

# *Ascham Ink*



Ascham School 2012

*Edited by Elise Dempster*

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# *Bones Like Toothpicks*

The bird had been half hidden by a tuft of knotted grass. Its feathers were slick, shining murkily. Wings were pinned close at its sides, and its eyes were twisted shut against the sunshine. Flora had almost run right across it, shrieking against Amelie's giddy onslaught. Her feet were tripping across the field, hardly distracting her eyes from their two-man tag. Her vision was a blur of grass and trees, fence, and sky, and the occasional strand of watery cloud. The wind sparked with their squeals and hysterics.

The crumpled form appeared to materialize under the sole of her shoe. Flora twisted violently to the left, fighting the momentum throwing her forwards. She slid under Amelie's outstretched arm in an un-choreographed tumble, and landed in a heap with her limbs tangled about her. Her throat rasped with giggles as they escaped into the sharp spring afternoon. The sweater on her chest felt heavy as she tried to pull in gasps with fluttering eyelids. Dampness seeped into the threads and clung to her shoulders, sending goose bumps along her arms. She lay, like a splayed animal, and let several moments slip past. A root from the naked oak tree pressed into her leg before disappearing back into the earth. The ground smelled like rain and decay; its perfume drifted towards Flora, and she trapped it with deep breaths.

Amelie's sleek fringe blocked Flora's sequin sky when she peeled her eyelids open. Her eyebrows pulled together momentarily at Amelie's thin smirk. Then she saw the hand being offered, and flashed a smile in return. Grasping Amelie's fingers, she pushed the ground away with uneven elbows. Her ascent was all knees and little slips on the slick grass, but eventually she was standing, unscathed. Rotten leaves and clumps of mulch clung to her sweater, and one protruding root had left its imprint along the seam of her jeans. She swiped at the back of her legs, between her shoulder blades, the sides of her sleeves, trying to dislodge most of the dirt. It clung to her stubbornly, but Flora picked off most of the larger clumps. Her ponytail hung askew, and one or two leaves had wound their way into her hair; blonde strands, darkened by winter, hung limply by her face.

Her lungs stung with too much cold air, and short giggles punctuated attempts at steady breathing. She turned her face to Amelie. Black eyes winked back at her, and another grin grew across her fair skin.

“Now you’re it!” Amelie’s voice whipped over her shoulder as she spun in escape.

“Wait! Look out!” Flora’s words streamed together as they sprinted out of her mouth. “Amelie! Stop!” Her voice rose to a screech, and a burst of terror seized her stomach.

Amelie slid to a halt, mid-stride. A heap of matted feathers was nestled in the grass beside her toe. Flora dragged in a huge gulp of air, and let it hiss away between her clenched teeth. “What if you’d stepped on it?” Her speech quivered.

Amelie glanced over her shoulder. Her back was tense, and she stood completely still next to the bird. “Do you think it’s dead?” Her eyes flashed in the pallid light.

“I don’t know.” The sentence was breathy. “Maybe.” Flora scuffed the tips of her wellington boots against the trampled grass. “Should we bury it?” She remembered her mother digging a grave for their fish in a flowerbed. They had walked into the kitchen one morning to find it floating limply at the top of its bowl. Its two eyes bulged like marbles, and its wet tail had clung to her fingers when she lifted it into the air.

There was no reply. She uncoiled, and sank to her knees next to the distorted form. Her fingers slipped underneath folded wings, and rolled it over in cupped hands. The bird’s glassy eye stared sideways.

Flora watched her friend with a dark gaze. Tingles pricked her skull at the roots of her hair.

Amelie stroked its ash-flecked feathers with chapped fingertips. She traced the curve of its beak and the little talons at the end of its curled toes. Her teeth stained delicate lines across her pale lips. Flora’s own teeth gnawed at the inside of her cheeks.

Amelie bent her head to the bird cupped in her hands. She pressed her mouth against its vibrating chest, and its heartbeat thrummed against her lips. Strands of feathers caught against stray strands of saliva and clung to her chin. The breath felt humid in her mouth, and Amelie imagined she was sucking the air out of the little bird's lungs.

Flora held her palms in front of her, with fingers loosely furled. She studied the ridges at the back of Amelie's neck and the hunch of her shoulders over her shadow on the grass; their shadows had grown long. Her breath clung shallowly to the sides of her throat. Amelie's fingers coveted the shivering pile of feathers, carving tracks against its wings. Flora rocked unsteadily on the balls of her feet, and picked at the threads of her sleeve with errant fingers. Her eyes flickered tentatively between Amelie and the arching boughs of the oak tree.

"Amelie?"

Amelie's eyes swam into focus for a second. The strands of liqueur hair against her face trembled slightly, but she did not turn her head. The girl's gaze seemed very short, like she was looking into the air in front of Flora, but not seeing the expression behind it.

Flora rubbed at her hip with the heel of her hand. Her feet felt impatient; the soft wind and seeping damp reminding her of the time.

"Amelie, is it breathing?"

Her eyes caught on Flora's. They blinked quickly, and a short pensive nod followed. She murmured almost imperceptibly.

Flora tipped her neck backwards to examine the stripped oak branches. They crept over the lopsided fence, skimming the sky and snagging on wispy clouds. She searched in vain for a nest, suspended in the junction of two boughs, a lattice of discarded twigs. There were no concerned parents perched above them. "Do you think we could take it back to your house?" They could keep it in a box and feed it worms until it learned to fly. Her suggestion fell on flat air; Amelie continued to croon to her captive.

Wiping a hand across her dry lips, Flora coughed weakly. She would not step closer to Amelie. The other girl crouched calmly, but her presence was savage. Flora stuffed her hands into her pockets to keep them from reaching

for the vulnerable creature in her friend's grasp. Her eyes did not move from the fingers stroking the bird, its chest, its neck. They left rivets in the downy feathers. Her fingernails traced patterns against the arc of its wings.

A few feet away, Amelie shifted. Her knees throbbed with the imprint of stones in the grass, and the soles of her feet ached with needles. She tossed her head and glared sharply at Flora's shrinking silhouette. Flora pulled her shoulders up in defence, and pursed her lips together; she swallowed the warning on her tongue. Amelie let her own lips curl into a cruel sneer. The corners of her eyes were tight with malice. She tilted her head to the left slightly. "Why don't you run and get a box for it?" The words drifted across the distance like silk.

Flora's ponytail swung violently as she shook her head.

Amelie let her features slide back to impassivity. "Let's just go then. I'm cold."

Flora released a shaky sigh. Her blood raced as if she had been holding her breath, and the pit of her stomach shattered. Her toes were numb, but she forced them to slide, one in front of the other, towards the far fence, past Amelie's rising shape. She left a trail of crushed footprints across the field.

Amelie watched her shuffle, stumble; the grass whispered with every step. She paused as she straightened her back. The bird's head lolled against her palms, hovering at least a foot above the ground. Her thumbs rested against its collar. She hummed sweetly to the sagging creature. The heart under her thumbs beat erratically. Its beak hung open and slightly askew. She fixed the horizon through dense eyelashes and filled herself with cool air.

Still murmuring tenderly, her fingers tensed and grew unforgiving. The pads of her thumbs pressed against its grainy throat. She felt its windpipe, like a heartbeat, hiccupping under its frail skin. Inside her cracked smile, Amelie's teeth ground together. The muscles in her fingers twitched, but she willed them to move slowly, deliberately encircling the tiny body.

The bird's prison contracted around it. Steadily, Amelie drove her fingers harder into the fledgling's neck. The frantic pulse seeped away, and she let its body tumble to the grass.

Beneath her control, the slender bones had cracked like toothpicks.

# Weak

“Nicholas, come out here and help your poor mother.”

I remember the sound of her voice that particular morning, coarse and harsh, echoing from the backyard. I remember the light that shone in through my window, a grey wash that smothered me in a dull, numb cloud. I remember rolling over to once again allow the softness of the blankets to drown me in sleep and smudging a tear that rested upon my cheek into my skin.

What I try to forget is the event that took place that morning, the thing I did that stained my memory and still, to this day, causes me to flinch when the image is projected upon my mind.

“Nicholas Katsieris, get out of that bed now, don’t make me come and get you.”

As my eyes opened to reveal the cracked ceiling above me a wash of water colours coated me in a strange sadness and the early morning’s cold air surrounded me like a bubble. Just eleven years old, I was the oldest boy in the family and therefore was given the most responsibilities. One of these consisted of killing the chickens for special occasions. My mother insisted on having a small chicken coop that was sheltered by the classic Australian Hills Hoist; an icon of the Australian dream. My parents saw the Hills Hoist as some sort of trophy adorning the typical Australian suburban backyard.

Leaning on the rusted iron figure, I remember my father would gaze at its beauty and announce triumphantly, “This here is a sign; it shows us that we are safe from war and violence.” He would say this with absolute passion, and then his eyes would fall to his feet and a tear would run out from underneath his glasses. As a boy I would ask my mother why he would do this. She said because he was happy to be here and to be safe, but I knew it was because he really missed Greece.

\* \* \* \* \*

I didn’t like to kill, the chickens were the only ones I talked to, however looking back now I think that it was because they were the only ones who would listen. When you have confided so much in someone it pains you to hurt them in any way.

I opened the fly net that led to the garden; through the gauze I could see my mother standing in the garden in her pyjamas holding a bunch of feathers. As she turned I saw the chicken's eye catch mine and I looked to my mother immediately.

“What took you so long? Go get me my knife and I will teach you how to do this.”

I walked to the shed and ran my fingers along the sharp blade. Trying to contain my emotions I walked slowly back to her, urging her to take it from me. I didn't like the feeling of something so destructive in my hands, something that could kill so easily and instantly stop the motion of a heart.

Irritably she pushed my hand away. “I don't want that, it's for you, you need to learn.”

The chicken was struggling in her hands. Avoiding both of their eyes I placed the knife on the grass below our feet and ran into the house, closing the door of the bathroom and locking myself in there. I looked at my face in the mirror and I was sobbing.

When I came out of the bathroom that afternoon I got a beating from my father, but this time I did not cry. I preferred to be beaten than to have to kill the chicken, I did not want that blood on my conscience. I got a beating from that day on, and every time I refused this chore, because to me it was no chore, it was a crime.

You could say I am a coward and I would agree with you and shake your hand. I cannot change who I am, nor do I want to.



# *El dilema del guardià del far*

Every week his brother rowed out to Andres' island – Isla Del Aire, a cracked piece of limestone drifting in the Mediterranean about a mile off Punta Prima – bringing supplies and news. For the last couple of months neither had been good, but his last visit had been the worst. Only a bag of chick peas, a pint of milk and a turnip in the way of supplies, and an agonising decision for Andres to make.

Menorca's villagers had been approached by the British Navy, asking them to switch off the light in the farro when the Italian ships were sailing past. If they did, plentiful food, medicine and building materials for the island had been promised. The islanders knew that Italian sailors, merely puppets of their Admirals, would die on the rocks that were the very reason the lighthouse had been constructed. But it would also be an open act of defiance against Franco – their much hated dictator who unofficially supported the Italians in a brotherhood of fascism. And the islanders had given Andres the decision to make.

Stone cut stairs, weathered down by the tread of feet belonging to many fareros making their evening pilgrimage to the light, wound themselves around the lighthouse interior, a cat loving its master, emerging at the light living in its birdcage on top of the tower. Andres struggled to keep the oil lamp steady in his walnut hands as he made his way up them, shaking visibly at the effort. He stumbled over the next riser and a sizzling splash of oil coated his palms. The lighthouse keeper winced. Not so much the pain but the ache of waste. Oil was liquid gold in Menorca these days. Reaching the top, he lowered himself onto the bench that had been part of the scenery since at least before the war. It relieved him somewhat, to think that other keepers had had the same battle with those sixty-five stairs that he was fighting daily. He gazed out the dome into the Balearic night, crickets singing in his ears and wild garlic winding itself through his nostrils. The cobalt blanket of night

stretched itself like a cover over the east with a smudge of the amber in the west where the remnants of the sun lay in rest. Pricked here and there with stars – Aquila the eagle, Capricornus, the sea goat – the sky was serene and velvety. Puffs of clouds out to sea seemed too innocent to procure a storm tonight. Andres was glad – the ships under his care would likely be safe, at least from the weather – over their safety from each other he had no control.

He unscrewed the cap over the flame box and struck a match, its spark burning up the lonely night and igniting the light with a fizz and roar. He screwed the cover back over the box and watched the light swing its beam out to sea and over the coastline of Punta Prima, circumnavigating its way around and around, climbing over the rocks it warned of and dancing off the dappled surface of the sea. Wonder sprung to mind as he thought of its eighteen mile nautical range and all that it encompassed. From the dry cracked lips of the island it stood on, the dusty, poverty stricken villages that lay amongst the scrub and honeycombed limestone along the opposite coastline, the fishermen in their rags and hand woven fishnets bobbing in crates, to the grey faced sailors on their steely grey war ships, bows sharp with guns aimed at each other far out in the Mediterranean – they all saw the light. But the wonder this brought wasn't enough to quell that dreadful dilemma that chiselled away at his insides like miners chipping away at stone, creating an ache that he knew was not hunger. It raged like a bull in its plaza de toros, round and around his mind, its horns locking into the sides of his head and kicking confusion like sand into his thoughts. Swirling and tearing and bucking. He had to think, to clarify his mind, to get an answer, to, to, to... But it was all too much, too much to lose either way, he decided. Lives, souls, hopes, wars... He tugged at his hair, clenching his jaw, before rising to his feet, collecting his lantern, its flame now flickering low, and easing his way back down the stairs. His thoughts spiralled with his footsteps downwards to his cottage.

Andres Ortega had greying hair, frown lines and creaking joints among other symptoms that could be counted as old age. However this was not the correct diagnosis for his condition. He was in fact only thirty-seven, but like the majority of his generation, the Spanish Civil War had inflicted suffering far beyond his years. His father had disappeared in the depths of the war

– believed to have been captured by Nationalist supporters, though no one quite knew. His mother had wept for four days when the postman had brought the news, and the haggard lines those tears had carved had never since left her face. His home was bombed, his sisters raped. Only he and his brother survived the war out of the seven of them there had been before.

Before. That golden word that when mentioned brings that glaze of memories over faces, that faint flicker of hope behind wearied eyes that appears but is quick to fade. What people had dreamed to be before the war, what they had been before the war and what they came out as on the other side was not the same. In reality their lives were not, in the majority, golden before, but memories don't live like people do. Certainly compared to the harsh battle for survival that life was for Menorcans in 1941, the life of struggle but not poverty that existed on the pre-war island was virtually a blaring trumpet shade of gold in comparison. Before the civil war Andres had wanted to be a pilot, join the swoops of Spanish taking to the skies. But there was not a way in hell that he could do that now. No money, no planes, no time. When the position of lighthouse keeper arose it had seemed the right thing for him to fill it, a way to escape the day to day suffering that the people on the main island faced, a result of Franco winning, and to save the lives that he had not been able to during the war. To state the facts without emotion, which Andres had learnt to do, Menorca had been with the Republicans, the other Balearic Islands Nationalist. It had been the Nationalists who had won. And Franco was one for retribution.

Of course he was not immune to the suffering and struggle for existence that the Menorcans faced. He knew this as he pulled out the few dried chick peas he had left in his cupboard and combined them with the leg of the mangy rabbit he had been fortunate enough to catch the day before for his supper. But somehow, out on his little island, a scrap of barren rock covered only by the tufts of ragwood and wild garlic that dug themselves into the cracks in the rocks and inhabited only by him, a few rabbits and some lizards, he felt slightly freed of the oppressing poverty of the villages, the stretch of turquoise water keeping him apart. But this had brought him into the heart of island matters, the very matter of life and death.

If the light was turned off, he knew not only that sailors would die, but their families would suffer like his had. But his people would get supplies. Supplies that they desperately needed to stay alive. If he left the lighthouse on, a symbol of survival for all sailors, and civilians too, then he would keep those marionette sailors and their families alive, but his people would continue their daily battle with death to keep their place on this earth. His people, his family, his friends, his home. They too were innocent, caught on the wrong side of a merciless war and a merciless man, in the same way as those sailors. He had seen far too much of death dressed in his black robes and sickle, harvesting both the lives of those he loved and those he had grown up with. He had to decide, but his choice would cause death no matter what, and he knew that that loss would remain with him until the day he himself was lowered into the ground. Would he leave the light on, a symbol of hope for all families wanting their loved ones home safely and appeasing the merciless man Franco was, or would he turn it off, extinguishing that hope, defying Franco but giving his people the supplies for survival?



# Untitled

“Leave,” Qiang whispered roughly in his son’s ear, “while you have a chance. They will come back for you.” With those few words, he collapsed to the ground, dragged out of the room by his wrists.

\* \* \* \* \*

Zhao Ming arrived home from school to his mother, Yun, cooking dumplings while his sister, Kou, chatted amiably.

“Gege!” she exclaimed.

“Hello Meimei,” he replied and sat down next to her after kissing his mother’s cheek. This was a regular routine, catching the bus home with his hilarious friends and arriving home to his loving family. After telling his mother and sister about his day, he walked upstairs to his father’s office.

Tentatively, he knocked, opening the door so his voice could enter the room. “Baba? May I enter?” Ming was always very hesitant when walking into Qiang’s office, as he hated interrupting. Qiang breathed a sigh of relief, knowing his son was still alive and well and not captured. “Of course, son.” The warmth in Qiang’s voice comforted Ming in a way nothing else could.

He walked into his father’s office to find him, as usual, on his computer. It was old and dusty but Ming understood how important it was that this computer was not known to exist.

Ming knew his father’s work as a political activist was dangerous. Somehow managing to find connections to men and politicians in neighboring countries, he sent incriminating facts about the regime - knowing that he, and his entire family, would join that long list of executed people if the Chinese government ever found out.

“My son, how are you? How was school?” Qiang always asked about school. Ming thought it was because he placed so much importance on education, but actually it was so Ming wouldn’t ask about Qiang’s work.

“It was great thanks. I to—” But Ming never finished that sentence. Mother’s quivering voice travelled up the stairs, saying, “Yes, I am Zhao Qiang’s wife. He is not here at the moment.”

The blood drained from Qiang's face, but still he walked towards the door. As his hand met the doorknob, the wooden frame flew off its hinges, flattening him. Three strange men marched in, holding guns to their chest, and picked Qiang's battered body from the ground. The strangers grabbed Qiang by the arms, but he wrestled them away, dropping onto his knees in front of Ming, telling him the words that would shape the rest of his life.

"Leave while you have a chance. They will come back for you," Ming screamed, the reality of the situation finally dawning upon him. He clung to his father, but the government officials hit him and he crumpled to the ground.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three days later, the shock of his father's abrupt capture still made Ming feel numb. He lay down and wished himself away. When he reopened his eyes, in front of him stood a figure he had not seen in years.

"Tommy?" Ming whispered hoarsely, "I haven't seen you for..."

"That was because you stopped needing me. You were happy."

That's when Ming realised he was right. Tommy had always appeared when he felt alone, sad or scared – never moments of happiness. "Tommy. What do I do? Help me."

"Listen to your father – he's right. You need to leave... quickly."

"But how?" Tommy just stood there, smiling, then suddenly disappeared.

Ming rushed down the stairs, greeted by the sight of his crying mother and sister huddled by the fire. His mother lifted her head and croaked, her voice hoarse from sobbing, "Ming, is that you?"

"Yes, Mama. Hi Meimei." His voice caught in his throat when he saw his distraught sister, but he put on a brave face, afraid her condition would become worse. Meimei just lay there, curled in a ball. She knew now that her father was no longer going to miraculously return. "Do you want to hear a story Meimei?"

Still she just lay there, but Mama nodded encouragement, so he began. His words painted a lovely story of powerful emperors and dragons. Meimei was interested, as was Mama, but the story had not made them forget about the terrible situation they faced. So he retrieved his notebook, and started

drawing, beginning with hesitant pencil strokes, then long, flowing lines, forcing his overwhelming emotions into the drawing, creating a different world. By the end of the story, his mother and sister were begging for more, and so it continued until midnight, the family forgetting what was wrong, sitting mesmerized by Ming's amazing drawings.

Later, as Yun read the Beijing Daily newspaper, she came across a drawing competition, for people around Ming's age. She exclaimed, "Oh Ming, enter! Imagine if you won!"

"Oh Mama don't be silly." Ming spoke the words confidently, knowing they were true, but his heart still started to thump erratically with anticipation.

"But look at the prize – a place at an art school in Melbourne."

With those few words, the blissful, imaginary world he and his family had been living in for the past few days was shattered, as he remembered his father's words. "Leave! Leave! Leave!" echoed in his head, and he knew he had to win. Precious days had been wasted rehabilitating his family from their depressed state, but it was now time to honour his father's last wish.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ming heard the flight attendant's voice vibrate throughout the aircraft; "We will be taking off shortly for Melbourne." His mother and sister sat on either side of him, as he considered how lucky they were for him have won a place in the school to come to Australia – a place of freedom. Ming knew what he was going to do in his new country. Silently, he vowed, "Baba never finished his work. I will." Then he slid his hand into his mother's, ready to start a new life.

# *Before I Knew You*

It was the kitchen, it was our kitchen: the shrill cry of the kettle, the clink of glasses clouded by our hopeless dishwasher and the almost-burn of cold, chipped tiles in the early morning. It was the kitchen where I'd had nearly all of my birthdays, standing on a wooden chair to reach the candles, to hear the calls of make a wish, in a time when I believed miracles happened that way. It was my mother who made the cake but my father who cut it, the knife I was never allowed to touch held steady in his hand, his strong arm protecting me from its sharp potential. It was the kitchen that had held a thousand conversations, the kitchen where my mother cooked and the kitchen where I sat one Monday afternoon, discovering my father for the first time.

I was fifteen, indignant at the world and careless of my place in it, clad in a school shirt too large for me and a skirt maybe too small, perched on a stool and looking up at my rough-shaven father expectantly. He was a thick-set man, with dark brown eyes and hair to match, a wry smile always at the ready and his fingernails forever caked with dirt. Mum had long given up on getting him fully clean – what was the point when he was up to his elbows in soil the next day anyway? His nose was only slightly larger than normal and he was neither a small man nor overly tall. My father wasn't someone you'd look twice at in the street, even though the neon yellow gear he wore was designed for visibility.

“Well?”

“Well what?” He looked startled, as if I'd just appeared behind him instead of having been waiting since I got home.

“Are you going to tell me anything, or should I go take a shower?”

“No, I'm getting there. Let me think.”

He pulled a packet of cigarettes out of his vest pocket and walked outside, the rusty screen door hanging open after him, an invitation. He had set off

the fire alarm too many times not to be cautious about smoking in the house (if not of the action itself). I felt I should be more worried about his habit, but Dad's smoking was something so ingrained into my idea of him that I didn't bring it up often. It would be like asking him to stop calling me nicknames or mimicking the weatherman.

I watched the tip of the cigarette flare and dim with his breaths, watched the smoke twist and writhe out of his mouth to be released into the air around him, a sort of perverted birthday candle. Make a wish, Dad. What do you wish for? I waited for his answer, the great nostalgia he'd promised me the day before (let me tell you about my uni days, Soph, you'll love it), and my mind wandered. I thought of him as a younger man, a man I'd seen in a photo once: still full of possibilities and a hope so thick he slicked his hair back with it. He wasn't like his friends at that age, my mother had said. They were as slick as oil and just as genuine, but my father stood out to her as someone different, and he was. So different, and yet just the same: no one predicted me, dropped by a stork into a house unprepared. Things got tense – rushed marriages are, I guess.

As I got older, it was my father who allowed me to stay up later, as if the extra time could somehow prolong my waning childhood. It became obvious over the years that he missed my younger days, when I, tottering, curly-haired and barefoot, saw him as close to omnipotent as one could be. These were days stained sepia with the tea he drank every morning, the days when he no doubt saw my innocent face tilted upwards at every moment of confusion, and his wise answer given set everything right. He was a constant presence, not so much warm as solid and steady, so much so that it was unthinkable in those early years for him to be elsewhere when I needed him. According to my mother, my cries over a grazed knee in one instance would not cease until my father materialised from an errand down the road. In my eyes, no one else was capable of healing my grievous wound but my father, all-knowing and at my side. Back then I would have refused to hear anyone say a thing about failed expectations, or dead end jobs. Didn't people realise their fancy homes were built on men like my father? It never occurred to me then that he might have regrets.

Now I often wondered if he'd chosen this life, or whether it was given to him as a gift he was too polite to refuse. I liked to think he grew into us, but his demeanour still suggested life was something to be endured, like he wasn't sure if the next ditch to be dug would be his grave and he was determined to go down whistling. Maybe that was why he was still smoking, because he'd rather choose his death than have it thrust upon him (refusal to be a victim of accident again). He was good to us, kind and hardworking, unfailingly patient but he was closed. I'd never seen him cry and suddenly I wanted to, wanted to see evidence (besides our house and our possessions and our safety), that he loved us. He gave us his time, but not himself. Was it selfish of me to want all of him? Was it selfish of him to keep himself from me? He's my father, I thought. Didn't I deserve more?

He still hadn't spoken, but I realised now was not the time for nostalgia. He needed the distance, at least for the moment. Maybe he had kept silent so I could come to my own conclusions. Perhaps he thought that way. I heard the screen door slam, just once.

I turned around and my father was gone, like the last tendrils of smoke disappearing into the air.



# Checkmate

It always happened at the same time every week; the time when I was forced to play the game I had no interest or desire to play. I watched, annoyed, as he pulled out the hand carved chess set, setting up each piece exactly ninety degrees to the edge of the board. We had started this routine when I was just a seven-year-old boy. Holding the chess piece next to my head, my father had said, “Chess is a game of war. So it’s best to act first before your opponent pulls a fast one on you. Never be a sissy when it comes to chess.” I was forced to play every week when it was Dad’s turn to look after me. He would just motion towards the study, not even bothering with common courtesies like saying “Hello”.

I would always play with the black chess pieces because my father believed it was only right he held the white side of the board; white always began the game. I had never questioned my father. I never sought to change the rules. He saw himself as the elder of the tribe; he would drink first, speak first, and eat first because God forbid he ever let someone else take the lead. My mother had described him as a quiet man, but he was toxic on the inside, bottling up all his emotions only to let them roll out with every move on the chessboard.

My father made his move and inched the white pawn forward two steps. I watched his expression – blank, like a poker player hiding his true intentions. He never let me suspect what he was thinking or what his next move would be. I contemplated my move, wondering how to make the game move faster so I could get on with my life, my homework. I could feel his eyes studying me as if each move I contemplated was written in bold ink across my forehead. Slowly, he began tapping his finger on the edge of the table. Tap, tap, tap. Pause. Tap, tap, tap. His right hand reached up and patted down the stray hairs, tapping them to his greasy head. His fingers twirled a loose piece of string on his worn dressing gown, a present from me years ago. Tap, tap, tap. Pause. Tap, tap, tap. I made my move – one space forward and two to the right. My father exhaled in relief.

“Took your bloody time, didn’t you?” I ignored his response and motioned

for him to make his next move. A slight frown passed across his face, breaking his blank expression for a moment.

We continued in silence for several minutes, his move then my move. Repetitive, boring and pointless, like watching a second hand ticking away on a clock. My father won the first of my pieces. He held it in his hand. The black piece rested in his coarse, worn palm, the skin once taut now sagging as if it were only a piece of material hanging on for dear life. He sat there passing the chess piece between his hands, taunting me. He began to hum a forgettable tune from some old opera. I was letting him get inside my head again. Every week the same manoeuvre and one I still couldn't ignore. The smell of his aftershave began to choke me and I felt myself slipping into a familiar pattern. My father always wielded the power, like the queen, a sense of invincibility draping around him. His fingers resumed their tapping against the table; each tap echoing inside my head. Each tap a criticism. Play faster! Pick up the pace. You call that a move? Haven't you learned anything yet? He never had to say a thing. I could feel it all from the way he sat as if he had a metal rod strapped to his back, the way his eyes shifted slowly from the board back to me or the slow inhalation and exhalation through his mouth that broke the silence. He was mentally prodding me.

I had three pieces left on the board. The game was practically over and I could sense my father had mapped it out right up until the very last move, which would allow him to win. I wanted to show him up, to defy his expectations of me and prove that he wasn't going to hold me prisoner any longer. I inched my queen forward two steps diagonally. Check. His move. My move. Check. His move. My move. My father's eyes widened in disbelief as he surveyed the chessboard, contemplating how to move his remaining pieces to win the game he planned. His hands shifted but drew back as if burned. He stood up despondently. The metal rod seemed to disappear as his back slumped forwards, his hand still holding my black pawn. He stared down at the chessboard for several moments, blinking rapidly before finally looking at me. I expected him to walk away from me then, angry at his defeat. Instead, he burst out laughing, clapped me on the back and left the room.

He left me sitting there looking at him, moving further away.

Checkmate.

# Cheater

I still remember the fly, this small dainty little terrifying monster, whirling around our heads. Of course I was completely horrified. But Chichi, my best friend in the whole wide world, just sat there and stared so intently at the petite creature.

Chichi had her eyes closed listening to something. She did this a lot. Just out of the blue, she would close her eyes and become completely silent. I used to think she was listening to music in her head, but sometimes I wondered... Chichi was playful like that, always somewhat of a riddle.

It was so cold that day. The howling wind was furiously blowing around us causing the lilies to flutter away their leaves, making them sad and bare, just like they are now. But now, instead of standing in a free meadow, they stand like soldiers who are honouring their battalion, saying farewell to those who have lost their lives. I stand here too, covered in ashes, with my saturated, engorged cheeks, and runny nose that seems to not want to stop.

Everyone who loved or knew her is here too. Their faces are ashen and pale, swallowing the big lumps that are forming in their throats. And Chichi, my best friend in the whole wide world is locked away in a shiny, intricately-patterned wooden box that will not allow us to see her ever again.



Before we went to university and our separation felt insurmountable, Chichi and I used to play Scrabble, in the beginning to improve her English, but later just because we loved the playfulness of words. Eventually it became our way of making the world seem smaller, making it feel like we were connected to everything around us. Actually, it became our habit that when we were miles away from one another, we would speak on the phone for hours, whilst playing Scrabble, of course. It gave us a language, even when sometimes we didn't feel like talking.

Even then, she was a chronic cheat, making up words, telling me they were legitimate or making excuses that it was her poor English which was to blame if she did get caught out inventing words. Of course, I would check the dictionary just to prove her wrong, but she always managed to be so persuasive.

“Bossamatic really is a word,” she would argue passionately. “The bossamatic teacher instructed the class as to how to complete the exercise,” she would announce with an earnest look on her face, trying to conceal her laughter. It was futile trying to argue with Chichi when she was making a point. It was also futile to remain angry with her.



The funeral went fine, as funerals go. As clichéd as it may be, the heavens opened and the angels themselves were crying, empathising with our loss. Chichi's two kids, Aiden and Tim, greeted me and we chatted, our voices shaking, giving away our fragile composure.

Now I am back home, in this little compartment of memories. I turn my attention to my old Scrabble board that lies on the coffee table and stare at it. I have taken up the habit of Solitaire Scrabble, challenging myself to decipher the secret codes with which the words tease me. I give up after several moments of silence and stumble towards my bed. I bend down on my weak knees and rummage through some photos until I find the one I am looking for. It's black and white, my grandkids would say how ancient it is, all crumpled and yellowed at the edges. It's a photo of Chichi and me. It was the first day we met.

I remember it so clearly. I was sitting down by my bay window watching all the new people come into the dungeon of a boarding school dormitory that my parents had sentenced me to, when a knock at the door snapped me out of my fantasy of freedom. Mrs Krupp stepped in holding her wrinkled, disturbing face high and impudently. Behind her walked a girl, confident, with the wildest golden curls I had ever seen. She had one of those smiles that seemed harmless enough, but betrayed a secret that only she seemed privileged to.

Knocking Mrs Krupp out of the way, she grabbed my hand and pulled me towards her and gave me a kiss on each cheek.

"Bonjour, je m'appelle Chicha. Tu t'appelle...?" Recognising my confusion she immediately stopped and continued in her best English.

"Pardon my French, I am bad at English. Um... what is your name...? I am Chichi. I love taking photos," she gushed, immediately removing her camera from its case, inviting the somewhat perturbed Mrs Krupp to comply with her wishes to snap a photo of the two of us. That was just how Chichi was, it was hard for anyone to refuse any request she made of you, even the stoic Mrs Krupp.

We became friends immediately; I guess the whole idea that opposites attract kind of worked on us. We were inseparable. We talked about

everything, about our homes that seemed so far away, about our siblings and how they drove us crazy. Whilst the other girls fought with their roommates, we were content, we got along, and we had each other. We began to look forward to coming back to boarding school, and even seeing Mrs Krupp; well, almost!

We were in Year Nine when the vehicle in which Chichi was travelling from the airport to return home to Sydney had a head-on collision. We had just come back from Christmas break, and I was so excited to see her, but she never arrived at the dorm. Late that night, I was sitting by my bay window, and watching the lights of the cars pass by; they looked like city lights. A phone call came from the hospital. The nurse said she had been asking to see me. She hung up abruptly. Silence... that was all that was left, silence, nothing more, nothing less. Silence at the other end of the line, silence in my room. I felt this aching pain in my stomach. I don't even know how I managed to get to the hospital.

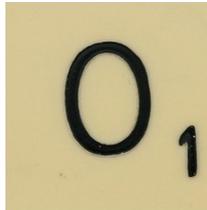
Sitting by her bed, I was relieved to discover that Chichi was only mildly concussed. I told her what a scare she had given me. On that night we made a pact.

"If one of us dies," she considered after a long pause, "if one of us dies before the other, that person has to find a way to send a message back, to let the other know they are fine, alright?" How could I disagree? That was Chichi, always the clown, always the joker, even in times of crisis. I hugged her, relieved to know my best friend was going to be with me for some years to come yet.

Now I stand over the Scrabble board again, trying to figure out words that will fill my emptiness. The letters don't seem to fit. No words appear. The letters provide me with no comfort in my quest for distraction.

All I see are the letters I... M... K... IMK, that's not a word. What can I do with that? I accidentally knock a letter to the floor and stoop awkwardly with my aching body to retrieve it from the thread-bare green carpet. The light has faded from my room and I struggle to see in the dim shadow of my desk lamp. I... M... K... nothing comes to mind. I look at the letter my thumb and forefinger have carefully displayed in front of my eyes. It's the letter O. Still

no help! I O M K. Hmm, I struggle for a moment and then... the riddle reveals itself. Finally, I locate the letter O where it belongs, but my better judgement prevents me from placing the letter in position on the board. I M O K... I am OK. But that's not right, it couldn't be. I place the letter in its required square and read the words aloud. I M O K ... I am OK, but still I resist embracing the message; apostrophes are not permitted. I finally surrender, shaking my head with some sense of amusement. Of course, it had to be, it was just Chichi... cheating again!





# Rory

## CHARACTERS

STEPHEN CAMPBELL, eighteen

KAIROS LEVAS, seventeen

MAY CAMPBELL, forty-nine

{SFX: Lights up}

*[It is a quiet, grey afternoon outside a church. There is a moment of peace. Suddenly, STEPHEN runs out of the main doors of the church and runs around the corner so that he is hidden from sight. Sounds of violent vomiting are heard. He comes back to the front of the church and closes the doors quietly before resting his back on the wall. He takes deep breaths and wipes his mouth surreptitiously. After a few moments, he takes out a cigarette and lights it, puffing on it thankfully. KAIROS enters. They stand awkwardly, pretending not to notice each other for a few moments, before STEPHEN decides to make contact. He butts out the cigarette, feeling uncomfortable.]*

STEPHEN: Sorry, can I... help you?

KAIROS: What?

STEPHEN: *[louder]* I said sorry can I –

KAIROS: I heard you the first time.

STEPHEN: So... why did you say what?

KAIROS: What?

STEPHEN: You said what before.

KAIROS: What?

STEPHEN: What?

KAIROS: What?

STEPHEN: What?

*[Pause]*

BOTH: What?

STEPHEN: *[sighs]* I'm Stephen.

KAIROS: Kairos.

STEPHEN: Cool.

*[Pause, STEPHEN rocks on his heels a little]*

KAIROS: I just –

STEPHEN: *[simultaneously]* So did –

*[They both laugh awkwardly, STEPHEN gestures for KAIROS to speak first]*

KAIROS: I just wanted to say I'm really sorry about Rory.

STEPHEN: Oh, uh, thanks. Did you... know... him?

KAIROS: Rory? Um... yeah kind of.

STEPHEN: Kind of?

KAIROS: *[awkwardly]* Well I mean... I was actually the year below you guys at school, but you probably don't remember. It's been like... six months since you graduated so...

STEPHEN: Oh shit, right, right. I'm so sorry, I should have recognised you.

KAIROS: That's fine... it's fine.

STEPHEN: My mind's just... yeah, not here today.

KAIROS: It's ok, I totally understand.

*[Pause]*

STEPHEN: So um... are you a friend of the family or...?

KAIROS: Oh, no.

*[Pause]*

STEPHEN: So you just decided to come?

KAIROS: Yeah.

STEPHEN: Are you – is that – I'm just not sure that Linda will appreciate

that. I mean... she's really touchy about that sort of thing.

KAIROS: Oh I'll only be outside I swear.

STEPHEN: Uh... ok sure then.

*[Pause]*

STEPHEN: Can I ask why you're here?

KAIROS: Yeah.

*[Pause]*

STEPHEN: So... why are you here?

KAIROS: I don't know. Everyone was going on about it at school and I overheard people talking about the funeral. I mean you know how people talk. I suppose I just... it's just really sad, you know? Rory's gone and you're still here... and I mainly just wanted to see you and tell you that, yeah, I'm sorry.

STEPHEN: Yeah well... I wish someone would just tell me a joke.

KAIROS: What?

STEPHEN: I've had so many people tell me they're sorry... I just don't know what to say, you know? I mean, do I say thank you? Do I say oh – you know – it's ok? Do I say I forgive you? There's no protocol for all this apart from hey, put your suit on, get into that church and look sad.

KAIROS: Are you not sad about it?

STEPHEN: Excuse me?

KAIROS: I said –

STEPHEN: No I heard you.

*[Pause]*

STEPHEN: Of course I'm sad... I mean, shit, my best friend is *dead* and nobody wants to talk about it. Like he's dead. He's bloody dead, Carlos.

KAIROS: Well my name's actually Kairos... but look, if you want to talk about it, I wouldn't mind...

*[STEPHEN looks at her with a half-smile, KAIROS looks nervously at her hands]*

STEPHEN: *[laughing sadly]* Sorry, I'm crap at names. And no, it's ok, I think talking about talking about it is much easier than the real deal, but

thank you for the offer.

KAIROS: No problem.

*[Pause]*

KAIROS: *[points to STEPHEN's shirt]* Yellow's a bit of an odd colour for a funeral.

STEPHEN: What? *[Realises she's pointing to his shirt]* Oh my shirt, yeah.

KAIROS: Well it's not exactly inconspicuous.

STEPHEN: Yeah, Mum got so angry about it. She said I was being disrespectful blah blah blah.

KAIROS: You don't think you're being disrespectful?

STEPHEN: Not really.

KAIROS: But... you're wearing *yellow*.

STEPHEN: Well yeah... But to be honest, I think everyone else is being disrespectful. Jesus, moping around the place in black like Rory was some sad sack old man or something. Rory was... fun. I mean, he was *alive*... I just think he would have wanted me to wear yellow.

KAIROS: Right.

*[Pause]*

STEPHEN: Who even *are* you, anyway?

KAIROS: I told you, I'm Kairos, I was in the year below you at –

STEPHEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah I know, I'm a dickhead because I didn't remember you went to school with me. What I mean is; why are you at my best friend's funeral?

KAIROS: Well I'm... Well what are *you* doing outside the church? Aren't you meant to be inside?

*[Pause, STEPHEN sighs]*

STEPHEN: Touché.

KAIROS: So what are you doing?

STEPHEN: Well... Ok so I was meant to give the eulogy, right? So I'm getting up and I have it in my pocket and I'm walking up to the podium – no, not the podium, the p... the p... p... pulpit! Right, the pulpit. And I'm walking up to the pulpit and the speech is in my pocket and suddenly I

feel... I don't know, I feel like... like I'm going to vomit... And at first it's just kind of this vague notion of vomiting, like an 'oh-I-might-vomit' kind of thing, but then soon enough all I can think of is vomiting and I'm nearly at the – oh what's it called? The pulpit! God. I'm nearly at the pulpit and I see all these people in black just staring at me and I think to myself 'well, shit' and I sprint down the aisle and get outside and throw up around the corner in the graveyard. And now I can't really bring myself to go back in, you know?

*[KAIROS smiles and after a moment STEPHEN smiles back]*

KAIROS: You didn't vomit here, right?

STEPHEN: Oh, no, don't worry, it was over there.

KAIROS: Oh good...

STEPHEN: Jeez, Rory would roll in his grave if he knew I vomited at his funeral.

KAIROS: Try saying that five times fast.

STEPHEN: What?

KAIROS: Rory would roll.

STEPHEN: Rory would roll, Rory would roll, Rory would... *[The words become jumbled]* Shit.

*[They laugh]*

STEPHEN: You want a cigarette?

KAIROS: Sure.

*[STEPHEN slips a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, giving KAIROS one before lighting his own and then hers. They lean back on the wall of the church.]*

STEPHEN: So I mean... why did you choose Rory's funeral?

KAIROS: Choose...?

STEPHEN: Well, like, heaps of people die every day. There are heaps of other funerals that are sad, or whatever.

KAIROS: Yeah, but like I said, I think Rory's is sadder.

STEPHEN: But *why*?

KAIROS: Well he was young, for one.

STEPHEN: *[sighs]* True.

KAIROS: And I just... you two always looked so close, you know. Like... I don't know, I don't want to say you looked like a couple but you kind of did.

STEPHEN: Don't they call them bromances or something now?

KAIROS: Something like that...

STEPHEN: I still don't understand why though. Did you drive here or...?

KAIROS: I just live down the road so it wasn't really an issue.

STEPHEN: Oh. I guess that makes a bit more sense then.

KAIROS: Yeah... Look, Stephen, I'm so sorry; I didn't mean to pry at all. I just thought you'd need someone to talk to who wasn't involved with all of this stuff.

STEPHEN: That's nice of you, I suppose.

KAIROS: It's just... I've always thought you were so *interesting*, you know? Like seeing you around school and things, I just think you look like... like you know everything. In a good way I mean.

*[Pause, STEPHEN smiles and KAIROS looks down]*

KAIROS: So do you want to talk?

STEPHEN: I can't just *talk*.

KAIROS: Don't you want to?

STEPHEN: Well yeah but... I don't know. I can't just start talking about everything. There's too much *stuff*, you know?

KAIROS: So pick somewhere to start.

STEPHEN: I couldn't possibly...

KAIROS: Well do you want me to ask you questions then?

STEPHEN: Yeah, yeah, that's a good idea.

KAIROS: Ok. Um... Well how... how are you feeling?

STEPHEN: Uh... Scared, confused. Weirdly guilty?

KAIROS: S'not weird.

STEPHEN: Yeah, but I feel guilty for my mum.

KAIROS: Why?

STEPHEN: She's so worried about me all the time. Ever since... well,

you know... she's been trying so hard. Like always happy, always trying to make me happy too, you know?

KAIROS: Yeah.

STEPHEN: And I feel so bad because I know she's trying but God it's so *annoying!* I mean she won't shut up and she just says all the wrong things all the time...

KAIROS: *[laughs]* At least she's trying though...

STEPHEN: True... OK next question.

*[Pause, KAIROS takes a deep breath in]*

KAIROS: How did Rory die?

STEPHEN: *[a little taken aback]* Well you certainly don't mess around, do you Kairos?

KAIROS: I'm sorry if that's too much. I can ask you another question if you want...

*[Pause]*

STEPHEN: He – uh – *[takes a deep breath]* he hung himself.

*[STEPHEN looks away for a moment, KAIROS looks down, frowning]*

KAIROS: Is that true?

STEPHEN: Yeah... Well that's what they told me. Why?

KAIROS: It's just that a few kids from school were saying–

STEPHEN: Oh come on, you know those kids don't know shit.

KAIROS: Well Briany's mum's friend is their cleaner and she... She overheard them saying that...

STEPHEN: What? What did she overhear?

KAIROS: Look, I don't know, it's probably all rumours.

STEPHEN: I don't care – I want to know what she heard.

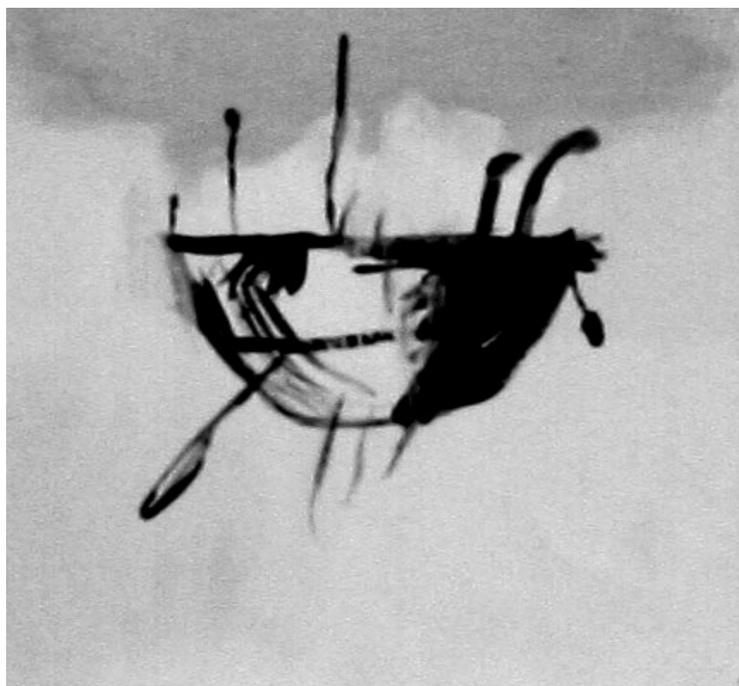
KAIROS: She overheard Mr and Mrs O'Hughes' conversation and... the way they were talking... made it sound like... Like Rory didn't – um...

STEPHEN: Didn't what? Can't you just –

KAIROS: It sounded like it was an accident... like he didn't mean to.

*[Long, tense pause]*

STEPHEN: I fucking know, Kairos.



# Cormack

Mrs Cormack was tired of cleaning. The apartment was a mess but she settled by the window with a cup of tea. She could clean it later.

There was still a mountain of damp umbrellas in the lobby. The snow had melted. It made her sad somehow, the way the snow melted. She could never stop wondering at just how white it was. So pure. But her wonder was always tempered with a kind of sadness. The whiteness glowed with impermanence. Snow dusted the ground that Halloween. This morning dirt and water lined her lobby.

The guests must have arrived home freezing. Early in the morning the frost bites harder. They would have smoked their breath out onto the East River and stomped stiletto shaped holes in the white all the way through the Park. She didn't see much of the guests. She just sat upstairs and heard them. The music was harsher than she'd remembered. More manic. Yes, manic. Manic panic.

There seemed to be an element of panic about all these parties. The laughter was shriller, the shots came faster, the pot smelled sweeter, sicklier. She watched them cling to their youth with urgency. Like they knew it was fleeting. Sarah thought about being young. She couldn't remember any urgency. It seemed an infinite moment. Now it's all the past. A finite chronology. Dates recited at a memorial service. 1948 the war ended. He went to Harvard. 1952 he came to Cambridge. 1988 a divorce. 1992 the second Mrs Cormack. Mrs Sarah Cormack. Twins in 1994. Death 2003. And all the glittering accolades in between.

Sarah finished her tea, left the cup in the sink and went to stack the umbrellas. She shouted at the stairs, "Nicole honey, can you start packing? We have to leave by five."

Every time they went to Connecticut she was reminded of what familiar smells like. It's all there; a whole childhood in damp grass, deer eyes flashing at headlights and a fleeting dusk at 5 o'clock.

And driving back she crosses over to something far more pungent. In Connecticut she smells a whole childhood. Here in New York is a life. Coffee cups up and down Lex, a dimly lit East River, and that smile.

Clarissa has that smile. Nicole has Sarah's. Twins but not identical. No, Clarissa is prettier. So pretty that girls often find it hard to like her. Until she smiles. There's cheek in that smile, a joke just for you, a party in your honour.

Nicole looks like Sarah but she writes like him. It's beautiful. She writes about him, processing. She was seven when he died. But death takes a long time to process. Sometimes it takes a lifetime. She writes about what she's read, what she's been told. She writes about the smile too. Snippets of information.

Mrs Cormack shouts and Nicole remains upstairs, unresponsive. She lives by the last minute. Clawing at the back end of every deadline. Last year, the night before her story was due, her sobbing woke Mrs Cormack at three in the morning. "I don't know what to write about."

"Write about Dad, honey. You write beautifully about him."

"I don't know what to say. I typed his name into Wikipedia. I've never done that before. But I was afraid to press enter." Her sobs are choking.

This had happened before. Once Nicole saw his photo in Vanity Fair and she started to cry. It's hard for her. Mrs Cormack's whole generation knows him. Mr George Cormack. But Nicole doesn't want to know him like they do. All she knows are huge hands, and the way the world looked from his shoulders. Sometimes that's enough.

And today she's ignoring her mother. She's upstairs, at the desk on the landing. She doesn't make a move to help when Sarah starts packing her things for her.

Clarissa's gone out. She hasn't left a note. But Sarah knows because the newspaper is open at the kitchen table. Clarissa reads the newspaper every day. Sarah often wonders at it. Oftentimes they talk about children becoming de-sensitised. Clarissa seems to be continually re-sensitised. Last year she went to Kenya to play soccer with orphans. One of them fell over. Clarissa had to wait an hour to give him a Bandaid. An hour was how long it took to get rubber gloves. Because you have to touch blood with gloves in Kenya or you'll risk getting AIDS. That's all Mrs Cormack knows about the trip. Clarissa doesn't tell her much.

She's gone out without her coat. Mrs Cormack often reminds her to take it. But more often she forgets. Clarissa wouldn't automatically take a coat. Even in October. Even in October snow. She doesn't seem to think that way. Once she took the blue line all the way to Harlem. She didn't have a phone. She'd forgotten it. No one knew where she was. She hadn't left a note. She wanted to see what it would feel like. She thought it might feel like freedom.

Mrs Cormack folds the newspaper and then goes upstairs to pack Clarissa's things too. She texts her.

"Come home soon."

The beep is immediate. Clarissa left her phone on her bedside table. Mrs Cormack adds it to the bag.

Hours later Nicole is still unmoved on the landing.

"Do you know where your sister is?"

"I dunno, she doesn't tell me anything."

Mrs Cormack is halfway down the stairs. She half turns and calls up the bannister, "What is your story about?"

"Stuff. Stuff I've been thinking about."

They think about him a lot. George Cormack. All three of them do. The trio separates, squeezing themselves into the shadows of the apartment. There's plenty of room for shadows. George preferred dim lighting. He thought it gave an antique feel.

But they don't talk often. There's Mrs Cormack, living off her inheritance. She can afford to send the girls to the top school. There they're taught to be strong, independent, career-driven. And they come home to their mother, an unemployed ex-journalist slipping from the social pages further and further into the apartment's antique gloom. They don't want to talk to her.

At 4:30 Clarissa comes home. At 4:50 Nicole comes downstairs. At 5:03 they're all in the car. The only conversation is the river, slurping its polluted water all over East End Ave. The Cormacks listen to it in reflective silence. Every time one of them speaks, the others ache. Every sentence is a reminder of how differently their thoughts have drifted, how the silence steers them so far apart.



# *On the Relation (Father, Daughter)*

$$\mathbf{daughter = father + father^2 + \dots + father^{x-1} + father^x}$$

She loves her father. She really does. Everyone who has seen them together knows this: the way her eyes follow him out the door; the way she calls him with a slightly upward inflection, half with reverence, half with awe; the way she straightens her back when he walks into the room, as though the very sight of him induces a reflex to present her at her very best. These little things nurture a tender affection that can only run from girl to father, the sort of love that one would assume quivers in the very veins of her little face, as necessary as maths, the rain, and her beating heart.

## *father > daughter*

Her father is a senior mathematics professor at Princeton University. Largely retired from rigorous lecturing, he allows himself to indulge in the familiar comforts of topographical corollaries and integral conjectures. Nowadays he has set up a timetable, scheduling a different collaborator each day. Today it is Terence Tao. Yesterday it was John Nash. Her father seems – dare she say it? – giddy in their company, conversing in alphabets and symbols that she cannot even pretend to understand, fervently quoting lemmas with an exotic slant to the iambic pentameter. The Shakespeare of mathematics, she likes to think.

She remembers a time when she and her father frequently attended Sunday barbecues with other mathematicians. She was small then, no more than a girl of eight, but she was bright enough to catalogue the defining features of a mathematician. The men were all like her father: stout and smart and piercingly methodological. They all chewed their food ten times, she remembers, and back then she thought she could hear their brains tick in a metronomic countdown before a faint beep signalled the moment to swallow.

She remembers being asked about her father's work.

"Daddy is a Senior Mathematics Professor at Princeton University," she said, quite proudly.

The mathematicians laughed. So did her father.

She remembers being asked whether she knew algebra.

"No, I don't know him," she said, quite honestly.

The mathematicians laughed again. Her father did not.

***father approaches negative when daughter  $\leq 95$***

"Dad?"

"What?"

"Are you angry?"

"No."

"I know you are —"

"I'm not."

"I'll work harder this term. I promise."

"It's fine."

"Dad? Do you still love me?"

"I do. But I'm working."

***as time increases, daughter increases but father decreases***

Dawn breaks early. She adjusts to the sunlight, goes out to the tap beside the roses and runs her hand along the length of the hose. A film of dirt gathers on her fingers. She rubs her hands on the sides of her legs and the dirt works its way into the creases of her palms.

Her father is turning fifty-eight in September. He is shrinking faster and faster into a small mould with arms and legs disproportionately long, as though the gravity of time has weighed his limbs down, given them more length but less purpose. More recently she notices that he has become more

plump and slump-shouldered too, possibly in a struggle to balance his rising hunch-back with his ballooning pot-belly. Against her father's objections she has come to savour his newfound vulnerability. These physical failings counter his intellectual brilliance to make him appear more human, more fatherly.

As the days wear on, she increasingly relishes spending every morning on taking over her father's more homely duties: preparing breakfast, making the bed, hanging up clothes and sweeping the driveway. She particularly relishes her opportunity to water the roses, as she is doing now.

Water sprinkles onto the crimson petals and pools at her feet, slowly seeping away into the grass. She tilts her head and sees her father hovering in the kitchen window, his rounded form captured in the rectangle but slightly obscured by a wispy curtain. She sends a smile towards him. Looking through the fabric, she is sure he has smiled back, warm and appreciative of her diligence and maturity. Delighted, she turns off the tap and slips into the kitchen, very happily serving him a mug of coffee. His eyes travel from the page of alphas and betas to the handle of the mug. He stares at the coffee for a very long time, then stares at her folded hands.

"Go and wash them," he says, and groups a polynomial.

***(father, daughter) is not a function***

What is a proposal? It is the subtlest expression of preference: not a command, not a duty, sometimes not even required. A few flicks of the tongue in tonally significant expulsions: of an idea, perhaps, of marriage, of union. She imagines her father in a city of proposals where there would be a lovely, vaporous discretion to everyday exchanges. Shall we stay? Shall we leave? She sees her father sighing, the heaving of his body releasing a diaphanous quality into the air, a barely audible protest against her departure. She is sure that her father would never want her to leave. When he proposes for her to move out, she regards it as a harbinger of her impending adulthood, his surrender to the waning years of her adolescence, of her dependence

on him. She is sure he wants her to stay and admire him and talk to him and make him coffee.

But on her way home she stops and decides to accept his proposal. She will move out, if not for herself, then for her father. She will show him that she is still his good girl, always ready to listen to him and make him proud. She looks up and around her, chooses a route at random, and heads into the washed-out twilight, into the emptiness of the suburban street, into a love that only she can comprehend. Somewhere, deep in the back of her brain, the probability of her going back home lingers, trivial and obvious.

# *Melting Hearts*

“What are you doing?”

I peeled my eyes away from Mathscape, my pen coming to a halt for the first time in hours. Schoolbooks flooded the shelf and floor of my room. I looked over my desk: sprawled maths notes, scattered pens and littered candy wrappers clearly displayed that I was doing my mathematics homework.

“Homework,” I responded, returning to my tedious scrawling of the week’s assignment.

Dad pushed open the door and walked into my room, carrying a bar of chocolate in one hand as a peace offering.

“Ah,” Dad leaned in to have a look, “trigonometry. Remember who taught you everything you know about trigonometry...” Dad’s sentence trailed off as if expecting me to bounce in my seat with my hand eagerly raised to answer his question.

“Me.”

Still working away, I rolled my eyes at his juvenile attempt at a joke. I wasn’t going to give in; surely he couldn’t expect me to forgive him so soon.

“Sure, Dad. Whatever you say.”

“I mean it – I was best mates with Einstein. I taught ol’ Steiny everything he knew. He came to me for advice about the light globe.”

“That was Edison.”

“What?”

“Thomas Edison invented the light bulb, not Einstein.”

“Jeez, no need to get cocky.”

I didn’t respond.

“Look at thi-is,” Dad said, singing the syllables as if he were talking to a five year-old, “I brought you some yummy choc-o-late.”

I turned to greet the candy.

“I bought it for you from the deli. It’s delicious milk chocolate with ganack.”

“It’s ganache, Dad.” I looked over the gold-edged package: the metallic

words ‘Crafted in Belgium’ reflected little beams of light.

“Thanks, Dad. I’ll have a piece.”

For a moment, I saw his face light up like a birthday candle. But the small flame was extinguished shortly as Dad masked his glee under an expression of exaggerated concentration. He successfully broke off a piece of chocolate without crushing the thin, brittle shell holding the thick filling inside. I received the chocolate and murmured another “thanks” in his direction. My eyes focused on the creamy milk chocolate surface and the intricate trickles of chocolate forming the raised crest of the Belgian brand. The warmth from my fingers began to melt the pattern, so I bit into it and the ganache slowly oozed out from the heart of the chocolate.

“What’s that?” Dad’s voice suddenly intensified as he pointed to a plate and cup on my desk from this morning’s breakfast. “I told you to take those down and start the dishwasher this morning.”

“I’m sorry; I must have forgotten,” I said quickly, instantly alerted by the tone of his voice. “I’ll do it now –”

“Now? It’s too late! You’ve had all day.” His demeanour jarred as his thick brows transformed and his mouth snarled as he spat out savage words. “You never listen. I’ll do it myself!”

I saw what happened next in slow motion. Dad’s hand snatched the plate too quickly. The mug resting on top wavered, and lost its balance. It hovered in the air for a moment as the plate was whisked away, and then smashed into the floorboards with surprising force. Shattered chips lay scattered around us, rendering the ground we were on dangerous territory. Dad’s face was spitting. He glared at me. Time resumed its normal pace for the anticipated onslaught.

“Look at what you’ve done! This is your fault. If you’d taken it down like I said then it’d still be in one bloody piece!”

I didn’t argue. Accustomed to his insane tirades, I looked down at my homework. I knew from experience that I could not offer to help. I would only be criticised. I could not continue working; that would show too much nonchalance. So I stared blankly at the problems on the page.

Dad stormed out of the room in search of a broom, leaving me with a

stale silence that made my insides feel as if they were being prodded with a blunt kitchen fork. I felt guilty for not cleaning up. But how was I to know the drama that would ensue? Nevertheless, I should have remembered to take the things down. At this stage, I realised that I was still holding my pen, and began drawing lines on my page. Straight lines morphed into spaghetti curves and squiggles and a jagged array of knives. Wispy knots engulfed the dead numbers of my work, no longer important.

Dad returned silently and steadily swept up the fragments of ceramic. He carried them downstairs and didn't reappear for more than an hour. I knew that he would soon inevitably revert to his unnervingly jovial character. But for the time being, I knew that I was not to seek him. I could hear the pops and sizzles of Mum's frying pan downstairs, and breathed in the rising scent of capsicum and green chillies. Had Dad told her yet? Mum might gently, but purposefully, suggest that it was he, in fact, who wasn't careful. But Dad was never wrong. I tried to coax my mind to muse over something else, a happier time with Dad. If I absorbed each of Dad's storms, then I'd be a sponge holding in cruel words, waiting for the next outburst to be helplessly wrung out and showered with more abuse. I learned a saying of Mum's: "in one ear, out the other." I was younger when she first said that to me, and at the time I was appalled at her rudeness. Only recently did I understand that Mum's words were crucial to my survival in this household.

When Dad returned, he knocked before he entered. Like a scolded puppy, he shambled awkwardly into the room. His face showed no hint of his previous anger. His eyes were subdued, affectionate.

"Hi, darling."

"Hi, Dad."

"I love you."

"Love you too."

Dad offered me the Belgian chocolate. But I still had a bitter taste in my mouth from the previous piece.



# Acacia

*The Characters: (in order of appearance)*

*FLYNN, fifteen*

*KEEGAN, fifteen*

*DANNA, thirty-four*

*BRIAN, thirty-five*

*SALLY, thirty-six*

*The Setting:*

A gentle light illuminates a small, square stage space – it is not raised. To the left of this space are three chairs and on the right, two. All but one seat is occupied and the characters sit neutrally, watching the scenes unfold and stepping up when needed. Upstage lies a worn, blue threadbare couch and next to it, a wooden side table. The action moves fluidly and the audience sits directly in front, the setting remains unchanged.

*DANNA enters, breathing out deeply.*

DANNA: Flynn?

*She moves to the couch, flopping back onto it with another sigh, exhausted.*

DANNA: Jesus.

*BRIAN has stood up from his seat and is standing awkwardly upstage, looking down at DANNA on the couch whilst she has said this last line.*

BRIAN: Hi Danna.

DANNA: Get out!

BRIAN: P-please can I come in... just for a sec.

DANNA: Uhh-

BRIAN: Please Dan.

DANNA: Don't call me that.

BRIAN: Sorry.

*BRIAN walks in, judging DANNA's reaction. She raises her eyebrows, watching him sceptically.*

BRIAN: How are you?

DANNA: What do you want?

BRIAN: I'd like to see Flynn, and you.

DANNA: Oh for the first time in the whole year you've been away?

BRIAN: 'Course not. Where is he?

DANNA: I don't know.

BRIAN: It's quite late...

DANNA: He'll be with a friend or something... You know where the door is.

BRIAN: Oh, no. I'll wait.

*DANNA eyes her nails.*

BRIAN: How have you been?

DANNA: Busy.

BRIAN: Are you still working at Lacey's?

DANNA: Yep.

BRIAN: Why don't you try somewhere else?

DANNA: The pay won't be any better.

BRIAN: Do you still want to move to the city?

DANNA: Of course.

BRIAN: When will you have enough?

DANNA: Six months time, I hope.

BRIAN: Not long now. Will you still chase that acting thing when you get there?

DANNA: I don't think so, I want to travel.

BRIAN: Well I always thought you'd be a good actress. You've got the full package. Looks, talent –

DANNA: Thanks.

BRIAN: You look great at the moment as well, really... trim.

*DANNA smiles, close lipped.*

BRIAN: And the house is so much nicer.

DANNA: I haven't done anything to it.

BRIAN: Cleaner then. What does Flynn think about the move?

DANNA: It's not really his call but he'd be for it. Where are you living in Sydney?

BRIAN: A mate's place in Glebe.

DANNA: Are you at uni?

BRIAN: Sort of, I mean... no. I'm still making the money for it.

DANNA: Really... what are you doing then?

BRIAN: Labouring, mainly.

DANNA: I bet you don't like that.

BRIAN: No, I miss you guys.

DANNA: You should come back then.

BRIAN: I'd have nowhere to live.

DANNA: Here, silly.

BRIAN: I'd move in again?

DANNA: If that's what you want.

BRIAN: God I'd love that, really I would. I've been thinking about this a lot lately.

DANNA: You'd have to move all your stuff in.

BRIAN: Aw it's only one bag, I could be ready in, jeez, almost a week.

DANNA: My things won't take long either. Flynn is going to be stoked.

BRIAN: You wouldn't have to shuffle your stuff around, I can work around you.

DANNA: Brian, I'm not staying.

BRIAN: What?

DANNA: I'm going to the city. You'll stay with Flynn.

BRIAN: We won't be here together?

DANNA: No, Brian, we're separated.

BRIAN: So rope me in and then you're gone.

DANNA: I've been here my whole life. I'm getting out. You had your chance.

BRIAN: What's happened to you?

DANNA: What's happened to me? I thought you wanted the same thing.

BRIAN: Before we had a kid.

DANNA: I'm sorry, I didn't want it to change everything.

BRIAN: You can't plan life Danna.

DANNA: I need some control.

BRIAN: Then what?

DANNA: Whatever I want... I'll probably go to India or something.

BRIAN: You really don't care do you?

DANNA: Africa could be amazing... or Japan.

BRIAN: I meant about us!

DANNA: Brian, things will just go back to the way they were a year ago. We were in love when I was eighteen.

BRIAN: There I was thinking you actually wanted me back.

DANNA: Brian—

BRIAN: You know they're saying Flynn lit the fire.

DANNA: Excuse me?

BRIAN: Keegan's Dad called, he said Flynn's gonna get in a lot of trouble.

DANNA: What does he know? Flynn's no arsonist.

BRIAN: Do you know where he was when the fire hit?

DANNA: With a friend.

BRIAN: You sure?

DANNA: (*quietly*) No.

BRIAN: So you've got no idea whether or not he came home?

DANNA: He did later on... he did... alright?

BRIAN: He could have done this, and it would be your fault completely. A whole town almost up in flames and it's on your shoulders. What are you doing to him Danna?

DANNA: Don't you dare. I haven't done a thing and you can't honestly think you can come in here and accuse him of something like that.

BRIAN: Please, you don't even know where he is right now.

DANNA: Shut up.

BRIAN: Tell me how you two are getting along these days.

DANNA: Leave. Now.

BRIAN: Fine I'll go find him. Looks like I'm the only one who actually cares about what he's up to.

*DANNA is frozen in her anger.*

BRIAN: And don't you worry, there's no way I'm staying here.

*BRIAN storms off stage, and back to his seat. DANNA remains on stage, eyes burning into the ground. She then turns slowly and walks to her seat.*

# *Rather Compromising Really*

The sledgewok is a very hard thing to master. It is a dance move which is somewhere between the powerful movement of hitting a tree with an axe juxtaposed with a sharp retort at the end like flipping the contents of a wok.

I was practising this in the bathroom mirror using my new shower-radio to listen to the mellow sound of The Smiths when the inevitable happened. I wokked too hard and smashed my head on the basin; in some form of cruel irony it felt as though I had been hit on the back of the head by a sledgehammer.

Mum walked in to find me in the most compromising position. Flat on my back in the bathroom, tighy-whities and winter singlet on; a freshly laundered 12 year old Ernie Lipshitz doomed to a life of perpetual embarrassment.

Mum, being the most motherly of all motherships, wrestled me back into bed with the effort it would take a Scottish dwarf to pull a Clydesdale. There I was in bed utterly frazzled by the day's events. I was alone with what was left of my thoughts, while Mum flitted around like a blind canary. My rattled nature caused my thoughts to whizz through my head; they would pause, whirr for a minute while I contemplated them and then whizz away like a balloon which is free to let out all its air.

"Next Tuesday I really must call..." \*farting noise\*

"Oh yeah... spelling bee this Friday – must look up..." \*farting noise\*

I was stuck in a half-consciousness like those delirious hours of two and three in the morning where everything from Velcro sneakers paired with budgie smugglers to fish fingers with custard seem like the very best of ideas. Blame skedaddled into the room; his ears were longer than his legs and his black spots were moving like butterflies on his white back. Mum followed the dog with her iPad, also known as her personal diagnostic kit;

"Right-ho Ernie, it appears you are con-cust. Can you touch your toes?" she said. How touching my toes could determine the state of my mental health was beyond me.

"Damn straight I can." I was feeling a bit sassy now; it was the new phase of delirium.

"I believe you mean damn bent, dear." Oh mum.

Thankfully it turned out that I could actually touch my toes. Somewhat relieved, the blind canary decided to make some Ky-See Ming. What this is, I cannot tell you, for no one really knows. It is a ghastly concoction of anything in the fridge deemed to make you feel better. In fact; I am sure that it only makes you feel better because you become distractingly nauseous from eating the Ky-See Ming instead.

The Ky-See Ming continued to spatter with the confidence of a very successful criminal. In fact, it was a dish so devilish in its taste that it would not be fit for consumption by the worst criminal. I had named it so for every time we ran bang out of food, mum threw in the off-cuts even the mice wouldn't eat to make a "tie-over dish" that bought her one more day to go to Coles. It included those household ingredients that everyone has; bi-carbonate soda, mouldy cheese, frozen vegetables, marmalade and custard power. Like every local Chinese restaurant from the Hung Min in Armidale to the Foo Man Chung of Chicago, no one actually knew what was in the dish; however in the case of Ky-See Ming it did not even have a bearable taste. Tonight it had gone from an orangey soup to a grey-brown unstrained gravy. Hmmm, colour change. Naturally that can only mean one thing: chemical reaction. Mum seemed to have forgotten about the concoction, although the house was filling with a sticky smell of hot yoghurt and crushed centipedes. She was upstairs listening to Kenneth Clark bang on about the ruins of Istanbul – typical.

The day was going nowhere fast; I drew my curtains, lit some scented candles and popped on the sound track from The Magic Flute. It was time for a nap.

I was woken by the fat-fingered prod of Finoula Garcia who was fat, sweaty and almost as hairy as her husband. Her mono-brow was approximately 1.3cm from my face.

"You see lady. He fine. Big strong boy like overcooked lamb on the spit."

Finoula had lovely metropolitan conditioning. She was quite possibly the most culturally rich person this side of the globe; her Spanish husband Jorje complemented the chilly nature of her Scottish ancestors. Despite this she

looked Peruvian and spoke with a Russian accent. No one could make head nor tale of Finoula Garcia but she was much adored nonetheless. Everyone knew her, especially mum who appreciated her medical advice – because of course the laundress had a depth of knowledge no conventional doctor could match. The ‘Incident of 1999’ had caused Finoula to become well acquainted with mum: I had swollen to resemble an inflatable pool toy in the shape of a red crustacean, and, frightened by her puffy four-year old, mum called on Finoula’s expert knowledge.

“Heat rash, no concerning needed lady.” Sure it could have been so, seeing as I had a temperature of about 40.2 Celsius. After fanning me, almost constantly, for a week mum called on Finoula again, who this time reported differently;

“Daisy, I no know this puffy kid.” Upon which she grabbed me around the waist; over-the-shoulder I went, fireman style, and she ran to the hospital. Turns out I had Kawasaki Disease causing an acute inflammation of my vasculitis. Since this bold move by Finoula, mum had taken her word as gospel.

Mum was happy with Finoula’s diagnosis this time despite the fact that I couldn’t disagree more.

“Finoula! Much appreciated. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, thought you were dead Ernie. Now who is for a spot of Ky-See Ming?”

Unsurprisingly Finoula had completely run out of time and dashed back to the laundromat we lived above. I was left to endure Ky-See Ming – tout seule. I could hear the vicious clang of cutlery and nauseating sound of plates as the table was set. I strode into the kitchen, head high, like Attila the Hun.

Out of the pot and on to the plate. It had developed a frittata consistency yet was slimy like offal. A wonderful marbling effect had been created so that streams of grey, brown and green ran artistically through my cube of tonight’s Ky-See Ming. From experience, the only way to endure such a dastardly thing is to send compliments to the chef, add lots of salt and have a bucket of milk at the ready.

At the back of my throat a compliment simmered and sat with spherical splendour; I pushed the bubble forward with confidence and spoke my

kindest words to mother. Instant happiness for Daisy Lipshitz. I began to add the salt and noticed the most abnormal thing; the chloride in the salt had a surprising reaction with the carbonate and was burning a hole through the Ky-See Ming, then the plate and golly, it was powering through the table. Before long it could have burnt right through the floor and caused quite a stir in the laundromat.

My senses did not come to me and in my worst hour I threw pepper on the devious gloop; after all they are binary opposites and therefore should cancel each other out. This caused it to explode into orange flames, licking the table cloth and spreading with the ease of butter on toast to the curtains adjacent to the table. In utter shock, mum and I sat gawking.

“Well, run, I suppose,” I said nervously. No amount of Scouts can prepare you for your own house setting on fire.

I flew down the hall, then stairwell and finally the corridor, until I was out on the street. My bathrobe billowed behind me; just personally, I quite strongly resembled Superman. Mere minutes later we were on the street; the apartment was blazing, all of us covered in Ky-See Ming, and not even Blame would lick it off. My life, it appears, leaves me up the stream without a paddle most days. I have no house, I have no food and I have only nowhere to go. I could not cry because the heat would cause my tears to evaporate too quickly for them to pitifully run down my face. I knelt on the tarmac and stared up at the apartment which looked like a piece of amber backed by the desert’s sun. It was beautiful on fire, it glimmered, it was light and it united mum and I in sorrow. The firemen did not arrive with their exciting yellow hats and black armour. The nature of this problem was such that the SES had to come; household chemicals can be dangerous and when fire faces a laundromat of washing powders the situation can turn explosive. Along with the SES came an abundance of news readers. In my robe I proudly related the events to our great nation of viewers.

This certainly was a compromising position, but my bathrobe would obscure me on screen and undoubtedly looked like a cape, and I smeared soot on my face in an attempt at a mask. My position, although compromising, would make the front of the local paper; The Evening Outrage. Just another night at the Lipshitzs’ I suppose.



# *Snow White Sydney*

Once in the smog-ridden, awfully busy, putrid city of Sydney, there lived a lovely woman of about thirty, who was at the hospital giving birth to a beautiful baby girl. And because of her pale complexion (and her father's surname) this baby was named Snow White. Life was good for the White family until Snow's birth mother died a few years later and her vague but friendly father married a young, vicious woman. Working for a fashion magazine, she was the kind of lady that always appears kind and generous (but really has a short temper and a conspiring character). Because of her manipulative attitude she was nicknamed 'the Queen'.

Soon came the birth of technology and throughout the years Snow White was growing more beautiful by the second. The Queen had befriended the new iPhone 4S and fell in love with Siri. Daily she asked, "Siri, who is fairest of us all?"

And every day Siri replied rather reluctantly, "Queen, thou art the fairest of us all!"

As Snow White grew older Siri was no longer oblivious to her beauty, so one day when the Queen asked "Siri, who is the fairest of us all?"

Siri replied, "Queen, thou art the fairest in this hall, but Snow White is fairer than us all."

The Queen, outraged at this news, ran downstairs and screamed at Snow, "You are so dead."

Snow White, taking this very seriously, ran to the train stop and hopped on the next train to the western suburbs. Although as soon as she had taken a seat she realised that Gerald, the Queen's personal assistant, had followed her. He sat down rather encouragingly next to Snow and explained that the Queen had demanded her iPhone to be taken back to her in proof that she would no longer have any social life and would die of embarrassment. Being a nice person, Gerald decided that was not necessary so stopped by Hot Dollar and bought a fake phone.

The poor young maiden travelled kilometres and kilometres until getting off at a small train stop where the bush had thickened and the air smelt like

rain and rabbit droppings. Walking through the small and crowded streets she noticed a cottage which she ran to for shelter from the heavy rain. Hoping that the people that lived in here were very stupid (or wanted to be robbed) she looked under the doormat to find a small key which fitted in the door easily.

The house smelt like gin and stale milk. Snow was not surprised to find the beds unmade but was so exhausted she took a large sleeping pill found in the bathroom and collapsed in one of them. When the owners came home she was still drugged and fast asleep so did not notice. Neither did the men, for that matter, who were so drunk they could not even see two feet in front of them.

In the morning, despite very sore heads the drunks were able to clearly see that there was a woman sleeping on one of the beds. Quietly fist-bumping and high-fiving each other they did not see Snow White awaken and stare at them as if they were monkeys escaped from a zoo.

“So you’re the disgusting creatures living here,” she murmured, displeased.

For a moment they stared at her, trying to digest the statement, then nodded at each other in agreement to it.

“I wish I didn’t have to see this,” Snow replied in disgust.

Suddenly, one of the men jumped and said “Oh! Oh! Wait, I’m getting an idea...” He paused. “She should be our cleaner and then she could sleep here all the time.”

All the men nodded simultaneously in agreement. Even Snow White was willing to do this because she could not imagine the horror of going back to the Queen. Snow White’s job started that very same day when the men headed off to the pub. She began to wash, clean and garden, soon interrupted by a phone call. There was a woman on the other side of the line asking if she wanted a free choker necklace as a sample of a new designer jewellery company. Being shallow and rather stupid she said yes and asked for it to be delivered.

Little did Snow White know that the Queen had found out about her plan and was heavily applying make-up to disguise herself as a door to door retailer.

When the men came back, rather drunk, they found Snow White lying

on the floor with a tight choker gripped around her neck. They removed the choker and all of them were very pleased to perform CPR on her.

The stepmother trudged back through the mud, irritated at her choice of high-heels for this... outing.

“At last,” she panted to herself, “at last that wretched child is gone.” She cackled (which is really rather demeaning for a woman of her age) and continued to trudge back to the house.

As soon as reception bars came up on her phone, she opened up Siri and asked, for mere reassurance, the ultimate question:

“Siri, who is the fairest of us all?”

Expecting that she would be, the answer was rather a shock.

“Snow is still alive, and there is none so fair as she.”

Raging with anger, she returned to her home and marched into the study where she collapsed in the desk chair in front of her computer. In a matter of minutes she had bought an iPhone virus off eBay and in a matter of seconds the file was sitting on her desktop like a bomb that was slowly ticking away. She opened up Outlook and sent the file to Snow disguised as a coupon for 50% off at Sportsgirl.

Once again, the men returned, drunk as ever.

“Itssnowwhyisshelyingonthefloor?” yelled one of the men, who were all very grumpy from being stuck in the pub all day.

Another of the men, the only one who had a brain in fact, ushered everyone into the hallway. He then had a look at the girl lying on the floor, motionless. He glanced at the jail-broken phone, which now displayed a glowing red Apple symbol. He grasped the phone and plugged it into his laptop, which (rather conveniently) had an anti-virus iPhone application.

Meanwhile, the evil stepmother had an important question to ask:

“Siri, who is the fairest of us all?”

To which she replied:

“Snow is still alive, and there is none so fair as she.”

If she was irritated before, I suppose we could describe the stepmother as fuming now. She traipsed into the kitchen (ignoring her shaking husband

in the corner reading the paper), swiped a dozen red apples from the bench and paced back to the bathroom. This was it. A single shot glass of pure poison into each one (actually, it was a brand of Scottish whiskey, but that's beside the point). She gathered them into a basket.

She stormed through the cottage the next day, dressed as an innocent farmer's wife bearing a gift of fresh red apples. Snow looked somewhat stunned by the sudden appearance.

"Hello..."

"Well, hello there, dear!"

"Ah, I'm not... Allowed to have strangers in the house."

"I'm no stranger – I'm just giving out some apples. Care for one?"

They did look awfully good. Snow could not see any harm in having a single apple. After all, she was a bit hungry.

A single bite.

The apple dropped onto the floor, closely followed by Snow.

At last.

At last.

The stepmother cackled. In need of reassurance, she slipped out her phone. Darn. No connection. She ran back towards the house, panting. Something to eat would do her good. She glanced at the apples while her phone gained reception. Without thinking, she let her tongue reach the pale flesh. Gone.

"You are the fairest. Updating data... Miranda Kerr is."

The robotic voice hummed over the fields.

# *The Three Little Pigs*

There were three pigs, Max, Jim and Fred,  
Who one day were kicked out of bed,  
Said their mother in a flying rage,  
“Go get some jobs, and earn a wage.”

“I’m tired of you mooching things,  
It’s time to fly, so grow some wings,  
You’re forty-three, and living with mum,  
You’re moving out you lazy scum.”

So off they went, into the world,  
Into the workforce they were whirled,  
(They did get jobs, mediocre pay,  
Down at the stables, shovelling hay.)

Then one day, Jim did up and shout,  
“I hate this job and I want out!  
For greater things I must be bound,  
Than shovelling dirty hay around!”

“I’m moving west, into the city,  
I’ll get a job, something less gritty.  
Soon I’ll see you boys around,”  
And then he headed for the town.

“I like it here,” said Fred to Max,  
“There’s very little income tax.”  
Max said, “Oh yes, let’s always stay,  
In our houses made of sticks and hay.”

And soon Jim had secured a job,  
An internship, at Fields and Lob,  
Where he was training to be a lawyer,  
Paid handsomely by his employer.

In no time at all, he bought a house,  
And found a lovely English spouse,  
And had three kids, two girls, a boy,  
Who filled their home with love and joy.

But Max was in a sorrier state,  
His rent was almost always late,  
He couldn’t keep up with rising rent,  
And so held on to every cent.

And so his landlord, Mr Roof,  
(Who some do like to call ‘the wolf’)  
Knocked on his door one afternoon,  
“Be out of here by 1st of June!”

So he quickly gathered all his things,  
(Just a few odd clothes and some knotted string)  
And fled to the house of his brother Fred,  
And camped out in his gardening shed.

But Fred was broke as well, you see,  
And had no other choice but flee,  
Because his money was all spent,  
He couldn't pay his monthly rent.

So Fred and Max fled both their homes,  
(Which were sold to a family of wealthy gnomes)  
And sought out to find their brother Jim,  
And travelled west to search for him.

And soon they did, and were surprised,  
To see just where Jim did reside,  
A modest mansion, all complete,  
With plasma screens and a Master suite.

The shock, Max almost could not bear,  
He cried, "Our bro's a billionaire!"  
He ran to the gate and yelled for Jim,  
"It's Max and Fred! Quick, let us in!"

Jim came outside and smiled with glee,  
"Max! And Fred! How have you been?"  
"Not good," said Fred, "we're both cold broke!  
The rent went up and made us choke!"

"So you've absolutely zero pounds,  
Left in either of your bank accounts?"  
Said Freddy with a hint of sass,  
"Who needs that silly banking trash!"

Said Jim in utter plain disgust,  
“You need an account! You really must!  
Come with me, there’s no need to thank,  
And we’ll open one at Westpac Bank.

“I also will need to amend,  
Some changes in the way you spend.  
From now on, no spending unless I say,  
And I’ll find you jobs with decent pay.”

Jim went to work and pulled some strings,  
And got them jobs filing and sorting things,  
As a team, down at Jim’s firm,  
And got them homes in half a term.

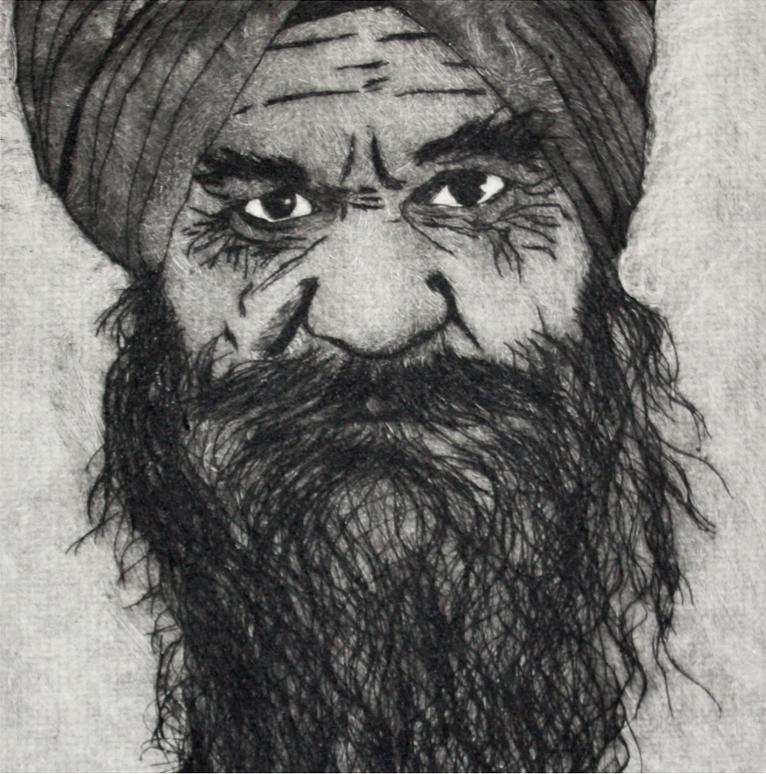
They invested stocks in enterprises,  
And in a year soon reaped the prizes,  
They bought apartments near and far,  
And in no time had a lovely car.

And after winning a financial war,  
They treated themselves to the iPhone four,  
And soon were avid millionaires,  
But weren’t prepared to stop just there.

They started their own enterprise,  
And oodles of riches was the prize,  
They were big names in the finance scene,  
On the cover of Forbes Magazine.

And in ten years, they all retired,  
Selling the companies they had acquired,  
Gaining the many benefits from,  
Their superannuation funds.

This goes to show, be sly and thrifty,  
And turn that ten into a fifty,  
Be wise as wise with all your money,  
And life's as sweet as bread and honey.



# *Cindy - Happily Ever After?*

As Ella looked down at the Prince's wondrous face alight with happiness and joy, she gave the other glass slipper to him. He gently placed it onto her petite foot and it was a perfect fit. They rode away on his stallion to his grand palace, where they were married the next day. Finally, she knew her happy ending was near.

\* \* \* \* \*

Princess Ella traced her finger across the table, no dust or grime left. "I'm sick of it," she said petulantly. "Why is this place so clean? I've got nothing to do!"

The Prince glared at her angrily. "Why do you want something to do? You worked hard to get that fairy godmother all your life," he demanded. "And to keep yourself skinny and good-looking. You told me, woman! Don't tell me you miss being little 'Cinderella!'"

Ella curled her lip. "But I need to keep my reputation up by helping the servants, I need to exhibit my niceness."

"Be my guest!" the Prince shouted, gesturing to the plates littered down the mile-long table that a cheerful looking servant girl was clearing up. Ella flinched from his fiery temper but still managed to make a sound of sulky disgust and ignore his question.

"I hate this perfect meal and perfect bed full of feathers and perfect cheerful servants. I hate perfect you!"

"WELL WHY DON'T WE DIVORCE?" he bellowed furiously.

Ella's eyes widened. The words hung like a motionless snowflake, cold and rare, between them. She melted inside a little from the startling blue eyes of her one true love. But in a flash of pique that easily drowned her adoration, she shrieked, "So be it!"

She tore up the long winding staircase into their bedroom, and threw into her handbag a red cloak, a scrubbing brush and some perfume. She threw the sheets off the bed as a last minute revenge and flew down out of the

palace, through the village to which she no longer belonged and into the forest that backed it.

As she entered the cool gloom of the woods she took some ragged breaths punctuated by sobs. She finally managed to calm down, hiccupping slightly. She donned her red cloak, applied some perfume on her neck and stood up. Now this would be her happily ever after.

\* \* \* \* \*

As she stumbled through the woods, over broken twigs and her own broken dreams, a little girl stood next to her mother clutching her hand. “Who’s that, Mother?”

The Mother shushed her, looking anxiously at the hunched shape of the person. “Why, Katie, that’s that Little Red Riding Hood. Ignore her, dear, and she won’t bother us.”

The apparent ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ looked up for a second, her twenty-two year old face full of lines and wrinkles that sixteen years had not shown. She called out, “Hello, friends! How may I clean your house?”

The Mother squeezed her daughter’s hand and called back, “Go away, you hag! You’ve been cleaning too much! Rest! ”

“And it shows on your face!” added the little girl. Ella turned and resumed her ponderous pace down the path. Six years of hard work had made her feel as though she was the best person in the world again, but now it was time to snare another husband and settle down for her happily ever after. Her real one.

As the sun drew closer to the horizon, Ella noticed a sparkle in the trees. She looked closer and realised it was a bird. It hopped closer to her. “You look like you need a happily ever after!” it chirped. Ella squinted and before her eyes, the sparrow transformed into her fairy godmother.

Ella was taken aback. “Why, Godmother, what were you doing as a bird?”

The godmother raised an eyebrow. “Why do you want to know? If you know will that be your happy ever after?”

“Oh, no, Godmother! I want another husband!”

“What did you do with the last one I gave you?”

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“Oh yeah... I lost him. I couldn't show my, um, goodness around the house. He was ruining me. I give back my title and now proclaim myself as 'Cinderella' again. It's much more suiting.”

“Mmm... well, now you've picked up that name Little Red Riding Hood too,” said the godmother, examining her fingernails. She looked over them at Cinderella. “So... do you like short people, then?”

Cinderella shrugged. “Sure.” Before the silence had escaped her mouth, the sparkling godmother, the glimmer from the sun through the foliage and the quiet babble of a nearby brook vanished.

\* \* \* \* \*

Poke. Poke.

“Is she awake?”

Poke. Poke.

“I'm giving up on this, it's ridiculous.” Tramp of retreating footsteps. Poke. Poke. Cinderella blearily opened her eyes.

“Am I in heaven?” she asked stupidly. As her eyes focussed, she realised she was still in the woods and a handsome man was peering over her. For a second, her heart skipped, believing it was her Prince but then she saw this man's eyes were black.

“Nope. You're still alive. Unluckily.” She might have mistaken the last muttered word so she leaned forward and he pulled to help her up. She realised he was short. Very short.

“You're a midget!” she exclaimed thoughtlessly.

“How original,” the midget said dryly.

“I mean, I... don't mean to be rude, but... you're a dwarf?”

“Tell me something I don't know.” Cinderella hesitated for a moment, unsure of her footing.

“Well, can I at least take refuge in your, uh...” She looked over him to see a cosy little cottage in a clearing nearby. “Cosy midget house?”

“Well, I suppose I have no choice.” Cinderella hurried after the dwarf/midget, and saw she had entered a house. As she stepped further into the house she banged her head on the low ceiling.

“Watch out for the ceiling,” the dwarf/midget warned, oblivious to the glare shot at him.

The house was strewn with axes, dirty clothes and a makeshift table stood in the centre of the room.

“Welcome to our house! Oh, and tonight, you can sleep in that bed,” he added pointing to a bed that was bigger than the rest but just as haphazardly made.

As Cinderella snuggled closer to the surprisingly warm duvet, she decided that this would be her happily ever after. She bonded with the kind midget/dwarf over dinner along with his six brothers. She decided she would marry one of them... but which one? Deciding on Dopey, they were married a few days later. As she picked berries from the bushes and shrubs surrounding the house, a beautiful maiden, with red lips, white skin and deep black hair approached her house.

Following her home, Cindy found the snowy beauty flirting with her husband!

“Who are you? Why are you here? Get out!”

“My name is Snow White. Please, I’ve been running for days from that huntsman! Let me be, please! I want a happy ending with a lovely man. Dopey here is quite a catch!”

“He’s mine!” Cinderella exclaimed threateningly toward Snow White.

“Goodness this place is a mess. It needs cleaning. All the time I gather!”

“That’s the point!” Cinderella began to lose her nerve. “Get out!”

“NO!” Snow White yelled. Suddenly, she grabbed Cinderella by the waist and dragged her out to the middle of the forest. This part of the forest was dark and gloomy, like a ghostly sheet had been cast upon it. Snow White then conjured up a tall, stone tower. With a flash, Cindy was inside, locked in with no escape route and only one barred window.

“Happily Ever After!” Snow White screeched from below and off she went to snag herself a groom. Fortunately, we can reassure ourselves that Cinderella could manage well enough by herself. Snow White’s spell had gone awry in her rage and so the inside of the tower was made of a wholesome, delicious kind of ginger bread. One has to wonder what Snow White was thinking of

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when she cast the spell to end up with gingerbread as the walls of the tower.

Meanwhile, even though the dwarves wholly enjoyed Snow White's company, they missed Cinderella's lasagnes. One night, they held a secret conference outside the cottage and agreed to banish Snow White. She was too powerful and had been influenced far too much by her stepmother. So it was Dopey who stole into Snow White's bedroom and nicked her spell book while she was out at the local village. She was staying there for a day or so, so the dwarves had plenty of time.

"Ooh, cool book, huh?" commented Doc.

"Would you mind if-if-if I er... did the spell? May-maybe I-I could kee-ep the book if you d-don't mind!" Bashful stammered, blushing as he gazed at the magnificent book.

"Hey, what about me? Everyone always forgets me. I deserve the book more than you guys," Grumpy said with a great humph.

So the argument went on from midnight till dawn, until Sleepy decided to open his eyes.

"Whaat about ze zpell, goiz?" he yawned.

The dwarves, panicking suddenly, began to flick through the book in search of a spell to turn Snow White into a frog. Unfortunately, Dopey recited the incarnation loudly to memorise it. There was a deathly silence that followed, but nothing seemed to be happening.

Little did they know that not so far away, in the gingerbread tower, Cinderella was singing to some birds. Suddenly:

"RibberRRTT!"

Cinderella gulped. She tried to sing again but, alas, she could not! Tense and feeling a little teary, she looked down at herself.

She screamed.

She was a green, slimy frog.

After a while spent sulking, she realised an opportunity. The barred window! She could jump out and escape! She threw herself forward and shot through the bars easily.

There was no one to hold the funeral for her.



# *CinderAlex*

I stood on the balcony of the highest tower in a castle that many would give anything to live in. But for some reason I had never been able to call it my home. The halls were littered with chandeliers and heirlooms. The rooms were crowded with gold and silver, all one day to become mine. I should have been happy. I should have been ecstatic. But I hated it there. I felt so suffocated and boxed in, yet so alone at the same time. A prince should not feel this way, especially not a prince on the verge of becoming a king. But I was not the prince that the land was looking for, nor the sort of prince they would want to run this country. If anyone knew about me, about my secret, I would be dead. I would be shunned from this cruel society, thrown onto the pavement as a peasant and discarded like trash. A prince cannot be like this. But I must live this harsh, unforgiving life until the day I die. Wearing that mask is the only way I would ever make it in the town, the castle with its grand staircases and endless halls. The only way...

\* \* \* \* \*

“Cinderalex, Cinderalex! Go back to kissing boys Alex!”

“Yeah Alex, go daydream about your imaginary boyfriend.”

I was sick of their tormenting. I watched as my step-sisters tossed my notebook to one another, reading my thoughts back to me as if they were their own death-sentences, disgusted looks stretched across their faces.

“This is just wrong.” Catherine had read the diary many times before, yet she loved to hurl insults into my face. I had heard it all already.

“He’s so disgusting,” Elizabeth yelled to Catherine. “Alex is in love with the prince! Alex is in love with the prince!”

Catherine laughed almost maniacally, throwing her head back. “As if he would ever fall for you! The prince likes girls!”

There was nothing ‘disgusting’ or ‘gross’ in the words I had written, only my heart spilled onto the page. It was about him. The one I had loved since I was able to admit to myself that I was gay. Gay. In a society like this a simple mention of the word would mean being ostracised immediately. I had

little comfort in the fact that I knew my secret would never leave my sisters' smirking mouths, for it would bring shame on the family.

By now I was immune to their abuse and simply continued with my chores. I was used to getting on with work, with life. I had been doing it since I was eight years old, since my mother died. She was a beautiful woman and the only one who accepted me for who I was. My dad remarried a year later and I still remember the cacophony of my heart ripping into shreds when he said he had to move on. He married a woman of high class and beauty, but behind her mask lay a devious, malevolent woman. But I suppose we are all hiding behind masks these days.

\* \* \* \* \*

My father's eyes were a deep blue, worn with age. He was dying. I walked to the end of the bed and touched his leg when he erupted in shivers. The King looked me in the face and held my gaze for an eternity before he spoke, "My son, my time is coming to an end and your time as king will soon begin. However to be a fit ruler you will need to find yourself a queen." His eyes bore into mine and I felt as if he was peering into my soul. "In a week's time a ball will be held and there you will choose your bride," he paused, almost as if he was waiting for me to say something. "You have to do this and you know that." The man was on his deathbed and all he could say to his only son directly related to the ruling of his kingdom.

"I know." Behind his gaze was something else, something I had not seen before. It was as if he knew. I left the room, my father's eyes still following me as I shut the door.

As to how I would choose my bride, I was not exactly sure. I was not the least bit interested in a bride. I could already see the ball panning out as the preparations were being made. Women, done up in the most elaborate and intricate of ways, made to look flawless, would be dancing and eyeing off their competition. They would all approach me one by one and I would pretend to be interested and dance with them, before simply moving on to the next face. It would all be a blur of ball-gowns, tottering shoes and sparkling diamonds. None of them even know me, yet they would all give anything to marry me. Status is a funny thing. I felt bad, really. They would be wasting

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their time with a man who is not interested, when they could be dancing with one of the many other fine gentlemen who I knew would be at the ball. If only I could dance with them.

I realized that I had somehow once again made my way to the balcony and I sighed at the sight of the tiny pinpricks of light that littered the sky. Such freedom seemed possible up there. A narrow path had been set for my life that I knew I could not stray from. It had always been there, since the day I entered this unforgiving world. It was a regrettable path but one that I knew I would never be able to run from.

\* \* \* \* \*

A letter arrived on our doorstep in the morning. I watched as they opened it, curious as to its arrival. My step-sister's eyes lit up as they saw an invitation to a ball at the Royal Palace. "A ball!" squealed Elizabeth. "We've been invited to the Prince's ball at the palace!"

My stomach twisted as I watched them celebrate at the thought of dancing with the Prince. I was once again reminded that my childish fantasies were, and would only ever be, figments of my imagination. I sighed, perhaps a little too loudly for they both turned towards me, smug expressions stretched across their spiteful faces. "Aww... does little Cinderalex want to go to the ball?"

Reality stung my eyes, and slowly made its way down my cheek. They turned their backs to my dissipating face and ran to their rooms, already preparing to suffocate themselves in lace corsets in a foolish attempt to impress the prince.

There is nothing I wanted more than to run at them and wipe the conceited smiles off their faces. My time would come. One day, my time would come. I rubbed my eyes and bent down to the floor, continuing to scrub the cold marble. I walked over to the sink to wet the sponge when I heard a hissing sound erupt from the cinders. I turned my head sharply toward the noise to see a cloud of ash rising from the fire. When the veil of dust settled a man stood in the fire-place, wearing a moth-eaten coat layered with a sheet of cinders. He had a large hat atop his head and when he straightened up it was hidden in the chimney. He was a tall man, with crooked teeth and a

wide, open smile. He stepped out from the fireplace and shook the residue off his shoulders. I stood there with an open mouth, waiting for this stranger in my fire-place to say something. He winked at me and extended a hand.

I was in too much awe to assume proper manners when greeting a visitor. Instead I dropped the sponge and tried to speak. "Um... Hello," I said, a little too flabbergasted to say anything more.

His smile stretched from ear to ear. He outstretched his hand. I shook it limply, still deciding whether this was a dream or not. "Charles," he said. "Charles Harrington. But you can just call me Charlie."

"I'm..."

"Alex, I know. I'm your fairy godfather."

I felt a tiny spark of hope ignite from deep inside me. I think my smile was now almost as wide as Charlie's.

"What are you doing here, when the ball is at the Palace?"

"I couldn't go. What would they say? An ash sweeper at the Royal Palace?"

"Do you want to go?"

I thought for a moment. "Yes."

From his hat Charlie produced a beautiful gown and a pair of glass slippers in front of me. They certainly were breathtaking garments.

"Put this on," said Charlie, handing me the dress.

"I'm not sure the royal family will appreciate a man in a dress at the ball."

"No, Alex. It is an enchanted dress. Put this on and everyone at the ball will see you as the most beautiful maiden in the entire kingdom. I promise."

I felt a pang of glee and took the dress from his hands, though hesitantly I admit.

"But you must know that the spell will wear off at midnight and when the clock strikes 12 you will begin to transform back into a man. So hurry now."

I hastily slipped into the gown and put on my glass slippers. Just as I finished getting ready, I was swept from the kitchen and landed in a stunning carriage drawn by two white horses. I felt a twinge of disappointment as I looked down and saw that I was still very much a man. Charlie, who was sitting across from me, handed me a mirror.

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“Take a look,” he said.

I held the mirror in front of me, and was surprised to see a beautiful girl staring back.

“Everyone else sees you as this. For the night, this is who you are. Just remember, you need to be gone by midnight.”

The carriage drew to a close, and my door was opened. I exited as gracefully as I could, surprised to see a number of men glancing at me. I climbed the stairs to the door and was escorted in. “Here I am,” I thought. “The Royal Ball.”

\* \* \* \* \*

I stood uncomfortably by the table covered in a glorious feast, though I had suddenly lost my appetite. I fidgeted with a silver ornamental fork as I waited for my guests to arrive. Maiden after maiden smothered in powder flowed through the entrance and I half-heartedly greeted them. I knew I had to pick my bride but how could I when I would never be able to feel that way for a woman? They all stared deeply into my eyes, trying desperately to catch my attention in hope that I would run and sweep them off their feet. They would not look twice at the other hopeful men in the room and I knew that if I was not wearing a crown I would be completely ignored. I had to adhere to my father’s request so I headed over to the women in swirling gowns.

I danced with one after the other and, as expected, felt nothing. No spark, no feelings. I glimpsed another beautiful woman walking towards me in a dress adorned with gold and silver. I had not seen her before and she was one of the last women that I had not danced with. I sighed and began to move toward her, practically dragging my feet across the ground.

But then we started dancing. As we swayed to the music I looked into her face to see a soft, charming smile on her lips, with almost a hint of mischief about it. We danced for hours, creating a spiralling tunnel around us, as if the space around our twirling bodies did not exist. We talked as well. Not about her, or about me, but about more important things in the world. I told her ideas that I had, things I wanted to change about this land that I had never told anyone before. Unlike the others, she listened to what I had to say and I felt as if I could whisper anything to her, pour all my secrets into

her ear and they would be kept safe and appreciated.

It was strange. The feelings that I began to feel for her were so strong, yet I had not imagined that could be possible. How could I feel such a connection with her when my entire life I had been sure of who I was? My head span. The confusion was too much.

I looked back into her eyes and noticed her gaze divert to the clock on the wall. Gasping, she suddenly turned away, breaking away from my embrace.

"I... I have to go," she stuttered, sounding unsure of herself. I grabbed her arm as she rushed towards the door.

"But wait!" I cried. "What is your name?"

"Alex, I'm Alex," she murmured.

I wasn't concentrating. I felt something erupting from the arm I still held in my grasp. Looking down I gulped as I stared at a burly arm covered in long black hair that had replaced the delicate one I had held. I let go in shock and staggered back but by the time I came to my senses, she was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

I looked up at the grand clock that hung on the wall and felt my stomach drop as I realized it was midnight. Time with the prince had stood still, like we were the only ones in the room. "I... I have to go," I said, my voice shaky. He looked into my eyes and I could sense the desperation in them. I tried to leave but he gripped my arm, asking me for my name. "Alex... I'm Alex." I looked down in time to see my arm transforming back into its hair-covered, muscular self. I pulled it away quickly but it was too late, he had already seen it and was practically tripping over his own legs in a mixture of what was probably horror and surprise. I did not want to stay to find out. I ran from the ball, broke free from that warm little bubble I had been in with the prince the whole night. I could feel the dress tightening on my ever-growing body and the tiny slippers I had been given were cutting into my feet. I ran to the house and stripped off the dress that, at the beginning of the night, had been a perfect fit. Later that night the step-sisters came home raving about their night.

"We danced all night," Catherine said facing Elizabeth, but I could tell that she wanted me to hear. "The whole night he was holding me in his arms."

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Catherine swayed around the room, pretending to recount a memory that never happened. I knew that they had sat sulking at the edge of the dance-floor the entire night, jealousy gleaming in their eyes. But I sat there and acted like I was envious of their evening, knowing in my heart that it was me who was with the prince, who he had held in his arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

I had to find her. I did not know who she was or what exactly had happened at the end of the ball, but I had to find her. The only information I had was her name, but that had to be enough. The morning after the ball I woke up determined and walked with a purpose, something I had not done in years. I went from door to door throughout the palace asking for an Alex but was given only apologetic looks in return. I searched for hours, with no intent of giving up. I would search for weeks if I had to.

I went from house to house, knocking. I held on to the only shred of information I had. A house down the road had a daughter called Alex but it I knew in an instant that she was not who I was looking for. I had searched the whole kingdom and came to the very last house. My knuckles pounded against the wooden door. A tall man opened the door.

“Is there an Alex here?” I said quietly, as this was my last chance at finding my love.

Two young girls appeared behind him in the door frame. Their faces lit up.

“Oh hello Prince Vince,” one of the sisters stuttered. “What has summoned you to our humble abode?” I could tell she was practically shaking with nervousness.

“I’m looking for Alex. Do you know of one?”

“Pfft, there is an Alex here but I’m quite sure he’s not what you are looking for. He’s just our ash sweeping boy.”

“Can I see him?” I said and barged through the frame. I walked through the threshold to the back of the house.

In the back room, a boy sat by the fireplace tending the fire. He looked up and stared into my eyes. Then I looked down. His arms. I recognised them.

“The arms. It’s you isn’t it? Those are the arms I fell in love with.”

Alex smiled and I walked towards him, lacing my fingers around his, guiding him outside. We passed his dumbstruck excuse for a family and stepped into the horse and carriage. We rode away up to the castle but as I arrived I was greeted by tragic news.

“Your father is passing,” said the maid at the front gate.

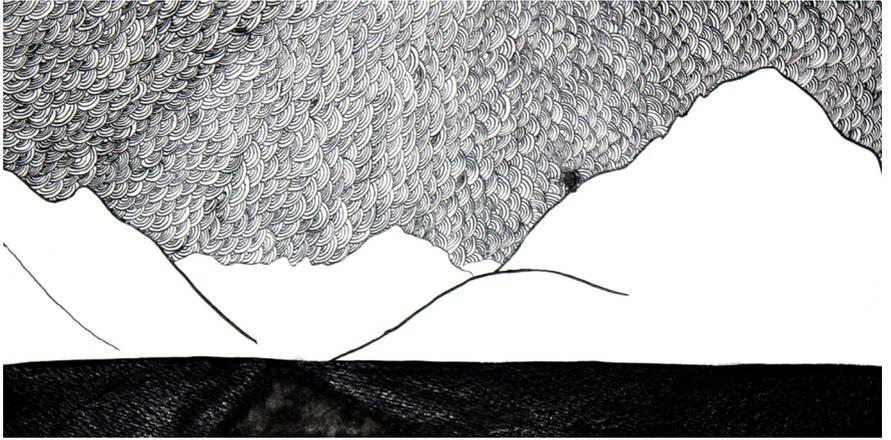
I ran up the stairs and into his bedroom. He was lying down and eyes had lost all colour. His gaze was directed towards Alex and me, hand in hand. “Father...” I started, but nothing seemed to come out.

“Son, stop... please. I see now that you are happy,” he whispered. “That is all I could ever ask for.”

A tear slid down my cheek and it was then I saw the colour drain from his face, his eyes fixed in a translucent gaze. The King took his last breath.

At first society was not accepting, and Alex and I feared we would be ostracised by humanity. But eventually gay couples across the land began to come out and people began to question what was normal. My first act as the new King of the land was to legalise gay marriage and raise acceptance of homosexual couples and soon people realised that it was okay to be unique.

So Alex and I and all gay citizens in the land lived happily ever after, in peace knowing that we were accepted and respected.



# *A Rose By Any Other Name*

*Norwich, Norfolk, England, 1894*

“You are not acting like a lady, Rose! No man will want to marry you if you continue this stubborn and unbecoming behaviour!”

“I’m glad of it.”

The words continued to ring in her ears, their shrill tones echoing. Tears stung behind her eyes as she tried to hold them back by staring blankly at the dull, cream-coloured paint of her bedroom wall. A faint smell of the roses she had picked from the garden last week lingered in the air, now more musty than pleasant although still pretty in their vase. She unlaced her shoes, and delighted at the loud clunk they made as they hit the floor, in a most unladylike manner.

Rose lay back on her bed, flinging her arms high above her. Her throat was constricted as she buried her sobs, yet she hadn’t felt this strong for quite a while. As soon as she had come up to her bedroom, she had loosened her corset, and undone the tight knot that was braided into her hair. This frosty encounter with her father would ensure that she had at least a few hours of liberated solitude in her room, before she would be forced to become the smiling ‘young lady’ again. She was only twenty-three years of age, but her father seemed to think that it was high time she accepted one of the marriage proposals from the train of suitors that had followed her since the age of seventeen.

Through her open window, she could hear the maids downstairs. They chattered and laughed so freely, in a way that was unfamiliar to Rose. She listened to the clinking of cups and cutlery, the shameless gossip and the purposeful opening and closing of doors and drawers. She wished she could be down there with them, earning her living instead of paying other people to do the real living for her. Just as she was beginning to settle into a pleasant meditative state, she was startled by a sharp rapping at her door. She gasped and rushed to tug at the strings of her corset and forced her feet

back into her shoes. She was in the middle of pulling her hair into a twist at the nape of her neck, when the door opened. Rose's attention snapped to the doorway and the figure standing in it. With relief, she realised that it was one of the maids.

"Oh, Daisy! It's you!" she stammered.

Looking puzzled, Daisy said, "Yes, ma'am. I thought I better come up and remind you that it's nearly time for the garden party." She felt her face harden. The garden party, where she and her sisters would be exhibited like the finest of ornaments in the Burtonwood family collection.

"Yes! I almost forgot! Thank you so much, Daisy." She nodded and closed the door. Rose let her hair fall onto her shoulders again. Rose's mind whirled like a torrent. In a moment of impulse, she flung open her bedroom door. "Daisy!" she called. "Daisy, please come back up here." She saw the maid appear at the bottom of the stairs, her face evidently curious.

"Yes, ma'am. Right away." She continued to trot up the stairs, before arriving at Rose's bedroom.

"Please come in, Daisy," Rose said gesturing to the doorway of the room. "I'm afraid I have a rather large favour to ask of you." Daisy's expression remained impassive, save for a slight twitch of her eyebrow.

"As you wish, mi'lady."

Outside, a throng of guests were milling around on the manicured lawn. All that was visible from Rose's window were the tops of parasols, held in the gloved hands of the ladies. She walked over to her dressing table and looked in the mirror. The slate colour of the maid's uniform that she was now wearing made her skin dull and her blue eyes appeared cloudy grey. She pulled her hair further forward, attempting to disguise her features, in the hope that no one would recognise her. She tucked her purse, containing only a few shillings, into the pocket of the borrowed apron then tentatively opened the door. She made her way down the spiralling staircase and noticed how little sound Daisy's flat leather shoes made. Her steps didn't echo in the stairwell. She stopped for a minute and listened, just to make sure no one was coming. She heard nothing. Rose closed her eyes and then swallowed. She quickened her pace and took the winding passageways that led to the stables that were nestled in a helpfully secluded copse of trees.

Once she was outside she hid behind the one of the crumbling, wooden stables and stopped to catch her breath. She could hear the faint sounds of laughter and clinking tea-cups echoing up from the garden party. She noticed that the air had developed a crisp edge and realised that afternoon would soon turn to night. The rattle of a carriage passing on the near-by road brought her out of her contemplation. Holding her skirt up from the ground, Rose hurried to the path that led to town. Trudging along the path, attempting to make her steps as resolute as possible, she felt the cold wind brushing along her cheeks, turning them to a numb crimson. The fragrance of the tall pine trees that lined the path cleared her mind but their long angular arms seemed to loom menacingly over her. Rose hesitated when she saw the peaks of the tall, brick buildings of Norwich, a town where she would have to be alone. "What have I done?" she whispered to no-one but the whistling wind.

Rose stood firm on the muddy path casting her eyes back and forth between the town and the distant home she knew so well. She was so far from everything she knew, but so close to home. She turned back. The tears tingled in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. Her borrowed clothes felt ridiculous. Rose had some decisions to make, but she realised that the only place to make those decisions was in her home. She turned back. On this journey, her steps were just as determined, but somehow more considered.

When she arrived back at the manor house, the light was dusky. The lawn was no longer filled with guests. She walked around the edges of the garden but no longer held up the hem of the dress from the ground, letting it drag in the soil. She stopped when she reached a flower bed. Behind a tall, white fence, grew beautiful red roses. Their leaves trimmed to perfection, their green stems bending with the weight of the velvety petals. Outside the barrier of the fence was a border of rough, brown soil. Out of this soil, grew daisies. They found their place in the unused ground, not heeding boundaries, but surviving with self-sustaining individuality. Rose picked three daisies from the ground and carried them back to the house with her. The house was quiet as she walked through it; no-one saw her climb back up the stairs leading to her room and close the door. She removed the roses from the vase and replaced them with the three daisies. She smiled quietly to herself.

# *Rose\**

\*It's not always what it seems.

The wretched thorns warn passers-by  
To refrain from picking flowers.  
Concircled pink petals hide this, however;  
A deceiving trap.

Dare you pick me?  
Dare you take the risk?

(I'm only plastic, of course. It wouldn't hurt one bit.)



# *Here's to you, Montague*

Jess scans the party

#girltalk

Guy in blue shirt!

Where?

Twelve-o'clock. Very hot.

Really...?

What the fuck is Lucy wearing?!

Whoa. Slutty.

Ohmygod look at Finn!

Why...?

He is so damn fine!

He's attractive, I guess

if you're into Ryan Gosling.

As if you wouldn't go that!

Oh please.

Finn's blue eyes meet mine, and he nods in our direction

smiling slightly;

I pretend not to notice.

Amber! He is totally checking you out!

Not interested.

What are you lesbian now?

Wait... is this about Harry... still?

I roll my eyes.

Harry is my only ex-boyfriend

How do I explain him?

Once upon a time... I liked his blue eyes  
and lanky but toned arms

He played the electric guitar  
and was in a "band"

And their cover of the Arctic Monkeys'  
'I bet you look good on the dancefloor'  
wasn't bad

But that was the extent of his  
Pros Column.

Before long his attitude worsened  
and his acne

his pimples were like tomato paste  
smeared across his cheeks

And he was smart  
Condescendingly.

And even though he asked, pleaded and threatened  
We never did it.

And when we broke up, seven months ago,  
I rang Jess and cried on the phone because I was relieved  
And have not kissed any boys since.

Not all boys are like him, Jess insists.

She's right

They're worse:  
rooting, banging and screwing

I sigh

What ever happened to making love?

What are you, twelve?

And gentlemen?

Sexual lib happened... for starters...

Or just... old-fashioned kissing in the rain!

I want to ride around Rome  
clinging to Gregory Peck  
on a red motorcycle...

Ohmygod Amber...

You're such a Drama Queen.

Life isn't an Audrey Hepburn movie.

I know that, I just wish... you know...

But Jess isn't listening

too busy batting her eyelids at Connor Huff across the courtyard.

Cuteeeee

shut up!!

I'm going to the bathroom

before I vomit.

Alcohol get the better of ya?

No. Your eye-sex did.

Take your time, Jess giggles, waving Connor over.

I pass boys and girls dancing grinding

to the noise erupting from a booming speaker

and someone vomiting into Georgie's father's crimson pot plants

and smokers: half inhaling, half coughing.

There's no light beneath the bathroom door

but I know better than to assume it's Vacant

knock, knock, knock

Someone smoothly touches my arm

Hey a husky voice breathes in my ear

It's Finn.

(because unfortunately, that's how stories like these begin)

Hi

Off to the bathroom, he says with a wink.

Wow. You're smart.

He laughs

Need an escort?  
Do you really want me to answer that?  
He smiles, not bothered  
You can pretend all you like  
but I know you want me.

First of all you're not my type  
And second of all –  
Yeah, but I like breaking the rules.

Oh a bad boy! How refreshing.  
Come on, you're not even the least bit curious about me... um...  
What's your name again?

Ugh.  
It's Annabelle or something, right?

No.  
Tell me then...  
and I'll never forget it

Actually  
I have to *use* the bathroom,  
so if you wouldn't mind...  
A beautiful girl like you shouldn't go into the bathroom alone.  
I'd feel personally responsible,  
if you ended up in an  
alternate universe.

Ok Marty McFly  
I'll keep that in mind  
And don't worry  
I'll be sure to wash my hands.  
Have fun, he grins, blue eyes gleaming  
before strolling away.  
I open the door

with a frustrated sigh  
And enter

ACT 1, SCENE 5

The Great Hall in Capulet's Mansion

*Enter [AMBER]*

*AMBER stumbles on stage from the stage left entrance. Violins and cellos play, vivaciously. The ball-room is filled with GUESTS and GENTLEWOMEN dancing. All the ladies are dressed in tight corsets and long skirts. To be frank, they look like waltzing triangular shapes. The gentlemen are dressed in vibrant colours and ruffled shirts and cuffs, with doublets. Everyone is wearing a mask tailored to his or her costume. The best looking guests twirl their masks between their fingers, displaying their attractive faces. Amongst all the elegance, LADY CAPULET dances suggestively with TYBALT... her nephew in-law. No one consciously passes judgment. AMBER takes everything in very slowly. She is dressed in a beautiful, long white gown. She is easily the prettiest in the room. All the other women glare at her with envy. She breathes in deeply, pinches her skin several times and panics about the scientific impossibility of her surroundings.*

*AMBER [To herself] Wow. Either I'm a lot drunker than I realised...or I'm dreaming... very vividly...*

*A SERVINGMAN offers AMBER a glass of wine.*

*AMBER [Without thinking, she quickly takes the glass from him] Thank you. [She gulps it down, blinking as it makes her eyes water slightly] [To herself] You're not supposed to be able to drink in a dream. Are you?! Or open doors! Oh my god! I've actually gone insane! What was that movie? Inception. [Slapping her face] Wake up! Wake up Amber! Ow! [Rubbing her left cheek] That hurt.*

*Realising that several people surrounding her are observing her behaviour very closely, AMBER tries to keep her level of panic to a minimum. Soon*

*enough, everyone ceases to stare. Except however for one young, attractive man. He looks at AMBER curiously. AMBER becomes increasingly aware of his fascinated attention towards her from across the room. Even though two giggling women are clinging to his arms somewhat provocatively, his gaze does not waver. He is the best looking man she has ever seen, in real life or on television. Her cheeks flush as she tries to ignore his intensity. He detaches himself from the besotted females at his side and approaches the nearest SERVINGMAN.*

ROMEO [*Nodding in Amber's direction*]

What lady's that which doth enrich the hand of yonder knight?

SERVINGMAN [*Distracted*] I know not, sir.

ROMEO [*To no one in particular*]

O she doth teach the torches to burn bright!

It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night.

The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand,  
and touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.

Did my heart love till now? forswear it, sight!

For ne'er saw true beauty till this night.

[*He begins to make his way towards Amber*]

*There is a musical interlude. AMBER uses this as an opportunity to ask a SERVINGMAN for an explanation of this strange turn of events.*

AMBER [*To SERVINGMAN*] Hi. Sorry... ahh... where am I... exactly? Not Georgie's house – right... or her bathroom? [*Laughs nervously*] Obviously not.

SERVINGMAN [*Half amused, half confused*] The Capulet residence.

*The SERVINGMAN walks away, leaving AMBER alone...but not for long...*

ROMEO [*To AMBER*]

If I profane with my unworhiest hand

This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this,

My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand  
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

*[Kisses her hand]*

AMBER Th-thank you *[Giggles]*.

ROMEO O then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do:

They pray, grant thou lest faith turn to despair.

AMBER *[Glancing nervously over her shoulder]* Ah – I think you’ve got the wrong girl. See...I’m not really the most religious of people. I mean I did a bit of religion in primary school where they taught me how to recite the rosary and not to do the sign-of-the-cross backwards and Dad used to take my little sister and I to confession every so often and we do the whole Easter Bunny and Santa Claus thing – even though I stopped believing when I was nine... after I caught my parents wrapping my gifts and cried myself to sleep because –

ROMEO *[Presses a finger to Amber’s lips]*

Speak not, while my prayer’s effect I take.

Thus from my lips, by thine, my sin is purged.

*[Kissing her]*

AMBER *[Breathlessly]* Wow. You’re a really good kisser.

ROMEO I have ne’er kissed anyone so pure

Thou art more beautiful than light itself

To press my lips against thine is a sin

That I would gladly purge eternally.

*[Kissing her again.]*

AMBER Is this how you get all the girls? By giving them your sin, or whatever?

ROMEO Sin from my lips? O trespass sweetly urged!

Give me my sin again.

*[Romeo leans in to kiss Amber again. She pulls away sharply.]*

AMBER Hang on...

ROMEO My sweet angel, pardon I beseech you?

AMBER Look, I know guys like you and how you work. You're perfect, smooth, charming... you catch a girl like me off-guard and before we know it, you're on to the next. I mean you look so much like Leonardo DiCaprio it's ridiculous! So tell me...how many other girls are you tuning?

ROMEO What Leonardo do thou speakest of?

I know not what thou meanest by tuning?

AMBER Tuning... like flirting... or courting... I guess. And DiCaprio... but when he was younger, obviously. You know... *Inception... The Departed...* "I'm the King of the World"... "Bling-bang"...*Romeo and Juliet...*?

ROMEO [*Romeo bows*] Why yes, I am Romeo Montague.

AMBER Wait... am I supposed to be, Juliet Capulet? Is that what this whole twisted thing is?

ROMEO Thou art a Capulet? It cannot be!

O dear account! my life is my foe's debt.

AMBER No... no... again I think you've got the wrong girl – my name's Amber Whittle.

ROMEO O I have ne'er heard a sweeter sound. [*Extends his right, upright palm*]

Whilst thou dance with me in the next measure?

AMBER Really? Wow. No one's ever actually bothered to ask before. Um...ok...why not? But I should warn you... I suck. There's a good reason I stopped ballet when I was seven.

*ROMEO shakes his head gently, in disbelief. He walks AMBER to the centre of the dance-floor. He presses his palm against AMBER's palm, and then slowly intertwines his fingers with hers. AMBER's heart races. ROMEO's eyes gaze so deeply into hers that she almost feels guilty for having to blink so often. He leans in to kiss her slowly.*

ROMEO Amber, by yonder blessèd moon I vow

That I love thee. My blessèd angel, whilst

Thou pronounce thy love for me faithfully? [*Gets down on one knee*]

AMBER [*Pulls ROMEO upright and hisses*] What are you doing? Are you

trying to humiliate me?

ROMEO Sweet Amber, I would never dream of it

for I love thee more than I love the –

AMBER Woahhh. Did you say love? I mean... I met you an *hour* ago... there's a carton of milk in my fridge at home that I've had a longer relationship with.

ROMEO [*With tears in his eyes*] For what purpose wouldst thou withdraw thy love?

AMBER Why do you keep using that word? Ok... so... you give me butterflies and sweaty palms and cause my heart to race and when you kiss me I feel like... like... I'm Claire Danes or something. But...love? Or marriage?! What if you're a psycho-maniac-with-untreated-bipolar... or you're just trying to embarrass me... and this is just some twisted joke... and surely there is more to falling in love than two people kissing at a party...

ROMEO [*Takes her hands*]

Thy stony limits cannot hold love out.

And what love can do, that dares love attempt.

Therefore thy qualms are no stop to me –

AMBER In all honesty... Romeo –

ROMEO Arise fair sun and kill the envious moon!

AMBER I find it really hard to understand you.

ROMEO Dear saint, I will not rest, till thou art mine.

AMBER Yours?

ROMEO And I am thine, for all eternity.

*[Kisses her]*

AMBER I forgot what I was going to say.

# *Celebrity Sonnet*

I know you not, yet I'm in love with you.  
You know me not nor do you know my name.  
But does that render our love false or true?  
Are we the victims of love's brutal game?  
Must I now know what lurks within your soul?  
Why can't our love be just as deep as skin?  
It may seem that my love for you is cold,  
But one way love has never been a sin.  
And in our love there never will be pain,  
How can one grieve something they never had?  
And yet you flutter always through my brain,  
To you there would be nothing I would add.  
And now I know that when push comes to shove,  
Nothing feels better than feeling the love.



# The Order

“Good morning my Tasmanian devil!” Oli stumbles into the kitchen, flecks of sleep caked in his dark eyelashes, long matted strands of hair flopping over his beaming cheeks. He’s wearing his green and gold rugby jersey like an oversized nightie, his tanned, spindly legs still painted the fluorescent pink of his favourite sun zinc. He reaches over my Vanity Fair and grabs his Dora the Explorer cup, filled to the brim with milk.

“Who wants sausages?” Max turns from the stovetop, frying pan in one hand, tongs in the other and a coffee stain leaching its way down his apron. In my house sausages are the breakfast of champions. They’re what Max eats before he asks his boss for more funding for the department. They’re what I eat before the judge passes down her decision. And they’re what Oli eats before his first day of school. My baby is already a school boy.

Licking my lips, drenched in the true blue Aussie mix of pork fat and tomato sauce, I collect the plates and drop them in the sink. Oli tries to slip away to the TV – apparently the Aussie girls won the Hockey World Cup and Fox Sports is showing all the highlights – but Max picks him up and gallops him back to his room to get dressed.

“Charlie? Did you pick up the dry cleaning yesterday?”

“Yeah – on my way home from work. Your tux is in the wardrobe and I put our suits on the back of the door.” I wiggle into my navy trousers and roll up the sleeves of my pale blue shirt. We all squeeze around the sink as we clean our teeth and we all grab our bags as we hurry to get to work and school.

I kiss my boys farewell at the front door. Oli bounces down the stairs to the garage, his lunchbox jumping around inside his school bag like the metal beads in a rattle. Just before he leaps into the car, he turns and gives me one last hug. He holds on for longer than normal, his breath baited with the heart-pounding excitement and stomach-churning fear of anticipation. “Thank you for finally letting me go to school,” he murmurs in my ear, inaudible to anyone else.

“Any time, sweetheart,” I whisper back. Max bundles him in the car, one more uneasy wave for the beginning of term, and they drive off.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the sun sprays the day's last few minutes of buttercup gold across the world, Oli drags the yellow chalk along the pavement, finishing his hopscotch grid. I lie on the porch after a long day, my eyes resting from hours scrutinising every megapixel of a court document, the inside spread of Vanity Fair dripping from my lap, the ancient wooden deck creaking with my every movement. Max has been here for hours, his garden shears rhythmically whooshing as they lop leaves off the hedges. Minute beads of sweat run down his nose as he waters the Gynea lilies and fertilizes the waxflowers and plants more of the everlasting daisies. Oli pauses his game and sits on the step beside my head.

"Charlie?"

"Yeah, sweetie?"

"What do people mean when they say I'm a girl?"

I open my eyes. "You're not a girl! Who said that?"

"Some boys, at lunchtime today. They were getting into teams for soccer, and they asked me if I was going to play. I said no, because some girls were playing netball, and I know how to shoot, but I don't know how to play soccer. So they called me a girl."

"Sweetie, it doesn't mean anything. It means they can't understand why you prefer netball over soccer and they feel a bit threatened by that. So they protect themselves by making you feel unsure. Trust me, one day they'll want to know how to shoot like you."

"Sure?"

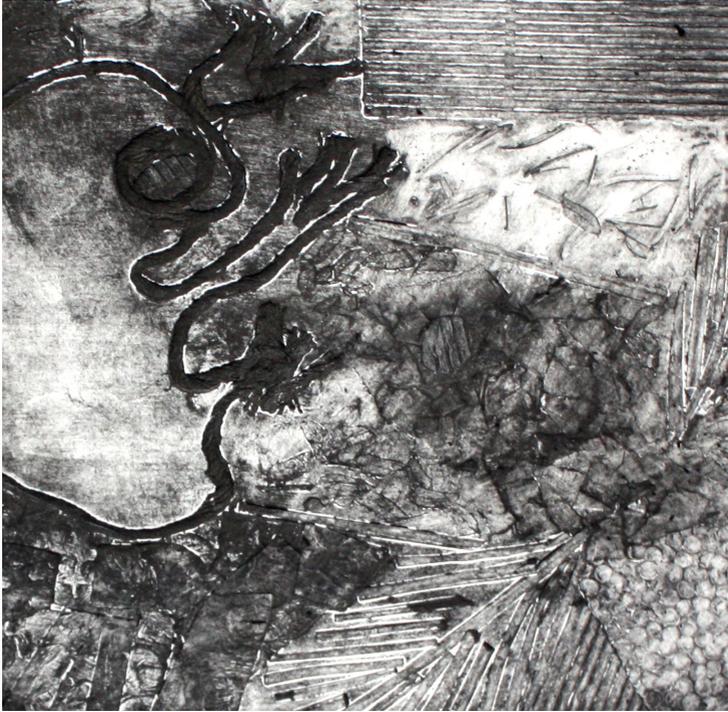
"Sure." I look out across the scene. The orange sun paints its peachy-pink glow across the drifting clouds, setting the world on fire. I love this garden: it's wild and rambling. One day, the strawberry vines will consume the house, whitewashing its walls with their vibrant cordial liquid. One day, the golden orbs of the wattle will create a carpet, softer and more delicate than a wisp of fairy floss. One day, the mango tree will become the magic faraway tree, a ladder into the heavens.

Beyond the crooked white pales of the fence, slanted like teeth which haven't seen braces, the world is different. It is structured, planned. The

road is perfectly asphalted, lined by cars in precise perpendicular rows. Mr Smith's tabby cat leaps between the makeshift cricket bats littering the street, abandoned by sweaty-fisted, dirty-mouthed boys with closely cropped hair. It then springs across the road and paces down the street, where skipping ropes lie, once bright and sparkly and swung by the lollipop-sticky hands of girls with rainbow fingernails, but now broken and forgotten.

For some reason, there's an order out there. It divides the pony-tailed, toothy-smiled girls from the rumbling, wrestling boys. Maybe it's a caveman instinct, a way to prevent us all from the gut-wrenching hurt of exclusion: to make the world out there seem a little simpler, a little nicer, a little more beautiful. But I think it's more beautiful in here, where everything grows free. It's as if God created something miraculous, and then nature ruined it to make something even more perfect.

Oli goes back to quietly counting his jumps. Max trims the dead leaves off the kangaroo paws and plants the everlasting daisies. I close my eyes.





# *A Belmont Apple*

“HELL-O MA-BEL?”

The nurse, who chewed her gum with determination, leaned against the bathroom door with her arms crossed.

“Can you hear me?” She said.

Gripping her woollen shawl around her and looking at her tartan slippers, Mabel could hear her alright. But she couldn’t, she just couldn’t do it. The nurse moved over to the bathtub and wiggled her hand in the warm water, “It’s alright, just take your clothes off. Come on.”

“I can manage myself.”

“No you can’t.” The nurse replied sharply, “Trust me Mabel, you don’t want to leave with bubbles in your hair again.”

Mabel considered this. She looked up furtively, “I have to take my clothes off?”

“Yes.”

“All of them?”

“Of course!”

Very slowly, Mabel slipped off her shawl and then her jumper, revealing cotton undergarments lined with dainty frills which George had thought pretty. Mabel suspected this was probably not what the nurse thought. A few minutes later, she was completely bare. She swayed gingerly by the hand-basin, looking around the green bathroom, holding the rings around her stomach where her sagging bosoms rested like sacks of clay. She caught a glimpse of herself in the bathroom mirror and saw the drooping, ridiculous thing she was, like a walrus with a tuft of white fluff hovering atop its head. She looked away quickly.

*On her way to the storage room, Mabel stops deliberately in front of the Perspex screen of Mr Spencer's office. It is one of those screens which are very generous with its reflections, and Mabel enjoys seeing herself in its glossy image, her legs arched naturally in a confident stride.*

"If you can believe it," Mabel said, "I used to be a size six."

"I'm sure you were, honey." The other replied, slipping on her earphones. "Step in the tub."

"We used to wear pencil skirts to work."

"Come sit over here."

"Ooh," Mabel slid into the warm water, feeling it slap against her belly. She giggled, "This feels quite good."

The nurse flicked on a pair of plastic gloves and began to scrub Mabel's back, she tapped her feet to music Mabel could not hear. The bathroom was filled only with the rubbery sound of the sponge and the occasional grunt from the nurse as she cleaned. Mabel fingered the fluffy bubbles floating on the water and looked around the bathroom. Something was scribbled in between the vintage flowers on the wallpaper. She squinted. "92 and still lookin' good." It read in a scrawly old man's writing. Mabel laughed. With some sort of newfound confidence, she turned to the nurse.

"Next Friday it is—"

"Lean your head forward." The nurse interjected.

"Pardon?"

"Lean your head forward, I need to wash your hair."

Mabel craned her neck and stared at her wiry legs which looked all the more wiry beneath the swelling water. Her knees were like tomatoes and the age spots that dot her body looked like barnacles on a whale. She closed her eyes, "I'm, I'm hav—" But the bubbles rushed into her mouth, she spluttered out the bitterness.

*Her waist is also something she is proud of, it is slim and she has never had the problem of getting her pencil skirts tailored unlike others who struggle with safety pins and belts. Her hips curve favourably outwards, balancing perfectly with her formfitting bosoms, a feat-*

*“Mabel?” It was Mr Spencer.*

*“Oh!” Mabel snaps her head away from the screen, “I’m on my way to the bathroom.”*

“Done, you can sit back up hun.”

“I wanted to tell you,” Mabel said, “Next Friday is a special day for George and I. It is our anniversary.”

“Awesome! What is it, your sixtieth? Seventieth?”

“Fifty-fifth.”

The nurse whistled in disbelief. Then she clasped her hands together, “Aren’t you and George the only couple still alive here at Bethel? I could’ve sworn you were... anyway, are you planning anything?”

“No, I’m not even sure George remembers.” Mabel admitted, “And, well, I’m not sure I want him to.”

“What! Why not?”

“I don’t know, I have this feeling it’s probably not a good idea. There is something... something about...” Mabel looked up at the nurse, but the eyes she saw were blank, “I guess it will remind me of how old we are.” She concluded.

“But that’s what makes it adorable, hun. I mean, we could get some pictures posted on our website. People like that sort of stuff.”

“I’m not sure I would like that.”

“I think you should consider it, Mabel.” The nurse pulled the plug from the tub, the water drained away with an unpleasant, gargling sound, leaving Mabel exposed. The nurse wiped her hands on the towel before handing it to Mabel, “Dry off, you can do that yourself right hun?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” She replied, making her way to the door. “And consider it Mabel,

it'd be cute." She said before disappearing out of the room. Mabel listened to the clicking of her shoes down the hallway. She shivered under the wet towel.

Tap. Tap. Tap. The sound of the receptionist's nails on the keyboard formed a comfortable beat to Mabel's mornings, something she could tap her foot to or sway her head with while she ate her breakfast. So when all of a sudden, the tapping stopped, Mabel felt she couldn't swallow. She looked over at the desk. She blinked. But he was still there. In a smart navy suit with white stripes, a well-cut white shirt she hadn't seen him wear since the 1960s stood George. Despite his back being turned to her, he seemed particularly tall, towering above the bent backs which shuffled around him. He wringed his hands together as he walked to the desk.

"Good morning."

The receptionist put up a hand, "Wait. ID Number?"

"George Griffin."

The receptionist looked at him without raising her head.

"No, I want your ID Number."

"Right, right." he reached into the pockets of his pants. Then he patted his suit. "I must have left the card in my room."

The receptionist drew out an unnaturally long sigh. "You really need to remember to take your card with you everywhere you go." She said, closing her Twitter account, "It's a pain for me doing this administration."

"I am very sorry."

"So what is it you want?"

"I wanted to organise a venue for an anniversary on Friday..."

Mabel dropped her spoon. Some of the other residents on the same table looked at her. She smiled, took out her handkerchief and pretended to wipe her mouth, but her eyes were trained on George's back.

"...and I just want it to be a surprise for Mabel."

The receptionist examined her purple nails. "That's cute," she said to them, "So what do you want?"

George brought out an old receipt on which he had written a little list on the back, "I was planning to have dinner, and I wanted to buy some candles

and some other things I've written here." Mabel fidgeted in her seat, *no George no*.

"Aww," the nurse took the receipt and slipped it on her table, "I'll ask the carers if they can get these items for you."

"Thank you but I also wanted to get flowers for her. I haven't written it in that list because I want to get them myself."

"That's super cute but you'll need to ask your carer if you want to leave the premises."

Mabel found herself nodding, *it's too much trouble, George*.

But George shook his head, "What do you mean?"

"We just need consent from your carer so we can make sure you are safe."

George hesitated for a moment. Then he said, "Okay, I'll do that."

Mabel could not listen anymore. Her mind was racing. She pushed herself out of the chair, knocking a knee on the table leg and hobbled quickly out of the dining hall.

The hallway was long. The doors flanking it leered at her. And the door that led to her room was barely visible, a flickering blue haze, like a flame – threatening to vanish. Mabel tottered towards it. Her eyes pulsed with her every step, her every breath. Her thoughts seemed to brim out of her very head. They were inconsolable. *What does it even mean?* They cried. *What does it mean to have a fifty-fifth anniversary?* Streams of sweat dribbled down her face. Mabel fumbled with her handkerchief. *Anniversaries!* They seemed to sneer. *They only make it worse. Cruel things, anniversaries, cruel things.* She dabbed her forehead with trembling fingers. What happens next? She was almost there. *What happens when... when...* She reached for her keys. *When there were no more anniversaries?*



# The 324

I am walking down the aisle. My breathing is forcefully long and heavy. I am trying to suppress my panting, as though that fifty metre run didn't actually kill me. My school bag almost wipes out a frail old lady who should really be sitting at the very front. It's almost as if they have to prove to themselves and the rest of the passengers that they really aren't risking their lives by walking a few extra metres down the bus. In reality, the slight acceleration that might only make one of my strides abnormally long, would throw the little, thin-haired grandma and her pale blue Laura Ashley matching pants-suit down the bus. I pity her.

As I reach my perfect vantage point of observation – third seat from the back on the right hand side of the aisle – I swing my bag off my back like an Olympic hammer thrower, lucky not to swipe the school girl opposite clean off her seat. I wish I did though, I think she would have appreciated it. Something out of the ordinary would add interest to the mundane conversation she is having with the boy next to her. I feel sorry for the pair. It seems like that awkward conversation you're obliged to have every morning with that guy you met at that party one time, only realising later that they catch your bus every day.

I get comfortable, struggling to shove my bag into the tiny gap between my legs and the seat in front. After all of my fruit has exploded I finally succeed, at the expense of my legs and my dignity – I am sure I have flashed the woman in the fake Dior sunglasses receiving the full brunt of the cringe-worthy conversation happening behind her. I leave a perfect amount of space next to me if by chance a good looking boy in uniform needs a seat.

Now settled, finally, I hear a noise that makes my nerves twitch anxiously. No, it is not the hum of death metal blasting from the headphones of the business man, calmly reading the Financial Review. I hear scratching, and to fill my morning with rainbows I find it is coming from the hands of the man in front who is blatantly attacking his neck. Bloody gouges and flaky skin cover the back of his neck and run through his spiky hair. It's horrible.

When I look away I see my favourite couple getting on the bus. I believe them to be like a failed and aged Sonny and Cher but more hardcore who find themselves still living in Kings Cross. They never speak to each other but they don't have to. The woman has a severe, black hair cut, thick, black frames and an even thicker tattoo band around her bicep. She always smells strangely of cocoa butter and was in fact the one who inspired me to moisturise more often. The man is more ordinary-looking but I can tell he is hiding an elaborate tattoo of his own and he definitely used to have a mullet in his not-so-high prime.

My train of thought is interrupted by two Vietnamese women who have, by chance, run into each other. I don't understand how these women seem to know every single Vietnamese person who catches the bus. Every day there is a new pair squabbling about something obviously very interesting. They talk as though the space across the aisle is as big as a crowded auditorium. I sense gossip and figure, if my friends and I could talk at the pace they were going, I would feel much more satisfied at the end of the day.

The tired voice inside my head, urging them to shut up, simultaneously yearns for the coffee that the well dressed man further down the bus is taking for granted. The perfectly ironed, pink and white striped, collared shirt, skinny leg jeans I am planning to wear this weekend, oversized tan belt, clown-sized Italian leather shoes, flawlessly slicked and styled hair, posture that would impress even the fanciest of lady etiquette clubs and the way he is daintily sipping from his thermos, all screams gay. Either that or he still lives with his mother. I decide gay, based on the fact he is too good looking for the latter. I sigh internally, frustrated that all the good looking ones turn out gay. At the next stop, a young woman hops on the bus, sits down next to him and kisses him gently on the lips. Well then, I guess he's still in the closet.

I catch my reflection in the pane of glass in front of the business man unconsciously sharing his music with the world, and I understand why I never pick up guys on the bus. Averting my eyes from the failed attempt at effortlessly styled mess, I take my attention outside the window. We are stopped at a bus stop in a dingy little area still in the Cross. There is a homeless man lying across the only seat, accounting for the exhausted and

annoyed expression of the old man, itching to complain to his old man friends about the state of the world. As if sensing his disapproval, the bearded pile of clothing staggers to its feet, rummages in his pants for something... finds what he was looking for and begins a long and steady piss on the bleached smile of a model advertising real estate. As the bus roars out from the kerb, I am trying to keep my cool; you can't laugh hysterically when you're alone.

The dwindling rush of warm breath running through the slit of open window signals another bus stop. This time my good-looking-boy-in-uniform radar sets off alarms. Upon seeing him politely stand aside for the old folks to board the bus, my hands wildly twist about my hair in an attempt to tame the uncontrollable frizz. I realise my morning ritual is at an end. The ever growing scrutiny dawdles to a stop as I am lifted ever so slightly from the vinyl seat as he collapses in the space provided. All thought is focused. All senses blazing. I have a new project at hand.



# Poem

I stand here, apprehensive,  
Fate soon to unfold,  
Shivering in fear  
Of the stories I've been told.

A crack that shatters sky,  
Slices through the rippled sea.  
A flash of tangled flesh,  
As I splutter helplessly.

A haze of opaque greens,  
Obstructing any chance of sight,  
While the hands of nature strangle,  
Bringing waves of desperate fright.

Wrapping limbs in ribbons,  
Drags me to the hidden floor,  
As I finally break free,  
I only know I'm in for more.

As the struggle ceases,  
We believe that it is done,  
But relief is evanescent,  
It dawns on us; it's just begun.

A burning heat, my head aflame,  
A blaze of light and speed,  
Though I battle with my body,  
I know that I must proceed.

Emerging through the cluster,  
On we clamber, one by one,  
Through the tunnel of the trees,  
Softly dappled by the sun.

But in a heartbeat I am falling,  
And though I try to produce sound,  
I am frozen as I lurch ahead  
And tumble to the ground.

I am broken, I am trapped,  
I hear a suffocated moan,  
I lie in a sea of faces,  
Though I'm utterly alone.

A cry for help, distressed attempts,  
For what seems like an age,  
Though I manage an escape,  
From my self-constructed cage.

On I press, through the fire  
That wraps around my feet,  
The sun creating prison,  
Out of concrete beams of heat.

My legs are pounding, hard and firm,  
Blood rising in my chest,  
My breath is slowly faltering,  
Crumbling and compressed.

The heat creeps down my closing throat,  
And wraps around my lung,  
Nature's hands again approaching,  
Grasping breath and taking tongue.

But my freedom, I can see it,  
Straight ahead of me, in view,  
And if you could sprint to freedom,  
I must ask you, wouldn't you?

I've made it through the struggle,  
And I've lived to tell the tale,  
I fought the weary battle,  
And though I faltered, didn't fail.

I stand here, breath is precious,  
And my energy is gone,  
And I know that I will never,  
Attempt another triathlon.

# Rowing

It is early morning.  
I feel the balance, the power.  
Three  
Two  
One  
Row  
The yelling becomes louder.  
The pain becomes irrelevant,  
My wrist flicks back and forward.  
Blades go squared.  
Feathered  
Squared  
The boat glides.  
The cox yells, "Nearly there."  
I count the seconds.  
Minutes  
Hours  
Stop, focus  
Follow the girl in front,  
Shoulders. Ponytails. Bodyrock.  
My wrist flicks back and forward.  
Blades go squared.  
Feathered  
Squared  
The cox yells louder than before and harsher than before.  
BEEP!  
The race is over.  
My boat passes the line.

The pain hits me like a tidal wave,  
But the pain is irrelevant.  
My wrist still flicks back and forward.  
Blades go squared.  
Feathered  
Squared  
Even though I have stopped.  
Lean forward. Tap the shoulder of second seat.  
Lean back. Shake the hand of bow seat.  
Breathe Relax.  
I feel prouder than before.  
Runners run.  
Cooks cook.  
Rowers row.  
I make the boat move.

# *The Green Room*

Wild, untamed. This Ocean belongs to no-one.  
We all want some of its wildness.

The foam of the wave breaks,  
Wild, like a rabid dog.  
I push forward and duck,  
Under.  
My mouth fills with salt.  
I surface,  
I feel the pull of the waves.

I turn fast and paddle hard,  
Paddle harder into the set.  
The board releases and I'm up,  
And then the wave closes.  
It's a door with hinges long broken.

Then I'm there.

S  
  l  
   i  
    d  
      i  
       n  
        g  
          through the green room.

Shadows fade.  
Light shimmers through the water.  
This is what I live for:  
A hallway of kaleidoscopic green.

Sun shining across the water,  
I burst out of the tunnel.  
I'm smiling.



# *Lottie*

She found it strange to be at the beach. To enjoy the cold wind, the harshness of the rocks on her feet, the sand that clung onto her skin for dear life until it became so itchy that it was her survival or the sand's, and both parties put up a good fight. To wash off in the small showers and step back out into the world like a new person – clean and well-presented – as if it were more than mere minutes ago that she left the sea, looking like total chaos, her hair wild and covered in goose-bumps as if she were in training for an Antarctic expedition. She sat, contemplating nothing that was at all sensible, and watched as people left their overly large sun umbrellas to dip their toes into the water, and more often than not decide that they would find more pleasure just watching the waves move back and forth, rather than being in them. She found pleasure in both.

She could do nothing but wait. Wait for the sun to sit at the top of the sky and the moon to wink at her and only her as it exposed itself confidently during the day, completely the same as it was only hours beforehand but totally irrelevant to the rest of the world nevertheless. Poor Lottie. She wished to find a deeper meaning in the moon, to somehow relate it to herself and realise that maybe she was better than she thought she was, but she couldn't. She thought and thought and stretched her brain to its farthest corners in a desperate attempt to increase her self-worth only to be distracted by a far-away seagull caw, or the sound of a baby on the beach, unaware of its wonderful surroundings and crying, begging to return to the comfort of its cot. Babies. Darn, she thought, as she watched it leave. Her mother would join her soon to take her back to the house for lunch. Gosh darn. In fact, 'gosh damn' felt like a better thing to be saying, she thought, but she dared not say it aloud in case anyone heard her and told her mother. The beach was the only place she could be entirely herself, be a grown-up, be as mature

and sophisticated and independent as the ladies underneath the oversized umbrellas. They weren't quite ladies, being but sixteen or seventeen years old, but they were certainly ladies to little Lottie, and she thought about how long a time it would be until she was that age, and would she be the same, or would she have a different nose and a different height and maybe people would realise that she was a lady all along, deep down inside.

The bushes were almost the deep green colour that Lottie loved, but not quite. She felt as if it were a trick, a punishment that they were so close to that beautiful colour yet were just a tad off and had landed on a colour that was quite ugly, really. 'Little things,' she thought, 'what a difference they do make,' and off she was, thinking again. She scratched and wriggled and lifted her face into the wind; the movement seemed unstoppable. All the while the bushes sat in their ugly green flesh, so close to the road, so confined in their growth as Lottie was not. Behind the bushes sat a gravel road, black if you were too lazy to really look, grey if you stared for a little while, but brown, a dashed, faded brown to the locals. Whatever colour it was, it was almost hidden in fog and the stickiness of dew and damp hung over it in a statement of oppression. The roses in a garden nearby were beginning to turn a slight yellow and their sweet scent shadowed the salty smell of the sea. Upon the hill a fresh patch of grass was slowly emerging where the road ended and the Rogues' house began, for Mrs Rogue had finally allowed someone to fix up her garden, a thought inspired by the garden in the house near the road near the bushes near the beach with the waking yellow roses that were the talk of the town; a small town, it was, which is quite apparent from the topics of conversation, but a lovely one nevertheless. Those who travelled there thought in lust, 'Who could ever possibly get tired of the beach, the shops that are so very picture-perfect, just the look, the feel of it all?' and they desired to stay there forever until they returned back to their own towns and forgot all about the little beach, the idyllic shops, the Rogues' cottage home on the top of the misty hill. From that house a figure could be seen leaving, opening the newly-painted white gate, exiting the property and making its way down to the beach. The very same figure could be seen, one hand on hip and the other protecting their eyes from the sun, searching for something, someone, and quite successfully.

“It’s so very cold! What on earth are you doing out here without a towel?”

“But Mother, it was so warm before in the sun. The weather change must have been gradual... I did not notice a single thing.” Lottie lied through her teeth, her chattering teeth, but it was not all a lie. Of course it was never warm, but as she sat on the beach, thinking, just thinking, she did not notice anything at all. Not the boy that ran past her, waving; nor the seagull whose cry had so terribly disturbed her peace and quiet only a short time earlier that morning. Only now did she notice her cold chattering teeth, her little arms that were wrapped so tightly around her skinny, long legs, and so she jumped up and ran to the house, her mother calling “Lottie! Lottie Rogue, don’t run like that, you’ll slip and fall!” But she never did, and by the time Mrs Rogue entered the cottage, Lottie was already pulling on layers of socks and jumpers and scarves to keep herself warm for Mother’s delicious roast lunch.

# On the Margin

Olivia tells too much; she tries too hard. Some days she's overwhelming and I try subtly to hand her off to someone else, rushing off to get a pencil sharpener and only coming back once she's engaged. Other days I resign myself to sketching distractedly while half-heartedly nodding or murmuring my agreement on the rare occasions when she takes a breath. I listen to her tales of weekend plans, homework troubles and sport matches gone wrong wearing my this-is-so-interesting mask while silently counting down the minutes, the seconds, until the end of the lesson.

I have a love-hate relationship with art. It's my favourite subject but double art practical lessons every Monday are a challenge, to say the least. Under any other circumstances I'd love to spend over an hour working on my sketches, but we have assigned seating. I'm always next to Olivia. It's not that I hate her, and I really do try to be nice. It's just, there's only a certain number of times a person can listen to the story of Dot the Dead Fish before they stab someone in the jugular with a newly sharpened pencil.

I can already tell it's going to be a bad day, and that's before I've even sat down next to Olivia. Spring has finally arrived in the form of blinding heat and my un-air conditioned train carriage coupled with the fact that we're still in winter uniform means that I've arrived at school hot and sweaty. As I walk in late to art I can already hear Olivia talking, her voice somehow managing to cut through the murmur of all the other conversations.

"I didn't have much to do that day so I mostly just read. Have you read *The Night Circus*? It's great, it's about..." I walk over to find her monologuing to Rachel across the gap between the desks. Rachel is looking thoroughly uninterested. Hearing me approach, Olivia turns to greet me with her customary one thousand watt smile. "Oh, hey Rose! I was just telling Rachel about my holidays. I haven't told you yet, have I?" And so I get swept up in Olivia's thirty chapter epic about her last vacation.

I've finally managed to establish a careful equilibrium between tuning Olivia's voice out into background noise and still managing to appear that I'm listening when Ms Griffiths asks for our attention.

“As you girls know, every term we have to do a group task.” Everyone groans, in enthusiasm of course. The dreaded termly group task where we all have to work together while pretending to like each other. Joy. “This time I thought we’d do it a bit differently. Instead of working in a group you’re just going to work in pairs on a week long project.” Around me everyone starts grabbing onto her friend, establishing the desired pairs. “Of course, to ensure that everyone is productive,” Ms Griffiths continues, with a pointed glare at some of the girls who have already paired up, “I will be choosing the pairs.” Another groan. “Everyone, turn to your desk partner.” I turn and meet the glare of Olivia’s smile. “This is your partner for the group task.” My heart sinks to ankle height.

“I can’t wait to start on our project,” Olivia enthuses as she follows me out the classroom door, both of us swinging our backpacks over our shoulders. “I absolutely love French Impressionism. Oh, and what do you think we should do for our visual? I think we should do a poster and we should have different sections for different artists with biographies and I totally have glitter pens we could use!” I try to smile encouragingly and go to speak but Olivia continues. “We should get together over the weekend to work on it. We could go to your house and hang out and work on it. It’s going to be so much fun! I’ll bring my pens and—” Tired of waiting for her to finish, I interrupt.

“We can’t go to my house because we’re renovating and the painters are going to be there this weekend.”

“Oh,” Olivia’s face falls. “We couldn’t just work in one room?”

“No, I can’t even sleep there over the weekend, I have to stay at my cousin’s house. Could we go to your house?” For once Olivia is silent. Strangely so. I would revel in the peaceful moment but I can tell something is wrong. “I mean, if it’s okay with your parents and everything,” I quickly add.

“Yeah, I guess,” she replies cheerlessly.

The day of doom has finally arrived. It's nine o'clock on a Sunday morning and, when I would usually still be asleep, I am standing on the doorstep of the only person who could make the prospect of a group project even more dreadful. I knock and, to my surprise, hear the scurrying and stomping of many feet.

"Who is it?" a childish voice singsongs.

"It's Rose, Olivia's friend." The door cracks open to reveal a touse of blonde hair at hip height.

"It's your friend. Can I let her in?" the boy turns and shouts back down the corridor behind him.

"Yeah," I hear Olivia's voice cry faintly. The boy opens the door and immediately grabs my hand, pulling me down the corridor with him.

"I have new LEGO. Do you want to see?"

"Sure," I reply as he tugs me into a living room where every inch of the floor is obscured by a multitude of toys. I stumble over LEGO spilling out of boxes, nearly stepping on a toy doll aboard a pirate ship. "Where's Olivia?"

"She had to go upstairs to give Juliet a bath 'cause she threw up. It was gross," the boy replies. Just then Olivia rushes down the stairs holding a wet-haired toddler in her arms. Her hair is messily scraped back into a ponytail, her shirt damp with spots of water and she looks the picture of stress.

"Hey, are you okay?" I ask, concernedly.

"Yes, it's just been a difficult day with the kids," she replies, putting the little girl down in a playpen in the corner of the room. Then she seems to catch herself and she looks up sharply, almost ashamed. "I mean, my parents are out so..." Sensing her discomfort I try to change the subject.

"I brought some markers and cardboard for the poster."

"That's great," she replies, walking into the kitchen. "Can you just wait while I make Juliet a bottle?" I nod and watch. She expertly makes a bottle of formula, testing the temperature on her wrist before giving it to Juliet.

"Are your parents out often?" I ask.

"Dad's away on business a lot and Mum works nights so she can be home during the day," Olivia replies while she clears newspapers and jam smeared

plates off the living room table. “Is it okay if we work here so I can keep an eye on Max and Juliet?”

What I had thought would be a day of working on the poster while having my ear talked off turns into a day of trying to work on the poster while making sure Max doesn’t break everything in sight and Juliet doesn’t eat anything inedible. By the afternoon when I have to leave to catch the bus home, our poster is only half done and looking slightly dishevelled with a few scribbled contributions by Max and a coloured piece of cardboard stuck over a juice stain.

“I don’t know what to do,” Olivia frets. “It’s due tomorrow and we’re not even half done.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take it home with me and finish it,” I volunteer.

“Really?” Olivia asks in amazement. “I don’t want you to have to do it all because it’s a group project and I know I have to contribute.”

“Don’t worry, I’m happy to finish it off.” I look around at the toy strewn room. She has her hands full enough, I reason.

It’s Monday, I walk into art carrying our poster to find Olivia waiting at our desk. For once hearing her voice first thing isn’t irritating as she jumps up and hugs me, thanking me for finishing the poster. I unroll it for her to have a look at my additions and my restoration job of Max’s scribbles and then we hand our poster in to Ms Griffiths. As we sit down at our desk I take a deep breath, anticipating another beginning. But Olivia is silent.

“So, is Juliet better today?” I ask. Olivia turns to me, and for once her one thousand watt smile isn’t blinding.

# Angel Blood, Angel Tears

Sunlight streams out from behind thick windows, a feeble breeze humming in the warm air. Cheap streamers fill the room, banners stretched across the ceiling in bright colours. The mildly unpleasant scent of store-bought cake and burning candles wafts through the small space, accompanied by loud off-key singing. A single girl sits alone, her muscular legs crossed beneath her, her soft round face creased in solemnity. A whispered song slips from her lips, so gentle it barely reaches her own ears.

“Take the fallen angel, feel her broken wing.

Believe her, she believes in you.

Hear her final whisper...”

“Kayla!” The sudden interruption is sharp and surprising, making her jump. A young girl bounds to meet her, her smile stretched too wide for her youthful face. “Kayla, come on! We’re taking a family photo.”

Protests fall on deaf ears as the girl is dragged along and forced to pose, a puppet on a string. Propped between her parents, a grin frozen on her mouth, tears burning behind her eyes, she wants to collapse and cry. Instead, she smiles. The camera flashes; the moment is finished but the beaming continues.

“Kayla, would you like some birthday cake?”

Her stomach rumbles, a ravenous roar. “No thank you. I’m not hungry.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Fine, lank hair like a child’s wafts down her protruding shoulder blades. Sallow skin stretches across her face, her cheekbones jutting out from beneath. Trembling, her brittle fingers curl around the metal of the fork, her hollow eyes fixed on nothingness as shadows dance their way across her emaciated face.

“I won’t.”

The room is bleak and cold despite the cheerful wallpaper and the bright lights. Silence wraps around the space like a blanket, a stale scent drifting like smoke in the air. The hands on the clock tick away the minutes as everything remains motionless.

“I won’t.”

Before her sits another, who looks more like her than she would ever dare admit. The woman’s eyes are lined with exhaustion and worry, age etched into her features. The ticking hands slowly wear her down as she notices the darkness and the stillness of the room. It seems no matter how hard she tries, despair manages to seep through.

“I won’t!”

The girl’s final shriek is high and shrill, rasping against her delicate throat. The veins are clear beneath her translucent skin, thin blue lines intertwined like threads, painfully evident. The sound seems as though it could snap her feeble form and send her crumpling to the floor like a broken doll. The thought scares the aged woman; it appears to be almost possible.

The plate leers at them both, lying between them on the polished wooden table. The girl glares back, defiance like a spark in her dark eyes. Anger bubbles beneath the surface, poised and prepared to strike at the slightest aggravation. It flows through her blood, mastering her mind, her limbs, her thoughts. Fighting it seems pointless; the anger always wins.

“I won’t eat it.”

“Kayla...”

“Why are you doing this to me? Why are you punishing me?”

“I’m trying to help...”

“Why do you hate me? Why?”

The words are a sharp staccato in the emptiness, so sudden and harsh they cut. The woman has come to expect these outbursts, but she dreads them nonetheless. Her face remains deadpan, but tears prick behind her eyes, shining in the fluorescent light. The girl sees them, but turns away.

“I’m going to my room.”

The woman’s hand engulfs the girl’s, pulling her back. The frail bones crunch beneath her fingers, sending a wave of nausea through her stomach. Shame courses through her chest; her own daughter disgusts her.

“Just one spoonful. Please.”

Her voice breaks as a single sob escapes. A dry rasp catches, her chest heaving with suppressed tears. The young girl’s face sets in its blank expression, no pity in her sunken eyes. Her bony fingers clasp the plate, knuckles strained to the point of turning white. Slowly, deliberately, she flings the plate at the wall, china shards flying in all directions as the carefully prepared meal trickles down. Her words are razor sharp, clipped and cool.

“I won’t.”

Upstairs, the door muffles the sound but cannot mask it completely. Flowers bloom across the childish wallpaper that cloaks the bedroom walls, once comforting, now melancholy. Rough carpet scratches against the soles of the younger sister’s feet as she crouches, burying her head in her tiny hands. Misery stains the blue of her youthful eyes, fatigue tracing lines in her soft skin. Her broken fingernails, chewed to the quick, dig into the sides of her head as she clutches her ears with her eyes screwed tightly shut. Somehow, the sound of shrieking manages to seep beneath the door, through the cracks in the wall and beneath her clasped fingers. It surrounds her, enveloping her, endless. Rocking back and forth, a disjointed song tumbles out from between her lips, the song Kayla used to sing back when a spark still glimmered in her eyes.

“Take the fallen angel; feel her broken wing,  
Believe her, she believes in you.”

Downstairs, a heart wrenching cry echoes, bleeding its way through the walls to find her. Her small fingers tighten.

“Hear her final whisper; hear the angel sing,  
Hold her, she’s been holding you.”

A crash erupts, shattering any semblance of peace. More crashes ensue; any obstacle that falls in the path of Kayla’s rage is destroyed.

“Angel blood, angel tears; nothing left to say,  
Love her, she loved you.”

Fury snarls, setting the house alight with tension. Unforgivable words are bellowed, each one stabbing a little deeper.

“Watch her crumble, surrender; see her slip away,  
Forget her, she’s forgotten you.”

An eerie blanket of silence falls over the house, infinitely worse than any sound. Tentatively, the small hands pull back from the young girl’s ears, her eyes wet. She reaches for the small photo frame on the desk, peering at the photograph of her fourth birthday. Her family beams at her, the image of herself blocking Kayla, whose face is contorted into a half-smile. No love lurks in her eyes, no hope or happiness. Tiny fingers slacken; the photo falls to the floor, a spider web of cracks creeping over the thin glass. Quiet sobs shatter the silence, but no one outside cares; she is forgotten.

Kayla stands before the mirror, her clothes abandoned on the bed behind her. She is thinner than anyone would ever guess, her ethereal form starved and lean. The reflection is grotesque, repulsive; no matter how hard she tries, it never appears right. Her skeletal fingers press against the cool glass, her reflection taunting her with its imperfection, its ugliness. The anger has cooled now, and numbness has taken root, spreading through her chest and limbs. The numbness is even crueller than the anger: reminding her always that she is alone. Expressionless, she returns to the bed, certain that it will creak beneath her weight. Even when it doesn’t, she imagines the sound. Her eyes fixed on her reflection, she hums beneath her breath, a song from a time she barely remembers:

“Watch her crumble, surrender; see her slip away,  
Forget her, she’s forgotten you.”



# *Candle*

Her flame dances in the darkness  
Licking at the night  
She conquers the darkness  
With her infectious light

Her body, a wax cylinder  
Her wick, a jet black snake  
She's trapped in blazing fire  
Burning at her stake

Wax melts at her foot  
Dripping down her sides  
Lying in her pool of blood  
Her warmth still abides

A soft wind blows  
Slowly does she choke  
She leaves nothing but a puddle  
And a wisp of floating smoke

# Breathe

## *Driver*

“Hey, you okay?” I ask while reaching over to pat my daughter’s shoulder. She brushes it off hastily, like it is a poisonous spider that is crawling on her, and mutters words from an ancient language long forgotten. At least I hope that’s what it is. I turn back towards the windscreen and clutch the wheel tighter, knuckles blaring red. A blanket of silence cloaks the car, suffocating those underneath. The blanket’s edges reach out onto the street in front of us, a concrete jungle devoid of life. “Was it something I said? Are you upset about what happened?”

“No Mum, it was nothing you did,” she grumbles as she flicks back her curly, sunburnt hair. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the bobble head gymnast dancing on the dashboard, its joyful smile oblivious to the tension that coats us, dripping like honey.

A shadow appears on the road. No warning, no anything, it just runs out. I have no time to push the clutch or slam down the brakes; I have no time to think. A squeal, a crash and then the glowing red liquid, too much, too much. The barrier between inside and out is coated with a film of sticky blood, but I don’t know whose. The sound forces me to close my eyes, but blaring lights invade the lids, and my mind aches from the interchange of noise to nothing. Life went from a vibrant green to a murky colour halfway between red and brown.

The world is in splotches of colour, bouncing onto a canvas with the flick of the artist’s hand, the reddish colour jumping off the tip, finding freedom for a few endless seconds, and then harshly landing on a white prison.

I hear it, the car breathing next to me, subtle, muted, silky breaths, not anything like how I imagined a car to breathe. My eyes won’t open; they’re jammed tight, stuck together with extra strong glue. I imagine a little workman using a crowbar to pull them apart. He must have been successful because my eyes jerk open, and the light invades with a terrifying force. But it helps me see my daughter lying next to me, her face a pool of tranquil calm in a scene of panic.

I reach over to hold a finger over her mouth to see if she is breathing. I can feel a warm chill brush my fingertips, whispering to me that she is alive. I withdraw my fingers and dig a hole into my jeans, searching blindly for my phone. I find it, I open it, and I dial a number.

### ***Victim***

Throw it, boy, just throw it. I need to chase it and bite it and shake it until it's dead. I can't let it live inside with my family; it might bite them when they're asleep. Not me of course, I am always on the ready, always know what is coming.

Just throw it, come on, and don't hold me back, it needs to die. The ball grins evilly as it flies over my head and sails off into the distance. I run, I chase it with all my might; it cannot get away from me this time. I catch the ball and bring it back to the boy, shaking it violently as I go.

I drop it between his two hairless feet, sit down and look at him expectantly. My tail going crazy with the excitement.

Again, again, throw it again! He bends over and picks it up with two pink claws, and makes a funny noise when my spit dribbles over them. He gives me an odd look, sighs, gets in position to throw again, and he does.

I run, faster than ever before, and chase it onto a hot, hard surface that burns my paws. But I must get the ball; I chase it even further across the tough ground.

### ***Owner***

I laugh as he jumps onto me, wagging his tail so vigorously that I am sure it will fly off. I fall over from the momentum and roll over, dodging his hungry tongue. I push him off me, and pick up a ball sunbathing on the grass. I chuck it in between my hands, watching it spin and spiral in the air like a ballerina. I draw my arm back and throw the ball across the front garden, so hard that I can hear it whistling a hasty tune about nothing in particular.

He chases it and brings the ball back within five seconds, and places it between my feet. I lean over and grasp the sticky ball, its watery tongue licking against my skin. I wince in disgust, but I stand back up and throw it again.

But the wind pulls the ball way off course, and it swims through the air until finally landing on the tarmac, a green sprout in a field of black. I try calling him back, but he is so focused on the ball that he keeps on running. I follow.

He runs out onto the road at full speed, and the car keeps driving. They clash head on, each receiving enormous amounts of pain, but the monster feels it less. They both scream, but his is more unnatural.

When the world stops moving, I break its silence by running out, blinded by the lakes of saltwater pooling in my eyes.

I crouch beside his sleeping body. I remember what it felt like to lay my head down on his soft stomach, feeling his heavy breathing lift me up and down, his soft barks begging me to get off.

I do this now, closing my eyes, thinking so hard that it hurts, and then the pain is gone, and I feel the memory even clearer.

So clear that it feels real.

# *Bitch*

I just bit that little hand  
But she was asking for it  
I should know  
I'm a little dog  
A little bitch

Little girls love little dogs  
And I'm the littlest dog she's ever seen

I look so cute  
All white and fluffy  
Big sad eyes  
Yap, yap, yap  
I'm begging her to come closer  
Big sad eyes  
How could she resist?

Yes, that's right  
Closer,  
A little closer.

But then I feel so small  
So insecure  
Insignificant  
Don't look at me like that  
I'm not just a little ball of fluff  
I have feelings  
Big feelings

I'll show her

I'll show her I'm big and tough  
I can make you scream  
Yap, yap, yap  
When I take a big nip

Some people call me a bitch  
But I'm really just a little dog.

# *The Field*

## ***Illumination***

The ash had settled and it was a bright and splendorous day. It was shortly after the sun had commenced its majestic ascent to its peak. Four young brothers skipped through an endless lush field of wild flowers. Each one had an unbridled zeal and sense of optimism towards the bountiful plain. Yet even in their young hopeful minds lay the seed of ambition, even a trace of power-lust. To share the field would not suffice, each child would grow to crave possession of the whole. Every morning they would do push-ups in an attempt to prove their dominance over the earth beneath them. The field was spotted with thousands of wild flowers in myriad colours each reaching for the sun, like a student's hand eagerly waving for their teacher's attention, and gulping down its potion of rays. Their roots were entangled amongst a quilt of verdant grass where insects lingered. The field was cloaked by a subtle hum of birds and small creatures whose tune was so soft that it was inaudible to humans, even the brothers.

## ***Revolution***

The brothers didn't see the field this way. They were driven by curiosity and a burning desire to express their natural ingenuity by transforming their sublime habitat. The four brothers began inspecting and collecting various shrubbery to manifest into contraptions. Soon they had constructed slingshots from twigs and flower stems. Each aimed to make them bigger and more and more powerful than the others' so they searched for the waxiest and most flexible flower stems to contort into their weapons. As the boys progressed through adolescence, the gloss of the field's vibrancy began to dull from the loss of patches of its flora. Rocks and slingshots had been flung across the plain and were entrenched in the deep crevices they had made. The wild flowers were short and sparse, the grass had been stamped with brown patches and the hum had suffered a slight diminuendo.

### ***The First Round***

Each brother soon realised that it would be impossible for him to claim the field alone. For victory, they would need strength in numbers. And so in the first years of adulthood, the boys divided into pairs – the two youngest joined as did the two oldest. This alignment came about in a rather arbitrary manner, creating ententes and alliances not through affinity or love but proximity, with each brother already having carved out a section of the field for himself. The next morning battle began. Rocks soared through the sky in every direction. The brothers filled their slingshots with anything from beehives to sharpened pebbles to poisonous spiders to balls of splinters and catapulted their terrorising contents to each other. Both pairs dug trenches in which they hid when under attack. These trenches zigzagged across opposing sides of the field, two long bottomless shatters in a fragile piece of glass, bordering what was now a muddy mountain range. One day two of the boys were hit square in the chest by two large boulders catapulted towards them, and the young men lay at the precipice of death.

### ***The Treaty***

Starving and wounded they lay helplessly in a muddy crevice until the two victorious parties came for them, carrying in one hand salt for their wounds, and in the other bandages to save their lives. As the two foreign hands reached out to the limp bodies they surrendered, handing over their slingshots and spears and every last piece of equipment.

“We are the victors and you are the losers, hang your head in shame!” exclaimed the taller of the two older men, whilst patting the other on the back.

“All of our offspring will remember this,” continued the smaller, more cunning of the two. “They will remember us as the heroes and you as the villains, you as the aggressors and us as the defenders. And none will be any wiser.” The pair laughed voraciously for some time while the younger brothers remained motionless, inching ever closer towards death.

The behemoth eventually spoke again. “And what’s more – you will replant our half of the field, but will not be able to eat the fruits of the crop, and will not be allowed to restore your own pastures until you are finished.”

The two older brothers reached out their hands to their two prostrated siblings. With no other choice, they reached up, clutched their hands and accepted the terms.

### ***Roaring***

The enslaved brothers laboured on their brothers' fields while their older brothers, spurred by a renewed sense of ambition, made more and more complex, intricate creations out of the field's resources. The inventions made life far easier for the victorious brothers, and as they aged they became complacent and soft. Their eroded senses meant that the increasingly resentful subordinated brothers could restock their weaponry and fashion new inventions of their own right under the noses of their oppressors, storing them in the trunk of a hollowed out oak at the end of the field. During this eerie and strange interstitial time, the field regained some of its lushness and began to resemble the Eden it once was.

### ***Round Two***

Inevitably, the two enslaved brothers rebelled. Their shame and disgrace over their defeat had only multiplied their craving for power and whereas the two victorious brothers were now content with their quadrant of the field, the former slaves would stop at nothing to capture the whole. They caught their tormentors by surprise. This battle would be longer and more painful than the first – the instigators were more bloodthirsty and tenacious, the boys were older, their inventions more sophisticated. One day one of the older brothers stopped to question the other as to what they were doing.

“Why must we always be fighting?” he pondered. “What is the purpose? What will we gain?” After gazing at the tainted, fraying field for some time he replied solemnly, “This is not like last time. We have erred. Because of us, they are self-destructively angry, and determined. If they win this time, they will not merely take our land, they will take our lives.”

The younger brothers had been triumphing until this point, pushing their elders into the field's corners and valleys. But the threat of extinction gave them renewed vigour and the tables turned. The youngest brother was

soon injured and lay hopelessly amongst the dead wild flowers, paralysed. However, his ally kept fighting with an endless energy; the more wounded he became, the more ferociously he fought. One day, when the situation was becoming increasingly desperate, one of the older brothers discovered a new weapon when rubbing two sticks together: fire. It was more powerful than anything he could have conceived. It was Godly. Proud of his ingenuity and gleefully perceiving an opportunity to end the battle, he lit a ball of moss and propelled it on to the opposition's side of the field with his most powerful catapult. He watched the grass begin to burn, the orange spread, the earth begin to shrivel up into itself like a piece of paper crumbling into smoke under the fire's scorch. But as the amber waves of fire swayed in his eyes he watched them gradually creeping closer and closer until they were licking the earth beneath him. They devoured every last morsel. Beneath the huge cloud of smoke survived nothing but the four brothers standing, simply looking at the ash and at each other. Covered with grey, they were barely distinguishable. A bitter chill crept into the air.

# The Return

*“History cannot give us a program for the future. But it can give us a fuller understanding of ourselves, and of our common humanity, so that we can better face the future.”* – Robert Penn Warren

In grade school, there was a baseball field at the end of my best friend’s street. In those days, the teachers didn’t take some perverse pleasure in swamping us with paperwork, and we would spend the waning daylight hours gripping the chicken wire with numb fingers, watching the town team run through drills. I remember the breath making little white clouds in front of my nose. Afternoon practices are like watching early mornings in reverse; eventually it became too dark to find the ball against the New England snow or encroaching underbrush, and the coach would call it a day. We would wait until the older boys had piled into their cars and then run home like airplanes along the sidewalk.

In mid-May, the field was suddenly mown into checks and the leafy shrapnel was gathered up and carted off in black plastic bags. Invisible rakes visited one weekend and carved a diamond into the red dirt. Then the scrimmages started, and the three of us would be down there on Saturday afternoons to watch frozen limbs ease back into the swing of a game. There were other gangs of boys there by that time too, but we always saw ourselves the most dedicated, the most fanatic. Ryan, Jarred, and I followed the team from selection until the diamond was abandoned in October. During the Summer season, we would each pick our favorite and keep tabs on him; his home runs, hits, outs, stolen bases. Just like in the big leagues, only one day we might be the ones with a third grade fan club.

Jarred’s old man was a baseball nut too. On his eleventh birthday, Mr. Newton bought him a new glove, an aluminium bat, and spikes. Then he took us all down to the field at the end of their street and made us run plays until four. He coached us informally all Fall, just as intent that we would make the team. If you were eleven by the fifteenth of February, you could participate in selection week. That cut Ryan out of the season between fourth and fifth

grade, but after that there was a solid run of three or four years when we all walked to the field after school to do the team's drills ourselves.

They were stellar years too. Lincoln won the championships every year but one. Even then, the umpire should've called out instead of safe. I've hit a few homeruns in my career and Ryan was a decent fielder, but man, Jarred could pitch. Since high school, I've tried to play a little baseball on the side, but I have never seen anyone pitch as fast or as accurately as Jarred. He was our celebrity, our golden boy. After one year in the team, he was invited to play for Roxbury County, and then the state. It was only a matter of experience until he was picked up by one of the big league teams. Maybe we were a little optimistic in eighth grade, but it certainly seemed that way. Ryan and I might follow too, simply falling into the step of our trio.

None of us ended up playing in front of a crowded stadium. At the end of eighth grade, Ryan announced that he was moving to Roxbury College, a private school for kids going to famous colleges. I guess we'd forgotten to notice the grades he was getting on the side. The school was too far for him to travel to practice on time; he tried to come to most of the games, but homework eventually caught up with him. Around then, my own parents started noticing my work; it was exceptionally deficient. Then an errant pitch in practice hit my left hand and broke all my fingers. Maybe it was a combination of overuse and nagging from my parents, but it took too long to heal and I was dropped from the team in tenth grade. That left time for tutors, and I eventually clawed my way into a state university. I suppose Jarred was as close as it got to professional; he played in the minor league for a few years between graduation and his father's death. Mr. Newton died from a stroke, unexpectedly, and Jarred moved back home to tie the family together. Now he teaches history at Lincoln High, where we used to go.

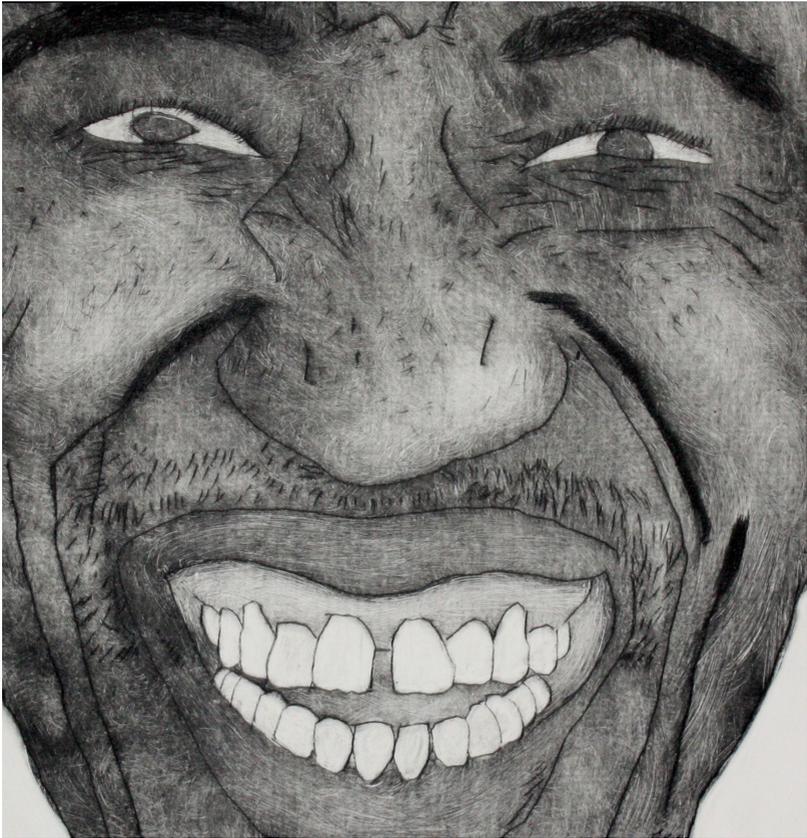
A few months ago, Ryan had a residency at a hospital in Roxbury, so I took a long weekend and drove from the city to Lincoln. I stayed at my parents' house. Feeling guilty for not visiting more often, I sat down with them and agreed to trawl through the boxes of my childhood. It was themed blue and orange. Everything I wore, all my crude drawings, my bedspread; it was all variations on blue and orange. I had scrawled 'Lincoln Bears' over every

piece of stationery that crossed my path. There were photos of the three of us standing at the edges of sports fields, me in various versions of the town uniform, slices of oranges and fizzing plastic cups crammed into my fingers. Pages were dedicated to the three of us, with arms slung over our shoulders and beaten caps perched on sticky hair; behind us, the row of parents sported coolers and satisfied smiles, chatting between those who might never have met. I wondered then, if those kids would ever have guessed where they'd end up, if they dreamed of their careers yet or only desired to coach their children on that field.

When we met on the Saturday morning Ryan, Jarred, and I ended up walking from the center of town to the fringes of the baseball field. The April grass was a bit frosted, but we ambled along the foul line and left our footprints in the outfield. I could suddenly see us at fifteen again, scrambling to dive in the path of an impressive hit, or squinting to grab a few more minutes while the light sank behind the tree line. As ever there were muddied balls nestled in clumps of tall grass; this place could stock a sports store for a month. Jarred was revisiting his wind-up, with much gusto and flare, when the first equipment laden boys appeared behind the chicken wire.

The rest of his team dragged their gear behind him and they eventually took over the diamond. Once again, we were watching a practice from behind the fence. The dirt here was still bare of grass, and the reason trotted along the road a few minutes behind the team. Three little boys and one very young brother bounded towards the links. Their fingers wound through the wire and their breath puffed in white streams as they settled into their observation positions. I found myself wondering how many years they would play for, and then hoping they'd get a very long innings.

Jarred's first son turned eleven today. I'd bet my salary that Mr. Newton bought his son a new glove, an aluminium bat, and spikes. I'd bet my first bat that they'll be playing catch on the baseball field all day.



# Acknowledgements

Firstly, I'd like to thank and congratulate the girls whose work appears in these pages. I am always impressed by the flair and passion for creative writing that students in the senior school possess and this year's *Ink* demonstrates yet again the rich rewards of that flourishing creativity.

There is a wide range of writing in these pages, from promising talent in the younger years through to entrants in the annual Ascham Writers' Festival, Year 12 Extension 2 major works, and the Amy Molineaux Prize winner. The artwork in this year's publication similarly illustrates the variety of work and talent across all years of senior school Art students.

I would very much like to thank my colleagues in the English Department for their untiring support and humour. It is only through their nurturing 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 for developing their students' abilities and imaginations so keenly.

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And to all of the contributors and all of the writers in the senior school – keep writing! There is nothing so liberating nor significant as putting yourself and the world onto paper, whether for yourself or for others. Revel in the joy of reading and writing and, as another teacher once said, let it fill your soul.

***Elise Dempster***

