

The Curious Writers

Short Stories From North Norfolk U3A
Creative Writing 1

Summer 2026



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Introduction

Welcome to *Creative Writing 1* collection of short stories made possible by the generous funding support of the U3A North Norfolk, together with the vision and hard work of our team of writers.

Are you wondering if you might be able to write something? Do you sometimes feel that you could, given the chance, write a book? Hopefully, reading this collection of short stories will show you that it is possible. We are one of a number of friendly, inclusive groups within the U3A Nationally, who offer a supportive environment that can help to start you on your journey into writing your first story.

One of our group members has progressed to writing a short film script which is now in production. Another contributed work in a life writing project at The National Centre for Writing. Our third member was awarded Highly Commended Writer in The National Centre For Writing's annual Escalator Prize and is completing his first novel. Our fourth member has now begun work on her first historical novel, an excerpt of which can be read in this anthology. Our fifth member has published online. And now, as a group, we have taken ourselves through the process of producing this collection of short stories – working through the editing process, wrestling with the design, and gaining an in-depth understanding of what it actually takes to create a book of any size. Not all of our members have chosen to take part in our endeavours this time....

We were all once curious about writing and wondered if we could write anything – it didn't take very long to get to where we are now.

Go on, take the first step. U3A has a number of great writing groups in each region.

We ostensibly write for our own and each other's pleasure, and we hope you will enjoy our writing.

Regards

The Curious Writers: Carol, Fiona, Gila, Mark and Stephen.

The Deep - Mark Hinsley

Suddenly, a jolt, and the world was spinning. My stomach lurched as I and my car are launched into the air. A sudden sploosh, and the windscreen comes in on me, cold dark water forcing its way into my mouth and eye sockets. I cough up water, the car slowly sank into the dark depths of the Great Ouse, the cold numbing me, the dark disorienting me, consciousness deserting me.

I came too, surrounded by water, locked into my seat by my seatbelt. I reach down to press the release button, feeling my way through the water, my movements slow, my panic rising. I locate the button and press it. I'm still trapped. I press harder. The belt comes free, my lungs are burning through the lack of air, I try to open the door, but the water is working against me. I push with my feet, trapping myself against the steering wheel. I relax and try to manoeuvre between the wheel and the seat. The effort makes me desperate to draw breath, but the slightest relaxation of my mouth draws in muddy-tasting water. Water the giver of life, but also the bringer of death.

I slide myself out of the seat, still not knowing if the world is upside down, or me, or both. I drag myself through the hole that was the windscreen straight into a muddy bank. The bank grows hands that claw at me; the hands have talons that gouge into my flesh. One finger presses into my mouth; I nearly breathe, but bite the finger, and as it leaves, I squirt out the muddy water that came in.

My vision adapts a little, I see the outline of men emerging from the mud bank, dragging me face first into the mud. I fight off the arms, trying to right myself, my feet slowly being sucked into the mud. The burning pain in my lungs almost too much to bare. I pull my haunches downwards and attempt to launch myself upwards, but the mud and the hands have a firm grip on me. I kick out at mud and mud-men and try again. This time, I launch upwards, and my

face breaks the surface of the water to catch a breath before the hands drag me down again.

I kick and struggle with all my might, trying to reach the surface again, but the hands keep tearing at me and pulling at my clothes. My desperate exertion is sapping my energy, and I consider closing my eyes, surrendering to the comfort the enveloping water offers. Then a vicious hairy face with mad staring eyes appears before me, grinning wickedly whilst trying to prise its fingers into my mouth, to force me to breathe the water of the Great Ouse.

I fight with what strength I have left, punching and kicking, flailing my arms whilst trying to force myself upwards. I break the surface once again and catch a breath. I hear voices shouting, 'There he is'. A hard object hits me, but I grab it and realise it's a buoyancy ring. The hands are still pulling me down, but now I hold the ring and can pull myself up at the same time as kicking out; kick, kick, kick against the hands and towards the bank. The hands have one last attempt to drag me under, but. I'M. NOT. LETTING. GO. OF. THIS. RING. I kick and kick, and hands are dragging me out of the water onto the bank. I choke and cough up murky Ouse water. As what light there is fades, I see blue lights are flashing in the distance, and then I loose consciousness.

I wake in a warm hospital bed, kind medical staff checking my vital signs.

I tell people what happened to me. Many tell me it's my half drowned mind playing games with me. Fenlanders, however, tell me the story of the fenland mudmen and how they enjoy luring people to their deaths on the fens. They also say I should never be alone on the fens again, because next time they won't be thwarted....

The Beanpole and Jack - Fiona Ireland

Children call me the beanpole - not to my face - but whispered, behind my back. I'm straight up and down you see, with just a few angles and tendrils; elbows pushing holes in my jumper; neck craning to see what's coming round the next corner.

I live in a small, terraced house that has no front garden, but squats at an angle which means I can look right down the street. The kitchen is at the front of the house, and I like this, not because I'm nosey, but because I like to keep an eye on things while I'm washing up. The thing I'm keeping an eye on at the moment is tall like me and he could staple pages together with his teeth; his hands extend beyond the sleeves of his jacket as if he is reaching out for something. I want him to reach out for me; I think he's my soul mate, but I don't know how to tell him. Today, like me, he is wearing my favourite colour, green. He swings his arms when he walks with a timing like a metronome; that you could play your piano to and I'm sure that if you were to lay us side by side, we would not only be equal in length but would breathe in and out in unison.

A couple of days ago, I noticed that he was wearing a tee shirt with 'Beethoven' stamped across the front and I think this was a sign. I went up town the next day as a result and stole Beethoven's fifth. Naturally, I took the cheapest CD I could find, slipped it up my jumper, then walked out with my arm across my chest as if I'd broken my collarbone or something. I have a portable CD player that my uncle left me when he died, and tomorrow, I am going to open the kitchen window and play Beethoven when he walks by.

I played the CD - da da da dah – da da da dah and I recognised it. Another sign. So, I was 'singing' along to it as he walked past, and he looked in at the window and I think he smiled.

His hair looks like it could do with a wash. Still, it's all right, I once thought I would like to be a hairdresser, so maybe I could do something with it.

He was late this morning. I had to wash up my cereal bowl eight times before he strode by. He looked in at the window just as I looked up at the kitchen clock. So maybe next time I will call out, or maybe I could play the music again, if it isn't raining. I don't want the rain to come in through the window.

Some children were walking behind him today, swinging their arms like pendulums and they tucked their bottom lips under their front teeth; they were chanting something, but it was difficult to catch what. Horrible kids. I banged on the window, something I would never normally do, and he turned and must have thought I was waving and he waved back. I blushed scarlet. I mean I would never be so forward, what must he think of me? I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and went over and over the sequence of events. Surely it can't be long now before we speak.

I had the kitchen window open and I sang – da da da dah – and he said – da da da dah; da da da dah; dadada da da dahh. And we laughed. We were both wearing blue today, sky blue and I've been floating on cloud nine ever since. I imagine telling our grandchildren about the first words we ever exchanged and them saying – thank God for Beethoven Gran.

It's dustbin day today; as good an excuse as any I need to venture out on the pretext of putting a last-minute item in the bin. This is where I curse the angle of the house because he walks from right to left and I can't see up the road, only down. But I decide that if he really is my soul mate, we will find each other anyway, I will somehow sense his approach and dash outside at the right time. The fourth dash did it.

His name is Jack and he works in a record shop, hence the tee shirt. They were having a promotion, he says I should have

gone along, seeing as how I like Beethoven. He's more of a country and western fan himself, Garth Brooks is his favourite and I should have said "oh yeah, he's great" or something, but all I could think was, I hope he's never seen me nick anything from his shop. I tell him that I have a CD player now that my uncle's passed on and we talk about this and that, then he says he must rush or he'll be late.

Now that he's gone, I'm not sure. If he was my intended, I would have felt something, I would have known who Garth Brooks was, I would have heard of a Hillman Imp and he wouldn't have kept looking at his watch.

I hear the grinding whir of the dustbin lorry and I look out the window. This huge giant of a bloke tips my bin onto his back as if it were made of paper and he looks in at the window and he winks at me. I smile and decide that maybe Jack's teeth were a bit large when seen close up, and I think about what I might put in my bin next week.

A Grave Day - Carol Connor

Cousin Chloe, what can I say about my cousin Chloe? We were the same age and shared the same grandparents, and that's all we had in common.

I arrived at Chloe's monstrosity of a house at eleven o'clock and was not the first to arrive, but certainly not the last either. Chloe had wanted to feature on the television programme *Grand Designs*, the one where emotionally traumatised people share the construction of their 'architecturally innovative dream homes' with someone from *Channel 4*. I'm assuming *Channel 4* weren't interested in Chloe's project, as it was more reminiscent of Windsor Castle than an eco-friendly woodland retreat built out of bamboo and cow dung.

Cousin Chloe's wealthy lawyer husband met me at the door and directed me through to their largest reception room, the one with an Italian-imported ceiling that boasted paintings of leanly muscled naked men, religious-looking people in coloured robes, and fat little cherubs bouncing around on white, fluffy clouds. I had always thought that Michelangelo must have been having an off day if he'd had any hand in it at all.

I saw my brother and his wife standing by the room's huge bay window and headed straight for them. 'Morning, Rob. Emily,' I said.

'On your own, Stephen?' my sister-in-law asked. 'Where's Georgie?'

'Olive and Harry have been up all night vomiting,' I replied. 'We couldn't send them to school, so Georgie's had to stay at home.'

Two ladies, wearing identical black dresses covered with startlingly white starched aprons, approached me; one bearing a gleaming silver pitcher in each hand and the other masterfully offering a tray crammed with cups and saucers, a sugar bowl and two milk jugs.

'Would you like tea or coffee?' the one with the pitchers beamed at me.

'Ooh, thank you, coffee please,' I told her and she poured some thick, black liquid from one of her vessels into one of the bone

china cups that were on the other lady's tray. I took the filled cup and held it, mirroring my brother and his wife, who were also holding on grimly to their saucers.

'Would you like milk and sugar?' the tray lady enquired, with a fixed grin on her face.

'No, just black, thank you,' I responded.

I noted the black-and-white ladies' ability to show complete detachment from the people upon whom they had been employed to wait. They were meant to be invisible, and they almost were.

'Mum and Dad here yet?' I said, before taking a sip of coffee.

Rob raised his eyebrows. 'I've just had a message from Dad. Mum wasn't happy with her dress so she had to find something else to wear. They'll be here in the next fifteen minutes though.'

I looked out the window. 'Well, here comes Granddad!' I announced, and Rob and Emily turned to watch as a hearse pulled onto the drive. Suddenly, Granddad was standing next to me and, I have to say it, he was looking pretty good for someone who'd been dead for just short of a month.

'My big farewell party then,' Granddad said cheerfully. 'What are we doing at Chloe's?'

'She's got the biggest house, obviously,' I stated.

Granddad shrugged his shoulders. 'Didn't know that so many people would want to come. Georgie not here?'

'Kids are sick,' I explained.

He grimaced. 'And where's the grieving widow?'

I nodded towards Helena, who looked characteristically stunning, dressed in a *Dior* suit and balancing elegantly on *Jimmy Choo* stilettos.

'Obviously not grieving too badly,' I remarked. 'At least she had time to go shopping for something expensive to wear.'

Granddad laughed. 'Knowing Helena, she's had it in the wardrobe for a couple of years at least. She was probably starting to worry that I was going to live forever.'

'Eighty-seven's not bad. And it was relatively quick. Painful at all?'

'Stung a bit,' he admitted. 'Where's the service going to be?'

'Cousin Chloe's organised the whole thing so, today, we're having the burning bit at the crematorium. Then, next week, we're having a memorial service at St Martin's and Chloe's invited some of the teachers and a few of the ex-pupils that you kept in touch with. I believe that a soloist from the school choir is going to sing *Ave Maria*.'

'In Latin or English?' Granddad wanted to know.

I didn't actually know the answer, but suggested, 'Latin probably. It'll discourage everyone else from joining in. Here are the family cars. Are you going with Mum and Dad or coming with me? They've just arrived.'

'I'll stick with you, Stephen,' Granddad decided. 'Seeing as you're on your own.'

Rob and Emily had already climbed into the back of our family car, so Granddad and I got into the middle seat, and I noticed that Granddad was looking me up and down as he was apt to do.

'You look very smart,' he commented as we drove away. 'Nice day for it too. So, who's reading the eulogy? Not your father, I hope.'

'Cousin Chloe,' I informed him.

'Oh no. She's got such a whiny little voice. Can't you do it?'

'Well, I wasn't asked,' I smiled and hoped I was managing to hide how irritated I was by the fact that Chloe had not approached me. 'I dread to think what she's going to say.'

Granddad pulled a face. 'I bet she's going to talk about my other wives. Of course, it was an awful shame about Lilian, but Anne - now she was a terrible woman.'

'Out of respect for Helena, I think Chloe will probably avoid mentioning either of them too much,' I assured him.

'Is Helena going to speak? I mean, we didn't have the happiest of marriages but you'd have thought she could manage a few kind words. I'm assuming the will hasn't been read out yet.'

I shook my head. 'I don't think so.'

'Good, good,' Granddad was grinning mischievously at me. 'Please tell me that there isn't going to be any poetry. Hugh Grant isn't going to pop up and read *Stop All the Clocks*, is he? Ghastly

film but Helena loves it. Starts off okay, with the weddings and all that, but then it just becomes sickeningly sentimental. Typical of that Curtis man. Overrated in my opinion.'

'Hugh Grant didn't read it,' I corrected him. 'I believe it was the actor John Hannah, and I very much doubt that John Hannah's been invited to join the family at the crem today. You ought to have left us some instructions so that we could have known exactly what you wanted.'

Granddad looked a little sheepish. 'No-one really expects to die so suddenly. What songs are we having? Who chose them?'

'I can't actually remember,' I lied.

'You're lying,' Granddad said at once. 'I can always tell when you're lying to me, Stephen. Come on, tell me what we're having. I hope it's something classical.'

I realised there was no point in not telling him because he was going to hear the music Chloe had chosen anyway.

'We're having *Let It Shine* by Take That. You know how much Chloe loves Gary Barlow.'

'Take bloody That!' Granddad exclaimed. 'You'll be telling me next that we're all walking out to *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life*.'

I didn't answer, and Granddad was shaking his head despairingly.

'Oh no, I'm right, aren't I? Take That and bloody Eric Idle.'

'I'm not actually sure you will be walking out of there, Granddad,' I reminded him as kindly as I could. 'I think we're intending to leave you behind. Have you thought about what you want us to do with your ashes? Do you want to be scattered in woodland or out at sea or...?'

'Do what you want,' Granddad interrupted me in what was his sulky voice.

'Oh no, come on, don't be like that, where shall we scatter your ashes? Or would you like to be buried at St Martin's with Lillian?'

'Don't you dare bury me with Anne!'

'Well, Granddad, that would be quite tricky - because Anne's not actually dead yet.'

He looked disappointed. ‘More’s the pity. Can’t believe that old witch has outlived me.’

The car came to a stop at the Crematorium and Granddad and I climbed out. I waved at the occupants of the car in front that had brought my parents and Chloe’s parents – my Aunt and Uncle. My already tearful mother waved solemnly back.

Granddad was looking around at all those who had come to mourn him. ‘Don’t even recognise half of the people here. Who’s that woman over there with the nose piercing and the tattoo on her neck?’

I strained my eyes to see her. ‘Oh, that’s the girl who found you slumped over the table in *Costa Coffee*. She rang for the ambulance.’

‘Had I at least managed to finish my drink?’

I shrugged. ‘I’m not sure but I think you’d had a cake too. Hope it was a good one. I mean, if you knew it was the last cake you were ever going to eat, you wouldn’t really want it to be from *Costa Coffee*, would you?’

Granddad nodded in agreement. ‘If I’d only known it was the last time I’d taste coffee and cake, I’d have got there earlier and had the lot, and I certainly wouldn’t have ordered a regular decaf with coconut milk. There are quite a lot of things I’d have done differently had I known it was all about to end.’

‘Are you very sad, Granddad?’ We were watching his mahogany coffin being carefully lifted from the hearse.

‘No, not really. I would have liked to have seen my great-grandchildren grow up but that’s a privilege few people have. What will you tell your children about me, Stephen? How will you describe your Granddad to them – should they care to ask about me?’

We had moved into the crematorium and I was sitting behind Helena, the merry widow. She was looking at her phone and swiping at it, her long, acrylic nails bringing a splash of fluorescent pink to her black funeral attire.

‘What’s she looking at? Look over her shoulder,’ Granddad demanded. ‘I’ll bet it’s a dating website.’

‘Don’t be daft, she won’t be on one already,’ I assured him, and then glanced over her shoulder anyway. ‘She’s on *Match.com*, and since Helena’s not interested in sport, I’m guessing it’s a dating website. Looks like her next victim will be six feet one and balding - but with a nice smile.’

Granddad looked indifferent. ‘Well - good luck to him. About my ashes, Stephen. Perhaps you could put them in a pot and use them as confetti at Helena’s next wedding.’

‘Be serious,’ I told him. ‘Where shall we scatter them?’

‘Oh bury them with Lilian. At least then you’ll come and see me too when you’re visiting your grandmother. She was a good woman.’

The coffin was being carried in to an acoustic version of Ed Sheeran’s *Perfect*, and I heard Granddad give a disappointed grunt.

The vicar started his speech, describing my Granddad, but I did not recognise the person the vicar was talking about. The facts may have been correct, but they did not paint the whole picture of the man who had always been there when I was young - wiping my runny nose, cheering me on when I learned to ride a bike, and comforting me when I was sad. He had watched me grow into a man, enjoyed my successes, and had been there to pick me up after my failures.

‘Granddad,’ I whispered, ‘You asked me how I’d describe you to my children - should they ask. Well, I’d describe you as the best granddad any boy, any man, could have had. The funniest, the kindest, the proudest.’

Granddad’s image was beginning to fade. ‘Thank you, Stephen, thank you, but, honestly, who wrote that little speech for you, Richard Curtis?’

Granddad took one last look at me and winked.

I'm a poet and I know it? - Gila McGrath

A bit like Pam Ayres
You know, the one with funny ears

I thought to myself, this can't go on
Nothing but nothingness looming on the horizon
So, I joined a group, it's fair to say
I'd had enough bread and soup making for one day

Creative writing, ooh that's a fancy name
But if nothing else I like a challenge, I'm always game
Write about what you know, said the guy to my right
I think his name is Mike, nope, it's Mark, what am I like?

Don't forget to have characters that people love
Shouted Carol as she walked through the door
She's a fine one to talk,
She watches films full of blood, guts and gore

Deadlines looming, its tomorrow or deadline eve
Poetically put by the late Steve
No, not late as in dead
Late as in couldn't get out of bed
Or something to do with his leg
Couldn't understand the mime as to why he wasn't on time

I am now caught up in this loop
Of naming people in the group
What of Beth and Fiona too? I can't exclude those two
I could remedy that and avoid a spat
By mentioning their love of catssss

The Tree - Mark Hinsley

I stand alone, admiring my wonderful tree, it soars up into the air, tall and broad and strong.

It stretches its limbs skyward, beckoning for the sun and the moon and the stars to grace it with the light that they shine on and through it.

My tree waves and dances to the tune of nature, the wind and the myriad creatures rustling and milling in its canopy.

The farming ants climbing up and down to milk their aphid cattle, unaware their glistening fluid is used by so many.

The gold and green leaves, flicker and shine like jewels, water diamonds drip from its canopy, plashing my face and inviting me upward.

I rest my head against the rough bark, and hear the rush of water within, like a geyser frothing from the land and touching the universe.

My body clings to my tree, propelling me upwards, towards the top where I will touch the golden oriel of the sky and be healed.

I pass a thousand eyes, some that see me and steer clear, those that do not and neither care nor acknowledge my existence at all.

I sit awhile on a branch at the axil where it is attached to my tree, its lissom shape the beauty of nature's catwalk.

The dappled shade throws kaleidoscopic patterns across my face and melts into my surroundings, hiding between the leaves and twigs around me.

I sit a while and contemplate where I am in life, somewhere between the beginning and the end, fragile and lonely and yet not alone.

My breath caught up and strength revived I climb again, upwards ever upward must I strive to gain that which my heart wishes.

What I desire I do not know, wealth and health and happiness I suppose, illusive things, intangible things, worthy but worthless things?

As I climb the light becomes stronger the shade less pronounced, the breeze catches me and drives my fear of achieving what it is I want.

At last I burst forth from the canopy, the leaves silkily touching me, the universe welcoming me with its chorus of light and air.

The sun's rays playing on my cooled skin, the wind catching my breath, the scent of the tree, my tree all encompassing.

My senses captured for moment in time, I am in this age and every age this my tree has lived through.

The light is blinding yellow and blue and gold, clouds hang in the sky waiting for me to move, to decide to collect my wish, my trophy?

I reach and reach to touch the coruscating golden orb; I clamber to the very top of the topmost twig and reach and touch the sun.

My fingers scorch but I do not let go, I feel the heat travel down my body, cleansing me of my ills and refreshing my life.

My heart soars and plays out over the tops of the mountainous canopies surrounding me, I dance with crows and doves and sparrows.

Butterflies flutter me away and bees buzz me back, clouds cotton wool me a bed and vapour waters me back to my tree.

Yet, the wind picks up and undoes my balance, I tumble and fall, my tree deciding whether to catch me, lets me plummet.

Through its branches and leaves I descend uncontrolled and in fear my life ends here smashed and bloody on the ground far below.

And then my tree catches me.

I lie in a bower of leaves and twigs gasping for life, my tree cradling me, sighing, a mother ministering a child.

I lie and listen to my heart beat slow, and my breathing calm, and nature singing to me, telling me all will be well.

The sun touches me again and again and I'm aware I do not own this beautiful tree, but the tree owns me.....

Poor Bazooka - Stephen Pullman

If you didn't work there you wouldn't know about the stable at the end of the mews. It wasn't much of a stable now – the last of its beauty stolen by boxes of car parts stacked in one corner where the resident rats ran and played. At the end of the stable, one stall remained, its Edwardian division wall beautifully carved and topped off with a cast iron grille. The stall held Bazooka, a partly blind horse, and no one had noticed that he was lame.

Tancred didn't like school, and the school didn't like him. So he went to the mews he could see from his flat and he hung around the garages where the three men fixed up cars and after a while they let him stand in and help –

Tancred fetch polish. Tancred fetch paint, Tancred fetch a dolly hammer, Tancred fetch a bullseye pick, quick, quick.

One day Peter the Rastaman told him of the horse.

There's a horse down there you know, Tancred.

No there ain't.

True, Tancred. Go look.

Billy Cockbiscuit looked out from behind a bent ford and stopped beating the dent and said.

He's telling you right, Tancred.

Nah, you're winding me up.

Fat Sid – who should have been spraying a Vauxhall Astra some kind of metallic red – put down his tea and said.

Come on, I'll show you.

They walked down the mews over the old grey cobbles and when they reached the end Fat Sid pulled back the door and the smell of car oil and hay and rat piss made Tancred feel bad. The place was lit just enough to see shapes and something moved at the end and made a sound. The horse nickered and blew, moved

its ears forward, then flicked them back. Tancred watched, noticed the musky smell, looked at the horse's head – It looked like a statue he'd seen.

Looks like he's in a prison cell. When do you take him out?

Fat Sid poked away at his ear and sniffed and buried his hands deep into his dungarees and said.

We walk him in the mews. That's about it really.

But, don't horses need to go running?

He's going away soon. We've got someone coming to get him. You can feed him if you like. He's called Bazooka.

Fat Sid walked off gesturing vaguely toward the back of the stable. Tancred walked about halfway in and looked to see what the horse would do. It paid him no mind and just tapped one hoof on the brick floor and moved a half step back then forward again. Tancred crept forward slowly, never taking his eyes off the horse. And then it looked at him. Tancred noticed Bazooka's eye, the left one, looked like a blue marble. Bazooka nickered then sighed and turned his head to get a better look at what was in front of him. Tancred stepped toward the stall and raised his hand slowly and whispered over and over –

I won't hurt you.

And then he touched Bazooka's cheek and Bazooka lowered his head and nudged at Tancred's hand looking for food.

I'll be back. Don't be scared, said Tancred.

A couple of days went by.

When Tancred walked into the mews that Saturday morning it was starting to rain. He saw the van. Tancred couldn't read too well and he stood and mouthed out the letters and he was pretty sure the words said fallen stock. The rest of the writing was a mystery of numbers and letters, but he liked the colour of the van. Tancred walked on to Bazooka's stable and he had a bag of carrots and a new trug for the horse's water. He reached the door of the stable

and heard voices, it was Fat Sid and Peter the Rastaman and Billy Cockbiscuit and another voice he didn't know. He heard Peter say,
So, it happens fast then. The horse won't feel pain, you know?
No, it's very quick, Sir.

Wednesday then? said Billy Cockbiscuit.

Yes, we'll be here at eight o'clock to collect if that suits you?

Fine, said Billy Cockbiscuit.

The stranger walked out of the stable doors and mumbled wankers and jumped a little when he noticed Tancred leant up against the door. He gave Tancred a sideways glance, looked at the carrots, looked at the trug.

Are you going to kill the horse?

Euthanise, we euthanise horses, he's blind and lame. Are you the stable lad?

Yes.

Well. At least you know what you're doing.

The stranger got into his van and slammed the door and revved the engine and crunched the gears and pulled away fast. Tancred watched him go and tried to weigh what he'd been told. Tancred walked into the stable and the three men stopped talking and looked his way. Peter the Rastaman gave him a half wave and grinned stupidly, looked guilty, like he'd been caught stealing. Tancred waved back and went about his business and found the broom with no hair and walked into the stall and pulled at the dirty bedding hay. The three men walked away – never said a word. After his choring he sat on the last bale of hay, looked at the horse, the horse looked back. Tancred said.

I'm coming back tonight. We're going up to the canal – he pointed to the stiff leather halter – you have to let me put that thing on.

He'd been to the shop and got his mother's vodka, left her three microwave meals in the fridge, left tobacco and papers and a

lighter. She'd sorted out her own puff. He pulled on an extra sweatshirt, pulled on his beanie, his sweatpants and baseball boots. He kept five pounds from her change, poked it into his sock, and snuck out the door and quietly closed it. She was crashed out on the sofa. A bomb going off might have woken her up – probably not. He walked down the stairs and into the street and walked the white lines and jumped the potholes and looked up at the streetlamps and admired their firewhite glow. The stars in the sky he never noticed. He never looked that far. The mews was black on black but for one old coach lamp that had been there forever, and no one knew how or why it got electrified or why it even worked but it gave one pool of amberlight to help a passerby. Tancred reached the door of the stable and opened it and jumped back shocked out of his skin and landed on his backside. Bazooka was on the other side of the door standing waiting for him. The horse nickered and looked at the boy and shook his head. There was no light in the stable, and Tancred had to feel his way down to the stall and find the halter. Something scuttled by and squealed and it made him shiver. He patted the post and found the halter and walked back to the horse who by now had walked out into the mews. The horse stood there sniffing and snorting in the cold fresh air. Tancred stood beside the horse and puzzled over the halter – held it up, held it out, dangled it. In the end Bazooka got fed up and stepped back and dropped his head under Tancred's arm, aimed his nose at the open loop, pushed his head through. Tancred held on and suddenly the penny dropped. The halter was on and loosely fitted but it would do a job. Tancred looped the rope, looked at Bazooka and said.

You ready?

They walked out of the mews. Bazooka bobbed his head up and down and walked slowly. There was a little hitch in the horse's stride and he seemed to lean gently into Tancred. Every now and

then Bazooka stopped and looked at the world with his good eye, then he looked at Tancred as if to say – which way now? At the canal bridge, by the pub, Bazooka caught a whiff of beer and looked longingly in the direction of the scent. They arrived at the old brick horsepath leading down to the canal, and Bazooka shied a little and Tancred went in front and stamped gently as if to show the horse it was safe, and for the first time he pulled on the rope and the horse came forward and followed him down. They made about forty yards when they came alongside a narrowboat. It had three bags of coal up on its roof and an assortment of small boxes that contained plants. In the poor light Tancred could just make out a bicycle. There was music playing inside the boat – sounded like Star Wars – weird. Bazooka suddenly whinnied, and the lights went on inside the boat and the duck hatch flew open and a head poked out in shadow from the light behind. A torch beam shone around the tow path. The voice was croaked from snoring in sleep and the speaker was breathless.

What are you doin' with a horse, kid.

Tancred thought about running, but that would mean leaving the horse. He looked harder at the old man and he knew him, not well, but he knew him. The old man was often in the pub when Tancred went over with the others for dinner. He was funny, and if you asked him anything he always answered – well. He had many different ways of answering well and the others called him Tommy.

They're going to kill him, said Tancred, surprised he'd spoken.

Bazooka looked at the scene with his one good eye and rotated his ears toward the boat.

Wait there, said Tommy.

Bazooka wandered off and found grass and Tancred told Tommy what had happened. Tommy leaned on the tiller with his quick found hat plonked on his head and his threadbare jumper pulled

over his beer belly. He had his pyjama bottoms on – they badly needed washing.

A pool of light from the galley made them both silhouettes.

Where you going to take the horse?

That play area no one uses, well, just for now ‘til I get something worked out.

You can't leave him there because that's where the pissheads go and they'll barbecue him. Listen, go tie the horse up to the boat. I'll make us some tea and you can come aboard, we'll work something out.

They sat in the galley, drank the tea, Tommy said,

You know how they got the horse don't you?

No.

Billy Cockbiscuit's a gambler and he's lost thousands in that bookies in the high street. And he being the brains of the outfit went and persuaded the other two that they could own a racehorse. Christ knows who set him up with the horse but the fool bought it and then he convinced the others to put it with a trainer. They spent a lot of money. The trainer told them it was never a racehorse and never would it be. So they cleared out that old stable and put the horse in there. It's been there for eighteen months. Cruel, really.

Now they're going to kill him, Tommy. Can't let that happen. Can't.

Well.

I don't know what to do.

Well. Right. Listen. There's a horse sanctuary I know of. You'll have to walk the horse along the canal and I'll follow you in the boat, but it'll take a couple of days.

What's a horse sanctuary?

Well. You really don't know?

No.

They look after horses that people get rid of so the horses don't get killed.

Okay.

So, you up for it?

Yes.

Okay. Go get some sleep and we'll go at first light. You'd better let your mum and dad know what you're doing.

No dad. Mum don't business.

How old are you?

Fourteen.

Well.

Tommy shrugged his shoulders and made space on the sofa for the boy, threw him a couple of blankets. He went outside and hammered in a mooring pin and tied the horse to it and threw a blanket over the horse and spoke to it.

If you wander off I ain't comin' looking for you.

Then he gave Bazooka a carrot and went to bed.

The morning came too quickly and they were both tired and the cold damp air didn't help at all. Tancred tried to pull out the mooring pin and it shot out of the ground and he fell arse over head. Bazooka just looked at him. The horse wiggled his ears, walked off to find grass and nickered, it sounded like he was laughing.

It was a simple plan as plans go. Tancred would walk forward with the horse and Tommy would follow with the boat. They would stop and have lunch on the boat and carry on until dark and then after a night's sleep they would carry on to Cassiobury where Tommy would moor the boat. They would have to walk seven miles to the sanctuary with the horse – Tommy kept quiet about that bit.

It's a few miles and we've got seven locks to go through, you all right with that?

What's a lock?

Just a way of moving a boat up and down. Don't worry, it's fun.

Tancred looked at the old man on the boat. He was leaning on the tiller and smiling and it seemed to Tancred like the old man had the easy job – I'm standing here with this great big fuck off horse and all you have to do is drive the boat – he should have been home. She would be waking. She'd need her toast and whatever drink he could find to stop her sweating and shaking. She never ate the toast but he made it anyway. If she'd pissed herself or thrown up or shit herself he would help her to the bathroom and wait while she got cleaned up. He would be rolling a joint for her now and sometimes he would smoke a bit for himself – it helped. He looked at Bazooka, noticed the sweet smell of the outside morning, listened to the sounds that were not the sounds of her groaning and spewing in the bathroom. He heard a bird but he didn't know what bird it was but it didn't matter it was free outside and it was a bird. And the boat engine beat away and his throat was breaking and he knew he was crying and the horse just looked at him and it nudged his shoulder with its head – that way fool, don't walk back. A bus rumbled over the bridge and a train went by in the distance rattling the bullhead rails. Tancred picked up the rope and Bazooka looked and chewed away at the grass he'd scavenged. And then a weight fell from Tancred. He didn't understand what had happened, just left with burning, burning, burning but the weight had gone, Tancred picked up the the rope and kissed the horse, said,

Come on, Bazooka.

After a couple of hours Tancred felt his feet getting hot and sore. Bazooka plodded on looking around at the factories and ducks on the water. Every now and then Tancred noticed the fish surface, pop their mouths, then sink below leaving the green soupy water full of circling ripples. He looked up at the sky and realised he never really looked up at the sky at all. The clouds caught his eye

and then he tripped over and Bazooka shied and pulled back and stood snorting. Tancred got up and brushed himself down and picked up the rope and patted the horse and apologised. He heard the clank and thump of Tommy's boat engine. Tommy shouted,

Just up ahead is Bull's Bridge we'll stop here for some grub, all right?

Tancred waved and stood and watched Tommy bring the narrowboat in. Bazooka pushed his head into Tancred's back and they walked up to the boat. They gave the horse a trug of water and half a box of porridge oats and two apples and two carrots and a Weetabix that Tommy found behind the porridge oats in the cupboard. It didn't touch the sides. Bazooka stood looking at them – is that all? They made do with tea and toast. Tommy looked at the boy. He was tired, but not struggling. When he told the boy about the next stage he made it sound like it was nothing.

We'll get to Denham Deep Locks and that's it for today. I'll get moored up and shoot off on my bike and get some grub for us all, and you can sort the horse and put your feet up, Okay?

Is it far?

Well. Not as far as you've come.

Okay.

Tommy watched the boy and the horse cross over Bull's Bridge then he fired up the boat engine. He could not work out why the boy never smiled or spoke with any kind of curiosity about anything. He was like a slow guided missile going on and on. So the day passed by – September warm, biscuit-coloured sun, nights closing in. They cleared the lock and Tancred stood and held the horse and watched how it all worked out. He liked the noise of the water, the dripping wet gates of the lock, the sound of the ratchet and the lock key working. They tied Bazooka to the mooring pin and settled down inside the boat, Tommy unpacked the shopping bag and then someone knocked on the duck hatch.

Hello, sorry to trouble you, hello.

Tommy went out and Tancred sat with his knees up to his chest and listened hard.

She had braided hair and a piercing in her tongue, another poked through her eyebrow, baggy pants and a baggier jumper, no make-up, smelt a bit sweaty.

Is that your horse?

Tommy tried his best to look bemused and said, Yes, is he bothering you?

Are you going to leave him here?

Well. I'll take him with me when I go.

But it's a canal towpath.

Well. Do you know why it's called a towpath?

What?

Well It's called a towpath because horses just like him used to pull boats just like mine along the canal and they did it for years. He can be here. He ain't botherin' nobody.

But?

No buts. He's here for the night with us and in the morning we're taking him to his horse sanctuary.

Her mouth flapped open and shut as she desperately tried to think of something to say. When she walked off and passed by Bazooka he farted and she jumped. Tommy grinned and went back inside the boat.

What's up with her, said Tancred.

Well. Every now and then you'll meet someone like her. She's one of them crazy entitled people, they know all, and know fuck all. Just leave 'em be and let 'em pass by.

Will she call the police?

No.

Why?

She probably don't like the police either.

They woke up shivering cold in the morning – stiff legs and stiff backs. At the next set of locks Tancred tied Bazooka to a gate post and went to the boat and held out his hand for the lock key. Tommy smiled as he watched Tancred make a good job of it. They made good progress, struggled to get a mooring, and eventually toed themselves in between two other boats. Bazooka broke the ice with the neighbours. They got a cooked dinner when the old couple found out what they were doing, and the young couple on the other boat fed Bazooka an apple and brought him water. They all sat in the evening and shared what they had and Tancred smiled for the first time in a very long time. When they climbed back into the boat they sat on the settee meaning to talk but fell into a dead sleep instead.

They woke early, drank tea, and ate what they could find. They walked the quiet roads, the footpaths, what fields were left. On the way they talked to pass the time.

What did you do?

Well. I was a stormtrooper in Star Wars.

Yeah right.

I was. The original Star Wars filmed at Elstree Studios I'll have you know. I'll show you the photographs when we get back to the boat.

Okay. Why do you live in a boat then, you must be rich?

Well, I lost everything, and I didn't have a bean left. You see, I invested all my money and poof off it went. But, my friend, I'll share this with you. Sometimes you have to lose everything to gain what you need most.

What's that mean?

I had too much of the stuff I didn't need and not enough of the stuff I did need.

So you don't care about losing all your money?

Well. No, I don't.

No. Money's money, Tommy.

Well. Money's a curse, boy, a worrying curse. There's better things to go after.

They turned out of the lane they'd wandered and saw the gate to the horse sanctuary. Tancred stopped at the gate and Bazooka looked over his shoulder at the horses way off in the fields, and let out a high pitched whinny. Some of the horses turned round, looked over at Bazooka, and returned his call. Tommy lifted the throwover loop on the gate and they began the walk up a long lane to the sanctuary. Tommy turned round and spoke to Tancred.

We say we're on holiday on our narrowboat and we found him abandoned on the towpath. Okay?

Okay. Wouldn't we have to call the police though?

We were on the canal in the middle of nowhere so we brought him here, just play dumb.

I'll just keep quiet. You do the talking.

Well.

They entered the yard and Bazooka looked round and his ears turned in every direction. A stable door opened and a young girl walked out backwards talking to something inside. She stopped and looked at them, walked over, picked bits of hay out of her hair.

Hello.

We've found this horse on the canal. We're not sure what to do with him.

The canal?

Yes.

That's miles away.

I know. We're knackered.

Have you called the police?

No, do we have to?

She chided them a little, but there was something about the horse she liked. He had a proud, brave look about him. Undefeated. He had the moon blindness and an abscess in his hoof, but he wasn't giving in anytime soon. He bent his head down toward her, nickered, shook his head. She took the rope from the boy.

He's called Bazooka, said Tancred.

How do you know that? said the young girl.

Well. We called him Bazooka, said Tommy.

Bazooka it is then, said the young girl.

They stayed another hour. Tancred gave her the five quid he'd tucked into his sock and said,

Just something for the feed.

Tommy gave fifty quid and a snide email address – well.

Tancred stood beside the horse and laid his head against its body and heard something – Bazooka's beating heart – lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub. He breathed in the scent of the horse and hoped he would never forget it. Bazooka turned his head and looked at Tancred for a long time then let out a sigh and walked into his stall.

Walking off down the lane they were both quiet. Tommy looked at Tancred and said,

Are you upset?

Yes.

You can come back and see him.

No, I won't come back.

Well, said Tommy, then he nodded sagely and they walked on.

Saying Goodbye - Fiona Ireland

I have gulped the whisky too quickly and it catches slightly at the back of my throat. I'm not used to it I suppose; but it was William's favourite; Talisker. I look at the bottle. Just another drop, then I'll break the rules and habits of a lifetime by driving afterwards - Yes, I know I shouldn't; but right now, I don't care what happens to me. - Or anyone.

I visited the church yesterday - wanted to get a feel for the place with no-one else around. I crossed myself, sat down at the back and pretended to pray, whilst surreptitiously looking around. A couple of women were sitting near the altar, hands in laps and staring ahead. I examine the backs of their heads, relived I don't know them. I like churches; several dark corners to sit in, unobserved. Ideal setting really.

And today; I have thought of wearing something scarlet. Isn't it the fashion now, to hold a service for the celebration of life, to tell witty stories and scatter previously untold secrets? But whilst the idea makes me snort out loud, there are others to consider. I'm not that insensitive. Bloody hell William, why did you have to go and have a heart attack? I wipe the whisky from my lips.

Okay. Sober black suit, grey silk blouse, can't decide whether hat or no hat, so I carry one to the car, place it on the seat beside me. Take a deep breath, grip the steering wheel white-knuckle tight, as if this feeling of holding on to something cold and hard could stop all these other feelings. Sober, black feelings that match my very fine buttoned-up suit.

I am not given to crying, nor to scenes of any kind. I have always prided myself on being discreet and I certainly have no wish to change now. No. I park a short way down the road from the church and watch as people arrive. Don't know any of them, except from their photographs. It's his children that I find the most difficult.

They're still quite young, lives stretching ahead of them, but I don't have to like them; they who had the ability to keep William away from me, except for just a few hours, week after week. Year after year.

And then there's her. Petite and tragically dark. Once beautiful, still beautiful in a way, yet somehow not enough for him. She suddenly turns and looks my way, as if she knows I am sitting here, watching from my car. I quickly dive for something to extract from the glove compartment and wait for the appropriate amount of time before looking back up.

I wish I'd brought a hip flask. Maybe I shouldn't have come. I start to doubt what right I have to be here and yet I was so certain yesterday. Who's to say what's right and what's wrong? I was so sure our relationship was right and I would have waited for him forever.

I know I should say goodbye here and now, drive back home and drown my sorrows. But just as I think this may be the best thing to do, the bravest thing to do, I find that I have placed the hat on top of my head and I'm marching towards the church. I open the door and slide into the shadows at the back. I listen to music that William and I shared, hear him described with love and warmth by people I have never met. Most of his life was out of bounds to me and so it remains. I don't belong here, but I stay until the end.

As the service finishes, I whisper goodbye and steal out of the door only to find I am being followed. William's son calls out to me before I reach my car, while I am still fumbling in my bag for the keys.

"Mum would like to meet you."

I turn.

"Please."

And even if I'd wanted to, I could not have moved. I watch her approach in slow motion; a stiff smile pressed onto her face.

"You must be Ellen," she says, quite simply, removing the glove from her hand.

Then she slaps me hard across my cheek, hard enough and so unexpected as to make my head jolt from side to side. Her son, seemingly not knowing what is going on, doesn't say anything, just looks at me with William's eyes and guides her away. I finger my cheek, the shock only now releasing the tears. I briefly close my eyes as I wonder who Ellen is.

Water - Fiona Ireland

Water,
Too much
and there is flooding
Too little
and there is drought
Too dirty
and there's pollution, cholera, dysentery

Water
Too precious
to profit from.

Millie's Story - Gila McGrath

Millie or, to give her her full name, Millicent Eugenie Horsham Horne, walked into the bedroom she shared with her husband and kicked off the black shoes she was wearing, glad to get them off her feet and feel the cool breeze on her toes. The black hat, with the lace and the evil, spiky hatpin, could go as well. She was relieved to be home, alone for a few minutes, while she changed into clothes better suited for feeding the baby.

For the past 5 years, she had shared the room with her beloved husband, and now she shared it with her 3 babies. She looked around at the bedroom, running her fingers along the dressing table he had made for her so she could sit and make that beautiful face even lovelier if that were possible. She sat in the window seat again, crafted with love, and thought, for her comfort, there wasn't anything he wouldn't have done to make her happy.

Ivan Hilburn Horne had been a handsome man who'd stood tall and erect. His skin had been the colour of ebony, his teeth a pearly white and the very first time Millie had laid eyes on him, he had stolen her heart. Admittedly, it wasn't the most romantic of meetings, with their eyes meeting over the shop counter as she shyly asked him if he had pigs' trotters. He had replied, 'No, that's just the way I walk.'

Ivan was the butcher's son, and her aunt had sent her to his shop to buy pigs' trotters to boil up for supper. It wasn't Millie's favourite dish, by a long chalk, but, as her aunt would say, 'beggars can't be choosers.'

She laughed at his joke, her smile brightening up the whole shop, and he always said that was the moment he knew he would marry her.

True to his word, Ivan proposed six months later, and six weeks after that, she became the happiest, most beautiful bride in the whole of Georgetown, quite possibly in the whole of Guyana, or even the world.

Nine months to the day, Ivan Junior was born, a honeymoon baby, people said with a nod and a wink. But Millie knew that this was a honeymoon baby; she had been brought up to be a good Christian girl, and, even if she didn't want to be a good girl, her aunt had eyes in the back of her head and would not miss a trick.

A year later, Hilburn, or *Bunny* as they called him, joined his brother, another healthy, bouncing baby boy. Ivan joked that he was planning on setting up his own cricket team of just his sons.

'Well, good luck with that,' she would tell him, 'you will need to get another wife to complete the line-up.'

Life was good. The shop, which Ivan had taken over, was doing well, and Millie, a warm and loving mother, looked after the babies and made bread and cakes to supplement the family income. Her only complaint was that Ivan worked too hard; he would be up and out of the house by six to go to the meat market to get the best meat for his customers. Once the shop was closed, he had to wash every nook and cranny of the shop to ensure that it was spotless. The slightest blood or bone left behind could cause maggots and flies not what you wanted to see in a butcher's shop. He often complained of headaches and was getting too tired to even play cricket with the boys.

While she had a good life with Ivan, Millie was ambitious, and, with a sharp, quick brain, she wanted more. The family was growing fast, and the little cottage was bursting at the seams, especially with another batsman on the way. Ivan laughed as they lay on the bed, and she told him of her dream to buy a plot of land

and build a house on it, big enough for all of them and the ones that had yet to be born.

She reminded him that he had laughed at her when she said she was going to learn bookkeeping so she could do the accounts for the shop, and hadn't she just passed her bookkeeping exam?

'Yes, you are correct, my dear, but I don't think even you can magic up enough money to buy land, no matter how creative your bookkeeping.'

With a heavy heart, she folded her clothes and put them away, not wishing to ever see them again. Funeral clothes, suitable for a young widow.

Remembering the conversation with Ivan, it seemed such a long time ago, yet it was only a month since they'd discussed those plans, a month to the day that her world came crashing down. How could such a beautiful day change in the blink of an eye?

She was sitting in her aunt's old rocking chair, nursing the baby: smaller than the other two and sicklier. For no particular reason, they had named him Joseph, but perhaps they'd named him after Ivan's friend, Joe.

Watching the sun cutting through the dust and the cat playing with a piece of string, Millie's thoughts were interrupted by Ivan appearing in the doorway.

'You're home early, what's wrong?'

'Nothing, I just had a headache and closed the shop early; I think I will be okay once I've had a lie down.'

Those were the last words Ivan said to her, for no sooner had he finished speaking than he was falling to the floor like an oak being felled. Millie screamed and jumped up, forgetting she had the baby on her lap, and ran to Ivan. She felt for a pulse, ignoring the wails

of the infant on the floor, but there was nothing. She shouted at him and bashed him on the chest, but still nothing.

It was the neighbour who eventually came, picked Joseph up, checked him over, and then gently encouraged Millie to move away from Ivan so the doctor could deal with him. What the neighbour meant was so the doctor could officially pronounce him dead.

With the funeral over, Millie knew that she had to find a way to keep her young family safe, safe from the poorhouse and from the predators lining up to take her business from her.

The next day would be the start of a new chapter because Millie would be the first female butcher in the whole of Georgetown.

Millie woke and hurriedly fed the baby, then checked in on her aunt, who was, not so gently, snoring. It was beyond her comprehension how the boys could sleep through the noise, but she was grateful to her aunt for agreeing to move in and help her with the children.

She rushed off to meet Ronald, who had worked in the shop with Ivan. Ronald was going to take her to the wholesale market, to show her the ropes, and to help her open the shop.

The market was a busy, bustling place: full of men, and noise, and cigarette smoke. The voices carried quite a way: auctioneers and buyers shouting over each other while the merchants, carrying pigs and sheep on their shoulders like sacks of coal, pushed people out of the way.

Ronald managed to secure a spot for them, right at the front of a large stage, where the auctioneer was preparing to begin the day's auction. The atmosphere around them was tense with anticipation, as buyers jostled for position and sellers displayed their best wares. Ronald pressed a card with a bold number into Millie's hand, leaning in to explain the process.

‘Only raise the card if you see something you want to buy,’ he instructed her. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll guide you by nudging your elbow at the right moment.’

Millie knew she would need to act swiftly, as hesitation could mean missing out on a good deal. She tried to steady her nerves, readying herself for her first experience at the market auction, knowing she would have to learn quickly to keep up in such a demanding environment.

Millie braced herself as the auction began. Ronald gave her a gentle nudge, signalling that it was time to bid. Her arm shot upwards instinctively, but she was a fraction too late—the man standing in front of her managed to secure the meat before she could. Another round quickly followed, and Ronald nudged her again. She raised her card, only to be beaten by the man to her left. After several failed attempts, it dawned on Millie that her problem was not just hesitation because, despite her efforts, she was consistently being passed over, her bids seemingly invisible to the auctioneer. Frustration built as she realised that speed alone would not win her the meat; she was being overlooked time and again.

Millie was not one to give up easily and excused herself from the bustling market, dashing home as quickly as her legs would carry her. Fortunately, Ivan’s heavy coat, the one he had always worn on chillier days, and his ever-present fedora still hung by the back door where he had left them. Without wasting a moment, Millie scooped her hair up into a hasty bun, pulled on the oversized coat, and plonked the hat squarely on her head. With this new resolve, and disguised in Ivan’s familiar attire, she was certain she could outsmart the men who had been keeping her from making her bids. She marched back towards the market, ready to confront the challenge head-on, and determined to beat them at their own game.

As Millie had made her exit, another figure had entered the market: Malcolm, the newest butcher in Georgetown, had stepped onto the scene from the opposite side. His arrival would signal a new dynamic in the busy marketplace.

Horizon - Mark Hinsley

Well, it came as a bit of a surprise waking up in a brighter than bright place, lots of people bustling about. I was approached by a chap in fine leather sandals, with a beard, flowing white robe, kindly smile and bright eyes, he asked if I was ok?

I'm not sure, I replied.

Oh, well you'll soon get the hang of it, he chimed.

Oh, I said.

I looked down at my own clothes and noticed I was in a white polo shirt, white shorts and white plimsoles, well I thought they won't stay that colour for long!

Don't worry, my bearded friend echoed, they're all the latest materials we have, the eternal white 2000, a material less sticky than Teflon, so any dirt just slides off it. Not that there's any dirt here anyway, of course, he smiled with teeth that almost, but didn't quite, blind with their whiteness.

I'm Mathew, your guide to the realm. If you have any questions, the answers will become apparent at some point. Now, if you follow me, you've been assigned to a very important committee. Do you remember anything from before?

I don't think so, I respond, trying to remember something, anything, but it seems I can't get beyond a veil in my mind.

Oh, good, says Mathew. Now, the committee you've been assigned to.

Is there any chance of some food and a drink first?

Ah, that's the beauty of the realm, just imagine you're eating the most delicious meal and drinking the finest wine, and you'll be replete as if you have had such a meal, stand there and try it.

I imagined half a grilled lobster, salad and a glass of fine champagne and there I was, my stomach filled with the contents of my imagination, no heady alcohol fuzziness, but the same gentle soothing effect.

There, I'm glad you enjoyed it! Now, for this committee you've been chosen for.

Oh, I've been chosen, not just assigned?

Chosen, assigned, either way, you'll love it.

Ok, so what's this committee?

It's the souls committee. He said this with a flourish, a white smile that blindingly glinted bright white light, nodding at me as though it should mean something to me.

I'm sorry, Mathew, but what does the souls committee do?

You really don't remember anything from before, do you?

No.

Ok, the souls committee have an eternal problem. Souls are finite; they're moved around the living as needed. But we have a problem, humans are becoming too populous, there aren't enough souls to maintain the populations of other living things on earth.

In a kind of Buddhism way?

Yes, in a kind of Buddhism kind of way, something dies, something is born or grows, and needs a soul.

Grows, born?

Yes, every living thing needs a soul, bugs, plants, trees, mushrooms, everything! Don't worry, eating things is part of the natural process of renewal and the chance for souls to experience the wonderful lives of every living thing, no matter how simple or complex. The committee is trying to work out how to manage this, and as you've been on the committee for most of its life, we thought you might be best placed with it once again.

So I've been on it before, have I?

Yes, you rather like your sabbaticals from the realm. You were most missed when you were the soul of a giant redwood, just over three thousand years gone, you were, most inconvenient... the easiest break was when you were reborn as a bacteria, unfortunately, it only lasted the blink of an eye as you were caught in some stray ultraviolet light....

That all sounds rather marvellous, but a tad exhausting...

Has anything from before come back to you?

No, I'm still rather hazy....

I'm not sure I should tell you this, but in your last excursion, you were a parasitic worm, living in the bowel of a witch doctor in Orlando in Florida. Unfortunately he drank himself to death, and

you went with him on his cremation pyre. Still, luckily, none of the other billions of souls associated with him were former members of the committee, so it's all down to you, I'm afraid.

So, can new souls not be created?

Well, there's the rub, you see, we could under certain circumstances clone souls, but it's a little frowned upon because if there was another mass extinction event, where would we keep them? Redundancy is such a costly affair, as is storage. We'd rather keep to our current souls budget if we can, one in, one out; it's so much clearer that way.

But what if man travels into the solar system, the stars, what happens then?

Currently, we have a Schengen style agreement with the places they can reach at the moment, and for the most part, galactic travelling souls balance out....

Sounds like a difficult problem.

Yes, and so far it's been quite insurmountable!

So how many of us are on this committee?

Just you, all the other members keep going on sabbatical....

How do they go about that then?

Well, they just think what they'd like to be next and as soon as there's a place, and pop, off they go, all rather inconvenient....

I considered this and decided bowhead whales were long-lived and rather lovely.

Pop!

Oh bugger, says Mathew, he's disappeared...

Pop!

A change of light and there I was, an egg and sperm just merged, lodging myself into my mother's uterus and swimming towards the horizon....

The Last Time I Saw Martin - Stephen Pullman

I live here now and this was my lifelong dream—to get up and just walk to the sea, to smell the salt, the seaweed, the sand. To walk to the beach at the dead of night and look up at the sky and sea and the stars and the moon and walk like a ghost along the shoreline. As I said, this was my dream, but the gods don't give you everything. And she dreamed my dream and we left the city that we knew, the friends, the dirt, the noise, and we came here.

I was a soldier, not because I wanted to go on a crusade. I wanted a wage and somewhere to exist. I'd been in a long time, almost a lifer, and then my luck ran out. When it happened we were young, afraid, cast into a madness we could never have imagined. Afghanistan, where was it? What was it? We were in Sangingrad stuck in the middle of a load of crazy Pashtuns. I will not bore you with the details, but I will tell you this, never believe what the politicians tell you and never fight in the wars they construct, go your own way, give them nothing.

And who was Martin? He joined us in the madness with his company in the blinding heat of June. Dust and flies and sweat and the never ending smell of shit. He looked like an athlete and I noticed that the others just flocked to him. He was slightly taller than everyone else—you could always see him no matter where you stood. He never seemed to sweat, had a mop of wild black hair that blew around his face.

All I remember is this, a huge flash, and what felt like a huge blow to my chest, and then being dragged, and then waking up in the compound in a room that was mercifully cool. I could not stop shaking. All through that first night he lay beside me and held me and stroked my hair and told me that it was safe. In the weeks that followed he never left me, it seemed as if we were two halves of the same thing. Conversation sometimes didn't happen but we were still talking somehow, a glance, a smile, a laugh. I told him that I had this dream of living by the sea and he asked where I would go and I said Cromer. When he asked why, I told him I had been there when I was a child and then later on trips with friends—

I just loved it. And then, on a relatively quiet day when we were stood down, a kind of madness descended on the place and I ended up in a helicopter and he stood there and waved and choked on the dust as we lifted away. He had his hand on his head and it looked as if he was trying to stop his hair blowing off. We'd never exchanged contact details. We expected to come home together, that there would be time, time for everything.

When I was discharged I spoke to her and said let's do it, let's go, and we went. Years went by and I found he would pop into my head almost every day. It wasn't like just missing somebody, a whole part had gone, a hole in the landscape of my life. I considered contacting the regiment, or going on the Facebook page, but we consider lots of things don't we. I really never expected to see him again.

We were sitting on the pier, me in my shady spot and her in the sun. I knew it was Martin, didn't even have to look, knew he was there. He walked up and without looking at either of us he sat down. At first I thought he was blind—I had to shift up and make room. It was as if he didn't see us sitting there. He just sat there looking out to sea. She asked if I fancied a drink and I said yes and she walked into the bar and I looked at him and we burst out laughing and jumped up and I kissed him and he kissed me and we just stood there holding each other. And she came back with the drinks and he sat down as she walked up and just went back to looking at the sea. I said thanks love to her and he got up and walked away like some downed defeated boxer who'd wished that he had died. I sat there frozen, I'd told him that I loved him and I knew that I had lied. She looked at me for a long time, then she said,

Who was that bloke then?

What bloke?

The bloke that was sitting next to you.

Dunno.

Why did you stick your tongue in his ear then?

What?

You haven't kissed me like that for years.

Okay. He was in my squad, he's out of money, broke, I said I'd help him.

How'd you do that then?

What?

Help him.

Gave him a couple hundred quid.

Two hundred quid.

Yes.

Where's your debit card?

What?

Your debit card, you need a debit card to get cash out of the bank. Nice try—no cigar, try again. Who is he?

We were in the army together, he needed some help, that's all.

When my friend Joan needed help I helped her, but we didn't end up muff diving on the pier. Who is he?

We knew each other in the army, that's it.

Last chance, what are you up to?

Nothing.

You're in the spare room tonight, see you.

She got up and walked off, left her drink on the bench. I watched her walk to the up ramp, and then she slipped into the crowd. I never saw him again. I thought we would talk when she'd gone but he just stood up and walked off. She warmed a little, but it wasn't the same. We share a bed now. We eat breakfast in the morning. We go shopping.

And so I will tell you this in case I die tonight.

Love is not fair—It is cruel and vicious if you are not truthful. So think on.

This is for you if you are young.

Mirror - Carol Connor

They visited Granny twice a year: once in the summer and once in the winter. This was the summer visit.

Marnie was an only child: adored, cosseted, cherished and the centre of her doting parents' world. With shining auburn curls, thickly lashed, cornflower blue eyes, a flawless complexion and a rosebud pink mouth, she had the perfection of a porcelain doll, and her parents treated her as though she were indeed made from the finest china.

Granny was Father's grandmother, older than Marnie by nearly a century but shrivelled and shrunken so that she and Marnie were now of a similar height. Mother was afraid of the ancient woman, wary of the woman's sharp tongue, and, likewise, Father had little fondness for his Grandmother. However, upon the old woman's death, it would be he who inherited the family estate: the 17th-century manor, family chapel, farmstead and acres of surrounding land. How the family had made its fortune, nobody seemed to know, but there were rumours of magic, of witchcraft going back hundreds of years. Mother laughed at such suggestions but couldn't completely dismiss the idea that Granny was not a physical vessel for something evil.

Granny opened the door to the house just as they arrived. Blind since childhood, her hearing was still as keen as that of a Labrador Retriever, and she had heard their car as soon as it had turned onto the impressively long driveway that stretched up to the house. They took it in turns to step from the glorious summer sun into the walnut wood-lined hallway that accepted them into the gloom. Mother found the light switch on the wall and pressed it so that they were rewarded with a dull, yellowish glow.

'Where's my Marnie?' Granny greeted them.

Marnie was not afraid of Granny, and she went to her and let the woman touch her face, allowing the claw-like bones of fingers to trace her perfect features.

‘My beautiful girl!’ Granny exclaimed. ‘Come through to the drawing room with me. Your mother can go to the kitchen and make us some fruit tea and bring the cakes.’

Marnie went with Granny, who, despite her advanced years, walked without the aid of a stick, and they arrived in the drawing room, a room that was densely packed with antique furniture and starved of any daylight by the long, heavy curtains at the windows.

‘Granny, can I turn on a light?’ Father asked.

Granny waved her hand dismissively at him. ‘Yes, yes!’

There was a small lamp on the sideboard, and Father turned it on revealing that the series of shadows were actually a collection of sofas, chairs and small tables.

‘How are you, Granny?’ Father questioned her.

‘I’m not dead yet,’ she stated. ‘You must be disappointed.’

‘Not at all,’ Father lied.

‘Has anyone been to visit?’ Father continued with the awkward interrogation.

‘Why would they come here?’ Granny responded, though there was no trace of either resentment or disappointment in her voice. ‘Since your parents died, nobody comes to see me. I will tell you that the only thing to be gained from outliving those you have loved is the solitude it affords you to remember the ones who have passed.’

‘You have us, Granny,’ Marnie reminded her.

The old woman nodded. ‘I do have you, Marnie.’

‘Granny,’ Marnie began, ‘can we go to the mirror?’

Granny was nodding her balding head. ‘Yes, my Marnie, come!’

There on the wall, as tall as a door and wider than the vintage sofa where Father was now sitting, was a fine mahogany-framed mirror dating from a time before even Granny was born.

‘Must you do this every time we visit?’ Father sighed wearily.

Marnie and Granny stood side by side in front of the mirror.

‘Tell me what you can see, Granny,’ Marnie’s sweet voice penetrated the silence.

‘I can see the ocean,’ Granny looked through her sightless eyes. ‘Blues and greens with clambering, dancing waves touched by soft, white foam. What do you see, Marnie?’

‘Oh, Granny,’ Marnie sounded sad. ‘I must confess that I can only see our reflections. Are you very disappointed in me?’

‘You will see when you’re ready to see,’ Granny comforted the child.

‘Is it still the ocean?’ Marnie pressed her then.

Granny’s sightless eyes were unblinking. ‘Yes, there’s something in the waves.’

Marnie was tugging excitedly at her Great-Grandmother’s arm. ‘Is it a fish, a dolphin, or a whale?’

‘Why no, child, it is none of those.’ Granny’s tone was flat. ‘It is something older than the sea and more powerful than the oceans. It has no name.’

‘Only God is as old as the sea,’ Marnie told her. ‘Are you looking at God?’

‘God!’ Granny balked. ‘No, it’s not God.’

‘I want to see it!’ Marnie declared. ‘But all I can see is the two of us standing at the mirror.’

‘Then do you think you’re ready to see?’ Granny’s question had an urgency about it, but Mother had walked into the room, so Marnie did not reply.

‘Granny, come over to the table. I’ve brought the tea and cake,’ Mother said.

‘Daddy,’ Marnie began, ‘what’s older than the sea?’

Daddy smiled at his daughter. ‘I think Granny is just telling one of her stories.’

‘My tea needs to cool a little,’ Granny announced. ‘Marnie and I shall stay here at the mirror for a bit. The waves have gone now, but they’ve been replaced by a field of flowers blowing in a gentle breeze. I can smell their perfume and see the bees busily moving flower to flower. The sky is so blue without a single cloud to spoil it.’

In a whisper, Marnie said, ‘I think I can hear the summer birds singing. Oh, they’ve stopped. Has the scene changed?’

‘What can you see in the mirror?’ Granny asked the child.

‘Oh Granny,’ she wept, ‘I am sorry to say that I can still see only our reflections.’

Granny used her twisted hand to pat Marnie’s shoulder. ‘Hush now, you will see when you are ready. Do you remember what I saw in the sea? Do you remember? It’s here too amongst the flowers.’

Father had grown weary of the game, and he headed out of the room and along the corridor to the study where Granny always left mountains of post for him to look through. He would take most of the correspondence home with him. He called to his wife, keen for her to help him sort the important letters from the junk mail, and she arrived before he had even made a start on the first pile.

Mother was about to speak when she felt a chill run through her, and it entered her very soul. She ran from the study, back along

the corridor and into the drawing room in time to hear Marnie squealing.

‘Marnie, Marnie, are you hurt?’ Mother cried, but Marnie, still standing in front of the mirror with Granny, giggled before replying.

‘I can see a dense forest with emerald-coloured trees that have long, white trunks. There are sweet woodland animals: foxes and deer. Listen, Mother, listen to the wind in the leaves and look at the sparkling sun so high in the sky just gazing down on so much beauty.’

‘I can only see your reflections,’ Mother told her truthfully.

‘But can’t you see it?’ Marnie’s voice sounded strange, ghostly. ‘There, it’s right there.’

At that moment, Marnie turned and ran towards her Mother, and, as Mother looked at her beloved child’s face, she let out a terrible scream because gone were the thickly lashed, cornflower blue eyes, and instead there was nothing but gaping black holes.

‘What have you done to her?’ Mother sobbed. ‘What have you done to my daughter?’

But Granny was smiling into the mirror.

‘Marnie is yours forever now,’ she said to her reflection. ‘We both are.’

The Secret - Gila McGrath

Irene welcomed the young woman into her home, “Come in dear it’s freezing out there”.

The young woman walked into a small flat, straight into a kitchen diner, warm and tidy but homely with pictures of children on their wedding day, grandchildren in graduation gowns and great-grandchildren in christening gowns filling the spaces on every wall.

For Lucy, this was one of her more enjoyable assignments, being sent to interview Irene as she approached her 100th birthday, far nicer than standing in the cold whilst watching the local football team lose yet another game.

Like the rest of us, Lucy was keen to learn the secret to a long and healthy life. Irene laughed when asked the question. “I’m sorry, Lucy, I don’t know the secret.” It could be genetics; my mum reached her 90s, and my gran lived to 103.

My advice would be routine, every day I follow the same routine, and I check I can still do the same thing I was able to do yesterday, and if I can’t, then I change it, but never for more than 2 days in a row.

I’m usually awake around 7 am, I have a stretch on my bed before going to the bathroom, where I look at myself in the mirror and say well done, you’ve made it through the night.

I put the kettle on, and whilst it’s boiling I do tippy toes, that’s what my daughter-in-law and I call them, I don’t know what the proper name is for them. My daughter-in-law got me doing these when I stayed with her and my son during lockdown. So, a cup of coffee with half a sugar, I know that stuff’s not good for you, but I’ve done it for the last 70 years, I’m not about to stop now. I usually pop back to bed just me, Alexa and Radio 4 for another hour.

Breakfast is usually porridge and a couple of prunes for the you know what. I try to do those balance exercises whilst brushing my teeth, I saw it on Good Morning, or whatever it's called. I don't know if it helps me to stop falling over, I'm normally in a heap from laughing at this old lady trying to stand on one leg.

I try and walk into town and have a chat with the girls in the charity shop, I use to work there as chief tea maker until they told me I was too old to be an apprentice, if the legs aren't up to it then I take a few turns around the garden and talk to the roses, if its good enough for King Charles then its good enough for me.

I like to cook an evening meal, again, if I am not up to it then I have a ready meal, my daughter gets me those I don't like them, but they are handy and it makes her happy. I try not to do that for more than 2 days in a row, that's the start of the slippery slope to the Sunnyside home for the Bewildered. That's not its proper name, so you had best leave that bit out dear, I wouldn't want to get you in trouble.

I treat all my chores as an exercise routine, from making the bed to loading the washing machine, but my favourite one is holding on to the handrail in the hallway and imagining I am a top ballerina warming up.

My children keep talking about carers, but the last time I had one, the poor love looked so tired I ended up making the tea for her.

No, I am ok for now, and when I am not, I will let them know, so sorry Lucy, the interview probably wasn't as exciting as you thought it was going to be, there's no superfood, no magic potion or even a picture in the attic. It's just a plain and simple routine.

You mind how you go, and I hope to see you again next year

Ta ra

Writer's Block - Carol Connor

(To be sung to the tune of *Memory*, from the musical *Cats*)

Midnight

Not a sound from my keyboard

Sleeping is just a memory

I am here on my phone

In the lamplight

The screwed up paper mounts at my feet

Writer's block – I softly moan

Memory

Writing wonderful stories

And such meaningful poems

I was prolific then

I remember

When 2000 words were never enough

Now zero-word count – looms again

Unique tales, no, they have gone

I give myself a warning

'Write about crime

In the form of a rhyme

Or you'll be up 'til morning'

Daylight

I am watching the sun rise

I must think of a title

Perhaps I'll look through the bin

Sheets of A4

Bear many scribbles in a blue ink

I don't know where, to begin?

Burnt-out writers, know my pain

My past skills shout a warning

'Try an essay
Or a cheeky short play'
Oh God, it's now mid-morning

Help me!
I just need to start writing
Perhaps I'll try a few lyrics
Yes, I feel that I can
Words are flowing
Oh yes I can't stop, they're pouring out
And that's how this all began

The Cheshire Cat – Mark Hinsley

See how he smiles
Beguiling creature that he is

Don't trust him

The grin that covers a thousand sins
As he rifles a thousand bins

Don't trust him

He won't look you in the eye
He doesn't want you to know what he's thinking

Don't trust him

My claws are sheaved
You'll be relieved as I move upon your knees

Don't trust him

How he toys with that poor mouse
Till he bores and it roams your house

Don't trust him

Feed me, feed me, he pleads
Then he walks away with disdain

Don't trust him

He lays there purring upon the rug
He knows which one of us is the mug

Oh, don't trust him

The Curious Writers

A ghost attends his own funeral and is surprised at what he finds out.

A young boy and an old man decide to steal a horse to prevent it being slaughtered.

A woman watches for new lovers from her window, another is exposed as mistress at her dead lover's funeral.

A man crashes his car into a river and is then pursued by creatures from the deep.

Millie's husband has dropped dead and now she has to run the family's butcher shop alone with her new baby in tow.

Poems and more: are you a curious reader?

Go on, take a look inside.

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