now?"

"Sir," began the bald one that seemed to me to be part gorilla part fountain, sweat pouring from his head and down his face like someone in a shower. "For someone who is adamant that they did not kill their wife, you appear very complacent about her death."

"I am not complacent, merely here at this present time trying to clear my name as a suspect." I thoughtfully added a few tears, not because I wasn't innocent, but it felt like one of those times when tears were necessary.

"Okay, we only have a few questions more, to make sure that we understand your story completely, then you need to sign a legal document stating that what you have said today is true, and then you may leave." The word leave bounced out to me, and without taking notice of what they had said I nodded vigorously, anxious to be gone.

"Where were you at five o'clock on Monday?"

"I was in the house, in the kitchen cooking when I heard her scream."

"And what did you do after you heard her scream?"

I sighed and closed my eyes, the darkness welcoming as I revisited the haunting day.

"I had been cooking in our rather spacious kitchen, chopping up vegetables into tiny pieces when I heard the scream. She had been out on the porch, working on a tan that we both knew she didn't need. I ran through the already open door. I tripped on the step leading outside and crumpled on the floor. When I came to I was next to my wife, blood covering her chest, her eyes glazed over, looking towards a God she never really believed in. A knife was next to her, right next to her left arm. I tried to see if I could feel a pulse. I picked up the knife and threw it aside and then I called the police right away."

"The knife was near her left arm?"

I frowned, as a light in my head flickered. The memories played in flashes. The half chopped vegetables, the sound of her scream, the door, my hand

holding the knife. My eyes flew open momentarily. I furrowed my forehead intently.

“The knife had never been in my hand,” I whispered.

“Sir?”

I jumped as the men leant closer to hear what I was muttering to myself.

“Nothing, nothing.”

I closed my eyes again, concentrating really hard. I didn’t do it, I thought, I didn’t do it. Sure enough the reassuring pictures of the knife on her left side rushed up to greet me.

“Yes, the knife was near her left arm,” I replied, trying to hide the tremors that I felt rise in my throat.

“And other than throwing the knife aside when you came to, you had no contact with the weapon in question?”

Once again unwelcoming flashes of memories flooded like a tsunami all at once, wiping out my thoughts. The vegetables, her scream, the door, her face, the knife in my hand... then black.

Her face was new to my set of memories of that day. I tried to recall if that was from another memory, but I could not remember ever seeing her face contorted as it had been then. What was curious was the knife moving in my memories, and I felt confused. I had loved my wife, there was no reason I would ever want to kill her, or so the police told me. I was sure that I had been faithful. She had no money, and she had always loved me more than I knew I deserved.

The table wobbled again. I was starting to think that maybe the bolts were merely part of the look that the architect had been going for. The table was clearly not bolted down, and yet when the man had held out his hand to stop himself from falling upon entering the room the table had not moved an inch. I was being silly; the table was not moving, of course not.

“You had no contact with the weapon in question beforehand?” The question was posed again.

I hadn’t handled the knife, I thought. Of course not, she had screamed for help and I had gone with a crow bar to rescue her. I had never handled

a knife before. I wondered if I would even be any good at handling a knife.

“No, I have never before handled a weapon like the knife.” Saying the statement out loud felt good. I almost allowed myself a smile... almost. I sounded so sure of what I was saying, it sounded so true when I said it aloud.

The tallest of the men, almost like an elongated giraffe, let out a sigh of disappointment.

“Okay, those are all the questions, just sign the document and you are free to go.” He pushed over an A4 piece of paper and a black pen. I warily eyed the desk, daring it to move when I was so close to leaving the wretched place.

I picked up the pen and grumbled with frustration, fumbling with the pen as I tried to get a proper grip. I'd never been able to hold anything properly, always being a klutz and dropping things.

Like an opening flood gate an overwhelming surge of thoughts and memories crashed into every part of my mind. I groaned as my brain experienced sharp pains.

I had been cutting vegetables with a black knife. I heard her scream. Wanting to help her as quickly as I could, I took the knife to ward off what was scaring her. Running through the open door, I tripped over the step... and there it was... the missing piece that I had hidden from myself the whole time. I had fallen onto her, knife in hand as it plunged into her heart. I had never meant for it to happen, but my own clumsiness had allowed for the accident to still take place.

“No,” I whispered. I never had a knife, I thought furiously, fighting the thoughts back behind the gates. I would never harm her. I had been knocked unconscious. Scenarios played in my mind.

“I did not kill her,” I whispered.

“Yes, yes we know,” the men replied, almost in unison. “You just have to sign the document and you can be off.”

They seemed so sure of themselves... so sure of me; they believed I didn't kill her. I relied on my instinct as I had since her death. I bent over and picked up the pen. I looked blankly at the document, and then, my body on auto-control, I signed the document in big curly letters, so slowly I was sure that another half hour or so had passed.

“You may leave now, and good luck with finding the person who killed your wife,” Giraffe said, shuffling the papers into a pile and shoving them in a manila folder.

“I didn’t do it,” I whispered and with that reassurance I pushed the memory away, stood up and thanked the officers. I opened the door and heard them talking as I left.

“It sure is cold in here,” one said.

“We should ask for the heater to be fixed,” replied the other.



PEOPLE IN GLASS HOUSES SHOULDN'T THROW STONES

Naomi had a desperate desire. She knew that what she wanted was completely off-limits and yet she could not resist her curiosity. If Jack discovered her, his anger would be uncontrollable. The office beckoned her slyly, forcing her to inch closer and closer, day by day. At one point, Naomi had even gone so far as to place her hand on the doorknob, her fingers caressing it. However, a shield of fear and retribution stopped her. Naomi's conscience was stronger than she cared to admit. But she could fight it. She would. The time would come when Naomi would discover why her husband spent so much time in this room. She would step over that threshold. And she waited in anticipation for that day to come. Even when Jack was home, Naomi's mind was consumed by the mysterious contents of his lair. She hid her obsession from Jack and she was certain he had no idea.

But she was wrong. Jack knew just how much she thought about the room. Though of course he kept this from her. He had already hypothesised as to the reasons for her obsession. He thought it might be that her educational and intellectual insecurities had never left her. Naomi craved the stimulation of the words that used to be her playthings but had become her oppressors. They echoed in a marble tomb. He remembered how she used to gush and gurgle at the sight of a book. This was how Jack explained Naomi's desires and how he justified his refusal to meet them. He thought such curiosity was worrying because it hinted at the uncontrollable. Her curiosity was like a siren whose music would lure Naomi to the hidden and jagged rocks.

That is perhaps why he locked himself in his office every night. Locked himself in and locked her out. Sometimes in the darkness of the night Naomi would smell his cigarettes. The smell wafted up to her, teased her and dared her to descend into the forbidden. Naomi would hear the scratch of

a feverish pen and the sound of a ladder squeak as Jack's fingers crawled over the shelves looking for the right textbook. He wanted knowledge just as desperately as she did.

At times like this Naomi's eyes would flutter to Sue's house out of habit. From the highest level of her house she could look down into the bedroom where Sue's child lay sleeping. Its stomach rising and falling to the rhythm of its mother's gentle patting. Naomi noticed that like its mother, the child had blonde hair. The light reflected in it and gave the child a bright glow. A halo above his head.

Naomi allowed her eyes to relax, drawing herself away from the family portrait. Instead she looked at her own reflection in the mirror-like surface of the glass. She stared masochistically at herself, wishing that she too radiated a mother's light. She had extinguished that light years ago. And Naomi wasn't sure if she deserved for it to be relit.

Sue's eyes looked only into those of her baby's – she was completely oblivious of Naomi's jealous stare. Naomi knew this emptiness was her own fault. She was the one who had suppressed her desires. And now all she could feel was the drowning weight of regret. She allowed this weight to rock her against the glass until her forehead was drawn magnetically to it and she found herself balancing only on her toes. She looked down onto the baby as though Sue weren't there. Naomi hummed a sweet lullaby that only the moonshine could hear as its reflections danced across the walls.

* * * * *

When Jack came home from work the next day, Naomi was lying in bed. He kissed her on her forehead, a subconscious reward for the beauty over which she had no control. His innocent departure from the room triggered a reaction. Naomi's eyes snapped open and she stared at the ceiling. Blank though her look appeared, her mind was active. Naomi's thoughts spilled over one another. She noticed a moth trapped in the fluorescent light fitting. Its burnt and broken wings dragged across the glass. Naomi warned it to stay away, to enjoy its freedom, warned it to avoid this ghost house. Naomi tried to prevent that moth from making the same mistakes she had.

As if from nowhere, the anger rose inside of her. Her face contorted with

dissatisfaction and she felt the desire to smash crockery. Although she didn't have the strength to smash, Naomi had the strength to scream. She wanted to shatter this suffocating silence. Naomi ran down the stairs, her feet slapping the tiles, hitting their cold white faces. She decided she would no longer be on the wrong side of the door. It was time to beat the quizmaster at his own game. Bluebeard could not keep her out of his dungeon any longer.

Naomi burst into the dining room, where Jack was seated. His large hands were peeling off a whisky bottle's label, stripping away the paper until only the glass remained. His face had barely registered shock at her abrupt interruption. Eventually his eyes softened and gently gave her permission to speak. Naomi demanded that Jack let her into his office. Jack made her wait for his answer and then gave an excuse that you'll agree was pathetic.

"You don't want to go down there. It's full of my textbooks," he said. She struggled to remain polite, angered though she was at the implication that she couldn't or didn't read. She majored in English for Christ's sakes!

"So I'll never see the place in which you spend the majority of your time?" she questioned.

"It's not a big deal, Nay. Anyway my office has hideous yellow wallpaper - you wouldn't like it," Jack said, getting up and tickling her hip. He sensed her sudden inability to speak.

He continued to drone on with endless words. I won't bother you with them but the ones that stood out were 'trust', 'husband' and 'love'. None of which Naomi particularly cared for at that point in time.

"You shouldn't try and control your husband, should you? It is my room, where I work. I don't see why you need to worry your silly little head with such things."

Naomi could not believe his audacity.

"So how come you're allowed to control your wife?"

Naomi felt Jack coil as if about to strike. His muscles froze and tension drifted off him in waves.

"You shouldn't have said that, Naomi. That was a mistake."

"Well, you know..."

And then Jack said something that he shouldn't have. He called Naomi crazy. And if there was one word that Naomi couldn't stand it was the 'c' word. It reminded her of all the things she wanted to forget. But Jack was the psychologist. And she wanted to know his diagnosis.

"Am I crazy?" Naomi asked. She waited for an answer.

It never came.

Jack walked downstairs to his den. The sound of wood smacking against more wood echoed through the house. His knowledge was closed to her. Naomi would have saved herself some time if she had stormed after Jack. She would have caught a glimpse of the room's hidden contents. Instead she stayed where she was, steaming with anger, filled with worry.

* * * * *

Naomi glared at her reflection in the shine of the table that had been their first purchase for the house. Her finger traced the interconnected rings left by past perspiring coffee mugs. The rings were endless, like the number of times she and Jack had sat around it talking to each other. And the number of times she had reminded him to use a coaster. Her eyes flicked to her watch and followed the larger hand passing over the numbers – a clear indicator of his tardiness, his failure to be home at the agreed-upon time. Naomi fiddled with her ring, metal against flesh. Steering it around her finger, pausing only for the sound of his key in the door, metal against metal.

Jack stepped over the threshold. Arms and smile spread wide.

"No Jack. It's not all better." Naomi hated the way he would always pretend that everything was alright when it clearly wasn't. Naomi was not all better. In fact, she felt much worse. Her fight with Jack had left them both burnt and betrayed. She knew that Jack felt as though he were the hero, trying to protect her. But Naomi did not agree. She felt increasingly locked in the glass cell he had built for her.

"I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you," she continued.

He sat down across from her. "Stop bringing it up, Naomi. I've already told you that wasn't my fault." Jack ensured there was no room for that particular memory, that ghost child, to sit with them at the table.

“So it was all my fault then. You think I’m keeping myself here?”

“I’m trying to look after you. Do you not feel safe? Don’t I provide for you?”

It was a fairly misguided idea on Jack’s part to think that the answer to any of these questions was yes. Perhaps he would come to realise this. I’m sure you’ve already realised it too.

Naomi moved to the other side of the kitchen, barricading herself behind the countertop. She continued, “I don’t care that you think I’m sick. I want to look after someone for once. I know I didn’t before but now I do. I’ve changed.”

Another child; Jack turned it over in his mind. The first child had died before even having the chance to fully form into a human being. Could Naomi be trusted? Who was to say that this child wouldn’t end up like the last one? Disgust’s bitter taste had risen up into Jack’s palate as it had once before. He struggled not to spit it out. Jack knew it would stain the white tiles.

“You didn’t before, now you do. Make a decision, Naomi. You can’t keep changing your mind.”

She felt her foot retract and slam itself loudly against the floor. Jack struggled not to point out the irony of her petulance. He didn’t want to be too much of a bastard.

“Is it your failure to become the next Jane Austen that has spurred this sudden interest in a family?” Sometimes he failed on the bastard front.

“Stop bringing it up, Jack. An unfinished degree doesn’t make me a failure.”

“You can’t even look after yourself. That’s why I have to,” he continued.

It was clear that Jack didn’t want children for this very reason. He already had someone to treat like a child. Naomi was baby-like in her stubborn refusal to be satisfied. He had given her all the toys she could possibly need – a big house and a loving husband. So Jack came to the only possible conclusion he could fathom – she was just selfish.

“Look, I can’t trust you. I can’t even go into your office.”

“You lost my trust when you started acting this way. Closed in. You played dead.”

“But you are killing me, Jack. Just like you killed our child.” This wasn’t exactly a truthful representation of what had happened. To be fair, Jack had

not been given any choice in the matter. Naomi had simply removed the son he had never had.

Jack's only response was to thrust his finger threateningly into her pale face. Naomi laughed. A laugh that rattled her and left her hunched over. She reminded Jack of the witches in fairytales he would have read to his child. This sight disturbed Jack. He had always been the villain in his personal fairytales. And he liked it that way.

"You pushed me further and further away and now our son is dead."

Jack's fingers snaked around her arms, shaking her. He tried to silence the accusations. "Dead dead dead dead dead dead." She clattered the broken pots and pans. The sounds echoed loudly around them. He couldn't block out the sound of her voice. It penetrated through his barricaded mind. Had Naomi lost her senses? He shook her again and again. Violently trying to prevent the unwanted words from escaping her lips. He stopped, and held her close to his face.

Anger distorted her face.

"He was my child too," he whispered in her ear.

Jack slammed his open palms against the glass window in front of him. It shook with a deafening vibration. It was so strong, a shiver passed through Jack himself. He sighed. Naomi looked away. Both were resigned to the bitterness they felt. Darkness hung over the sun like a blanket as shadows tiptoed into the house. Holding hands, the shadows danced on the countertop. The smoky wisps of their memories hung heavy in the air. It was these memories that Jack and Naomi had buried like mines after forgotten wars. But mines explode.



A MOTHER

Her eyes.

Slits of black just visible underneath lowered eyelids. They sliced through me, serrating my flesh like a kitchen peeler to an onion, shredding away my layers one by one. I could sense Her presence to my right, the oppressive weight of Her silence bending down and forcing itself upon me as I continued to gaze at the door. Such a beautiful door.

I knew it well.

Its resolute stance.

Its defiant shackles.

Shimmering with the hazy tint of glossy lacquer, it stood stanch before me. Small metal studs protruded from the earthly ochres of yew wood, their carved tips angled towards my body as if mimicking pointed fingers, raising shrieks of alarm and protest at my presence. I felt my mind chill, then numb, as I willed them, so reminiscent of the medieval fifteenth century to disappear from my twenty-first century life, for the door itself to dematerialise in a silent shroud of mist, to bring me the uncertain chill of the night, the pale shadow from the moon, numb in the sky.

My breath came short from underneath tight fabric, and my feet were cold inside the warmth of heels. Between the door and my being lay a long, narrow corridor, penetrated by darkness.

My palms throbbed, and my spine climbed my back.

I knew my father, his words. They shouted in me and threw themselves down inside me.

What in God's name do you think you are wearing, young lady? Where the hell do you think you're going on this fine night? Do I need to remind you that it is the Sabbath?

A scream shrieked within me, and yet, somehow, I remained still. Rooted to the ground where I stood, gazing at the door, and at Her eyes.

Her disapproving stare.

Thou shalt keep the Sabbath holy. My jaw ached as the statement

reverberated inside me till the voice was like a hammer.

“You can’t make me!” my mind screamed at her passive, wilted figure. “I see right through you!”

Agonised thoughts pinned me down, leaving me grovelling on the ground, desperately growling at Her figure. My quivering eyes flew to the mahogany mantelpiece, upon which a pair of white dress-up wings rested, sedate.

“Is it because you were never allowed relief? Never granted wings, even after all those years of graceful servitude to Him. Why? Were you too modest for them? Or did you just not want them, did you think you could somehow be with Him, be like Him, by modesty?”

And yet, even as my lips stammered silently with these thoughts, I felt my throat strangled, as if crushed by the vice of terror.

Scratch, scratch.

The air swayed and shivered around me, carrying with it the noises of the house.

The clinking of keys and the silent creak of a door handle.

The soft whispers along the wooden floorboards with each step along a shrouded room.

I felt myself pulled down by some immeasurable force as I turned my head to the dim darkness behind me, feeling my joints creak with each twist of my neck. The shadows of the hall captured me. The creaking floorboards underneath my weight gave me away. I sent my eyes ahead of me, scissoring up the winding staircase, creeping through doors slightly ajar.

I shivered at my solitude.

Alone, the words came to me again.

In clothes like that anyone would think you came from a brothel. What would your mother say?

My nails dug into the soft flesh of my palms as an acrid taste gathered its way into my mouth.

Fitfully glancing to my right, I caught sight of Her pale, delicate clothing,

the veil delicately covering Her hair like the hijab, worn by so many Muslim friends. Flowing lines of material carefully draped her body, sealing away any open flesh.

Thou shalt not engage in premarital intercourse.

I felt something inside me shift then, and a crow, somewhere behind the door, lurched into its repulsive song.

Because I knew.

I knew that I touched myself.

And then, at that precise point in time, I felt moments begin to twist and curl. I stood there, feeling Her lift her pupils to gaze at me, at the truth of me, to shred apart the moment. It fell, slowly, in pieces around the floor, eerily reflecting light off the dark, looming, claustrophobic walls. Off in the distance, I could hear the traffic of the swollen city.

Far away from this, from me, from the house.

Somewhere behind that door.

I could feel Her eyes, scrutinising me now, judging. My stomach clenched as a breath ransacked my lungs. There was nothing else I could say.

The pieces on the floor were left there. I wished to forget them, to walk away.

The shame.

If my father knew.

It was the words and the pieces, and Her and me.

And my father, waiting in the house. Underneath the darkness of the spiralling staircase, in the corner of a dimly lit room, behind doors which crept open slowly underneath one's touch.

Silent howls ransacked my guts. And I understood.

The door.

I ignored the scream of my mind as my legs, as if held to the earth by the mighty hands of God himself, dragged their way forward, closer to the bulging metal studs.

I could see my fingers before me, ghostly white and trailing like tendrils, as I reached for the brass handle.

It glowed, illuminating and warm against the darkness surrounding it. I suppressed a choke as I willed my arm to stretch further, my fingers to close around the cold, hard metal.

No.

My motion was gruesomely severed by the word.

My arm drew back. I couldn't go.

Ba doom.

Ba doom.

Silence and fear fed on my mouth as I listened to the distorted rhythm, penetrating throughout body and bones, a sound so similar to the menace found in approaching footsteps. The hair on the back of my neck prickled and I jolted my body around. As my back was crushed against the door, I could feel the studs furrow deep into my spine, and it was only then that I realised the chill that had fallen upon the house.

Darkness stretched out before me, yet still my skin prickled with the knowledge of being watched. As my eyes jolted from corner to corner of the house, I became aware that my hand had fixed itself around the cool brass handle once more.

Swallowing, I forcefully suppressed a cough as saliva met the dry scratchiness of my throat. I stood, trembling, attempting to gain control of myself.

A minute passed.

Then another came and went, and another. Time grated itself deep through my thoughts.

I waited, my teeth set as my fingers clamped upon the hard, unwelcoming metal.

My gaze pivoted, and I saw Her. I saw Her eyes, no longer regarding the infantile Jesus in Her arms, but staring.

Straight at me.

She looked.

She looked victorious.

My heart clenched as I felt blood, searing as resentment, churn through

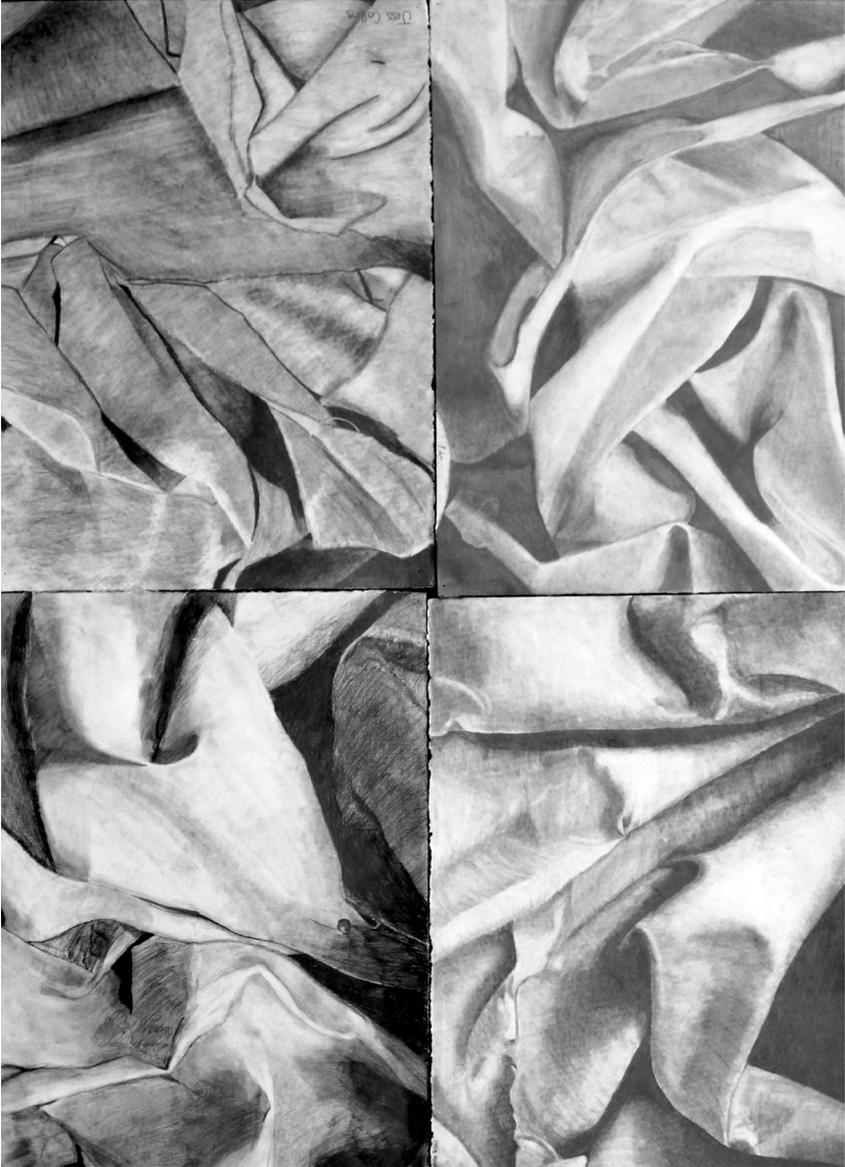
my ears. Struggling through the warning shrieks oppressing my gut, I grunted with the effort as I spat. Spat out the acrid feeling in my mouth, spat out my hate, spat out the words.

“Stuff you.”

The handle gave way underneath my hand, and, as I swung open the door, my father’s barbaric howls and lurching momentum in his pursuit were fleetingly lost, carried away in the peals of thunder and rushing gust of wind that enveloped me.

UNTITLED

Swaying high above on trembling wires,
Unable to reach the gaping gutter,
Where a single shoe huddles in a pool of brown.
Others are abandoned in the town,
The drowned boots squatting in the rising mud,
Torn silk heels strewn about the dimmed alley
And defeated tips just rising from the dirt,
No longer hoping to be clawed free.



ARTWORK: UNFINISHED

Artwork 1

Name: Break-through

Oil on Canvas

Size: 1 metre x 1 metre

With different shades of blue, a pleasant complement to its intense central splatter of red, this truly magnificent masterpiece is one of the best the NSW Art Gallery has seen in many years. Samantha Heartley is described by many as a 'break-through' artist. With the striking long and even strokes of bright and bold colour, and the unforgettable colour combinations, she creates vivid and precise work. Heartley has defied expectations and we hope that we will once again receive something of such high standard.

Swollen ankles, weary eyes, and an aching back – all the signs that something is growing inside you. Samantha Heartley levers herself out of bed, reaches for her glasses and rests them on the bridge of her nose. The legs are stretched and the back arched, as she stumbles towards the mirror. Streamers of golden sunlight peer through the Venetian blinds, while the gentle breeze blows her shoulder-length hair behind her. Outside, the branches and leaves rustle with a sudden gust of wind, while a blanket of fog rests in the air, embracing all that is in its environment. She faces the mirror side-on, admiring the enormity of her stomach while she brushes her calloused hand against it. She pauses for a second, savouring the moment. She feels her stretched, chestnut-coloured skin, as her stomach rises and falls. She feels like a child on her birthday, eager to discover what magnificent present is hiding inside the wrapping. She smiles, excited to know that soon enough, she will be able to embrace the surprise hiding inside.

Artwork 2

Name: Life

Oil on Canvas

Size: 1 metre x 2 metres

In contrast to Samantha Heartley's first set of artworks, this artwork is truly one of a kind. Heartley's second work is a mixture of different hues of brown and blue, creating a striking combination. When one first views the artwork, it seems to be a blur of colours, however if one looks for a longer time, they can almost imagine a face, standing out from the array of colours. This second artwork should definitely be added into Heartley's collection of masterpieces.

3 am. Cries penetrate the hospital ward. They have been going on for an hour. Samantha's husband clutches onto his wife's hands, not knowing what to do. She cries again. But soon not her cry is heard, but another. It is a baby's cry. Samantha breathes a sigh of relief, lying in the bed. Her husband peers over her shoulder as she holds the baby tenderly and gently rocks it in her arms. She turns to her husband, eyes sparkling with her tears of joy.

"We're a family," she says.

"Yes, we are," her husband replies.

Artwork 3

Name: Contrasts

Oil on Canvas

Size: 0.8 metres x 1 metre

This artwork is Heartley's best yet. It shows her extensive ability to create stark contrasts, with the red, although there is only a speck, penetrating the black background, creating a mesmerising effect. Many reporters have asked her what her artworks are about, but she always refuses to answer with the whole art community striving for her source of inspiration to create such powerful artworks.

Up and down, up and down. The brush flows with uneven lines of colour while she feels the ridges of the wooden brush, as it is pressed deeper into the canvas. By the time she has finished the artwork, it is late afternoon. The clouds have closed in, obscuring the sunlight as thunder rumbles. She takes a deep breath, smelling the fresh sea air and flops onto the once thickly padded chair, while throwing the overused paintbrush into the bin. Her arms rest on the armrests, while her bare feet lie stretched in front of her, embedded with ridges from the woven straw mat.

She sits alone. She has no friends, no family. She is solitary.

She looks to the table near the easel. Ripples form in the murky water, disturbed by the wind off the sea while paint brushes lie in it, like reeds in a swamp, all still and stiff. Buckets of paints rest on the ground, their sides covered with spillage. She listens to the swell of waves crashing onto the sand, a sweet lullaby, while the continual pitter-patter of rain harmonises with it. She swivels her chair towards the table, resting her elbows on the desk. Piles of sketches lay messily stacked on it while marks from pencils and paint adorn it, an artwork itself. Ahead, on the white-framed window, blotches of grime are splattered on the glass. She imagines her exuberant child, as he runs joyously to his father without a care in the world. He could be ten years old now, but she is unsure. She has lost track of time. His cropped brown hair blows in the sea wind while his father hoists him with one arm onto his

broad shoulders, both of them drenched in the rain. His father piggybacks him into the water, while the spray of the wild sea engulfs them. For a while, they are submerged in the water. She can't see them. All she sees is the waves crashing onto the shore and the rain blurring her vision. She watches expectantly and waits for them to resurface. But they never do.

Artwork 4

Name: Nothing... for now

Oil on Canvas

Size: 3 metres x 3 metres

Quite similar to her third artwork, this piece is simple yet effective. The constant monochrome palette suggests a feeling of blandness and simplicity, and also suggests a deeper meaning. When one views it, they seem to be entering into another realm, another dimension. The sheer size of it often overwhelms viewers, creating an intimidating shadow.

Heartley lies in bed, asleep, solitary. Her body may be with us, however, she is really somewhere else. Where she is, the sun shines every minute of the day and schools of fish swim in the lukewarm tropical waters, while palm trees sway with the summer breeze. At the beach, she sees her cheerful son, who is ten years old today, running joyously to his father without a care in the world. Sunlight illuminates his chestnut skin. His cropped brown hair blows in the sea wind while his father hoists him onto his broad shoulders. His father piggybacks him into the water, while the spray of the wild sea engulfs them. They are submerged in the water. They surface from the water, hair plastered to their heads, bodies gleaming with the reflection of sunlight on the droplets of water on their skin. Her son is laughing, mouth open, body shaking with joy while her husband walks away from the water. He smiles to her. She smiles

back. She turns her head to the sun, blinding her eyes. However, something strange engulfs the light. Her vision is blurry. Her heartbeats quicken. Her stance is unsteady. She finds this strange, very strange.

Heartley is still lying in bed, asleep. She stirs, moving her legs while curling into a ball, head touching knees. Her chest rises – oxygen is inhaled. Her chest falls – carbon dioxide is exhaled. The brain sends the body messages, helping it stay alive while the heart beats, giving it life.

But eventually nature takes its course.

Eventually, oxygen isn't inhaled. Eventually, carbon dioxide is not exhaled. Eventually, the brain does not send the body messages to help it stay alive. Eventually, the heart does not beat, to give it life. Because all that is left now, is a body, cold, stiff and solitary.



SAMSON

‘Beware lest you lose the substance by grasping at the shadow.’ – Aesop

He had been there since Charlie could remember, a constant phantom presence wavering quietly behind him. It was not that he came uninvited; it was simply that he never left, always leering over his shoulder as he read or tugging on his sleeve if his jumper got caught on a nail.

Samson. His name was Samson. And he was Charlie’s friend.

They set out a plate for him at dinner every night, four instead of the more pragmatic three. The cold, empty shine of the china was reflected in the weary eyes of his parents, but Charlie saw none of it. His friend ate in silence, simply because he was hungry.

“Can you pass the salt please, Mum? Samson needs it.” His mother handed him the saltshaker with a sigh. His father cleared his throat.

“Charlie,” he fixed his beady eyes on his son, who was keenly salting the empty dish at the other end of the table. “I saw an advertisement for a job today.”

“I thought you already had a job.”

“I do, Charlie.” The older man rubbed at his temples therapeutically. “I meant that I saw a job for you.” Charlie’s fork clattered to the table and his mother winced.

“Dad, I’m not old enough for a job, I told you this.”

“It’s just a little part-time thing; I think it’s time you started taking on some responsibilities, son.” Out of the corner of his eye, Charlie saw Samson shake his head decidedly and he did the same, standing up to leave the room. “Charles, sit down. Where are you going?”

“No.”

Charlie stared at his ceiling, trying to find people in the stucco lumps. There was an astronaut right above him and a star nearer the door. He wondered whether the astronaut was looking at the star too.

“Samson, do you think the astronaut is looking at that star?”

Samson shrugged beside him on the bed, his shoulder brushing Charlie's.

"Yeah, I don't know either."

A pause. The pair found more characters in the ceiling.

"I'm not sure if I'd want to be an astronaut, you know. It would be nice wearing the suit but to actually have to go to space and – and – and do things..." Charlie trailed off. Samson nodded slowly.

"I suppose you wouldn't really be an astronaut then, would you? You'd just be a man in a space suit." Charlie waited for his friend's nod but Samson didn't reply. The astronaut peered down at him from the ceiling with pity in his gaze. Charlie rolled over onto his side and closed his eyes, sleep quick to smother him.

Most arguments started at dinner, but the biggest argument started at breakfast. Breakfast was Charlie's favourite meal of the day.

"Charliedarling!" The way his mother called him always sounded like one word; it was Charliedarling or Charlielove or Charliesweetie. Sometimes Charlie thought she was calling someone else.

"Yeah Mum?" He yelled from upstairs.

"It's breakfast time, come on."

"But Samson's still asleep!"

There was a loud exhale of breath and then a pattering of feet back to the kitchen. Charlie came bounding down the stairs moments after, his stomach betraying his resolve to wait for his friend.

"It's ok, Samson can eat later," he muttered as he entered the kitchen and grabbed a plate of toast, dropping into a chair. His mother eyed her son over the table as if looking at a particularly confusing crossword clue. His father had already left for work.

"Darling," her hushed voice bounced eerily off the linoleum tiles. "When is this Samson nonsense going to stop?"

"What?"

"You know what I'm talking about. The little games and the – and the talking to yourself and –"

"I'm not talking to myself Mum! I'm talking to Samson!"

"Charlie, stop it." There was warning there, she was about to lose her temper.

“No, Mum, you stop it!”

“Charlie!”

“I’m just a kid, I’m not –”

“Charlie!” His mother was yelling now, really yelling, the veins shining from her forehead.

“And you think you’re so big because you’re an adult and –” Charlie choked as he shouted back in a strangled whine.

“Stop!”

“But I’m not an adult, I’m little Charlie, I’m just little, I’m –”

“Charlie, stop!”

“No, you stop!” His vision blurring with salt tears, Charlie grabbed his plate and hurled it at the floor. The explosion of sound rendered the pair silent. Shards of china skittered to their feet and Charlie let his tears fall onto his Spiderman pyjama top.

The silence hung heavy between the mother and son. They both looked at their laps.

“Charlie,” his mother breathed, so quiet she could have been talking to herself. “You’re twenty-seven.”

Her son looked at her, the slap of recognition clear on his face.

“I know.”

He loped up the stairs, back hunched and eyes low. His plate still lay smashed on the floor. His mother stared dumbly at it as she lit up a cigarette.

“Samson?” The man called to his empty bedroom, voice suddenly huskier than he could ever remember it being. “Samson?” He tried again, opening a few cupboards as he did so. Emptiness poured out of each one. He pressed his fingers to his skull and an eerie keening sound reverberated around the room. It took the man a moment to realise that the sound had emerged from him. He ripped the blanket from his bed as angry tears began to fight their way from his eyes. With a snarl, he snatched two handfuls of books from the shelf and threw them at the wall. His mother did not stir from the kitchen.

After this show, he collapsed onto his back, emitting a wounded howl. Tears blotted his vision as he tried to make patterns in the ceiling. He could not see the spaceman, only ugly beige lumps of stucco.



VICIOUS CYCLE

Deborah is six years old. Deborah is six years old and she is small, and her pale brown eyes seem too large for her face as she peers at her new mother. Her old mother, wicked mother, 'too-high-to-look-after-herself-let-alone-a-child' mother, has not visited her for two months. Deborah doesn't miss her, exactly, but she is glad to have a new mother, an adult besides the social workers who gaze at her sadly and call her a 'troubled child', a 'needy child', a 'special case'. New Mother is beautiful, with dainty, soft features and a motherly disposition when she coos, "May I call you Debby? Debby, you're going to love our home. You'll have two siblings to play with and lots of yummy food!"

* * * * *

Cuckoos may be any bird of the genus Cuculidae, although the word is most widely used in reference to the Common Cuckoo. The Common Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) measures at thirty-two to thirty-four centimetres when fully grown, has a slender body type, and is of grey colouration. It may often be mistaken for a falcon.

It is important to note that the Common Cuckoo is a brood parasite, and as such does not rear its own children, but rather lays their eggs in the nests of other birds, which unwittingly raise the foreign chick as their own.

* * * * *

Within five minutes of meeting her siblings, Deborah has punched Sister Lana on the arm and bitten Brother Sam's fingers. New Mother sees this and sits her in the corner, facing the wall, for a minute.

Deborah never hurts them in front of New Mother again. After a rough start, New Mother is completely enamoured with the girl.

Lana is evicted from her room, to make way for Deborah. She is moved into Sam's room, and she scowls when Deborah lies in her bed and nestles into her duvet. Sam says nothing about the matter, merely cradling his sore hand in the other.

* * * * *

Once the egg of the Common Cuckoo has hatched, it begins to systematically destroy the host bird's own eggs (either by consuming or heaving the eggs out of the nest), thusly eliminating competition for food and attention from the parents. Now, whilst one might think the host bird would notice if their clutch of eggs was gone, replaced by a singular chick, such is the evolutionary finesse of the cuckoo that it grows large enough to encompass the size of several host chicks, and makes enough noise that the mother bird is convinced there is a brood growing in her nest.

* * * * *

Lana and Sam watch as Deborah takes her place on the stage and a book is placed in her elegant hands. She is Valedictorian, and has won a scholarship to Princeton. She is much taller than they are now, and as she towers over the podium Mother beams, tears of pride streaming down her care-worn face. As Deborah makes her speech, they smile too. She will be gone from the house soon, living on-campus. They are loathe to keep her.

* * * * *

The cuckoo will leave the nest around three weeks after hatching, and by this time is often more than three times the size of the host parent. Whilst it is at this age the cuckoo is ready to live independently, it will not be ready to mate itself until it reaches sexual maturity at three hundred and sixty-five days old.

* * * * *

Deborah is twenty-nine years old. Deborah is twenty-nine years old and she is lovely in a cinereous suit that flatters her slim figure. Her fingernails are varnished a clear white and taper off to smooth tips that barely do any damage as they push into Lana's bony wrist.

"Lana, I know we've never been the closest of siblings, but please, someone needs to look after Piper while I'm in Japan."

Lana has no children, Lana cannot have children, and she decides that the little girl, with her large, pale brown eyes peering up hopefully at her, is rather a darling. Shaking away Deborah's vice-like grip, she holds her arms

out, her tawny brown jumper sleeves hold the child to her breast, and her pale hair falls around Piper's full face. The child almost immediately takes to her, relaxing in her embrace and turning her innocent gaze back to her Old Mother.

"I'll take her in, Deb, but only while you're away." Her mind is made up. The poor child could probably use a less strict maternal figure for a few months. Besides, she and Christopher had room, and a child would certainly make the house seem less empty.

"Of course, of course. Thank you so much, Lana, this is a real help. I'll make sure to call in a few days after I've reached the hotel."

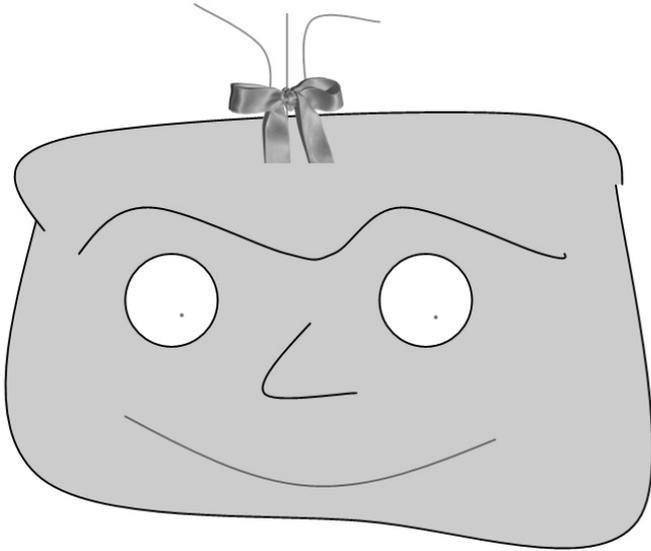
As Lana goes to make them afternoon tea, worrying as to whether Piper would prefer milk or juice with her biscuits, she misses the knowing smirk shared between mother and daughter, almost eerie in its similarity.

* * * * *

With the cuckoo laying its own egg, the cycle of hosting will continue. If the bird remains in the same territory as it was raised, its host parent may be subject to raising a second changeling in place of their own chicks, or, if the host parent managed to successfully raise its own young, they may become a host parent themselves.

GIANT GELLA AND THE THREE GIANT BEARS

Once upon a time there was an ugly misunderstood girl giant named Gella. Her name meant 'the one with golden hair'. She did have golden hair but she looked like this...



One day at Giant School, Gella was sitting all alone under the tallest tree in the playground eating her jumbo sized quarter pounder meal. She was dreaming of finally finding a place to fit in when suddenly the meanest and tallest bully in the land came and ripped one of her precious four hairs out of her head. After being bullied at Giant School she ran away, deep into the woods. She ran for days and days.

Meanwhile, in the woods there was a family of bears. The three bears were on their way out for a stroll just before lunch.

Gella, out of breath and dying of hunger, stumbled upon a ramshackle hut. She was so hungry, being a giant, that she ducked through the door and went in. Normally she wouldn't even think about this because she was a gentle giant but her stomach was screaming at her to eat something.

When she entered the hut she saw a small bowl of soup: a medium bowl of soup and a big bowl of soup. She was so happy. Finally she had something to eat. She went to the big bowl and cautiously had a sip. It was way too hot! But she gobbled it down anyway. She then had a sip of the medium bowl. It was too cold! But she gobbled it down anyway. She then approached the little bowl and had a little sip. It was perfect! She gobbled it down and even licked the bowl.

Gella was full. She wanted a rest. She walked further into the house and found three massage chairs with foot spas: a big one, a medium one, and a little one. Very enthusiastically she jumped on the big one. She slid her feet into the foot bath. She yelped. The water was way too hot. She took her feet out and hobbled to the medium massaging chair. She turned on the massage and put her feet in. The water was too cold. She then went to the little chair. The little chair was a tad squishy but she put her feet in anyway and turned on the massage. This massaging chair was perfect. She enjoyed a lovely full back massage when... CRACK! The chair split in half. She fell right through the middle.

Gella was feeling sleepy. She stomped up the stairs and into the bedroom. She was still in her sweaty school uniform and didn't want to sleep in it. She saw three wardrobes: a big one, a medium one and a small one. She opened the big one first. Gella tried on the big pyjamas but the top came down to her knees. It was a little too big. She then went to the small wardrobe. She tried on the pyjamas. She liked the material of these pyjamas but they were too small. She ripped the seams when she lifted her arms. She then went to the middle sized wardrobe and opened the doors. There were so many pyjamas to choose from. Such a variety! So Gella chose the fluffy pink ones with white polka dots. There were even matching slippers! She loved these pyjamas and hurriedly put them on.

Gella was ready to sleep, so she plodded over to the beds. There were three beds: a big one, a medium one and a small one. She lifted the covers of the big bed and climbed in. It was way too hard, which made her back start to ache. So she hopped out and jumped into the medium sized bed. It was way too soft, which made her bottom sink far down into the mattress. She kicked away the covers and went to the little bed. It was just right; she pulled the covers over her head and fell straight asleep.

The owners of the house, Daddy Bear, Mummy Bear and Bubby Bear came home from their family stroll. The door was already open; they suspected that something was wrong. The three bears lumbered in. They went over to their table to have some soup. Mummy Bear had made some before they left but now it was all gone. It was gone from the big bowl, the medium bowl and the little bowl. Bubby Bear was seriously annoyed. Bubby Bear wanted soup and Bubby Bear wanted it now. Daddy Bear told Bubby Bear to suck it up and be a bear.

The family of bears moved over to the living room. To find their massage chairs had been sat on. Bubby Bear screamed. He saw his much loved little chair had been smashed. Bubby Bear began to cry. Mummy Bear told her little darling to calm down. She could always buy him another one on eBay later.

The bears headed upstairs. They walked into the bedroom to find the wardrobes had been ransacked. Bubby Bear squealed. His favourite pyjamas had been destroyed. This was the last straw for Bubby Bear. Bubby Bear threw his shoe in frustration. The shoe made its way to the opposite wall with a thud which made the bears turn around.

There they found an ugly girl with only three hairs sleeping on Bubby Bear's bed. Bubby Bear broke down. Daddy Bear told Bubby Bear to zip it. Mummy Bear gently woke up the sleeping giant. Gella woke up and found three pairs of curious bear eyes staring at her. Gella explained her story over a cup of tea. Mummy Bear suddenly stopped her. Mummy Bear asked Gella that if she was a giant, then how could she fit into their house? Gella had an epiphany.

"If I'm a giant that means you must be giant bears!" she exclaimed. Gella was ecstatic! She had always felt left out and different but now she felt like

she belonged. She never realised that there could be other people or animals who were just as big as her. Even after being severely bullied, Gella was actually very friendly.

So the bears decided that Gella would stay with them instead of going back to Giant School.

The bear family bought Gella a regular sized bowl, a regular sized massage chair, a regular sized wardrobe and a regular sized bed. She went to school with Bubby Bear and made lots of new friends. Finally, after searching for a place to fit in, Gella had found it with the bears.

Gella and the bears lived giantly ever after.

HANDPRINTS

I'm holding my breath. It's swelling up inside me and I don't understand how the air can keep multiplying in my lungs when I have a hand clamped firmly over my nose. On the left of me, Alec's face is going blue from the effort and his eyes widen every second like swelling marbles. He catches me looking, raising my eyebrows, and pulls a monkey face. In my effort to keep my mouth closed, I end up snorting in laughter, and all the air packed inside my chest follows. The sound is so absurd that we end up in hysterics, rocking forward on crossed legs.

After a second, Alec abandons the contest and starts laughing as well. I have a feeling that he's probably laughing at our over-reaction. Maybe it wasn't really that funny, but we've all been sitting in the sun since lunch time, and there's a lot of left-over giggles in each of us. I have to calm down, though, because my stomach hurts and I'm beginning to feel sweetly dizzy, but the minute I do my eyelids want to drift shut and I have to lean my head on Charlotte's shoulder. She rests hers on top of mine and lets out a jovial sigh.

None of us speak for several seconds; the silence pours into the gulf surrounding us. Thinking that Charlotte had her eyes closed, because she'd be staring at Alec otherwise, I glance up from the shredded foliage in my hands. Behind his head, I can just make out the roof of his house, hanging over his right shoulder. Then his face comes into focus, and he's mesmerised by something behind our heads; his eyes glazed over. I give him a mocking half-smile, just as he realises that I've spotted him. He doesn't return the expression, but meets my eyes instead. I feel the back of my mind melting.

I turn my phone over in my hand. Even though it's been lying in the sun with us, it seems cold on my skin. Drawing it up to my face in the afternoon glare, I check the time.

"It's almost six." I astonish myself. Hugging Charlotte with one arm as I rise, I wave goodbye to Alec.

"See you tomorrow!" She calls as I begin to wander off.

"Or come out later tonight," Alec adds, rising stiffly. I return his hug weakly,

and clamber over the hedge into my backyard.

With strawberries and soda still swimming on my tongue, I crunch softly over the crumbling leaves that dance across our lawn after the sun goes down. I can still feel Alec's handprint on my back. Charlotte jogs up behind me, and jumps with her hands on my shoulders. I yelp, and we both stumble across the grass.

"Did you just do sprints when I looked away?" she asks. "You sound like you're out of breath."

"It's like when someone tells you to blink," I say. "It's all you can focus on, but whatever you do, blinking still seems weird." I pause. "Only, it's with trying to breathe normally after holding my breath for so long," I add, when she squints at me curiously.

"Thirty seconds?" Her tone could make toast.

"Thirty three," I reply, and shove her playfully with my shoulder. She splutters in mock indignation, and I spring up the low steps at the back of my house. Turning to wave, at the top, I catch her eye just as she slips back into her own garden.

* * * * *

We're sprawled over each other, Charlotte and I. Without shoes, you couldn't tell which feet belong to whom, but her nails are painted blue today. I never wear nail polish; it just peels off. She's getting me to do some multiple choice quiz from the back of a magazine. The pages are crinkled in spots where her spun straw hair dripped on it before we sat down.

We both jump when Alec lays a river-soaked hand on Charlotte's shoulder. "What are you guys doing?" He dries his hair like a dog. Several gritty drops hit my shoulders.

"Charlotte's telling me where I'll meet my boyfriend," I enlighten him.

"But we're almost done," she adds. "Just one more question, but she's still considering the answer." She offers him one of her headphones and closes the pages momentarily to flick through her music.

I don't answer the last question, just to see how long it will take her to realise. She's too busy listening to some song with Alec. I roll my shoulders and pull my elbows off the grass. Parched stripes cling to the red imprints on the skin of my forearms as I lean backwards. Plugging in my own headphones, I close my eyes and let the sun melt me into the ground. Like a lizard.

* * * * *

I can still smell fire in my hair, on our clothes. Ashes flutter to the ground as we walk, and the road feels smooth beneath our bare feet. I'm watching as my toes hit the tarmac, singing softly, out of tune. Across the street, other clusters wander to nowhere in particular, subtly staring at the three of us as we holler lyrics to random songs.

I know suddenly that the night isn't black or even blue. It's green; deep, dark green. For some reason, I smile, and I feel like mango sorbet or lemonade. Charlotte grabs my hand, tears me away from my reverie. We skip ahead, still screaming badly, twirling, tripping, and spinning. Our singing has turned to squawking; we hold our faces close belting out unintelligible words and holding back our mirth until the chorus ends. Alec's laughing. He smiles slightly at me, as we wait for him to catch up. Charlotte and I exhale almost in unison and unfurl our fingers, making space for Alec in the centre of our little line.

That's how I imagine I'd like it to end, if I was the director. The three of us would amble down the road; caught eternally in this instant, like pictures of the afternoon or sunrise. For a few seconds nobody speaks. I wonder briefly if they are considering the same possibility as I am, if they can taste the dark green wind as well. I think I feel Alec humming beside me, as his arm gently bumps mine, and I let petals tumble in my mind, bursting in my body as they fall. In my movie, I run away; caught in the future once again.



A LOST APOLOGY

The hum and thrum of the bustling London streets was lost in the secluded encirclement of towering trees where a lone man stood, enclosed. The sky was a crystalline blue, and the sun dappled trees waved their arms ever so benignly. A warm breeze swept playfully past, tugging at his hair, quite like the way Gordon used to when they were children. Gregory stood quietly. The exquisite flowers had long since lost their splendour. They lay on the cold, smooth surface of the stone in a state of disarray, the edges of the petals wilted, the once-vibrant colours faded. Limp, broken, dead.

* * * * *

It was drawing close to the death of winter but not quite yet the birth of spring when Gordon and I were brought forth to the world, one right after the other, but by fate's warped sense of humour, the first one born was to be normal and healthy while the latter was to be anything but so. Since childhood, Gordon had been fragile and sickly, plagued with numerous diseases and what was more, even at the age of five, he could not talk.

* * * * *

Faces loomed overhead. Mouths bared. Lips twisted into a grotesque sneer.

"Hey! It's the freak. Why are you shaking? Are you scared? You stupid mute!" As one, the vultures converged onto their cowering prey, shredding him with their harsh tongues. Gordon flung an arm out weakly, as though that matchstick of his could protect him. Among the mocking faces, there was one whose features Gordon knew well. A word resonated in his brain but it was lost before it reached his lips. A sudden break in the mass of bodies threw that face into sharp relief. His lips held the same derisive sneer but for a brief moment, his eyes betrayed his emotions. Holding his gaze, the word finally managed to burst forth from Gordon, "brother!"

* * * * *

The arrival of summer brought with it the blistering heat, any remnants of the harsh winter was gone. The garden flowers were blooming and their welcoming scent wafted into our house, soft yet enticing. The change that had occurred in Gordon was evident. He was now a healthy but extraordinary eight year old boy. After overcoming his communication barrier, a boundless amount of energy and curiosity that could never be completely sated was unleashed from within him. He also had an abundance of what I like to call 'pure optimism', believing in the impossible. He was an eccentric boy.

* * * * *

The gleam of luminescent teeth. A heavy brow furrowed in concentration. Head thrown back. Eyes squeezed shut. Arms dramatically flung out as though on the verge of taking flight. Gregory watched, feeling the familiar tendrils of anticipation and fascination tugging on him as his brother prepared to descend from his 'throne of glory' in a most bizarre fashion; by cartwheeling down the gentle incline whereas most children would choose to slide down. Half torn between disapproval of his brother's ridiculous stunt and a desire to see the outcomes of it, Gregory allowed this spectacle to proceed. However, an unwilling bubble of mirth escaped from Gregory's lips which gradually crescendoed into peals of hysterical laughter as he saw his brother slip comically on the slide and sprawl onto the ground in a tangle of limbs and clothes, a look of transparent bewilderment evident on his face.

* * * * *

The return of autumn had arrived all too quickly. It snapped at summer's tail, forcing her to flee. The garden floor was stained with rotting, rusty-brown maple leaves, the apples, swollen with ripeness hung onerously from the tree's sagging branches. The oppressive, misty, wet-moss air hung heavily, spiced with the strong pungent smell of the beginnings of decay.

* * * * *

Meaningless conversation. The luminous glow of burnished silverware, the occasional flash of expensive jewellery. Men, dressed in expensive tailor cut suits and in the midst of them, a short man dressed absurdly. Mindless penguins, crowding around a peacock.

“Your brother, he’s quite an odd fellow isn’t he?”

“You mean to say that that oddity over there is your brother?”

Even at the age of 58, Gordon dressed extravagantly. At present, he was wearing a flamboyantly tailored pin-striped suit that revealed a floral, fluorescent coloured shirt which was stretched tightly across the seams, threatening to burst open. Around what little of his neck was visible hung a tie, patterned with roses that came in a multitude of different colours that clashed horribly with his pinstriped suit. In addition to this queer outfit was an ill-fitting bowler hat of deep velvet, adorned with one luxurious feather that came from Mr Mingtin, his pet peacock. It was also a habit of his to wear sneakers along with his suits. Nothing he wore ever flattered his rotund and stout figure but it certainly grabbed the attention of the bystanders as he bounced through the streets. Around his eyes were finely etched lines that were constantly crinkled with mirth and matched his twinkling, amused eyes. Sitting on top of his potato-like head was an untidy mop of brown hair with silver strands of thread woven between them; the only unforgiving sign of old age.

* * * * *

Gregory was sitting alone. He closed his eyes, allowing the waves of nostalgia to wash over him. Probing his thoughts deeper, Gregory was ashamed to find that even after all those years, he was still embarrassed by his bizarre brother. How long ago was it when he flew into a fit of frustration at his own brother and called him ‘crazy’ to which Gordon had replied in that infuriatingly knowing voice of his, “The greatest men who walked the Earth were often crazy and you can never have greatness without a measure of eccentricity.” This line of thought brought him to a deeper sense of remorse. By refusing to acknowledge that he had a brother like him, he had severed all ties and had not seen him since. It was time to make amends.

* * * * *

Snow started to fall, like angels in their pale white tresses and pale translucent skin. They announced the arrival of winter. The chill of the morning air still lingered although it was nearly noon, enveloping the surroundings in its frosty veil. The intoxicating yet crisp scent of pine needles mingled with the soft powdery scent of fresh snow. The clouds were draped across the dreary, sullen sky, obscuring the sun, reducing its warmth and glow into a mere silvery orb, quite like its twin brother, the moon. It cast an ethereal glow on the snow shrouded world. Trees clad in their white uniforms bowed their heads in submission to the tyranny of winter. Silence prevailed, except for the occasional thump as the branches released their load of snow.

* * * * *

Gregory came to an abrupt halt in front of a set of iron wrought gates that at first glance seemed imperious, but upon close inspection one would notice the intricate pattern of what looked like bananas, pineapples and intertwining asparagus carved with the minutest detail. Gregory extended a slender hand, hesitating. Then he gently pushed and the gate immediately sprang back, arms opened wide, embracing an old acquaintance. The immense manor loomed ahead. Overtime, ivy had crept along the archways, twining around, in a desperate race to reach the top, until it slowly managed to envelope each pillar, strangling it with its deadly grip. The manor's orange colour reflected the sunset of a distant, exotic island instead of the bleak monochromatic affair that took place in London every afternoon. Reaching for the brass knocker on the polished mahogany door, Gregory knocked. There was a brief silence, then the door slowly opened, revealing a portly woman in a maid's uniform.

"Hello, is my brother Gordon –"

"He's dead. You must be Gregory. He died a few weeks ago but you were on a business trip." The maid eyed him reproachfully, as though he was the cause of his brother's death.

* * * * *

The man standing at the grave was gripped by silent tremors. Salty tears carved a path down his face as his whole body shook with grief. A single thought reverberated through his mind: he was too late.



WELCOME HOME, SUNSHINE

John stood outside on the deserted street. It was nearly midnight, and the cold, driving rain felt as though it was biting into his soul. He shivered, and pushed up his umbrella, cradling it, waiting for his car.

Sonya woke up to find the sunlight streaming in from the cracks in her straw roof. She spent a few seconds rubbing her eyes, before realising – she must be late. Sonya grabbed the woven, multi-coloured bag slung over the hook by her door and ran, fleeing through the fields, across the dirt road, through more fields again and in one great leap over the muddy ditch and into the schoolyard. She ran and grabbed a seat next to her best friend, Ikjot, seconds before the bell rang.

“Well done!” Ikjot whispered. “I thought you weren’t going to make it.”

“Neither did I!” replied Sonya. “Guess I got lucky, right?”

John waited, the water seeping through the holes in his umbrella and trickling down his nose, jumping with excitement every time he heard the screech of a car, the patter of footsteps or saw the bright, blurry light of headlamps in the distance. He had almost given up when a car turned down the lane and accelerated, before pulling up next to him with an ear-piercing screech.

“Get in,” a voice from inside the car commanded. John obliged.

Sunlight burst through the windows of Sonya’s tiny rural classroom. Small children sat at the front and chattered away happily in Punjabi, whereas Ikjot and Sonya preferred to stick to their English. After all, they both knew – the better their English at the end of this year, the more likely they were to get jobs in the city. Sonya knew Ikjot longed to escape the country and its

monotonous routines, but coming from such a small patch of land herself – with no father to support her or her mother – Sonya had to admit it was the prospect of a secure income which attracted her most. Sonya had often wondered what had become of her father, but around the time she turned ten she'd decided it didn't matter. She had her mother, her goat and her patch of land, and that's all she needed in life, she thought.

John looked around from the warmth of the front seat to the driver – a balding man in his mid-40s. Rather non-descript, John thought privately. Still, it was nice of him to offer to take me to the airport so late at night – or rather, early in the morning. I mustn't judge so easily. And, heaven knows, I shall have enough to worry about soon enough, not least this trip alone costing me my wages for two years.

Sonya sat under a tree, playing with her woven bracelet. Ikjot sat to her right, gossiping and giggling about the boys from the farm by the river. Sonya didn't understand how Ikjot could fail to see the inconsistencies in her life plan – she wanted to marry the eldest of the boys-from-the-farm-by-the-river, yet she also wanted to escape the country way of life by moving and working in the city. Privately, Sonya thought a marriage was most likely. Ikjot's father was rather well respected, and his brother – John, Sonya thought his name was – had won a scholarship to go to university in New Delhi, and from there, an exchange to somewhere in England. England! Sonya could hardly convince herself there was somewhere so far away. Ikjot had told her it was always wet there, and that her father had promised one day Uncle John – Chacha John as he was known – would come home and see them all. Ikjot had had a card come from him once. Her father had gone into the city, to visit a market, and had brought it back. Sonya had seen it, and was fascinated by the bright reds and blues lying amongst a blanket of grey. However, the baby had come near it and nearly torn a corner off, so Ikjot had locked it in the wooden box next to her mat ever since.

“Welcome to New Delhi, where the local time is 10:22 am. The temperature outside is approximately 22°C. We hope you had a...” John barely listened as the announcer’s voice waffled through the cabin, preferring to sit on the very edge of his seat and stare at the seatbelt sign, willing it to turn off faster, so he could leap up out of his seat and grab his hand luggage. He hadn’t seen his brother in three years, and wasn’t about to waste a second of his precious time with him. He burst through customs and immigration, and tripped rather spectacularly over his own feet, to arrive panting, in a confused heap, on the Arrivals floor.

Ikjot’s father ran across to his brother and pulled him up and into a giant bear hug. John hugged him back, before disentangling himself and picking up his suitcase.

“Where’s Ikjot?” he asked.

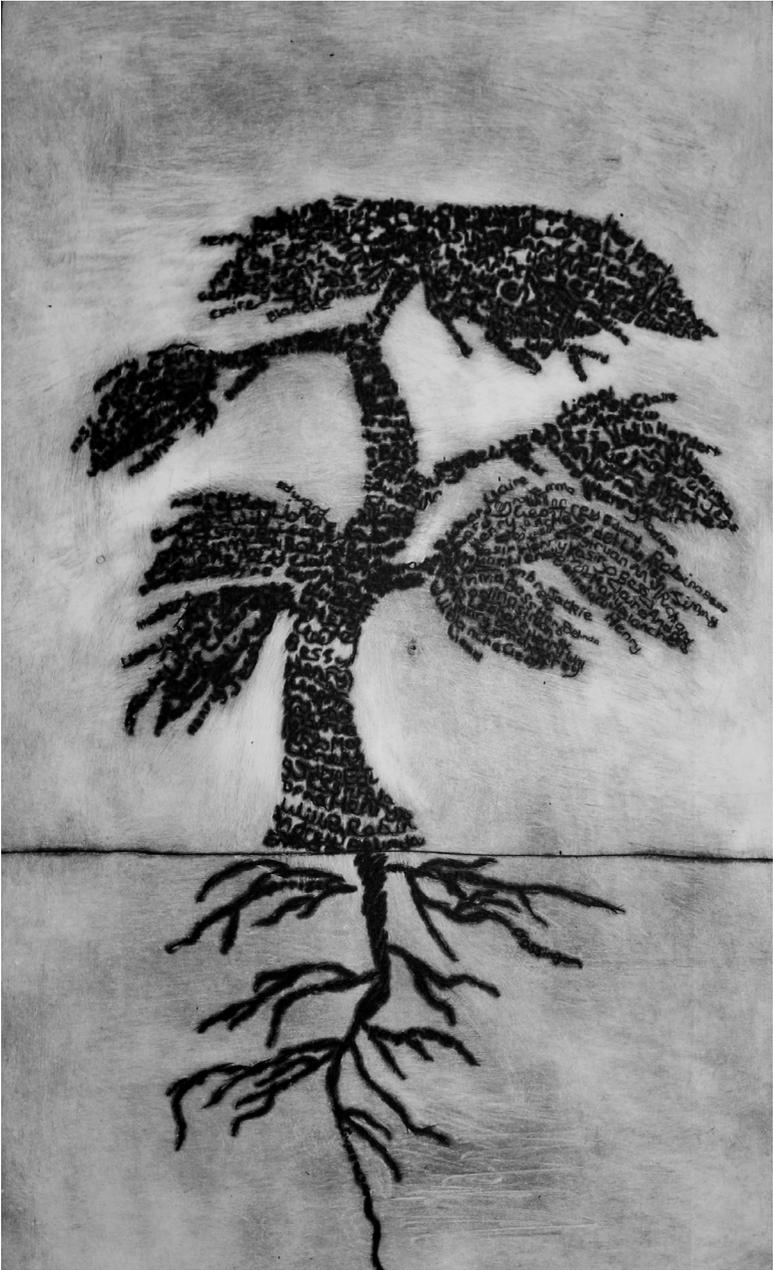
“Oh, she’s at school,” the father replied. “She wouldn’t want to miss a few days to come to the city... she’s working hard for her exams, you know! But I didn’t tell her you were coming; I thought it would be a nice surprise. We can head back to the farm now, or stay the night with a friend I know who lives near here, whichever you’d rather.”

“I’d like to see Ikjot, and my darling sister-in-law... How is she?”

“We’d better head back then. And she’s well, thank you. I’m hoping you’ll be able to tell me all about the most efficient way of planting rice. You see, my neighbour Tai seems to be planting like this...”

John tried to follow what his brother was saying, but he could hardly understand any of it. Funny, he thought. I must have known this before. Just try and look like it makes sense.

“Welcome home, sunshine,” his big brother said.



SOPHIE'S CHRISTMAS

'It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas...'

Johnny Mathis

"...reports of hurricane warnings have been issued and the residents of Darwin have been strongly advised to stay indoors. At the moment strong winds are picking up and severe storms have been predicted..."

"Sophie," my desperate mother called from the kitchen, "could you help me with the cooking, sweetie? I've just got so much to do. Oh and the ironing needs to be done, I just haven't gotten around to it yet." I peered out of the window, lined with a framework of silk-woven cobwebs. I watched as the mosaic of fine thread was torn apart by the wind. I sighed.

"Sure thing, mum."

"Oh, and don't forget to tidy your room. Love you, sweetie!"

The wind outside was picking up.

I slipped upstairs unnoticed, however, midway was bombarded with an army of shrieking girls, sliding under my feet. Anna, Kate and Claire stumbled to a halt, erupting in giggles. It was a mere day until Christmas, and, even after years, I had forgotten the enthusiasm three tiny girls could generate. I laughed. It was nice to see them so happy.

Call me cynical, but Christmas has never been a highpoint for me. When I was younger it was all about the presents. Those paper-wrapped packages would be enough to propel me downstairs on that one morning of the year and keep me going until the next. However, with age comes predictability and over time, my excitement seemed to slip by. Let me replay the last twelve years of Christmas. First there are the family get-togethers, then the stress of putting together the dinner and then the frantic rush to buy cheap, last-minute presents. Nothing changes. But perhaps I am just a cynic. I sighed and suddenly realised I was still standing on the staircase.

A desperate voice cut through my train of thought. "Sophie, honey, can you take care of your sisters tonight? I have to buy some things," Mum called

from the kitchen. I was about to tell her that I couldn't, that I had planned to get out of the house this afternoon, but she had already left. Out to buy the groceries for dinner. I stood there, stranded. Never mind.

An afternoon of the Brady Bunch was not exactly my ideal Christmas Eve... but then again, I was not exactly burdened with high expectations of the event. While my three sisters jumped about the house with an enthusiasm I found painful, I tried to retreat to my own mind, to shut out the pandemonium of everyday life. I looked outside. The sky was painted with a soft watercolour brush, a canvas of hazy blues and purples. It was beautiful, flecked with papery leaves being tossed about by the wind. Somewhere in the distance I could hear the crackle of a radio, desperate reporters urging the people of Darwin to remain at home. I frowned. A grain of doubt punctured my conscience.

By that night I was suffocating. I didn't think I could take it anymore. Mum was back, darting from one side of the kitchen to the other while my three sisters paraded around the room singing Abba songs. Dad was attempting to find extra chairs for an already full Christmas dinner, only to find out that half of our relatives had cancelled.

"Something about the weather I think Aunt Judy mentioned," my frantic father called. Out of the corner of my eye I saw mum stiffen slightly, with a look I could have sworn was desperation in her eyes. She quickly threw on a rather unconvincing smile and busied herself with the cooking. And all the while I was standing there invisible, in the middle of the chaos, with no voice.

The rain was torrential by then. The sky I had seen before had vanished. Dark clouds were gathered over Darwin, conversing in low and sombre tones. The city was a mere shadow. Wind battered the windows. I shuddered.

'...it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, soon the bells will start...'

The remainder of my Christmas Eve was spent in my room. The radio was broken. Fantastic. Mum came in later that night. The usual sound of her platforms clacking on the wooden floor was muffled by the wind, so I was surprised when she entered.

“What’s up Soph? You seem a little melancholy.” She stroked my hair.

“I’m fine,” I replied innocently. A look of consternation was evident in her eyes.

“I just worry about you sometimes. I know that I’ve been busy lately but I will try to find time for you, I really will. It’s just hard with the other girls and work and all.”

I wasn’t convinced.

“I’m fine, truly Mum.” She didn’t care. Not really.

“Ok, well good night sweetie.”

I sighed. Alone again.

At 12:00 am on Christmas Day I woke to the sound of screaming. Dad burst into my room, face panic-stricken.

“Get downstairs now. A storm’s coming...” That was all I could make out before a deep growl filled the room and a sound that mimicked that of a chainsaw took over. It happened so quickly, it was hard to know when I realised what was going on. Outside of the window I could just make out tree branches being hurled across roads, lampposts scattered across the pathways. It was a sight that I was not prepared to witness. Wind pierced the house and it shook violently. I couldn’t hear myself think. “Hurry!” I heard a voice say.

I fell to the floor, my legs shaking. Calm down, I told myself. Darwin has cyclones all the time. It will blow over.

A lamp on the table next to me was swept off the surface and shattered on the floor around my legs. I tried to look for the bathroom. It was the safest place possible. A cacophony of splintering wood and grinding shot through my ears. For a moment my vision was blurred, filled with a blinding white, more a sensation than a sight. The floor trembled beneath me as I looked up to see the roof crumbling. A crack, an explosion. There is not much that can be related to the noise that penetrated the air around me.

I snapped myself into focus and saw Claire cowering under a table. Where had Dad gone? Where were the others? Another crack. The roof was collapsing. I didn’t care. All that mattered lay in a howling heap in front of me, beneath ruins. Sprinting to the corner where she sat, I grabbed Claire,

holding her close to my chest. I could hear screaming, oblivious as to whether it was the wind or a strangled voice. I sat there, cradling Claire in my shaking arms, stroking her head and watching as the walls crumbled around me.

I was terrified. We were trapped, suffocating in that little box. We would die there, for sure. Breath had escaped me. My head was going to explode. The rushing noise wouldn't stop. There was nothing I could do. I was completely helpless, under the control of the writhing beast that threatened to consume us. This wasn't supposed to happen. Not on Christmas. My mind throbbed. A voice was screaming inside of me. A wrenching noise came from outside. I could feel tears teetering on the brink of my eye. I couldn't help them. Tears fell for my sister, shaking in my arms. Tears fell for my home, at the moment a gyrating pool of fractured wood. Where were my parents? What was going on? I closed my eyes and prayed for Christmas to end.

‘...it’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas...’

It was 7:00 am when someone came for us. I lay sprawled in a heap in the corner of the room, under a blanket of rubble. I think by then the storm had passed. The howling had calmed down. I had given up. My energy had drained away with the sliver of hope I had possessed. The noises had gone on too long.

At first there were voices, loud and urgent. And then my thoughts were once again drowned by a loud rattle, different to the screech of the storm. I looked up. My heart started to beat louder in my chest. And then they came. Crashing through the walls, men with yellow hats and bright torches. I stared, clueless.

“It’s all right, girls. You’re all right.” A gruff voice sounded. Hope.

They pulled us from the wreckage. They pulled us from that box, gave me back my breath.

“Claire,” I whispered. “It’s going to be ok.”

Reality. It was terrifying. The city had collapsed around us. Darwin was enveloped by silence, shrouded in a sheet of sorrow. Every building, house, shop, swept away by a force that no-one could overcome. I couldn't bear

it. I couldn't stand there and stare at my obliterated childhood. I shivered. It was so quiet. Where were my parents? Where was Anna? Where was Kate? There was that feeling again. My mouth was dry. I felt sick in the stomach. I squeezed Claire's hand and looked at the ghostly town that surrounded us. My home, memories. I wanted to break the silence, to crash through that barrier. I wanted to scream. But once again I couldn't find a voice. Though I heard one.

"Sophie?" A voice. A soft, familiar voice. Was that my name? I turned around. And there she was. Standing there, uncertain. My mother looked at me and tears started rolling down her cheeks. She ran towards me and held my head close, a warmth that I had not felt in what seemed like an age. I stood there, swaying in my mother's arms, peaceful. "The others are fine, they're safe," she whispered. I cried into her arms. I mattered.

And through the wreckage I could just see a sliver of tinsel, twirling softly amongst the rubble. I turned towards Claire, standing there shyly. I smiled gently at my mother. I thought of Anna, of Kate, of Dad, safe somewhere. It was Christmas.

'It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, soon the bells will start. And the thing that will make them ring is the carol that you sing, right within your heart.'

OFFICE TRAGEDY LEAVES ONE DEAD, CO-WORKERS SHAKEN

It's 7:05 by the time you've finally gotten into the elevators, which is nothing particularly spectacular; there's several layers of defensive systems to stumble through every morning before one can enter the building. A new gateway or metal detector of some kind is being put up today, suspiciously coinciding with the day of the year that Deborah complains about having to redesign pages 4-5 to you in the lifts ("There's only so much you can do with two towers falling down after so many years," she hisses as you watch the digital display roll over floor numbers like a countdown). Every person huddled next to you is carrying at least one coffee, if not more, and you all simmer slowly in caffeine and routine until the elevator finally reaches the seventh floor.

The herd disperses slightly as you make your way down the corridors, finally escaping the swarm altogether only to be faced with the small square cubicle that constitutes your space for the next eight-to-ten hours.

"Thank god you're here," a small blonde woman exclaims immediately from around a corner, as though she weren't lying in wait for you. "We're in a bit of a tizz at the moment in terms of the Arts section, and the OHSC is onto us about the welfare of employees again, not to mention accounting is flooding us with complaints about Style."

You're not exactly sure who this woman is or even what she's talking about, but that's hardly a novel feeling. She has long fingernails, the vibrant pink nail polish visibly bitten through at the ends. One of her hands taps repeatedly on your computer monitor, and you wonder how anyone can possibly work around her. The bags under her eyes could definitely be fixed with the revitalising cream that was advertised on the radio this morning. "I'll get on it," you promise, jotting down something about Arts and accounting and proper delegation of responsibilities.

The day continues in much of a similar manner until lunchtime, when you jostle into the elevator again with others journeying to the outside. To your disappointment, but not your surprise, there is nobody you've talked to before in the elevator, and you take your cigarette and coffee break alone. At one point a towering man makes his way towards you, and you flick out your phone in what turns out to be a successful manoeuvre to ward him off. It's not that you're unsociable – it's only that you know the inevitable awkward discussion will be about the new statistics about stress in Australians. It's topping the list of 'most clicked' news items on the website, and since you've heard about nothing else for the entire morning, the very thought of stumbling through the topic makes the coffee in your mouth lose its edge.

At exactly 12:45, you crowd back into the small compartment and travel upwards once again, but this time exit the elevator at the sixth floor. You hand over the transcript for an interview with some singer you've never heard of to the lady who seems to be in charge today in Arts, and she leafs through it reverently, as though it contains some great wisdom. You briefly attempted to read it yourself and can't see the appeal; it's as though all the celebrities you interview are famous for being cliché-spouting clichés. At this point you start making your way back to the elevators, but to your surprise there's a crowd of people, all frantically opening their Twitter apps on their mobile phones while simultaneously trying to get a good look at whatever's in the open elevator compartment.

"My god," says one woman, and a man you think you've received orders from before turns a pale white. It's just like the scenes you watch every day on the 24-hour news channels which stream to the screens that populate the newsroom. People are murmuring to each other and turning away, disgusted, while at the same time edging in closer and jotting notes down on their iPhones. You can't blame them, really – it is their job, after all.

"He's dead," the blonde woman that talked to you this morning announces to the crowd in a squeak, and the audience bristle with just the right amount of shock. You're not as frantic as the crowd to see the dead man's face,

although the thought he must have worked here does cross your mind in the middle of trying to remember what the woman's name was.

"Definitely suicide," one woman mutters as she backs away from the crowd with a friend, and you somewhat absently decide that following her might lead you to the emergency exit, or perhaps an alternative way up to the seventh floor. It seems rather odd that a man should choose to commit suicide in a lift, the hows nagging at you as well as the question of why someone would choose to commit suicide in an office, rather than somewhere peaceful like a cliff top or a bedroom. It just seems such a strange thing to do.

You follow the women up the fire escape, arriving to find the office in a commotion about what happened. Whole departments are crowded together, and the usually quiet office has been transformed into a riot of mutters and whispers. At the turnover of four o'clock, however, a story breaks about the death of a Middle Eastern dictator, and your colleagues break away back to their desks, only the occasional "How are we spelling his name, again?" breaking the steady drone of typing and mouse clicks. You feel sorry for whoever it is that takes your night shift – they'll have to talk to the editor about moving the AFL final that was supposed to be a fill on the front page tomorrow.



A GREAT AUSSIE BLOKE

It was my first day, a Monday, at the newspaper and already I was rethinking my decision to enter into journalism. From what I had seen so far, it was filled with impossible deadlines, exasperating sources and egos to feed half of Africa. I was sitting at my desk in the bustle of the open plan arrangement, with the sound of fingers desperately tapping on keyboards drilling into my brain, when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Ben? Hi I’m Janine, lovely to meet you. I’m the editor of our weekend pullout *The Good Weekender*. I was told by Jim that you actually don’t have anything to be getting along with at the moment and I think you’ll be perfect for this job I need doing. Get it to me by Friday.” She was around forty I’d say, with a bright pink smile and a thick blonde bob with a fringe. As she walked away without another word, I turned my attention to the brief that she had dropped on my desk and hesitantly began to read. In summary, the editor-in-chief had decided that they had been printing way too many stories about Australian women and all that feminist jazz we see plastered bloody everywhere. He wanted an informed piece written on the ‘standard Aussie bloke’. Frankly, I had no idea and decided I would need to go looking for inspiration. I dropped the steak sandwich I had been contemplating into the bin and grabbed the stiff new suit jacket slumped over the back of my chair. As I rushed out of the elevator armed with my uncomfortably new Macbook and a bricklike old tape recorder, I called my footballer mate Tommo to warn him that I was crashing his training session that afternoon. After all, I could use a bit of aimless banter after the day I’d had.

“Mate, the classic Aussie bloke is just that, a bloke,” Steve stated assuredly. “True blues don’t care about the volume of their hair or the frames of their sunglasses. We’re real footy-playing, shed-building, beer-drinking men.”

At this point the rest of the boys joined in with incomprehensible jeers of agreement and similar anti-intellectual suggestions, which I unenthusiastically jotted down save the occasional racist or homophobic cry emerging from the hubbub. There was no lack of enthusiasm or ideas, that was for sure, but it all seemed so predictable and narrow minded and I sure as hell wasn't about to embarrass myself with that sort of junk. Conversation soon moved over to girls, as it often does in such company, and it hit me. The female opinion of men is a huge factor in defining the masculine identity and there's no arguing that women don't love to talk about what they think. It was perfect, or so I thought.

My younger sister Katie had just got back from a trip around the world with her best friend Mil that day and Mum decided to have a roast dinner with all five of us at their house over in Randwick to celebrate. After dinner Dad settled down in front of the cricket while Mum did the dishes. They both seemed incredibly eager to help me out and initially I thought I was in luck... Turns out the only topic that Katie and her friend could focus on for more than one second was how guys had been dicks to them over the years and how they're all worthless pricks, "except you of course, Benny." Seeing that I was unhappy with their response the two girls got into a bit of a huff and told me to, "Go down to the pub then if you don't like our answers. Bit too feminine, eh?" Admittedly, they had had a bit too much welcome home champagne, but I took their drunken advice and happily headed down to the boozier. I walked into The Lost Dog with high hopes of inspiration but these were quickly dispersed with help from my good friends James Boag and Tooheys New.

The next day at the office was spent staring at a blank white page and watching pandas sneeze on the internet. The girl at the desk next to me was shocked that a man could be so stuck in writing about such a relevant and personal topic but honestly, it had never even occurred to me. Women have always been so caught up in their feminism and rights and all that rigmarole, but as a male, I'd never really had to put sufficient thought into

my own gender. In the end I decided to just go home and relax, at least then I could be stuck for ideas on my couch instead of a plastic revolving chair.

In the car I switched on the radio to hear one of those afternoon talk back hosts offering their listeners the opportunity to call up with a topic they wanted discussed. In my desperation I dialled in the number and pressed call. To my shock I soon heard my shaky voice buzzing through the speakers and all of a sudden I had been pulled into an interview of sorts as the host questioned me on my choice of topic, consequently my job and finally asking the dreaded question: What was my idea of the typical Aussie bloke? Frankly, at this point I had no bloody idea and as I prepared myself to say this I was flung forward as my car connected with a telegraph pole. After that, everything went black.

I woke up in hospital the following afternoon to a tray of boiled vegetables and meat and, seeing that there was no TV, painfully leant over and switched on the radio by the bed. By chance, it was tuned to the same station as the day before and as the reception crackled into clarity, I heard the same guy from the day before introducing his show.

“Now before I begin today’s show I would just like to put a few of yesterday’s listeners at ease. One of our callers from Tuesday’s show, a young Ben Donovan, was in fact involved in a car accident while on the phone to us. I do have it on good authority that luckily he is in fact in a very stable condition in hospital where he was taken yesterday. Thank god he’s fine though! He really did just seem like a great Aussie bloke.”



NETWORK

“Ridiculous. Absolutely appalling.” The umbrella burst outwards, shaking pellets of icy water against my face, chest; driving the loss deeper. Alone. Dark. Cold. The streets hummed with the absence of movement. The stillness. The yearning. I remained on the side of the kerb and cursed; watching the water gush down the gutter, counting every rivulet like a friend which only moments ago had been snatched from me.

“Mark Zuckerberg is working furiously to restore his multimillion dollar website but is experiencing multiple delays. We cannot be sure now for how long users will remain stranded without any ability to contact the outside world. Within only one hour of Facebook’s sudden malfunction, the only thing we can do is pray that we can hold out for just that little while longer. Reporting world catastrophes to you tonight, Sarah Wood.” The prim blonde nodded mechanically as she shuffled her papers and shoved them towards her colleague for the sports report. Sighing, I glanced away from the great public screen upon the crumbling façade before me, wondering when it was when I had last ventured from my room to explore the empty streets.

“It’s not bloody worth it is it?” I mumbled as I kicked at the water and glimpsed through the shuttering windows of the neighbouring apartment blocks, sighing bitterly at the silhouettes slumped against their computers, clicking and scrolling furiously at that unresponsive, blue and white screen. ‘Facebook’ in bold white letters blinked teasingly and the great red cross across the page severed every tie which I had to the outside world. Six thousand, four hundred and sixty-two. Every single friend gone in an instant. Surely I would be middle aged by the time I could possibly contemplate bringing my number of friends to double digits again, let alone thousands, without Mark Zuckerberg getting his site working again. The icy pellets drove deeper.

“Azura! Get over here now! Now!” My mother screeched as she pushed my brother into the rain, holding the limp figure of my little sister. “Don’t just stand there! The umbrella, you good for nothing wretch!”

Sprinting across the narrow road, I swerved the umbrella over the shivering

body of my sister and skipped rapidly out of the way to avoid my father, swerving our rusty Mercedes onto the kerb.

“How’s she holding up?” My father yelled from the driver’s seat, gesturing wildly outside the window.

“Oh, your daughter’s fine! She’s still in a state of shock; post-traumatic stress disorder Toby reckons,” my mother nodded to my brother who solemnly kicked open the door of the car and slid my little sister in. “I don’t know if she’ll be able to hold up for much longer.”

“God, I didn’t mean Tahlia, wife!” Dad shouted over the roar of the engine, “I meant the car! We haven’t taken her for a ride for a long time, with this new online shopping system and all. She might need a new coat of paint or...”

Dad’s voice was drowned by a wail from the cold blue lips of my sister. One hour after the catastrophe and she was already entering the first stages of post-traumatic stress disorder. I scrambled into the car after her, pushing her feet from their dangling position over the last chair and slamming the door. I gripped her white knuckles and blew hot air against her purple cheeks, closing her eyelids so I wouldn’t have to watch her pupils rolling to the back of her head. The car jolted into action and I glanced back to wave at my brother, still standing in the rain. He didn’t want to come; he had an English essay to write.

* * * * *

The hospital wasn’t used to visitors at this hour; the white floors, white walls, glowed dimly as I watched a single nurse push my sister into the emergency ward and glanced over to see the others furiously tapping against their iPhones; hoping, praying for any sign of an improvement. Facebook. The white letters grinned back nastily, stark against the red cross. Alone. Stranded. I watched my parents hurry in after my sister and sat awkwardly in the reception. Not knowing how to respond when asked if I would like a cup of water, I simply smiled and turned away; feeling pain jolt through my limbs as I spotted another victim rocking in his chair on the other side of the waiting room. He was cradling his scalp in his yellow hands, the whites of

his eyes yellow from lack of sunlight.

“Who am I?” he whispered joltingly. Obviously his ‘About Me’ section had erased itself with the rest of his Facebook. Alone. Stranded.

“And it’s working! Breaking news! Zuckerberg has finally cracked the code which has allowed for the renewal of his social networking site...” the blonde screeched excitedly from a box television in the corner; rapidly tapping on her phone while reporting, updating her new status.

I leapt upwards, running from the hospital as I pelted home. I didn’t hear the wail of pain from my sister. I didn’t see the flash of lightning across the lightening sky. I didn’t feel the jostle of others against me as the streets suddenly became alive with those shoving to get home. The only thing running through my head was my new status: ‘6142: every one of you means so much to me. Thank god for Facebook.’



TRAILSPOTTING

Julie felt the soft carpet against her cheek and once again tongued at the gluggy spittle glued to the roof of her mouth (she should really get some water). The place looked like a type of theatre. There were hundreds of seats lined all the way to the back; suddenly the room began to flood with people. All bald men with copper beards. She felt like John Malkovich. The man at the door bellowed, "Tickets please." And Julie quickly took a seat somewhere in the second row.

She saw camera men, crew, hair and makeup, producers all busily preparing. A sign over to the left hand side of the stage glowed red: LIVE.

"And here's your host Ralph Edwards."

The crowd erupted into applause.

"Thank you, thank you everyone. Tonight folks we take a look at a pioneer, an innovator, a man who is said to have one of the most fertile imaginations the world has ever known. Walter Elias Disney. Aged 43, father of animation. Anti-Semite. This is your life."

Julie took her cues from the audience, clapping along at the appropriate intervals. The man that was identified as Ralph was enchanting, witty, charismatic, charming, sleazy. He grinned a cheesy grin at the audience and then turned to Walt, now smiling malevolently, the bristles of his moustache splayed over his top lip. He reminded Julie of Freddy Mercury. Walt pulled out a neatly folded hanky and proceeded to buffer his head; the crowd watched on in awe.

"In 1937, the Walt Disney Studios released their first fully animated feature film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and led the way in a groundbreaking new form of family entertainment. More than seven decades later, Walt Disney Animation Studios continues to honour its heritage through animated films that combine beautiful artistry, masterful storytelling and groundbreaking technology.

ANNABELLE COOPER
EXTENSION 2 MAJOR WORK (EXTRACT)

Mr Walt Disney's company has been the proud recipient of forty eight Academy Awards and seven Emmys in his lifetime. He has also received honorary degrees from Harvard, Yale and The University of Southern California. Mr Disney was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and France's Legion of Honour and Officer d'Academie decorations."

Walt cleared his throat. "Aren't you forgetting a few there, Ralph?"
Ralph shook his head nervously.

"You sure about that? Check your script."

Ralph seemed embarrassed, caught off guard; he thumbed through the pages attached to his clip board, sweat follicles quivering in the trembling hairs of his moustache.

"Right, oh right, ahh yes, yes you also were awarded Thailand's Order of the Crown, Brazil's Order of the Southern Cross, Mexico's Order of the Aztec Eagle and the Showman of the World Award from the National Association of Theatre Owners."

Walt smiled. Pleased with himself. He crossed his legs and pulled out a Mickey nail file and began to saw away at his cuticles. Ralph looked rather confused.

"Continue, continue, don't mind me."

Ralph regained his composure, swallowing loudly.

"My, what an astounding array of achievements."

"Thank you, yes thank you Ralph."

"Well let's take a look at where it all began, shall we?"

Julie was thoroughly engaged by this point as was the rest of the audience, captivated by something so personal. She felt privileged; no one would have access to this kind of detail on the outside. Suddenly the bald man filing his already perfectly manicured nails in front of her became a gurgling bundle of mess, mewling and spewing, sitting in a cloth nappy howling, arms flailing. There was silence as the baby's cries reverberated off the walls. Ralph looked very uncomfortable. Walt Disney: as a baby!

“Walt was born on December 5th of 1901, in Hermosa, Chicago and grew up on a farm in Missouri. And tell me Walt, I hear that many of the inspirations for your Disney characters came from the farm animals?”

The baby gurgled enthusiastically.

Julie looked around. The men around her didn't seem to be alarmed at the fact that there was a baby being interviewed on live television. Think of the consequences! Should someone call child services? Julie considered other media babies; Michael Jackson's son Blanket was aired out over the balcony, Steve Irwin's baby tempted the jaws of a ten foot crocodile, Sacha Baron Cohen traded a baby for an iPod; this suddenly didn't seem so outrageous.

Her attention was then drawn back to the stage; in the place of the baby now sat a young boy of about seven or eight in a broad brimmed hat, checked shirt, denim overalls, and a piece of wheat hanging out the side of his mouth.

“Yes sir, many of my characters were based on the farm animals we had when I was growing up, I had a lot of fun with them.”

Strangely, Walt's voice was just as deep and rich as it was at the ripe, or perhaps in this case rotten, old age of 110. Ralph chuckled, the audience looked at little Walt, and to everyone's surprise he began to transform, right in front of their very eyes. The hat was substituted for a cap, the overalls for a neatly pressed uniform, the straw replaced with a cigarette, he grew about fifty centimetres and stubble sprouted along his razor sharp jaw line. It was amazing how his whole life could be captured in only a few moments, growing up in such a public arena; it felt as if she really knew him. Julie felt her cheeks flush pink as she gazed into the dreamy eyes of the young soldier.

“And Walt tell us, you served with the armed forces when you were quite young?”

Walt laughed. He was so handsome.

“Well I ah dropped out of school when I was sixteen, and I did enlist in the armed forces but I was rejected because of my age. So a friend and I decided to join the Red Cross and it was then that I was sent overseas where I was an ambulance driver for a while.”

“We're here with Walt Disney folks, and we'll be straight back after the break with *This is Your Life*.”

The audience applauded and 'It's A Small World' began to play over the loud speakers; Ralph sweating profusely. Moments later a large camera was held very closely to Ralph's face, too close really. Julie grimaced.

"And we're back with one of the most talented cartoonists of his time, Mr Walt Disney. Now Walt, I happen to know that there was also a point in your life when you were particularly intolerant of Hollywood's Jewish population."

"Ah yes, I did express a strong hatred towards the Jews." He shuddered. "Can't stand them."

"And this disdain for Jews filtered through your work in the Disney Company, is that right?"

"Yes Ralph, in 1933 I released my animated short film of *The Three Little Pigs*, which featured an anti-Jewish message."

Walt began to morph back into the bald man, fumbling around for his nail file, wiping the sweat off his shiny head with the hanky. Was that sweat? That wasn't sweat. It was glittery, gummy, like someone had drawn with glitter pens all over him. The trail glistened in the spotlight, marbling his creamy white egg head. Julie couldn't tear her eyes away, fascinated by it, infatuated with it. He turned to the audience and began to describe the cartoon as if it were an ancient fable. The crowd listened on like children.

"Well now, we all know the story don't we? The three little pigs each build their houses out of straw, sticks and stone. Well, when the big bad wolf tries to break in to the first little pig's house, the house of straw – he blows it down in just one puff! But when the big bad wolf tries to break into the second little pig's house, the house of sticks – he is disguised as a sheep, dressed in a woollen blanket."

The audience responded: "Oooahhhh."

Julie following along.

"And tell us Walt, what was the wolf dressed as when he got to the house of bricks? Tell us Walt."

"Well Ralph, he was in fact dressed as a Jewish peddler." Walt broke out into a wheezy laugh. There was a slight pause while Ralph looked somewhat confused. Again. He looked around at the crew, waiting for some sort of signal. He turned back to Walt and a smile spread across his face. He too then broke into uncontrollable laughter.

The audience joined in, doubled over in hysterics. Julie felt uncomfortable at everyone's reaction; what kind of show was this? It was outrageous!

But perhaps that was the point, thought Julie; they wanted to fire her up. Now she felt even more anguished: how dare they screw up her nice little life, her ideals of happiness, safety, peace, her childhood! They had taken away her innocence, exposed her to things she wasn't meant to see! She felt like crying, wanted her mother to pat her on the head and kiss her on the cheek when she found her asleep in her princess dress in front of the fire next to the cat who she had dressed up as Prince Charming surrounded by dolls, china tea sets and a plastic picnic where none of the food was real but she still pretended to gnaw on it anyway! They had burst her bubble. All she wanted to do was to go back to sleep.

"Well isn't that something," Ralph seemed satisfied. "Just astonishing, not only a brilliant mind but also a bigot at heart."

"Oh now, come on... thank you Ralph."

"Truly, I am honoured to be in such a presence, Ladies and gentlemen, Walt Disney."

The two men shook hands, and the crowd approved with more cheering. Ralph turned to the camera again.

"Until next time folks, good night," he signed off with an enthusiastic wink.

Julie sat amongst the audience who chatted excitedly as they got up from their seats. A man stopped her, "Say, didn't you think that was just the most wonderful show, Miss?"

Julie's face was suddenly smothered by a piece of paper. She clawed at her face, peeling it back off her nose and mouth. Holding it out in front of her she studied it. Rubbish? The heading read 'Receipt: iTunes, Account: Walt Disney's iPhone>recently purchased.' Julie bit her lip; he must have lost it by accident. She took a closer look. This was personal information! Address: The Enchanted Castle, Penthouse Two, phone number, bank details, even his email address: mouse_luva@disneyassociates.com. Julie felt herself go red. What should she do with it? She continued reading; he had racked up a bill of over four hundred dollars on iTunes in only the past month. She examined the contents: Richard Wagner, Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, 'Hey

Jewd' by the Beatles, Volksmusik Greatest Hits, 'Hungry Like the Wolf' by Jewran Jewran, Simon and Garfunkel, 'Jewdas' by Lady Gaga, Classics from *The Sound of Music* featuring Jewlie Andrews.

Jewlie, Julie shook her head, these newly discovered details rattling around inside. Anyone could have picked this up and read it, what if it had gotten into the wrong hands, his private information leaked to the world? She fantasised about what else she might discover had she the chance to go through more of his mail before something hard hit her in the back of the head. She fell to the ground.

THE TALE OF A RAVISHINGLY HANDSOME PRINCE

Once upon a time, in an era when people got a thrill from ‘Once upon a time’ stories, there lived a ravishing prince. He was perfect, with blonde, styled hair, and deep, sky-blue eyes... He had it all, the ideal facial features, skin smoother than a baby’s bottom (literally) and an immaculate outfit made up of a fresh wolf-skin coat and famously tight tights, even worse than the ones you found in your Uncle Charlie’s wardrobe two years ago. In fact, the only problem with this stunning image of a prince that you have pictured in your mind is that, to put it nicely, he was challenged intellectually.

Let me give you an example. There was a magic mirror upon one of his father’s many walls in one of his father’s many castles. If you stood in front of this mirror and told a lie it would transport you to the middle of the woods... making you walk all the way home. Ever since he was little, our darling prince would watch his father constantly getting sucked into the mirror and arriving home muddy and late for dinner. His father, every day without fail, would tell the mirror, “I think... I am the most handsome king of all,” and then he would, unfortunately, be sucked in. One day, our little prince (christened Richard) stood in front of the mirror and said, “I think...” Yep, you guessed it... it sucked him in. Not the brightest tool in the shed.

So, anyway, back to the story. Our Ritchie was turning twenty on the first of January. It was rapidly gaining on him that he needed to find a bride beautiful enough for him, but of course not so beautiful that she would make him look dull in comparison. He had decided to go for the whole, ‘Look at me, I’m so nice because I’m taking in a poor young woman who wouldn’t have had a better chance in life if I hadn’t married her’ look. So he took it upon himself to travel to the farthest corner of the earth (because in his eyes, the world was square) and gain himself a lonely, poor Barbie doll look-a-like lady worthy of his love. Ritchie decided that his first stop would be the old quaint

little town in the middle of the wood that the mirror so kindly used to suck his father into, so he decided that his method of travel would be the mirror. His father's castle with the magic mirror was very large with many stone out-buildings and sky high towers, so it took him a while to climb the stairs up to the mystical room with the magic mirror. He decided that he should let someone know where he was going, and so texted the press in the area to let them know that the prince was out looking for a bride.

"Now I will make the front page of *Royal Weekly*, Parisienne Hiltus will not stand a chance," he gloated.

With this positive idea in Ritchie's head, he decided that he must commence the voyage all great princes make. Following tradition, he stepped towards the mirror. From experience, he said, "I think..." and without further ado he was sucked into the mirror head first and smashed down into the middle of a forest. The trees were thin and tall, providing no protection apart from the upper canopy. Stinging ivy surrounded the faint outline of a trail.

Ritchie thought, "I wonder if father made this trail after his many strolls through this foreign land? The young lady that I rescue had better be grateful that I saved her from this tip."

The prince walked for five minutes before he fell asleep. He had never engaged in such a long, energy-consuming quest before, apart from searching the castle for his comb. He woke up shortly, after his little 'nanna nap', and found that the edge of the forest was within sight, along with a small village with very typical straw huts that you generally find in these kinds of tales. However Ritchie was astonished at his discovery of this new world.

He thought, out loud, "How strange to find a village in the middle of a wood..."

"Excuse me, but we are not in the middle of a wood, we are in the south west corner," said a knowledgeable passer-by. The prince then overheard him murmuring to himself, "Who ever thought of a village being in the dead-centre of a wood? It's absurd. I wish people would do their research." Ritchie was astonished, never before had he been treated in this way. Did this person not know who he was? (Obviously not, it seemed).

He walked pompously into the village, drawing the attention of most of its inhabitants as he went. Walking past a gloomy inn, he heard a couple

of wolf whistles, which he took as a compliment, and continued on all the merrier. Just as he entered the main square, he noticed a large well and a sudden need for the reassurance of his own beauty in this foreign land led him towards it.

Ritchie ran his hands lovingly along the coarse, sandpaper-like feel of the magic well, embracing it with fondness as if it were an old friend. He did this in truth, actually, for any reflective surface was his best friend. Peering over the top of the well, he nearly did a backwards flip in surprise. Luckily he did not, and so managed to preserve his beige, tailored trousers. Before him, lining the shaft of the well, were millions, literally millions, of ladies. But these were not the kind of ladies that he was used to. Not by a long shot. The ladies that he had previously been introduced to, time and time again, had flowing, long, blonde hair the colour of honey, skin so smooth and pale it was like jasmine petals, blinding smiles and wide innocent blue or green eyes. The ladies of the well compared to them seemed to be a completely different species. They had hairs out of place, crooked smiles, bent noses, wrinkles, greasy hair... the list of malfunctions went on. He had had no idea that ladies like these even existed. Another thing that he did not know at the time was that this was a magic well, one that showed you what you most desired...

His eyes suddenly caught a glimpse of a lady who was of the most exquisite beauty. She had ivory skin, twinkling green eyes and hair as black as the midnight sky. His heart pounded violently and then melted like a pound of butter. His last remaining brain cell died, alone. "That poor lady, stuck down there all alone, I simply must save her." (Ritchie had read manual upon manual upon manual of how to be a manly prince – his favourites included 'Rapunzel', 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Snow White' – and so knew that saving damsels-in-distress was his calling). He threw himself, head-first, down into the well, without regard for his personal safety. This maiden needed him, and he would not let her down! Oh how courageous he was! (Well he thought so anyway – to the rest of the world he was probably just more of a health and safety hazard.)

As he fell he felt the world around him spin, and rainbows of colour filled his vision. Time slowed down and he felt invincible. Then he heard a splash

and felt a wet substance around him. He slowly opened his eyes and glanced around. He was sitting in a puddle at the bottom of the well, and not a lady was to be seen, let alone the lady of his dreams. They had disappeared. He looked up, and down, and around him, just to be sure, and then again to be doubly sure, but no, nothing had changed. "Perhaps she has gone to do her hair?" He waited a little while longer, but soon despair began to engulf him when no lady reappeared. Why had his damsel-in-distress gone and left him? What had he done wrong?

Sitting in the bottom of the well, he felt wet and very sorry for himself. Especially as his gorgeous, new pants were going to be ruined. He decided, after three hours of pondering and boredom, that maybe he had better give up on this particular maiden and look elsewhere for his bride other than the bottom of this well. He got up, stomped out the pins and needles, and looked for a way out. There was only one problem with this plan. There wasn't a way out. He tried scrambling up the moss covered walls, he tried digging a tunnel out of the bottom, he tried absolutely everything he could possibly think of, but to no avail. He was well-bound.

Pulling out his mobile phone he dialled the castle, but a beep told him there was no signal. With a deep, melancholy sigh, his bottom lip began to tremble and he banged his fists against the wall. He did what he did best. He had a hissy fit.

After several minutes of severe screaming, Ritchie pulled himself together. He took a few deep breaths, but then deeply regretted the decision. Something smelt very unpleasant down there. Not the usual Christian Dior he put on each morning, something much more... fishy. He really needed to get out because his gorgeous pants were starting to smell putrid! The disaster of the situation was starting to sink in and morosely he sat back down on the bottom of the well. Just a few seconds afterwards, a beautiful smell of fresh roses tingled his nose. Ritchie sprang up and a tear ran down his rosy cheek. Roses always made him tearful.

Suddenly, a beautiful young lady popped her head down to see what that noise-like-a-chicken-trying-to-escape-its-owner was.

"Plllease hellp mee," cried Ritchie. The young lady had never seen such a sight in her life! A man crying? She was trying to imagine how the young

man had got into the well in the first place. It seemed very odd. The young lady looked around for something he could hold onto. Just to her right was a strong looking rope tied to a tree. She quickly untied it.

“Okay, hold onto this as tightly as you can. I’m going to pull you up.” Ritchie didn’t know if he was going to fall but he followed her orders. Half way up the well he cried, “I can’t do it anymore, my pants are too tight!”

The young lady didn’t know how to respond. “Just try, you’re nearly there!” She was very unimpressed with his flexibility skills; even she could do it. Droplets of sweat poured down his face as if he had just come out of the shower. Ritchie didn’t realise he was still holding tightly on to the rope when he was already out of the well.

“See? I knew you could do it!” she said, crossing her fingers behind her. The prince slowly released his hold on the rope and stood up straight, suddenly aware of the world around him. THIS was the lady of his dreams! Identical to the lady in the well, she was pretty, smart and had strong, freckly arms, weirdly positioned behind her back. Just what he had always looked for in a lady.

“Will you marry me?” he said falling down onto one knee.

“Of course I will! But you should know that I only marry well-dressed men.” She paused to cover a laugh as she noticed the prince immediately look back into the well to check his prized appearance. “And I’ve just heard that there’s a Ralphine Laurenno sale in the next town, perhaps you’d like to go?”

“A Ralphine Laurenno sale!!” The prince’s excitement was palpable.

“Uh-huh, and I also happen to know that there is a way to it that takes you less than a second, through the bottom of the well!”

She did not have a chance to take even a breath before Ritchie had thrown himself down the well a second time. A scream and then a distant splash confirmed that he had landed. Laughing to herself, she skipped off into the sunrise.

And to this day, if you walk past the village of Muddy Bottom, you can hear the faint cries of darling Ritchie, stuck at the bottom of the well. Nobody has yet been kind enough to point out the ladder directly above his head, leading to the top.

THORN AND ROSE

Once upon a time there were two friends: one, Malecent, was fair of face with a heart of steel and the other, Aurora, was a plainer girl with a heart of gold. One day, as they wandered through the village, they stumbled upon a Prince and both instantly fell in love with him. Malecent, who was as vain as she was beautiful, felt sure he would fall in love with her, as her beauty shone like the midday sun. Every evening, she would stand before her Magic Mirror, combing her golden hair and asking:

“Mirror, Mirror, tell me true,
Who is the fairest of us two?”

To which the mirror would dutifully reply:

“My lady, you shimmer like the sun,
Your beauty is surpassed by none.”

Each night, her heart would fill with certitude that the Prince would love her. However, the Prince had noticed the spark of kindness and wit in Aurora’s heart and, despite her plain face, fell in love with her. Noticing the Prince’s attention to her friend, Malecent asked her Mirror:

“Mirror, Mirror speak no lies,
Who is fairest in the Prince’s eyes?”

The Mirror answered without emotion:

“My Lady, though you are fairer than she,
Aurora is all that he can see.”

Malecent’s face swelled with rage as all her love towards Aurora dissipated and she began to scheme. She visited three of her friends to ask for their opinion on her dilemma. The first, a woman of great beauty but no wit, replied:

“Force her to be your servant, as no Prince would look twice at a girl in rags. It worked wonders with my irritating step-daughter.”

Malecent declined the idea, knowing that she would never coerce Aurora into being her slave. The second friend, a woman with the face of an angel but little intelligence replied:

“Disguise yourself as an old peddler and trick her into eating a poisoned

apple, as no Prince would look twice at a comatose maiden. It worked wonders for my insufferable step-daughter.”

Malecent decided against the idea, too vain to conceal her beauty behind a mask of age. Her third friend, a woman whose looks had been stolen away by age but who was filled to the brim with wit replied:

“Lock her away in the tallest tower, so high she could never escape. I did the same for the child I stole, and to the best of my knowledge she is still there.”

Malecent’s face transformed from its disfiguring scowl to a ravishing smile as she skipped the whole way home. Calling to her Huntsman, she gave him strict instructions, which he obeyed reluctantly.

In the darkest hour of night, Aurora was plucked from her bed by the Huntsman and imprisoned in the highest room of the tallest tower with no door and only one small window. As her golden heart flooded with panic and desperation, she eyed the small window, deliberating whether or not to leap to her freedom. As she quickly realised she had no other option, she leapt from the window, landing in an ungainly heap in the nettles Malecent had maliciously planted around the base of the tower. The sharp thorns tore at the flesh of her face, scarring her already plain features. Content that the Prince would finally love her, Malecent skipped off from where she had hidden to watch the whole affair. But she had underestimated the Prince’s love for Aurora, and despite her ruined face, he still loved her deeply, even planning to wed her. That evening, as Malecent stood before her mirror gazing intently at herself, she asked the question that had followed her all day, just like her shadow:

“Mirror, Mirror, speak no lies,
Who is fairest in the Prince’s eyes?”

The Mirror spoke nothing but the truth:

“My Lady, despite her tumble from above,
It is Aurora who holds the Prince’s heart of love.”

Rage seared in Malecent’s steely heart as envy stabbed her in the chest.

“Aurora must die,” she hissed angrily to herself as she swept from the room, her eyes alight with the sadistic pleasure that rose from her cruel scheme.

The next day, Malecent crafted a spinning wheel from beautiful, glossy wood, a spinning wheel so fine it could have spun straw into the purest gold. In fact, it did later on... but that is another story. Once the wheel was completed, she dipped the edge of the spindle into poison, her slender body rocking with a hideous cackle. She brought the wheel to Aurora, who marvelled at the beautiful object.

"I heard congratulations are in order," exclaimed Malecent, concealing her hatred. "For they say you shall soon wed the Prince."

Aurora blushed, the soul of modesty. "If he asks, I shall give my consent."

Malecent clasped her hands together. "That is wonderful!" she cried. "Why, you must begin to make the dress. When he asks you he will want to wed with haste, so you shall not have time to create a splendid enough gown. Look, I have brought you this beautiful spinning wheel as a present. You must begin immediately, or you shall not finish before the wedding day."

Aurora did not need fancy dresses to be happy, but she was grateful and moved by the amount of work her friend had put into the wheel, so she began to spin as Malecent watched gleefully. After a moment, Aurora slipped and the tip of her finger grazed the spindle. As a single drop of crimson blood welled, Aurora collapsed onto the cold ground. Pulling her face into a distraught expression, Malecent sent for the Prince, whose heart broke when he heard the news. Malecent returned home and stood before the mirror, the question slipping off her tongue once more:

"Mirror, Mirror, speak no lies,
Who is fairest in the Prince's eyes?"

The Mirror replied:

"My Lady, your beauty is glorious to behold,
While Aurora lies still, lifeless and cold."

Try as she might, these were the only words Malecent could get the mirror to speak. She flung her hairbrush at it in frustration and the Mirror cracked. A shard flew through the air and pierced her heart, killing her instantly.

The Prince spent every day at Aurora's bedside and while he watched over her, he made two wedding rings of the finest gold, his tears soaking them. He slipped one ring on his warm finger and the other on her frozen

one. As he took her cold hand, the two rings touched and Aurora's eyes opened as warmth returned to her. The couple was soon married and they lived happily ever after.



LETTERS TO MY PSYCHIATRIST

“Gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous. A gorgeous dress!”

I really wanted a red wedding dress, the colour of a smug over-ripe apple pendulous with the threat of descent. When I was young I used to love running my hands through the dirt underneath the apples, letting its moist touch travel up and down my fingers. I'd then flutter back inside and hide my hands in my pocket, telling my mother I wasn't hungry to prevent revealing their soiled nature.

I believe that you, doctor, would have diagnosed my mother with obsessive compulsive disorder. When she died we commissioned a painter to visit her tombstone weekly as specified upon her bequest, who added a new coat of what was supposed to be 'shining white' like the colour of an intense stream of light blinding the actor. However as time progressed and the sun spoke its first words of the day, this white turned from shining to overused coffee mug. It was nature's vindictive victory over my mother and I laughed at each new viewing, whilst still commissioning the painter to further visits, twice weekly.

From this description you may imagine my mother's horror at my suggestion of red. “No! Don't be silly! You foolish child! Red, why red? How absolutely vulgar! When this white one looks gorgeous... absolutely gorgeous!”

Yes, I did look positively 'gorgeous' when stumbling down the aisle in an over-puffed, over-priced styrofoam-like dress. On more than one account I wished I had worn the red one, maybe then John would have melted, a saint dying for his cause into the stainless marble of the Church or I would have been projectiled from the Church onto the cold, dirty streets of freedom.

I would say that by now alarm bells are going off in your analytical doctor's head; “Psychotic wife; wishes her husband dead, resentment towards her mother. Lots of work needed - maybe some drugs. ”

Now, I do not expect you to respond to my frantic plea for communication. But it would be very helpful if you did.

Sincerely,
John's wife

P.S. If you do deign to reply the drugs would be well-appreciated.

To my (albeit unofficial) psychiatrist,

Now that I have described my mother I am sure you have already allocated some blame for my predicament to her. However, to be fair; to allow you to spread Freudian liability evenly, I must tell you about my husband John.

John is a fine husband. He certainly ticks most boxes. He provides for our family, and never skimps on affection. In fact every day, upon his return, I am so privileged as to receive a cold kiss on the cheek, carrying memories of his usual ham sandwich lunch. I then reciprocate with such efficiency that a lipstick stain on his marble cheeks would be a miracle to behold. Having done his sexual duty, he will slither into his study and do whatever it is he does.

I am not allowed to visit him in his room. It was the first minute of our marriage that he said;

“Now, my little darling, you must not disturb me in my study. I have very important things to do at times, things you simply would not understand.”

I sometimes imagine what these ‘things’ might be. Perhaps he has set up a portal via which to communicate with aliens? In fact I would not be surprised if he were a member of the extra-terrestrial crowd himself. Sometimes, when I’m bored at the dinner table whilst he is on the phone or reading the newspaper I, being forbidden to do anything but stare devotedly at his highness, try to squint into his eyes to forage for some scrap of humanity, of feeling or expression. The search has been largely fruitless.

I like to group John and my mother together, that way I can fully channel my odious feelings towards them. It is a most effective form of occupation.

Now I shall say no more; I must be unpredictable, I must be elusive and retain at least a little of my girlish charm.

The loving wife of John

To my therapist,

I hope you enjoy the scones. You must remember to slather them with jam, and it must be the most scrumptious and succulent of jams, so red that your lips will be stained for weeks to come with its memory.

It was once said that the scones emerging from my oven surpass the expectation of every mouth upon which they melt. Light and fluffy pillows of butter and cream, they encircle the tongue with the most tantalising mixture of savoury and sweet. My husband states with utmost certainty that they are my greatest achievement in life.

My mother thinks that my scones are what wiped the spittle of disagreement upon the subject of myself from John's mouth, both literally and figuratively.

"Mmm, yes, I see... very good. Although I have never liked jam, such a frivolity."

Needless to say the thought of scones now makes my stomach turn and the liquid seep out of my mouth.

The baking wife

To my friend,

Dinner has always seemed to me the catalyst of the day. Food seems to have the most wondrous effect of extracting the thoughts and desires from the tops of our heads. In fact I believe that the only way to completely understand the dynamic of a family is to watch them at dinner.

I remember as a little child we had the most wonderful dinners. I would always walk away a little confused, my head still entangled in the crevices of some loaded remark.

“Did you have a good day today?”

“Yes. The tulips did not blossom as I expected them to.”

“Mmm, well I can’t really help on that matter... unfortunately.”

Usually my own dinners are slightly more droning. Last night, however, we had quite a disturbance; John received a paper cut from yesterday’s paper.

I have always rather enjoyed it when John hurts himself, not because I am a vengeful wife as one might suspect but rather because it gives me a chance to touch him. I make it a customary event to put on a show, to run whimpering to him in the expected demonstration of wifely concern and then to caress his flourey arms with the pretension of fear for his well-being. I will then use the rest of the night to free him of his pain, coincidentally relieving some of my own. Yes I admit; dramatising to fill voids has become my area of expertise.

Last night I was most successful – John actually allowed me to kiss his gaping paper-cut wound better. I could taste the bittersweet blood creep into the corners of my mouth. Isn’t it funny that blood tastes oddly familiar to all of us, like a person we see in the street and feel that we’ve met before.

The caring wife

To my accomplice,

It has been the strangest, most inexplicable of things – John has fallen into the habit of hurting himself lately. His injuries have always been small, small enough for my own concerned nursing to suffice but not small enough for him to take care of it himself.

Yesterday morning when darning his socks, I accidentally dropped a rather large and sharp needle on the wooden floor. Most unfortunately it happened to drop in such a way that the pointed end faced John's foot when I summoned him to try on his mended socks.

Then, the other night, the fork John loves to use on Wednesdays happened to fall into my clumsy hands whilst I was wielding the stone I use to sharpen knives. It was most unfortunate, resulting in a profuse emission of blood.

Oh poor John! He is becoming quite flustered. Only yesterday when I was trying to soothe his little finger after it was cut by an unusually sharp napkin edge, he reproached me most strenuously;

“Must you fuss so? I am no damsel in distress.”

I, myself, have been entirely satisfied in this turn of events, revelling in the unhabituated attention, the connection that has been forged.

Although, I am concerned as to his loss of blood – he might run out, having so little of it, and that would be a tragedy in which we would both partake.

A concerned wife

To my concerned therapist,

I have the most thrilling of news for you. I have finally learnt to enjoy my scones! I have the most brilliant additive, a secret ingredient, with the same effect as jam but so much better!

Last night at dinner, which I must say has become exponentially more entertaining lately, my carving knife happened to slip onto John's finger, just nipping off the fleshy bit at the top. My poor John's blood happened to dribble its way onto one of my freshly baked scones of the day, penetrating deep into its fleshy soul.

Now, I have always hated wasting food. It is a custom inbred in me by both mother and father to never have an overflowing garbage bin. Accordingly, I simply had to eat the sullied scone – of course trying to rid it of its stain first.

But it was not sullied at all! It was entirely delectable, a wonderful affair. Eating it was like holding John's hand and mine own at the same time. I could feel our very beings dancing in and out of the crevices of my moistened mouth.

It was scrumptious, absolutely scrumptious!

The satisfied wife

THE FUTURE COUCH

“No, no sweetheart, trust me. My patients value their time. They want to talk to me, just me,” issued a voice from behind the closed wooden door. John peered curiously around the screen that separated the patients’ area (or ‘Rest Room’ as it was helpfully labelled) from the threshold.

“Of course I don’t mean that! This is my place of work honey, you can’t be here at the moment!” The voice sounded desperate and slightly annoyed. “Yes, you know I love you. Now please, let me get back to my patients.”

The sound of a door opening was heard, echoing numbly through the bare room. John reeled backwards, just as the Doctor came around the corner. When he moved around the opaque screen, all he saw was John nonchalantly reading the morning paper.

“Hello, Mr Davis,” he said brightly. “How are we today?”

John grunted his reply and a small crease appeared between the Doctor’s long, furry eyebrows. He inclined his head, brow still furrowed, and moved backwards to let John pass into his office. John looked around carefully. It was empty, and there were no signs of a struggle or tantrum. When he and his wife had those kinds of arguments, a nuclear missile directed straight at the room wouldn’t have made the slightest difference.

“Please, sit down,” said the Doctor politely. John moved carefully over to the couch, strategically placed in the lightest part of the office. Although the leather was soft and supple from countless patients fidgeting, he found lying on it uncomfortable and awkward. He surveyed it for a moment, then decided to sit, rather than recline. The Doctor again looked at him curiously and this time chose to comment.

“Something is troubling you,” said the Doctor; a statement, not a question. John looked at him inquiringly, processing the sentence, then grunted that he felt ill.

“Why don’t you feel well, Mr Davis?” pressed the Doctor.

“I... I am not entirely sure,” said John, faltering and looking at the floor.

“Ah ha!” shouted the Doctor, half leaping from his chair. “By saying that it proves you mostly know what is wrong then! Please, share this information

and we will be able to move deeper into your... issues as our hour – five minutes of which is now gone – progresses.”

John’s face was slowly turning a crimson colour and beads of sweat were accumulating on his forehead. He looked at his shoes and tapped them together. He scratched his neck and then squirmed on the couch. He coughed a few times before speaking.

“What do you think love is?” John asked gruffly.

The Doctor paused in his note taking and peered at the man. After humming and stuttering for a while, mumbling something about “no direct questions,” he fingered a completely untouched writing pad and looked over at the man, taking his measure.

“What do you think love is?” he triumphantly asked.

John appeared confused. “I wouldn’t ask if I already knew,” he said, narrowing his eyes.

Looking pityingly at his blushing patient, the Doctor said, with the air of explaining something very simple to a child, “It doesn’t matter what I think it is. By asking me this question, you are subconsciously asking yourself!”

“No, I am asking you,” said John, looking up and speaking directly.

Smiling widely, the Doctor looked back down at his notes. “But I don’t know what you think love is,” he said, with a half-giggle, pleased by his own cleverness.

John began to look intensely frustrated. “I don’t know what I think it is,” he said, crossing and recrossing his legs.

“There must be a reason behind all of your questioning.” The Doctor looked up through his eyelashes and peered at the man keenly.

John looked sheepish and looked at his shoelaces. “Damn it! How do you always know? My wife left me this morning. She says she doesn’t need me anymore. She believes that there are more ‘cons than pros’ in our relationship.” He began shuffling his feet, the blush creeping up past his shirt collar.

The Doctor looked keenly at his pad, then seemed to realise that this was a sensitive issue. "Was she right?" he asked softly.

John, scarlet up to his chin, said, "Probably, but I never thought it would matter. I thought I was in love with her and she was in love with me. Isn't love supposed to be unconditional?"

The psychiatrist half laughed, apparently at the man's complete naivety. "Do you think that you are still in love with her?"

The blush was now in his hairline. "I don't know. Can you tell me?" John asked desperately.

The Doctor looked smug. "Of course I can," he said, laughing.

John looked surprised. "Really? But then why couldn't you tell me what love is?"

"Forgot the definition. Now I need you to roll up your sleeves so that I can get a blood sample." The Doctor began rummaging in his drawers and finally withdrew a thick needle, covered in plastic. He ripped this off triumphantly and began walking towards the distinctly nervous John, brandishing it like a sword.

John jumped up quickly and looked around, as if he was searching for a way out. As there wasn't one, he sat back down, looking like a cornered animal. "A blood sample?! How will that help?" he said, desperately.

The Doctor began rolling up his sleeves with a professional smugness affixed to his face. "Simple. The chemicals and hormones in your blood will tell me whether or not you are in love." He snorted slightly. "Trust me, I test myself at least once a week."

John looked puzzled. "But... but you aren't married. OUCH!"

"Thank you," said the Doctor complacently. He carefully transferred the rich, crimson blood into a small vial, walked out of the door and left John sitting alone on the leather couch.

Rubbing his now throbbing arm, John slipped off the couch and began wandering around the room. It had clearly been furnished to be as calming as possible. The walls had been plastered in a delicate ivory colour and the carpet, an inch thick, was a plush green. A polished wooden barometer hung on the wall, its slender arrow pointing to 'rain' although it was forty degrees

and sunny outside. Bookshelves lined the walls, bearing important titles in gold cursive. There were no family photos, no sign of any personal life. John bent closer to the shelves, giggling as he spotted *The Karma Sutra* wedged between two seemingly innocent titles.

John sauntered over to the Doctor's desk. Taking up a quarter of the room, it had a dominant stance, carved from solid oak and decorated with bronzed handles. The top was abnormally bare and organised, with three pens and a pencil lined up in precisely parallel lines, a stapler that was firmly perpendicular to these, and a laptop with a black screen that was humming away in the centre of the desk. As he turned away however, he noticed that one of the drawers was slightly ajar. He jiggled it, realising that something had been jammed in the hinges, hurriedly stuffed away. After a few moments, he worked it free. It was a tiny black USB, barely the size of his pinkie-finger. Written on top of it, in microscopic words, was

TRUE LOVE ©

and John's heart leapt into his throat. Looking furiously at the door, cursing the Doctor for keeping this from him, he silently turned back to the computer and pushed the USB roughly into the side of it. The screen lit up immediately.

LOADING YOUR CUSTOM CREATED WIFE NOW

John's eyes narrowed as the pixels in the screen all lit up and began to reconfigure themselves. As they finally joined themselves together, John stumbled backwards in shock.

"What the...?" he yelled, colliding painfully with the couch.

On the screen, lying down on a white-sheeted bed, was an extremely beautiful woman. Dressed in wisps of flimsy pink lingerie, she had an incredible body and even more perfect face. Long blonde hair was casually looped over her shoulder and her flawless complexion complemented sky blue eyes and pale red lips. And yet... there was something wrong with her. She was moving in an odd way, almost robotically, each movement precise.

Her underwear looked badly drawn on and one of her feet only had four toes. This made her giggling and wagging her fingers at John slightly unnerving.

“Hey there handsome,” she said, seductively, her voice unnaturally high.

“Who are you?” replied John, still in shock. He moved forward, the woman’s eyes watching him, and gently tapped the screen, accidentally swiping one of his fingertips over her chest.

GOING UP A SIZE

Immediately, her breasts began to swell and her bra grew accordingly. John jumped backwards in horror and the woman laughed.

The sound of the door closing made them both start, the woman actually tilting her head, trying to see who had entered. The Doctor walked in, whistling and fingering a long piece of paper with complicated figures printed upon it and titled: ‘Test Results’. He looked up and his wrinkled eyes widened with surprise.

“Oh, I see you have already met one another,” he said loudly. Then, in an undertone, he hissed to the woman, “I thought I told you that you weren’t to interact with my patients!”

The woman pouted her lip and her eyes welled with glistening tears. “He loaded me! I was just trying to be friendly! I didn’t mean to disobey you darling! You know I would never do that!”

The Doctor let out a long breath and looked at her adoringly, actually reaching out to stroke the computer screen, causing the woman to shriek with laughter and writhe on the bed in ecstasy. The Doctor laughed raucously and turned to John, a smile seeping over his lined face.

“May I present my wife,” he said, proudly.

John stared at him, his incredulity clearly outlined on his face. “Your... wife?” he said, hesitatingly.

“Yes indeed,” said the Doctor, staring at her, like a man seeing the sun. “Isn’t she the prettiest thing you ever saw?”

Clearly unsure about how he was supposed to act, John mumbled, “She is beautiful but –”

“And very understanding –” continued the Doctor.

John gulped. “I’m sure but –”

“And she will never cuckold me as long as we live,” proclaimed the Doctor happily.

“But she isn’t real!” John shouted.

At these words, the blood that usually coloured the Doctor’s sanguine cheeks vanished. He stumbled for a moment, swaying on the spot, before collapsing onto the leather couch. He lay motionless, gasping for air. The woman leapt up and began literally hitting the screen, as though trying to escape her technological cage. John was completely static for a moment before leaping up, snatching the computer off the desk and placing it in the Doctor’s trembling hands. At once, he knew his instinct had been correct. The Doctor began stroking the woman’s body with his wrinkled fingers, while she smiled at him, concern mixed with pleasure. Once he had calmed a little, she began speaking to him gently.

“He didn’t mean it sweetie,” she said softly. “We know our love isn’t fake – it is real and beautiful. I fulfil all criteria that a wife could. Our connection is something special. Think about your test the other day. It came back positive didn’t it?”

The Doctor looked at her gratefully, then fumbled in his suit pocket, producing a long silk handkerchief. Mopping his forehead, he said, “You always know exactly what to say, darling.”

“Of course I do,” she simpered.

“Now I feel better.”

“Because of me?” said the woman, suddenly sharp. “Or did you figure out your problems on your own?”

“On my own.”

“Perfect.”

The Doctor looked at her admiringly, and then let his eyes focus on John, who had been watching this exchange with his mouth agape.

The Doctor nodded to him. “You see? Open communication, that’s the trick.”

Without appearing to know what he was doing, John turned slowly and settled himself onto the hard wooden chair opposite the couch and began rolling the Doctor's pen between his callused fingers.

"Are you in love with your wife?" said John interestedly.

The Doctor peered at him curiously. "What a silly thing to ask," he said, twitching. "Of course I am."

"Were you always?" asked John, wondering whether the question was offensive.

Far from taking offense however, the Doctor widened his eyes pensively. "Well no, not always. When I first received the kit, she was totally androgynous, no breasts at all. But after that was fixed, I realised that I had definitely bought the wrong model. I had gotten the newest edition, which was the 'Positive-thinking Wife'. But she annoyed me so much that I just couldn't stand her anymore. She kept saying 'New Year, new life! Out with the old! Let's throw away all that is useless! Yes, let's purge our minds of all negativity.'"

The Doctor shuddered, the full horror of that time still fresh in his mind. "I finally had to track down an older model. I found her in an antique store – a real first edition 'Freudian Wife' – one that listened rather than talked! Apparently they had gone out of fashion and been wiped. But the funny man who owned the store had kept a copy, just in case."

The woman, who had been watching them, lying on her little virtual bed, interrupted, saying, "And we are very happy together, aren't we darling?"

"We are," said the Doctor. "She has more of my mother in her. You see she takes care of all my needs. We can spend all day together, so that I am never alone, she looks after me when I feel sick and best of all, she will never leave."

Absentmindedly, John reached for the pad of paper lying next to the wooden chair and began scribbling on it. "So you don't mind that she isn't a real person?" he asked, probingly.

The Doctor sat up straight on the couch, staring at John. His mouth quivered and his eyes were completely devoid of expression. Like two magnets however, he turned to look at the woman. His expression softened, and they smiled lovingly at each other. John sighed and moved over to the

door, wrenching it ajar and placing a foot outside the door, turning back in time to see the Doctor pick up the strip of paper he had discarded on the floor. John's eyes narrowed at it.

"Am I in love?" he asked, so softly he wondered if the Doctor even heard him.

The Doctor looked up at John and walked over to where he was standing. He held out his hand. John took it and immediately glanced up curiously.

"Time's up," the Doctor said, shutting the door behind him. John heard laughter in the next room, human and non-human mixing together. It sounded like music. He looked down at his hand, clenched tight since the Doctor had pressed something into it. He unfurled his fingers and stared at the thin black USB in his palm with printed letters saying

TRUE LOVE (V.2.1) ©

John gaped at it, then back at the door. He considered barging back in and throwing it in the Doctor's face, throwing it at the door, tossing it out the window. But instead, he placed it carefully in his pocket and hurriedly left the office.



I D

'The ego is not master in its own house.'

Sigmund Freud

February 19 2011, 9:31pm

Wheezing, resting against the melting skies, it is stroked by purring pines as they whisper of life against its weeping panes. Still. It soaks in its own solitude; oblivious to the bustling pavements, teeming with magazine faces lit with grainy lamp light. It ignores the streets alive with the shrill of children darting between groaning men grimacing over heavy parcels. Women daintily lift their emerald skirts against the tide of foot traffic and pull silken wraps across their chests as children with grubby faces push nearer. Creaking carriage wheels load the pavements with murky black water as horses toss their heads defiantly, champing against their bits. Boys in russet bowler hats and tattered rags knotted around their waists leap from the road as a barber, frowning over the price of pork selling at the butcher's next door, mutters in disapproval. A beggar gnaws at raw potatoes and hisses as a scrawny dog rubs against his knee and lopes to sit by the neighbouring oak door, slapping against its splintered frame as customers are greeted with drunken brawls and friends' wet kisses, tainted by the golden beer drooled from their crooked teeth.

A silhouette cowers behind three smooth wooden chairs: lacking all decadence and yet to experience the excited squeaks of splintered wood as patients leap at good news. It stalks the narrow hallway, squinting and shading its eyes from the glare seeping from the sliding doors which creak open of their own accord, shuttering glimpses of girls flicking golden curls from waxy grey foreheads and with fingers to their lips: "Hush, don't wake the patient."

"Lie down and just relax for me." The lighting of the drawing room is warm, illuminating the dark oil paintings. It casts shadows of the table, its four legs covered tightly with thick shawls, and a cobwebbed chandelier against

the peeling, maroon wallpaper. The fireplace flickers lazily and plays with a man's silver hair as he leans downward, pressing his hands against the youth's shivering forehead. His lip slants stubbornly as he leans and blows heavily from a nose erupting from his low cheekbones; air winding through the cut of his beard. His face twitches as he wriggles tiny round spectacles into position, magnifying deep hazelnut eyes.

The patient screws his eyelids closed and shudders, breaths wracking his chest in monstrous waves. He rubs his head against lavish rugs strewn over his bed; red and blue flowers of mathematical precision, alive with angles, shapes, Egyptian swirls. He drinks in the heady lavender fumes of the velvet maroon and vomit khaki of the cushions.

"Now there's really no need to squint so," he adds annoyed. "Just... sleep."

February 20 2011, 5:54am

Cl-chuck. Cl-chuck. Cl-chuck. His molars were being ground to smooth pebbles with inhuman speed as he clenched his jaw. Spasms wracked his body, sending him sprawling across the bed, casting nightmare shadows morphing with the speed of his movements, flickering with the movements of the waning fire. His fists opened, closed, his yellowed nails biting into his palm.

"Wake him, wake him now!" The elderly man strode from the fireplace and knocked the golden haired girl from his patient's side. He grabbed the youth's temples and forced open his eyes: riddled with electric red veins sprouting from black pupils, staring lifelessly. "Up! Now!" he screamed, his limbs taugt and strained; blue veins bulging from translucent flesh. "Wake him!" he shouted and pointed a gnarled finger to the girl cowering against the heaving floorboards. "He must remember!"

The youth's eyelids fluttered and he lifted his arm splayed over the side of the bed to swipe away the blotches crowding his vision. The puzzle of colours formed themselves into the intensity of the old man's glare, and the youth keeled backwards, alarmed.

"Come boy. Tell me, what did you see?"

February 19 2011, 10:02pm

The creatures were crawling with eyes, glaring, swerving, blinking over their fronts and backs. A lion, an ox, one with the face of a man and a flying eagle: all spreading their six wings, wailing and gnashing their teeth. The smoke of incense, mingling with desperate prayers, filled the hall. The clouds were trembling from the heated thunder of hooves and the sky was scattering sickly black hues, pungent with the stench of burning corpses. The balmy shades of the sun were bleeding to the chill of blue fire. The baying wind heralded his arrival.

“New boy,” an angel slid its shimmering robe over the brink of a cloud and plucked at its harp lazily.

“Suppose you want to come in then,” the lion yawned.

“Getting a bit of *déjà vu*: I swear he’s that other guy who came an hour earlier...”

“Rather me leave?” The youth felt adrenaline coursing through his veins and acid burning his tongue to a point. “Could actually accomplish something constructive while you revolting morons decide to admit me into your exclusive club or not,” he snapped.

“Huh, already experiencing the ‘Slip’,” the ox winked. “Oi, Leana; your shift. You know the drill.”

The lion stretched and slid its tongue over the canines bucking over its bulging, charcoal black lips, sucking and clicking against its incisors. It hissed calmly, “You see that peak?” He swung his tail towards the harsh outline of a cliff, biting and scissoring its way through the downy layers of cloud. “The Thanatos Pinnacle. Take this to the summit.” He nudged a scroll with seven seals, six broken, into the youth’s palm.

“New toy?” he smirked. “Sorry boys but I’d rather you do your own dirty work.”

“Not just any plaything, mate,” the eagle hissed. “You’ll know when its value is anything less.”

The youth reached and confidently tugged at the red ribbon clutching the last clasp, which slithered off, causing the end of the heavy parchment to tumble out of its case.

A sick man's delusive dreams
Naked, he sought the camp of those who desired nothing.
Alas, the fleeting years slip by
A shipwreck of his fortunes.

He scrunched the paper and shoved it into his pocket.
"It'll take you on the road of Eros," the ox nodded.

* * * * *

The thrill of a mission was crumbling from his limbs and falling softly against the calm trot of the clouds against his heavy footsteps. There were curious stares tumbling like spotlights from angels flittering the long way home, precariously balancing chests, goblets and slender rods. He sighed at the whispers gliding across the sweat sucking at his shoulders and the touse of his shallow breaths against his chin. Silence. The thump of the scroll against his leg was the only reminder of his task as the pinnacle continued to waver: left, right, left, mirroring his focus, left, right, left.

February 20 2011, 6:22am

"Just stop right there for me will you?" The old man was scribbling frantically against a notebook, his glasses fogging and beads of sweat glistening on his nose. "Quite a fascinating tale, son. These wild creatures you describe of course symbolise your sexual passion: the lion particularly a symbol for your desire of power?"

"But –"

"Oh nothing to be ashamed of, son. Slips of the mind happen in dreams," the old man winked. "You mentioned some 'Road of Eros' and the 'Thanatos Pinnacle'?"

"Yes, sir," the youth, grasping at the change of topic, had his hand half raised, imitating the swaying motion of the ox's mighty head as it nodded towards the grey road cutting across the clouds. "Yes, the 'Road of Eros': I'm quite sure that is what he called it... and I was to seek the 'Thanatos Pinnacle'."

“Eros: the Greek primordial god of sexual love and beauty; also worshipped as a fertility deity.” The old man stared hard at the youth who blushed. He tapped the ash from his pipe impatiently onto the desk and one of the girls bobbed forwards, providing a tray.

“Just a name, sir,” he mumbled.

“Thanatos,” he waved away the comment and continued passionately. “In my studio we call it the drive towards death, destruction, forgetfulness.” He talked as if repeating from a dictionary: he was familiar with the term.

“Oh but the dream goes on!” the youth stammered and frowned in concentration.

February 19 2011, 10:25pm

Hell calls hell. The inky black words were etched into the scroll as he pulled it from his pocket and clutched it to his chest. The harsh glare of sunlight had faded to the slap of the moon’s blue chill, casting a midnight veil across the horizon and the stars. Voices lapped against his ears. Frost clung to his shoulders. Ghost chains strapped themselves to his ankles and his feet dragged. Hands clasped his stomach, pulling it to his feet and palms pressed against his ears, cheeks, eyes. His footsteps echoed the crazed beating of his heart. The Road of Eros. The Road of Eros. Darkness had splintered all sense of direction, like a child swiping at an intricate jigsaw. The scroll pulsed urgently in his palm and warmed his chilled fingers.

* * * * *

The first thing that hit him was the same greasy smell of human sweat, the same sickly green light spilt from lines upon lines of dens as he found himself lying on a floor muddy and mad with chaos. He could just depict, by the crumbling light, the scroll which had rolled from his palm and lay less than a foot away. Flames cast grey against the black. He pushed himself from the ground with sudden energy.

“Lost little one?”

Fists clenched the scream and grappled against his throat as he turned to stare into the leering face of an angel.

“Where am I? Get your hands off me. Don’t touch that.”

“Hush. Merely at your service, my Lord, I’m sorry if I have offended you with proposed guidance. Follow me closely and I will lead you to the exit.”

“I can make my own way thank you very much,” the youth hissed, snatching the scroll greedily from the angel’s hand. “Tunnels have one entrance, one exit.”

He could feel the angel’s warm glow seeping from his skin with every step: a cowering lamp casting pockets of light which fed the famished black of the tunnel.

His skin crawled and his heart raced, each pulse reverberating against his eardrums, as he read the plaques above each prison. Luxuria. Sons clinging to their mothers’ breasts. Beds, with thin velvet blankets, severing visible limbs from covered bodies, giggling without shame. Slender rods strewn against the mottled stone of each prison floor. Gula. Children; their teeth sharpened like splintered glass tearing into flesh. Their faces erupting with diseased sores, like hot caramel popping in a pan. The stench of the severed head of an ox laying at their crimson feet and the gurgle of blood sliding down their throats. Avaritia. Beautiful boys in kingly furs, staring transfixed at portraits of men, their skin sagging and riveted with age, their veins greying, their arms scarred by defeat and fingers gnarled with unsuppressed longing. He rapidly looked away as one of the boys turned to him, grinning with white teeth and all the dimples of youth, with the glassy eyes and the intensity of obsession. Acedia. One man. Alone. Still. Bored. Uninterested. Possessed. It was as if he had been born from the icy stone of the wall into which he leant fiercely. His hands clasped intensely, stifling the tremors. Ira. Men hurling themselves at each other: kicking, biting, spitting. One clinging onto the back of the other, clawing his way to his victim’s eyes. Invidia. A man sitting alone and painted white by a spotlight; his eyes alight with desire and craving. Muttering plans, he picked obsessively and unsatisfied at leathering skin, scarred with thin craters and gnarled like pork fat crisping in a pan. The youth hurried onwards, squinting at the last plaque: Superbia, and halted to run his eye over the murky depths of the last den. It was empty.

“Their minds are uneasy with hopelessness, their feelings uncontrollable, their desires insatiable, their minds sick with self love,” the cold voice blew

against his skull. The scroll continued to pulse calmly, steadily, contentedly.

The steady stream of chaos; unorganised, unconscious, unlimited pleasure was dribbling into murky silence as they approached the end. The glow of dawn blew pinks, blues and purples across the yawning cavern of the tunnel's mouth.

Thanatos, the scroll read.

February 20 2011, 7:18am

“Oh, so now you are about to enter Thanatos?” the old man smirked. “About time! About to run over some poor angel with a chariot, are we?” The youth laughed half-heartedly against the old man's throaty chortle. “That's interesting,” he tapped at a scribble on his notebook with the back of his pen. “Hell calls Hell: one misstep leads to another. That probably refers to the little adventure you had in the tunnel... which you described as ‘muddy’?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, would you agree that we could interpret that as ‘covered in faeces’? In my studio, we see ‘faeces’ as a metaphor for ‘a wasteful use of important qualities in one's life’. Maybe, after this session, you would like to re-evaluate your natural talents: perhaps put them to some use to improve this chaotic society,” he shrugged. “That's up to you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You mentioned that small flames in the tunnel also cast ‘pockets of light which fed the famished black of the tunnel’? You would agree that this is a metaphor for your thirsty sexual desire being repressed today? Hmmm,” the interrogator allowed his nod to speak for his patient.

“Moving on...” the youth stammered embarrassed, glancing at a pocket watch which he rapidly snapped shut, lowering his flustered cheeks.

“Yes, moving along. Do you have any idea what those words on those plaques meant?”

“Luxuria, Gula, Avaritia, Acedia, Ira, Invidia, Superbia,” the youth mumbled.

“Yes, yes: it's all well and dandy to repeat them,” the old man rolled his eyes with impatience, “but do you know what they actually mean? Do the seven deadly sins ring a bell?”

“Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Wrath, Envy, Pride.”

”Precisely right! And what you saw in each of those caves was a rather graphic representation of each. Hell calls Hell. Interesting.”

“I agree too!” the youth added quickly as the old man flicked up his eyes towards his blank expression, unimpressed.

”What did fascinate me was that vision of yours of the two naked partners. Were you in any way embarrassed when you looked upon this scene?”

“Oh, yes, certainly,” the youth nodded vigorously and said with practised conviction, “how shameful!”

“Hmm, and you found that the people of the dream generally seemed oblivious?”

“Yes, yes, totally.”

“Well, generally I interpret the presence of nakedness in any dream as a desire to leave behind shame and restriction. Now, don’t feign ‘innocence’, boy. Nobody can blame you during these misguided times,” he stared dramatically out of the window, “...and you also talked a lot about fingernails,” he mumbled distantly.

“Fingernails, sir?”

“Yes! All that ‘clawing’ and ‘clasping of hands’ and those ‘gnarled fingers’. Boy, you never stop to amaze me with all that you have forgotten since telling me less than ten minutes ago! Fingernails, son, are dream symbols for condoms!”

“Condoms?” he spluttered.

“Not actual condoms, you fool. These condoms are metaphors for the actions you take in everyday life to protect yourself from sensitive situations, or emotions. More precisely: to repress sensitive emotions.”

“Is it necessary for everything in my dream, from faeces to fingernails, to be related to sex?” he shouted, exasperated.

“Why, don’t blame me. It was your dream!” the old man replied indignantly. “Though I must admit that I find this all rather intriguing,” he smiled calmly. “Please, continue!”

February 19 2011, 2:52pm

The slow stream of angels progressed to a steady bustle as the clouds yawned and stretched. The stares didn't cease.

He looked up and squinted again to the horizon, the hazy outline of the summit had turned golden. Four hundred... three hundred metres away?

"The Thanatos Pinnacle," he sighed. "And all you've been is a bloody pain in the arse," he glared at the scroll and waited for some sort of flowing script to imbed itself against the blotched parchment. He lingered at the mouth of the cave, peering at the peak, shutting his eyes as the voices continued to drone piercingly into his skull, turning back as, suddenly, the scroll started to glow excitedly. He was torn. The scroll burned brighter, vying for attention with the golden peak. The voices hummed competitively and started to fade. The parchment was unbearably warm and heavy and he was glad to rid himself of the burden, flinging it from his blistering palm. He backed into the comforting cool of the tunnel.

The last seal broke and the thinned parchment spilt from the casing:
 He is doubly destroyed who perishes by his own arms
 He drinks poison from a cup of gold.

February 20 2011, 8:08am

"You backed into the tunnel?" the old man was leaning forward, the tip of his tongue sliding over his sweaty lip. "No, no! You succumbed!"

"Succumbed..."

"The last empty prison! Your wish for power! The lion! Your pride!" The old man had leapt from his chair with surprising energy and was jolting his arms against the heavy air with each word. The chair tottered and finally fell to the wooden floorboards and the pen rolled towards the youth's feet.

"But I'm not looking for power, sir —"

"And don't you see?" The old man snatched up his notebook and hauled the chair upright, sinking into the velvet cushion pensively. "The scroll and those voices humming in your head? Your Id: the scroll and your Ego!"

"Id? Ego?" The youth was shaking his head; his lips parted in frustration.

“Your Ego, your sense of self: the organised, realistic part of your mind, the values which have been drilled into you since your birth! Your conscience!”

“And the Id? The scroll?”

“The Id: the part of your mind which is totally unconscious and has absolutely no contact with reality. The part of you which follows your desires wholeheartedly! The scroll.... pulsing excitedly before you backed into the tunnel...”

“So is this the one positive point of my dream?”

“Well, since you returned into the sinful tunnel, you broke the last seal on the scroll... ‘He is doubly destroyed who perishes by his own arms’... humans are nothing to their desires...”

“I’ve had enough!” the youth shouted. “I refuse to be part of your crazed experiments, your blatant lies, your stupid conclusions.” He rose and snatched his coat from the attending girl who averted her eyes shyly. He stopped at the doorway, turning to speak but fell silent as he watched the old man still scribbling by the light of the sun which was now finally streaming in sheets across the dull room.

“Mr Cartol,” he yawned and stretched laboriously as if they were parting from a humid afternoon tea on the veranda. “Will you take the trouble to send in Mr Anderson for me on your way out?”

LOOKS LIKE TEEN SPIRIT

The Revealer

I turn everything around, and yet I do not move.

I always tell the truth.

People argue that I'm deaf, dumb and blind.

But I'm not. I see everything. I hear everything. I'm just good at pretending, that's all.

I see you brush your teeth.

I see you analysing yourself naked as you get out of the shower.

I see you caking your face.

I see you flexing.

I see you at your prettiest.

And yet, you always insist that you are not pretty enough.

You practise your speeches in front of me. Whether they are for school, a 21st birthday party, the Academy Awards or confronting someone.

You talk to me.

Amber

Every night, before Amber rubs cream all over her notoriously dry-skinned body, she gazes at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. She can't help but notice the stretch marks covering her upper thighs that she carefully conceals, with board shorts at the beach, and tight black and blue skirts on Saturday nights, from judging eyes. She can't help but notice her slightly unshaven legs, and curses herself for forgetting to book a wax appointment with her friend, Jessica. She daren't go alone, no that would be too embarrassing. She can't help but notice her swelling backside and shrinking breasts. And

she can't help but convince herself that tomorrow she will start a new diet. One that will involve celery sticks, nuts, fruit and the occasional visit to the toilet bowl.

Amber's parents, Melissa and Arthur, don't see it coming. Not sweet Amber, who refused to wear a bra until she was fourteen. Not sweet Amber who plays the piano every day. Not sweet Amber who rereads Harry Potter on the weekends and regards Kurt Cobain as the greatest singer of all time.

Now Amber spends most of her time in the clinic. Although they were supportive at first, her friends forget to text her, stop inviting her out on the weekends and never remember to email her the schoolwork she's missed. Melissa and Arthur blame themselves and tabloids and bikini models and the school's self-esteem program.

Thomas

Every morning, before school, Tom spends at least two minutes looking in the mirror. He hates his acne. It looks like fermenting tomato paste smeared across his cheeks. His parents and friends and teachers act as though they don't notice. But he knows they're just being polite. Especially because whenever he meets someone new, they can't help but stare at his jawline.

His mother constantly purchases skin care and beauty products from the supermarket. He daren't do it himself, no that would be too embarrassing. He can't imagine what the guys at school would say if they found out.

"Mate, what's that shit on ya face?" they occasionally joke. He laughs along with them because that's how his parents taught him to respond.

"Pretend it doesn't hurt," his father Billy, used to say encouragingly, "and then one day it won't."

But Tom is still waiting for that day.

There are certain types of medication that one can get, in order to significantly reduce the effects of acne. Doctors will only ever recommend these antibiotics in severe circumstances. Thomas' circumstance is considered to be severe. And so, he begins his daily dosage. Just two pills a day, washed down with a glass of orange juice at breakfast. Easy.

But as you know, nothing is ever as easy as it seems.

Tom's muscles begin to disintegrate slowly. He becomes tired all the time. He falls sick at the slightest shift in temperature. He's moody. He yells and screams and sobs.

Looking at himself becomes even more painful, because he knows what his sudden beauty has cost him. Every night before bed, he forces himself to stare into his mirror, telling himself that tomorrow will be different. Tomorrow he will not swallow two pills with a glass of orange juice.

But tomorrow never comes.

Gemma

Gemma looks at herself in the mirror at least seven times a day. She enjoys staring deep into her bright blue eyes, flicking her soft blonde hair over her shoulder and pouting her lips in a way that only certain people, with a certain degree of arrogance, can.

She constantly aspires to be better than those around her. For instance, she was the first girl in her year to be given a car. Naturally it was a pink convertible the same shade of Elvis Presley's Cadillac and the same type of BMW that Robert De Niro drives. Her parents, Martha and Elliot, offered to buy her an island instead, but she declined saying that displaying wealth in such an extravagant way would be too embarrassing.

There is no denying that Gemma is incredibly attractive, but there is one slight problem with her body that upsets and frustrates her every single time she looks at the mirror: her breasts. They are simply not big enough.

But these days, there are all sorts of people who are paid to fix those slight physical imperfections. And Gemma knows deep down that at the drop of a hat she could be flaunting the perkier, roundest and most beautiful breasts in the world.

All it takes is one phone call. One appointment. And one surgery.

The surgery runs very smoothly. It's not long before Gemma is able to parade around the school locker room naked after swimming in P.E., with every girl hating her simultaneously. She has the attention of every male at a party. Actually she soon discovers that her breasts capture the attention of any male, anywhere... bus drivers, her piano teacher, her principal... even

the school gardeners. Everyone stares at her chest wherever she goes. No one looks properly at her face. Even her new boyfriend, Harry, forgets what colour her eyes are. He's just so fascinated with her boobies, like a little toddler with a new toy.

But Gemma soon realises that either she isn't taken seriously, or she is immediately disliked. And that it does not matter how many layers of jumpers or sports bras she wears, or how carefully she drapes scarves over her shoulders – they're always there... as insistent as ever.

The Revealer

Some of you will argue that I'm prejudiced.

But let me assure you, I'm not.

Remember I provide you with the image.

My job ends there.

It's up to you to interpret what you see.

And whether or not you'll be happy with the truth,

I'll always give it to you.



GOthic

And they all knew it too. The crowd was suspended, their hope flickering as the faded Audi wavered on the brink of the cliffs, jagged rocks crumbling all around it as the car slid further downwards. There were no calls for help within the car, no cries of consolidation from the watching crowd. They were all waiting, watching, breathing as one, with the only sounds the crashing of the waves and the tumble of rocks as they raced each other to the edge of the cliff. Then, the car sighed with relief and tipped downwards, its wheels spinning in a frozen moment of sinister beauty. Time and gravity remembered who they were, and the lump of metal arched through the air, ripples of discontent spilling from the cavernous blue monster as it swallowed the car whole.

* * * * *

“Don’t touch me! I’m not your little girl anymore!” Paul flinched, his forehead crumpling back into lines of misery as he placed his hand back on the steering wheel.

“Home wasn’t the same without you, Mila,” Paul said. She refused to look at him, still seething with the humiliation of being found sleeping under sheets of cardboard in a discarded alley. A silence settled over them, and her face throbbed with the memories of the night before. She gingerly reached up to touch her eye, a brilliant purple splotch surrounding it. Peeking over to her right, her eyes softened as she watched his hands clench and unclench around the steering wheel. She really had missed him for those three weeks, and his callused hands had always been there to brush dirt off her knees and pick her up when she fell. Sensing her gaze, he turned and smiled at her, his face unwrinkling.

“Do you still have your necklace?” he asked steadily. Mila tugged the neck of her shirt sideways to reveal the thin chain around her neck, the silver cross tingling her skin as the cold metal pressed against her heart. He opened his mouth to say something, but distracted, the car crashed through a wooden barrier and hurdled towards the cliff, momentum driving it downwards. Her heartbeat filled her ears as Paul grappled with the wheel, and her limbs froze as she took in the churning waters below.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she opened them again, to find she was still being forced back by her seatbelt as the car slid down. She looked over at her Dad, his face contorted, and was overwhelmed with the urge to reach over and take his hand, but the moment was lost as the car gave up, and the choppy grey water loomed closer and knocked her out on the dashboard.

* * * * *

She clawed her way back into consciousness as the salty, metallic smell overpowered her nostrils, sending a tingle of pleasure through her body. It was to her immediate right. And warm. She reached for it, her mouth opening in anticipation. Laughter bounced around her, and her eyes snapped open as she strained against cords tying her down. Her eyes darted down her body and saw the thick ropes binding her to a stone table, then flickered around as she searched for the sources of laughter. She tried to move her head, then choked back a scream as a pair of black eyes drilled into hers, framed by a high forehead and cheekbones and lush pink lips that were mesmerizingly beautiful. Silence pressed on the room and the woman's mouth opened, revealing a dazzlingly white set of teeth as the icy eyes remained fixed on hers. Her voice clipped the air.

"Nice of you to join us. Now get yourself out of these ropes."

Mila's mouth opened in confusion, glancing back down at her bound body.

"Do you think I'm being a bit... heartless?" Giggles erupted from around the room. The joke sank in and tremors racked Mila's body as her body revolted. She had no heartbeat. The stillness was eerie, and her head whirred frantically, reassessing her body.

"No heartbeat. Better smell, better eyesight, more strength, faster. And of course, you need to drink blood." The woman listed it off monotonically, her eyes glinting down at Mila and absorbing her reaction. Mila closed her eyes, taking huge gulps as she tried to process everything. The metallic smell was even stronger and she snapped her eyes back open, looking for the source.

"No blood until you escape," the woman said in a sing-song voice. A

hand was clawing at her insides, craving the blood, and Mila frantically tried to wriggle out of the ropes to reach the cup next to her. The woman gazed down at her then she disappeared from her vision and the sound of heels clicking against stone floor rang around the room.

“She’s pretty, this one. She’ll come in useful – there’s no doubt she’ll be able to bring out their true selves with some makeup and tighter clothes.” Fear washing over her, Mila concentrated on the pressure on her body then pulled, the ropes snapping as she sat up on the table. Hundreds of eyes stared back at her, shiny red lips and hair all around. The woman with black eyes, Clary, who had clearly just been addressing them, turned and looked Mila up and down, who began to tremble as the glowing eyes stared at her.

“Well that wasn’t so hard now, was it? The rules are simple. We only drink the blood of men. Men can never be given the option to live or die; only women. Any woman who hesitates when offered to join us dies. Men are vermin; vermin that corrupt the women of today. Our mission is to save as many women as possible from male corruption, and congratulations for being our youngest member!” Applause thundered around the room as Mila sat frozen on the table, overwhelmed with the sense of unity. The women started to leave, and Clary tapped back to Mila.

“You’re coming with me tonight. I’m showing you how it’s done.” She looked Mila up and down.

“Now drink your blood. I warmed it up for you.”

* * * * *

A shiver of excitement rippled down her back as Mila perched on a tree, balancing easily despite its fragility. Her eyes were fixed on the club, and groups of stumbling celebrators tumbling sporadically into taxis perched hungrily on the sidewalk. She leaned forward eagerly, then fell back as a raucous group was spat out of the club and swallowed by the yellow beasts. Mila glanced down at her watch, the moment steadily ticking closer. A glow of joy washed over her as she took in the sleek leather clothes that hugged her body. She looked good, and she knew it, her mouth tugging into a smile as she thought of the overflowing wardrobes filled with tight, glamorous clothing. She could hear the sound of their voices and her eyes flicked back

to the club as a giggling group of men and women emerged, and proceeded to walk down the street. A hand burst into the air, waving at the stars, and Mila jumped from the tree, landing crouched in a pile of leaves. She walked after the group, which had disappeared into one of the alleys spilling from the main road.

She rounded the corner and there, huddled on the floor in the yellowed alley were the two men and their girlfriends, their faces contorted into expressions of fear. The coven leered down at them; their faces were illuminated with malice against the shadows as Clary arched forward and yanked one of the men from the ground, dwarfing him even as he towered over her. A gust of wind raced past Mila, stirring garbage, leaves and the cloying scent of sweat into the air, whilst at the same time the clouds covered the moon, shielding it from the impending sight. Distracted, Mila almost missed the kiss. She shivered at the terrible beauty, as she heard Clary's teeth tear into his neck and watched his body arc to the floor as the venom seeped through his body. Clary gazed down at the man in contempt, delicately dabbing her mouth with a white lace handkerchief.

"What did you do?" squeaked one of the women on the ground, her body frozen in shock. The whole procedure had taken less than 30 seconds.

"Gave him what he deserved. We know how you got those bruises – and now it's never going to happen again." Clary smiled lazily. "So are you with us, or against us?" The woman's eyes bulged with shock, and looking at the broken figure next to her, she leapt up with a yowl of distress. The coven converged on her, a muffled scream escaping before the woman fell, still and pale, to the floor. One of the girls tugged a machine from behind a trash can and hooked it up to the woman, bright red liquid coursing through transparent tubes. Clary clicked her fingers and the other man was torn from the woman's grasp, his eyes closing and his body crumpling in defeat as the procedure was repeated. Clary turned and caught sight of Mila, holding onto the wall.

"What are you doing over there?" she called. "Come closer, I want you to see this." As Mila stepped closer, the man fell limply and the only sound was the sobbing of the woman huddled on the ground.

"With, or against?" Clary probed.

“Wi-wi-th” stuttered the shaking woman. Clary lifted her hand, and the other women converged once against, the woman falling to the ground with a thump.

* * * * *

“Why did you kill her? I thought she wanted to be with you.” Mila’s fear bubbled over; the entire scene had taken less than five minutes, and now the bodies were weighed down at the bottom of the ocean, discarded with a ruthless brutality.

“Oh, she did. But if they can’t even stutter out yes, they’re not worthy of it. And did you see the way she was clinging onto her abusive boyfriend? Puh-lease, why would we want that?” Clary laughed and tossed her shimmering waterfall of hair.

“But what about me? Why did you choose me then?” Fear was threatening to overwhelm her now as she thought of the ease of the killings.

“It’s lucky that I saw the bruises on your face before your car fell into the water, otherwise I never would have bothered to get my hair wet.” Clary’s high pitched laugh burst free.

“As soon as I saw them, I knew your Dad had done it. And I couldn’t let all that hate against him go to waste.” Mila tried to object, but her mind snapped her mouth closed. The bruises on her face had come from a street fight with another girl: she’d tried to take her necklace. Her Dad had never laid a finger on her in his life; if anything, her Mum had been the one that had forced her to run away. Paul had always been too weak to stop her. Her hands stroked her neck, the familiar chain of the necklace comforting her. She pulled the chain out of her top and looked at the cross, her hands trembling as she tried not to betray her mutinous thoughts.

“Cl-Cl-ary? Why haven’t I been burned by this?” Clary screeched with delight.

“Been reading a bit too much *Dracula*, I see. This is the 21st century sweetheart. No one gives a rat’s arse about religion anymore; why the hell would it affect us? No, the worst thing we’ve probably got going now is cameras, every bloody person has one and it’s a nuisance when we’re trying to stake someone out. Now that you’ve seen us in action, it’s time for you

to have a little fun tomorrow night. We tried to get someone like your Dad, who's been a bit too easy with his hands, but they're awfully popular at the moment and we haven't staked out some new ones yet. We've staked out a 'man', if he can even be called that." She scoffed and spat on the floor, just missing her suede heels.

"The newspapers say he allegedly tried to take advantage of a woman, but we all know 'allegedly' only has one meaning. It's disgusting, the way they try to defend themselves when they're reeking of guilt. It'll be fun, though! The first one is always the best one: I can still remember the rush it gave me!" Clary smiled, satisfaction snaking across her face. Mila forced a smile back, thinking of her Dad's hands clenched around the steering wheel.

* * * * *

"We'll be back to pick you up after we get some dinner. Have fun, and be careful!" The car door slammed and the Porsche slid away, leaving Mila standing in the rain outside the house. She turned and watched the car speed off, with memories of her first day of school resurfacing as the rain battered her. Only before, her Dad had pulled a bright red poncho from the boot and she had run towards him squealing with delight. Thunder boomed and the memory vanished as hailstones began condemning her. She felt only a numbness that the cold had nothing to do with, yet thinking of Clary's speed in the alley, she marched towards the house, the heavy clouds weighing down on her. The doorhandle felt icy in her grip, and turning it, she was surprised to feel it move and shudder open. Instantly, the smell of her father's cologne hit her, the smell bringing back a thousand memories.

What if...? She didn't let herself finish the thought. Despite herself, her mouth watered at the smell, before her eyes grazed a picture of a chubby blonde baby, fists waving in the air. Taking a deep breath, the smell of cologne was strongest somewhere to her right, and she steeled herself with the vision of Clary. She marched towards the room; she knew what she had to do.



THE NIGHT-TIME VISITOR

The crinkled brown package leaned casually on the front entrance of Gracie's new home. No postman had heralded its arrival so when Gracie unfastened her front door it fell with a metallic clank on the stony floor before her. Ejaculating a shriek, Gracie pulled back in alarm. A moment passed and she laughed at her amplified reaction. She knelt down to examine this unexpected object; it was some sort of package which read simply:

To Grace Baker
16 Harte Street, Eynsford

Besides these few words, there was no information to direct Gracie's mind as to whom the sender was. Peculiar, she thought, but there was naught to be done about that. Since the object in hand was, after all, specified for Gracie, she wasted no time in tearing away the brown paper which enveloped it. Far from anything she had expected, what lay inside was a magnificent oil painting. Sparkling with green, pink, blue and cream hues the painting was generally cheerful and struck Gracie as a remarkably fitting addition to the bare wall in her bedroom. It depicted what appeared to be some sort of garden party – children crawled under the table, mouths full of cherry cake while youthful women laughed on the lawn, a little dog chased butterflies in the foreground; there was no one else. That's a lie, Gracie realised, there peering from the top window of the house in the background was a ghostly face. It glared sadly at the joyful scene in the garden and Gracie could almost hear it sigh. Don't upset yourself now, she said to herself and dismissed any more lingering thoughts.

After supper, Gracie carried the painting to her room and hung it opposite her bed. Pleased, she sat on her bed to examine her handiwork and realised she had missed something obvious – the house and garden in the painting were her own! This epiphany led her to remark inwardly again how fortunate she was to come across this modest house at such a low price.

“It’s because it’s haunted,” a neighbour had told her. “Bad things happened...” Tales, Gracie muttered, bloody tales.

She could hear the low rumble of an approaching storm so she bolted her windows tight lest the rain soak her curtains, and blew out the candle. It was a cold and long night, but she could not get to sleep, she rolled back and forth in a state of frustration. Shadows danced across the walls and a chilly breeze caressed her legs so that her toes tingled and she adjusted herself so that she was under the blanket. As she did so, her wandering eyes locked on the right corner of her room.

There was a figure standing there.

Terror like she had never felt before seized her mind and soul. It struck her as what she imagined lightning to be and it paralysed every muscle in her body, but she did not faint. She would have liked to faint for anything was better than this current state. The figure stood in the corner, not moving. It’s not real, an unconvincing voice said, it’s only shadows and nerves. There’s nothing really there. As if in response to this thought, the curtains blew aside and the moonlight illuminated the apparition’s face momentarily. Gracie’s heart froze. It was looking at her.

Gracie could see the long, white skull glowing in the dark and where the eyes were meant to be, there were only two black sockets. They stared at her with intensity. It had high cheekbones protruding beneath a great bulb of a forehead and wisps of long black hair hung limply from its cranium. There was no nose. Gracie shuddered. The phantom made no movement save for the swaying of its long, long arms which hung well below its knees. Gracie couldn’t avert her eyes from this figure in the corner and minutes slinked away before sanity crept back into her mind. Say something to it, a voice suggested. Talk to it.

“Who...” she whispered through her dry throat, “Who are you?” The

figure did not answer, but Gracie thought she saw a change in its face, its wiry purple lips pulled back to reveal a gaping hole which was supposedly its mouth. An odour of rotting flesh intruded into Gracie's nostrils and she was more repulsed than ever. She scowled. Her visitor in the corner then made its first movement, stepping towards the wall where the painting hung opposite her bed. As it turned its revolting head towards the painting, Gracie could hear its neck crack. It reached out one of its long ape-like arms to a particular spot on the painting, and with its nails it scraped at the paint. It was a nasty sound and it did not stop so that Gracie could not help but let out a blubbering sob. The thing laughed as it scraped the paint, a slow and melodic laughter which rang over and over again in her ears.

Gracie sprang up into a sitting position as the first rays of the morning entered her room. Forehead beaded with sweat, she looked around the empty room frantically, under the bed, in the closet, behind the desk – the phantom of the night was not to be found. Perhaps it was never there. It was probably all a dream, the now more confident voice spoke up, I told you it was your imagin— the voice broke off.

There on the painting, the face which only yesterday was painted in the window of the house was gone! Where it had been, a hole was now there as if someone had scratched too hard and made a hole through the canvas. It was here, Gracie realised, it was here with me last night. In a frenzy, she ripped the painting off its hook and dragged it downstairs into the kitchen. With trembling, white hands she pressed the canvas, paint down, onto the fire of the stove and it was not too long before what was left of the painting was a little heap of ash. She gathered this ash and flung it out of the house and she watched as every single black speckle fluttered away. As the last of the ashes disappeared with the wind, Gracie felt a wave of emotions, mainly relief, settle on her and the bright morning did a remarkable job of clearing the horror of last night.

Three weeks after this incident, Gracie was leaving the house when she hurled open the front door and a brown parcel clinked onto the floor before her. It had no sender but it was addressed to Grace Baker of 16 Harte Street, Eynsford. Gripped with fear, she began to peel open the brown parcel with

quivering hands. She could see the polished corner of something silver and the dread began to drain away. It's not a painting, she assured herself, it's just a parcel. It was a mirror. Someone had sent her a mirror. Without much thought, Gracie looked into it and when she saw the reflection she emitted a bloodcurdling scream, fell to the ground and died there of a heart attack – for in the mirror, was her night-time visitor with the face of Death.



PIANO AND ME

I was hurrying across the main street in my smart suit. I needed to get to my daughter's Mother's Day morning tea and then to my job interview at 12 o'clock sharp. I heard beautiful piano music and the light thudding of feet coming out of the door to a ballet school, about ten metres ahead of me. The music stopped and an old woman, the pianist, stepped outside and sat on a bench, sucking on a cigarette. She looked up as I passed her. I nodded my head in acknowledgement. Her arm shot out and clutched my forearm. I struggled briefly to get away but quickly gave up, not wanting to hurt an old woman.

She smiled at me, seating herself on the bench. "Slow down. You young people are always rushing about. Have a break, a rest, a chat."

I sighed, glanced at my watch and gave in, sitting down next to her.

"I'm Rosy," she said confidentially. I looked at her, torn between amusement and affront. "Let me tell you a story," she said soothingly. "When I was a little girl, I had really wanted to play a piano. You with me so far?"

I nodded slowly, trying to pretend she was related because passers-by were giving me strange looks. Rosy began to tell me her story which began when she was ten.

She described her father, mother and herself sitting in the tiny, shabby kitchen of their small house. It was the usual dinner, cabbage and broccoli broth. She turned it with her spoon dispassionately, staring out of the window at the eucalyptus forest and thought for a while.

"Pa, can I learn an instrument?" she asked slowly.

Father, not looking up, grunted, "Where would we get an instrument from?"

"That old piano in the empty room," Rosy offered quietly. He turned violently to face her.

"Never. Even. Touch. That. Piano," he commanded loudly. Rosy, shocked, turned to her Mother pleadingly. She was staring at Father, in love with him and useless to Rosy.

"Why –" she started, daring her own bravery, "Why not?"

Father stood up. His chair scraped against the tiled floor and then toppled. "I will not be questioned."

And that was the end of the conversation. She had stared at her shoes for a long while before finishing her dinner.

Rosy had tried for months and months to wheedle her father. If he had thought she would eventually give up on the idea, he was wrong. The denial strengthened her desire. And so life only got worse. Mother began to stare Rosy down when she asked, blocking her. Over and over. The denial overrode all common sense, common justice. Over and over.

Rosy was tracing the bottom of her empty soup bowl with her spoon when she heard it. It was drifting upstairs, with the cold breeze that managed to squeeze through the cracks of the doors. Twisting, curling, beautiful like silver smoke twirling upwards from Father's cigarette. She wrinkled her forehead. Mother and Father were both upstairs finishing their soup with her, she thought with confusion. Musicians didn't belong to this small village they lived in. Musicians were weird people who could lure sound out of wood and stone. Musicians were odd. Unnatural.

Rosy turned to her father, hazarding that the music was someone playing outside.

"Who..." she started, "Who is the new musician in town, Pa?"

He levelled his deep set eyes on her. "What?"

"The sound?" she tried desperately. "That piano music?"

Mother laughed gleefully, "The girl has gone mad, thinking she can hear herself playing. Because guess what?" She directed this at Rosy. "You can't go on that god-forsaken piece of junk." She laughed harder. Rosy closed her eyes.

But the sound did not go away.

That night, Rosy listened to the floating music. She pulled her blankets over her head. The music wouldn't go away. It pleaded and pulled, picking at her as if she were a thread that would unravel. Finally, she couldn't resist.

She slid off her bed, slipping into her slippers and shabby dressing gown. She crept down the hall into the old room. The piano stood.

A far-off, lone call of a bird echoed in the distance as Rosy lowered herself gently on the faded piano chair and gazed at the grand piano. It was dark mahogany and the musty scent of the piano and the cool wind that sneaked through the curtains swirled upwards as she opened the old lid. The keys were yellow. She touched one with her finger. The ivory keys were smooth and worn. It was easy to press and a single quavering note trembled out. A memory came trickling back.

Grandma. Her beautiful melodies. Her frail old hands flying over the keys, creating music. Her wispy hands guiding Rosy's small ones to create simple tunes.

Rosy instinctively reached beside the piano and felt the soft paper of a piano composition. She slowly tried to read the manuscript and translate it to music. It came flooding out. She was lost in the exotic jungle of keys and music. The piano rejoiced with her. She could taste the rich notes on her tongue and the music spilled everywhere like melted white chocolate. The silken keys pressed down before she touched them, anticipating her light fingers. She didn't want to go back to bed. She was spell-bound. When the clock struck two o'clock, reluctantly, she knew she should go to bed. She closed the lid. Dragged herself to bed.

In the morning, Rosy stared at the stained ceiling. Her fingers were stiff but her ears were still buzzing. She smiled slowly, tasting a ghost of the deliciousness of last night.

Dinner took too long for Rosy's thumping heart. The piano was trilling, mimicking the height of her mood. Father glanced at her.

"It's rude to gobble your food," he said roughly. Rosy knew he was being unreasonable but she ignored it.

"I guess I'll go to bed then," she said, quickly picking her plate off the table.

Father and Mother took an abnormally long time to go to bed. She could count the seconds, by listening to the old grandfather clock's second hand. The seconds ticked by. The piano music quieted to a lullaby. Finally, the cottage hushed. Rosy crept to the old piano room. The music took a breath.

She smiled.

The next evening, Father squinted at her across the table, his ugly muddy eyes narrowing. Rosy met them silently. Mother frowned slightly, eyes twitching from her husband to her daughter.

He said, "What's wrong with you, today? All quiet and stuff."

Rosy kept her face a still wall. She saw him become afraid. Afraid of his own child. He covered it with anger. "Answer me, child," the man roared.

The length of silence had stretched far before she answered softly, "I am no longer a child. No longer someone to be restricted by your rules." Her tongue was unravelling, racing ahead of her mind. "I will and am learning an instrument."

There were sounds of shock and anger from that kitchen. "Who is teaching you... who – I," Father stuttered.

"The piano," Rosy replied before cursing herself mentally at how stupid it sounded. "But I don't need a piano. I need your help. I'm not getting it." Mother looked affronted but Father had begun to understand.

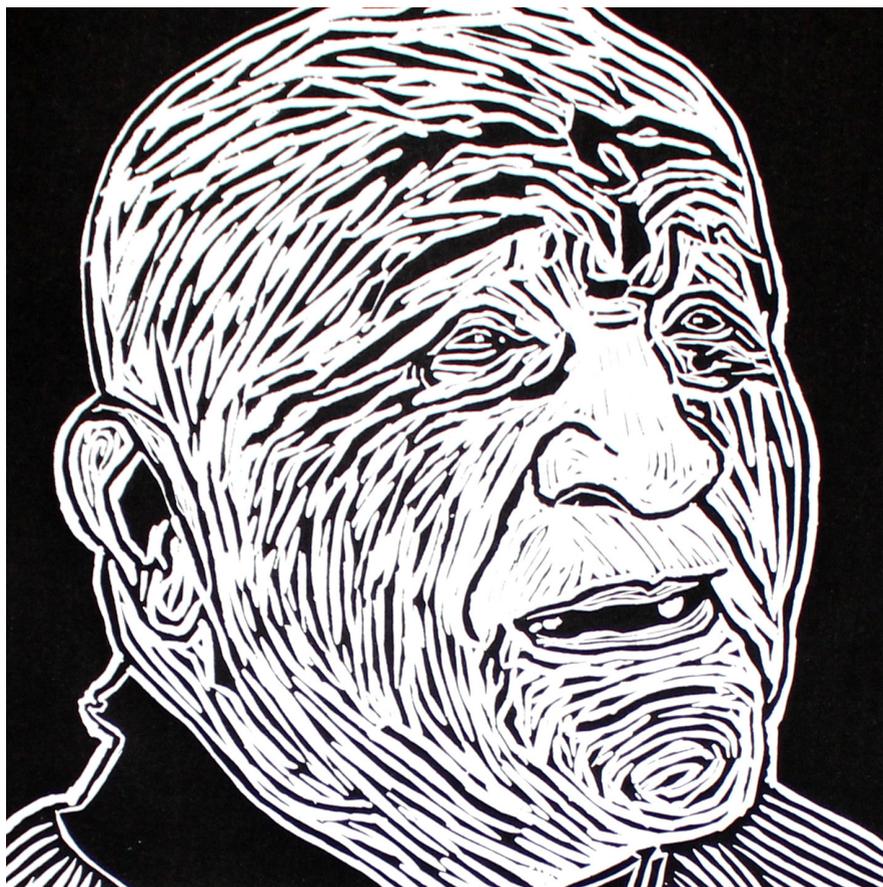
"My child-daughter. You shall learn an instrument. Ever since Mama, your Grandma died – I couldn't bear –" His eyes watered like a drowning plant, dying in its own home. He inhaled and straightened. "Yes. You shall."

Rosy stood up and walked around the table.

And hugged him.

I looked at Rosy. "And here you are." It was more of a statement than a question.

She smiled contently, staring at the cobalt sky and sucking on her cigarette. A tiny sparrow landed in front of us, cocked his head slightly. It stared straight into the pianist's eyes before spreading its wings and taking off. "And here I am." A sparrow called from the sky.



ALEKSANDRA PASTERNAKI
AMY MOLINEAUX PRIZE WINNER

THE BURDEN OF AGING

It has happened before,
Once a year I saw,
My skin it sags

But my eyes, you see
Still remain the same hue,
So blue you drown

Peel off my skin,
There transparent, so thin,
Peer into me

To look forward,
Trembling fingers, slowing heart,
Not too long 'til I depart

Smile slightly,
Be the cynic,
Who has time for moderation?

But to look back,
And clutch at your memories;
It is the essence

I have met God,
Thrice now,
His nose grew.

He said "Look to your future,"
But he was wrong,
So wrong

When one is old,
There is nothing there,
But dust and air

Pass over your life,
Realise the price you paid,
For death.

Of all the men I touched,
That burnt me,
Scratch at the scars.

A world in which neither of us pulsated,
Yearned so hard,
Is the best there could be.

This is the time,
To look back,
And so smile, frown

The sun it pours,
Its tentacles wrap me,
I am released

Soon the world will swallow me whole,
Its voodoo doll,
I feel its pricks.

It smells of smoke and shit,
Up here, down there
Of dust and air

Think of me,
Please,
Don't.

I will haunt them all,
Appear like a giant,
Tearing them apart

Bone by bone,
Ligament by ligament,
Nerve by nerve

We all wash our eyes with tears,
To see it all clear,
I'd rather reality disappear

I'd not come back at all,
I'd forgive you now,
If I could

Trust not in tomorrow,
Only in yesterday,
Memory keeps you the fool

What if...?
There is no what,
Only fixed, fools.

I am the crab,
Which drowns,
A parody

I am not euthanised,
It is not kind,
To survive

To this age,
Where men with beauty,
And grace

They do not look at me

Wandering the streets,
Hunting for girls with slender arms,
Not wrinkled cheeks

To swim on the land,
To walk under water,
I will soon.

I have rewound time,
In slow motion and in quick,
Until the clock lost its tick

There I saw the scythe,
The bony hand holding,
He winked at me

There was my youth,
There was my joy,
Back there was where it was all at.

There is time to defy,
All of nature and heaven,
With a pointy knife and pills

But I am tired now,
Age wearies,
It drags

Memory holds me here,
It is sad to say,
I have nothing else

Curled up on your bed,
Clutching sheets between bitten fingers,
You fear me

I am more than gone,
More than imaginary,
I am nothing

I do not remember what it feels like to be young

Pay your tax,
Pay your dues,
Or pay with your soul.

Stars are beautiful,
I gaze at them by night,
So bright

Like all lovely things,
To approach them would be lethal,
Annihilating you with their heat

The world is so black,
And it is so white,
At least by night

I go forward,
There is nothing there,
But dust and thin air

Go back
Back.
Back!

Do I see a smile?
I think I do,
I am sure I do.

I twirled and danced,
Skipped and sang,
God, I was alive

I do not skip and sing anymore

Sadness is more real than happiness,
You forget how good it felt,
All nebulous and airy and fantastic

Sadness never lets you go,
It's like cancer,
It permeates through you, pumping in your veins

Its claws mesh with your skin,
Holding you hostage,
Sadness has an awful smile

Perhaps Eden had been a bore,
Too much happiness,
Eating the apple was justified

The snake did humanity a favour,
It offered us horror,
To realise happiness

Thank you Serpent
Thank you Lucifer,
Thanks be to Lucifer!

But at this moment,
At this exact point,
There is too much Lucifer for me.

And I sit in my rocking chair,
With my thinning hair,
Looking forward to dust and air

To be old is to be sad,
To be young is to be sad,
To be human is to be thus.

In my possession there be
Marlboro, Memory,
And for the memory, Rum.

To have been a daughter,
To have been a lover,
To have been a wife

To no longer be anything
But a murderer, a killer,
To myself

When there is nothing left,
But slow decay,
In this present and lingering day

Until I am on a bed,
Drooling through teeth and lip,
Eyes half closed

Memories will float away,
Like steam,
Like a dream

When all is left is grey matter,
And carbon,
And dusty air

The blood will struggle in its path,
It will lose its way,
And all will stop

Some said I was beautiful,
Some said I was merciful,
But this is what they all said.

There are no words for me now.

I will rise up,
A life time of work,
And glance at my maker

Who sends me down,
Seeing me black and green,
All the way down.

Do not get lost in the morrow,
It should not be expected,
Only the past.

I will go,
A grain of sand,
Swallowed by the sea

I will make no impression,
Just a grain of sand,
Leaving the shore

There will be nothing left of me,
All of me will vanish,
I promise, I declare
Into dust and air.

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This is the first year that I have taken on the editing of *Ascham Ink* and I have found the challenge to be both more overwhelming and more rewarding than I had expected. In both instances, this was due to the sheer talent and passion for creative writing on offer and I have been so impressed by the flair and beauty that girls have woven in their writing.

There is a wide range of creativity in these pages, from burgeoning talent in the younger years through to entrants in the annual Ascham Writers' Festival, Year 11 Extension work and Year 12 Extension 2 major works, and the Amy Molineaux Prize winner. Similarly, the images here show the variety of work achieved across the senior school this year by Art students.

I would very much like to thank my colleagues in the English Department for their unwavering support and humour. It is only through their fostering of creative talent and their help in collecting entries that this publication is made possible. I would also like to sincerely thank Jeff Morabito and the Art Department for providing the images and also for developing their students' ability and imagination.

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And to all of the contributors and all of the writers in the senior school – keep writing! Revel in your creativity – it makes all the difference.

Elise Dempster

