

THE SHORT ANSWER:  
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES AND AN ANALYSIS OF THE USE  
OF SHORT FICTION IN THE TEACHING OF CREATIVE WRITING

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis will explore how writers learn and how best to facilitate this learning using short fiction within Creative Writing education. The critical essay will demonstrate how short fiction is a particularly appropriate literary medium for the development of Creative Writing students, and will argue a need for a more formalised language of Creative Writing criticism and for an extension of applied theoretical tools, modelled in this thesis. The study also explores how best to apply flexibility to the curriculum, in order to meet the needs of a perennially diverse student body producing a variety of different works in different styles, and calls for tutors to be more consciously engaged in translating their writing experience into innovative pedagogies.

The associated portfolio of original short fiction has been developed in concert with the study, using techniques and processes detailed within. It aims to demonstrate the overall suitability of the short story form for the development and assessment of student-writers, while charting my own dual development as both a student and teacher of writing.



The Short Answer:  
A Collection of Short  
Stories

Jon Mycroft





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## Last Stop

The bus came to a standstill with a hiss of airbrakes. Rubber squeaked against metal as the automatic doors folded open.

‘Last stop,’ the driver called out with a note of tired resignation. I gathered together my briefcase and coat before I eased my way onto the aisle and waited behind some youngsters barring my way. They moved slowly, wordlessly and without eye contact. They seemed to be strangers but in uniform. All wore black or black and red. Ticks and beats spilled out of their headphones so that the muffled melodies blended together into a sound like electronic cicadas. The passengers made their way down the few steps and onto the grass. I joined them, trapped in line like a link in a chain as we spooled out into the cold winter morning.

I looked in vain for a timetable, but there wasn’t even a bus stop. The road just ended in a field with one building visible over to my right and a solitary phone-box to my left; it stood in the unkempt field, monolithic against the bright grey sky. As the last few youths got off the bus, I stepped back on.

‘When’s the next one?’ I asked the driver. He didn’t move. ‘Excuse me,’ I said and touched his shoulder. It was damp with road-sweat.

‘What?’ He turned around, startled from his daydream. I watched the ash fall featherlike from his hand-rolled cigarette. ‘You talking to me?’ His ruddy face seemed carved from hard wood.

‘The next bus,’ I tried. Nothing, not a flicker. I tried again. ‘When is the next bus? I can’t see a timetable out here.’

‘What? *Here?*’ He pointed a thick finger at the floor.

‘Yes here, I’m going to need to get back. I don’t live here.’ I smiled. He didn’t. He looked one part scared to one part amused.

‘You want to get a bus *back?*’ It looked as though he was beginning to understand.

‘Not immediately no, we’ve just arrived.’ I smiled again; I don’t know why I bothered. ‘But eventually I’ll be wanting to get home, so...’ I spoke clearly and firmly, ‘when is the next bus going to arrive... here, please?’

His fat fingers were delicately rolling a cigarette. He seemed magnified, gigantified as he gently teased and shaped the tobacco. ‘Tomorra,’ he barked, licking his Rizla shut.

‘Tomorrow? That’s quite...quite...’ I searched, ‘*unusual*.’

‘Everything about this place is *unusual*, mate.’ He blew out a fog of Old Holborn and revved the sputtering engine, ‘Look, stay or go. It’s make your mind up time. I don’t care – just get out the way of my door.’

I took my wallet out. ‘Right, all I need is about ten minutes...’

‘I’m not a bleedin’ taxi,’ he said.

‘No, clearly, but as you probably realise this place doesn’t exactly have an address. The way I was told to get here was to take the Number Thirteen to the end of the line. So here I am. I don’t want to get stuck here and, like I say, I only need about ten minutes. Just got to run over to that pub there.’ I pointed out through the windscreen to the lonely brick house on the right.

‘Pub is it? I’ve always wondered.’ There was a wistful tone to his voice.

‘Yes, it’s a pub, and it’s my job to go in there and tell the landlord that his wife wants a divorce. All I have to do is serve him these papers and I’m done. I’ll be ten minutes.’

He didn’t look impressed.

‘Come on. It’s twenty quid for ten minutes work. Now that’s not a bad deal is it?’

‘Thirty,’ he snapped.

‘Done,’ I agreed, and found a crumpled ten-pound note.

‘Ten now, twenty when I get back.’ I waved the note in front of him as though it had an alluring aroma.

‘Sold.’ His palm closed around it. I retrieved my hand and stepped back. He smiled a yellow smile and pulled the door-lever closed.

Turning my collar against the wind, I made my way toward the red-brick pub. The youths had scattered in different directions, trudging aimlessly. There didn't seem to be as many as before.

'The Boatman' was written on the brickwork in tarnished brass letters. An old weathered pub-sign on a cast iron arm caught the breeze. It was hard to make out the faded picture, but as I got closer and squinted through the wind, it seemed that it was a portrait of a pale-faced man with black hair and two golden coins for eyes.

The smell wasn't what I'd expected. In my experience there is usually a familiar, almost homely, smell to a pub. A mixture of cooked food, spilled beer and old cigarettes still clinging to the upholstery. A combination of sweet and stale. This was different, more like a library.

'One for the road?' A rasping voice came from somewhere in the shadows behind the bar. The slurred words smelt of gin.

'The road?' I said, 'I just got here.' Smoothing down my collar, I walked over and laid my briefcase on the dark wooden bar.

'But you ain't staying long are ya?' He gave me a narrow look before slamming a glass tankard down beside me. Caramel coloured ale sloshed across my leather bag. He turned away and swayed a little, trying to align his glass with the Beefeater optic. Mopping up the beer, I retrieved the sheaf of papers from my employers and checked everything was in order.

'Are you the landlord? Mister Joseph Turnbull?' Still with his back to me, the barman gave a derisive snort.

'Ah. I used to be.' He turned his head enough to look sideways at me. 'I'm someone else now.'

'I see. Well, Mister Turnbull, I'm here on behalf of Sanderson and Shaw, solicitors representing Mrs Marguerite Turnbull.' I put down the small file. The puddle of spilled beer crept towards it, 'This is your official notification of her application for divorce proceedings.' I got up to leave.

'So, she's still alive, then?' he said, after a moment. I stopped and looked back at him.

'It would seem so,' I said.

He made a small sighing sound and looked a little confused. Then he seemed to remember something, and his face came back to life. 'You didn't touch your drink. You should. They'll respect you more if you're drunk.'

I kept walking. I'd been nearly ten minutes as it was.

He called after me, 'You can't go to Valhalla sober. You jus' can't.'

Outside, the wind was stronger and colder than before. I scanned the horizon for any sign of the bus. There was nothing. No youths, no driver, no sign of life at all, just the silhouetted phone-box. It had a scare-crow like quality. All alone in the shaggy field, it watched, it guarded, it warned. Above me, the strange sign creaked in the wind. I kept walking.

Each step up the incline changed my view of the horizon. I saw the sea, much nearer than I'd imagined. As the slope levelled, I saw that not too far beyond the phone-box was a sharp sudden drop running the length of the field. Long blades of grass at the edge of the cliff fluttered like tassels. I kept walking.

I got an uneasy feeling, somewhere between vertigo and agoraphobia. I felt churning in my stomach and tingling in my fingers. I moved very slowly and carefully; my legs a little bent, my arms away from my sides. As I got closer to the edge, I saw the sea below. Not a calm and rolling canvas, like over on the horizon; this sea was a thrashing lunatic hurling itself at the jagged rocks; roaring and screaming, and then taking breaths between waves, between barrages.

I suddenly doubted everything; I worried that for the first time in my life I would be blown clear off my feet, or that I would slip and fall while standing still.

The distance. The space.

The empty air called for me, groped for me. My feet felt like jelly as I took little measured paces backwards. Something was very wrong with this place.

Finally tearing my eyes away from the abyss, I walked towards the phone-box, wishing I'd left well alone. It was one of the old-style boxes; its red paint was faded and peeled. The disused door was stiff and heavy. Inside, I took the receiver and went to dial, only to find there were no buttons.

Confused by the blank telephone, it took me a few moments to hear the little voice squeaking from the handset. I brought it up to my ear cautiously and made out the words. It was a woman's voice; she had a concerned, kindly tone.

'Is there anybody there? Can I help you at all?'

'Who is this?' I said sharply, 'I didn't dial, it just put me through.'

'Oh,' she replied, a little surprised. 'This is the Samaritans.'

As I stood there in silence, looking out across the bleak little field and the unruly seascape, everything started to become clear.





## Skimming

I took my favourite photograph with a cardboard camera, the sort you might once have found amongst the favours on the tables at a wedding. I'd gone to Ireland with a friend. It was the cheapest and only trip we could afford. First a coach to Wales, then a ferry to Cork and finally a taxi to his parents' house. They were ex-pat English with Irish roots; forced into retirement by the recession. They had found themselves a neat and charming semi-detached in a cul-de-sac surrounded by fields. It was warm; a warm home filled with warm smiles and firm handshakes. My friend and his father didn't cry, not like his mother. Instead, they drank tea and talked sport and movies. I tasted my first soda bread, with marmalade, followed by a slice of homemade Victoria sponge served from a biscuit tin.

I heard all the childhood stories, saw the family album, listened to tales of their lost son, my friend's late brother. My brother had died too, at a similar time, and that made them comfortable, which made me comfortable. We talked until late, and I slept without dreaming.

Early in the morning, we took a drive – just the men. We went to the shore, to a cove of shining black rock and heaving waves; a grey sea under a grey sky made entirely of clouds. A salt-wind forced our collars up and our jackets shut, but the sting on my skin and in my lungs thrilled me awake, dissolving the last remnants of sleep.

I clambered up to a higher point, taking steep steps up the broken crag, until I reached the summit. I turned and looked out as far as the sea-haze would allow. But I knew as soon as I put the plastic view-finder to my eye that any picture of that bleak and colourless vista would lose its strange majesty. The magic of the moment was in the sound and in the smell, in the bracing wind. I began to stow the disposable Kodak back in my pocket, when I saw them, below me: My friend and his father were walking together along the edge of the cobbled surf. They hadn't far to go before the cove disappeared into the sea, and before long, they would be forced to turn around and come back

again. I watched them. My friend stopped, stooped and picked up a stone. He tossed it in the air and caught it again. His father then did likewise.

They stood there, ruffled and ruddy in the wind. Then, together but without a word, they both wound back their arms, and I took the picture, just as they launched their stones into the Atlantic, sending them skipping and bouncing from wave to wave. It never occurred to me to ask whose stone went the farthest.

## The Funeral

'Excuse me,' I said. 'I'm looking for the morgue.'

The receptionist looked up through the perforated glass barrier and gave me a serious look: 'It's called the mortuary in this country, dear. Morgues are American.'

I took a deep breath and tried not to snap at her: 'Which way do I go, please?'

'It's all the way at the far end.' She pointed. 'You go down the hallway to the crossroads. There's a big star on the floor there, like a compass, you can't miss it. Go right and then keep on going. Past maternity and A and E. Keep on going, all the way to the end. Mortuary is down there. You'll see the signs.'

'Maternity, A and E, mortuary,' I said.

'That's it, dear.' She smiled, and I walked away.

Birth, then life, then death. Easy enough to remember, I thought. I followed her directions past consultants with clipboards, nurses pushing wheelchairs, orderlies moving trolleys and a man carrying a mop. At the floor-compass, I turned to the east. It led to an endless sterile corridor. I passed clear PVC doors like plastic curtains, and wide-windowed consulting rooms, until eventually I found the discreet sign for the mortuary – quiet and sympathetic, it looked to be printed in a smaller font than the other departments.

Inside, past the threshold, the air seemed cooler, although it may just have been me. There was a little lobby with chairs and a coffee machine which wasn't working. Every wall had a dispenser for anti-bacterial hand sanitizer. I slowed my pace and wandered the lobby, a little lost. A CCTV camera in the corner whirred quietly as it focused on me, then a nurse arrived, looking concerned. She was a woman in her thirties or early forties, with dark brown hair tucked back in a bun. She walked towards me with small uncertain steps.

'Can I help you?' she asked.

'I'm here to see my father,' I said, then I told her his name and showed her my ID.

She checked a computer screen. 'He's already been formally identified. You realise that you don't have to—'

'I want to,' I said.

'Of course, no, of course. It's just that the funeral directors usually handle any private viewings. It'll only be a day, maybe two.'

'Are you saying that I can't?'

'No, not at all. But...'

I waited for her to finish deciding on her phrasing.

'...he's not been tidied up yet. As I said, the funeral directors usually... Never mind.' She shook her head. 'I'm sorry, I don't usually work down here.' She was blushing. Everything in the room was pallid: the walls, the plastic chairs, her uniform. The only life there was in her cheeks and it was already beginning to drain away. 'There will still be resuscitation equipment present,' she said.

'Present?' I asked.

'On his body. In his body. Tubes mostly. It can be unsettling to see but we have to keep everything in place until the post-mortem is complete. In case we did anything wrong. It's for the lawyers.'

'Which lawyers?'

'In case there was a mistake, negligence. There wasn't, I'm sure, but it's standard practice.'

'I understand.'

'I'm sorry.' She bowed her head a little. 'I'm not being very sensitive, am I?'

'Not especially,' I said, 'but honestly, that's okay. I prefer it that way. I can't bear the solemnity of undertakers. I like that you're frank. Thank you.'

'Mummery,' she said.

'I'm sorry?' I replied.

'They were called mummers. Professional mourners. They used to be hired for funerals to hang around and look terribly sad. Hell of a way to earn a living.'

We stood there, neither of us looking at the other.

'I don't know,' I said, after a moment. 'Maybe I'm different to most people. Maybe they need that illusion of sympathy. I don't like it. Florists, undertakers. They didn't know him, don't know me. Obviously, I'd rather all of it was formal, but not fake. Professional. Like a solicitor.'

'Or a doctor,' she added.

'Exactly.'

She motioned for me to follow her down a corridor where the air was even cooler. We stopped at a plain white door with a sterile-looking stainless-steel handle. She looked at me earnestly before slowly opening the door. A fluorescent light flickered to life, triggered by a sensor rather than a switch. The small square room was just as lifeless as the last: white tiled walls and floor, a single gurney bed, and my father, mostly covered by a sheet, also white. Apart from the medical equipment and the strange grey colour of his skin, he didn't look right. It wasn't Dad. He never wore white and would never lie on his back, not even on holiday by the pool; always on his side. He looked all wrong.

'I should leave you alone,' the nurse said. She turned to leave again, but I reached out a hand and she stopped.

'I don't suppose you have an iPod do you?' I asked. 'This is sort of my funeral. I mean this is my version of a funeral for him. I can't make it to the actual one, I'm too busy. There are waiting lists with the crematorium. You can't just pick a date. And I'm working on a film, you see, on the day itself. We're shooting at a location, some stately home. They can only get the building for the one day. I'd just quit, but there are other people relying on me, other careers, and they can't do it without me.'

'I see,' she said simply.

'This is as close to a ceremony as I'll get.'

‘What kind of music did you want?’

‘No forget it. It’s silly. He’s dead, jazz won’t change that. I don’t even like it. It reminds me of being a kid, trying to concentrate on my homework against snare drums and double bass. It drove me mad. It’s okay, forget the iPod, it’s stupid. Like bringing flowers. Pointless really.’ I shook my head and closed my eyes. ‘I just want to talk to him, you know? I just want to say goodbye.’

‘Of course you do.’

‘It’s ridiculous. I might as well write him a letter.’

‘I suppose,’ she said quietly.

‘I mean, I’m not talking to him, I’m not talking with him. I’m talking at him, at what he was, at his body, not him, not Dad.’ I tried to look away again, to look at the nurse, but I couldn’t. I kept going back to the body under the sheet – the thing that was once my father. ‘It’s for me, all of this. Flowers and music, eulogies, it’s for me, not for him.’

‘Well that’s okay, it’s important.’

‘I don’t know. It feels like empty ritual to me. Trying to replace the irreplaceable. It’s filler, isn’t it, it’s tinsel. Just a distraction.’

We were both quiet for a few moments. I could feel her becoming uncomfortable beside me. The air seemed to change, like before a storm. I opened my mouth to speak, to gratefully dismiss her, but I didn’t want her to go, not just yet.

‘My mum died of a brain thing last year.’ She looked over at my father as she spoke. Her voice was softer. She sounded tired. ‘I can spell it, but I can’t pronounce it very well, and it doesn’t matter what it was called, not now.’ She took a deep breath like a sigh and carried on in the same distant voice: ‘We all knew she was going; the family, I mean, not the hospital. Her doctors gave us the time and date pretty much; like a Ouija board. So, we all visited her in groups; said our final goodbyes, but it didn’t work, well, not for me anyway. She died in the night, after we’d gone.’

‘What do you mean it didn’t work?’

‘It all just turned into, what did you call it, ritual? We all had to walk away. We all said our piece and then left the room. That was the worst of it – closing the door, knowing that almost certainly by the following day, the bed would be striped clean, with all her bits and bobs in a blue plastic bin bag. We wouldn’t watch her die, not actually die. That might have been different. Instead there was just the door. It’s probably what you’d like, right now, to have that final conversation, but I remember quite clearly what I wanted. As soon as I shut the door on my mum, I remember wishing that we’d just had a normal day. Normal things, normal conversation, and then gone. Closure is a lot like trauma, I think. They both leave something permanent, something vivid to fixate over. That’s what I think, anyway.’ She sighed again, but more quickly this time. Her cheeks puffed for a second and she blinked. ‘All those I love yous and how proud she was, I didn’t really need that. I knew. She knew. We were just saying the words. It was the life that mattered, the living. Words can’t do justice to a thing like that.’

‘I suppose,’ I said quietly.

She looked at me. ‘What was your last chat about, you and your dad, if you don’t mind me asking?’

‘Our last chat?’

‘Yes. What did you talk about?’

I thought for a moment, pictured the scene, saw his casual wave as I’d left their house. I tried to rewind and search the images for a clue about our conversation that day. ‘The Tour de France,’ I said.

‘Oh, really. Did he like cycling?’

‘Not particularly. No, in fact, he rather disliked it, but it was in the newspaper. There had been some drugs cheating, I think. It was a few weeks ago. I was on my way to the airport and just dropped in en route. Ten minutes or so, that’s all it was.’

‘And you talked about the Tour?’

‘Yes. He’d been at the dinner table, reading, and he just started talking about it.’

'He probably didn't want you to go,' she said.

I didn't know what to say. We were silent for a moment and then she apologised.

'No,' I said. 'You're probably right, he probably did want me stay a bit longer, he was like that.

But I'd just popped in. I thought I didn't have time. I did though, I could have stayed longer.'

'But you did speak to him right before you left for the airport?'

'Only for a few minutes...'

'And then you left?'

'Yes.'

'Well then,' she smiled at me. A long kind smile. 'You almost certainly did, if you think about it.'

'What do you mean?' I said. 'I probably did what?'

'After he'd told you about the cycling and you went off to the airport, just before you left, you'd have said it, I'll bet.'

'Said what?'

'You'd have said goodbye, wouldn't you?'

I stood there in that cooled room, looking at my father, remembering everything at once. I saw our lifetime condensed into a flickering montage of images and emotions: I saw his face – younger, older, bearded, clean-shaven; all the faces, all the fathers, the whole man.

'I'll leave you alone for a bit,' she said, touching my shoulder with her palm.

I must have done, I thought. I must have said it. But I couldn't quite remember.



## The Platform

They all just stand there, on the platform, waiting in the fading sunlight. Everyone wears a uniform of one sort or another. The station staff wear orange high-vis waistcoats. The business sorts have their drab suits and plain ties, while elderly couples huddle in sensible knitwear. Wiry students with rucksacks and headphones pace up and down, past the group of hunched youths all dressed in various hoodies and sportswear. There are a few hushed phone calls in dark corners of the platform, but no-one is talking in person; they barely look at one another. When the teenagers first arrived they were more animate, they were laughing and pushing one another. Now that they've been waiting for a while, they have drifted into the same malaise. They just stand there like everyone else, waiting; staring across the rusted rusting rails in hopeless anticipation.

Litter wanders up and down the platforms, wind-surfing the diesel blackened tarmac, seeking some quiet shady corner to die. There are glimpses of wasteland beyond the tracks, between the raw concrete walls. The rest is poured smooth, like a jelly mould building. Everything here is cold to the touch all year long.

The wind howls. It has something to do with horizontal acoustics and the westward tunnel. The wind actually howls, as it ruffles newspapers and umbrellas. Nobody responds. They simply keep on waiting.

Now that smoking has been banned, coffee is their only respite. They cradle their paper cups like candles at a vigil, using the rapidly descending temperatures to warm their chilled fingers. Some of them are standing and reading mass-market paperbacks, following the words with their Wimbledon eyes – left, then right, and back again, until the book goes back in the bag for the journey home. In between train rides, the book will not be considered; it is simply chewing gum; musak; only there to fill a space in the void.

They have no energy, no power, none of them. They are all simply there, frozen in transit. They don't live, they exist.

...

I wonder which of them I should kill.

...

I look across at the hoodies and I see their contempt. They hate the students with their potential, they hate the suits with their income and their routines, they hate the elderly with all their nostalgia. And so they act up; wild and threatening, but at the same time, slovenly and bored. They are already doomed, so I look elsewhere.

...

I watch an old woman. It is hard to see clearly but she may well be wearing two hats. She stoops as she shuffles; the result of a retirement full of conversing with ground-level cats. Hers would be a mercy, not a conquest.

...

I see the business executive, puffed up with self-importance. For a moment, I visualise smashing in his dandruff-controlled scalp, perhaps with a lobster hammer. I fantasise about plunging a steak-knife in between his pinstripes and then watching as the dark-brown heart-blood seeps across his *Hugo Boss*. Everything about him is familiar and uniform; clichéd. To kill him would be to kill nothing.

...

A low rumble deep in the tunnel to my right precedes the dull peering headlights of my train. I get to my feet and stroll toward the yellow line. A man in his early-twenties saunters in front of me and dumps a black backpack at his feet. He is wearing expensive-looking spectacles and coloured socks:

an arty type. He is tapping his foot to a pair of over-cranked headphones while standing on the impatient side of the yellow line, the rebellious side, the wrong side.

I could position myself behind him, not directly but diagonally, so that our shoulders overlap. I start planning. I imagine the coming moment when the awesome presence of the approaching train cannot be ignored.

Coffees down, papers folded, bags gathered. Passengers getting on will be focused, wakened; those waiting for the next one will barely stir.

The noise increases as the train crawls closer. From this distance it seems to be hardly moving, but I know that will change as it gets nearer. It will be faster, heavier; relentless. The arty type sighs and puts one hand in his pocket. Just as the crowd begins to coalesce around him, he'll reach down for that black canvas backpack. He'll lean, he'll bend. With us hip to hip, I can ease his weight off balance, and with my knee behind his knee, the whole house of cards will come tumbling down.

I may get blood on me, brain even. There'll be the nightmares, the shakes and all that post-traumatic stuff. As a first-hand witness, I'll be offered counselling. I might even get compensation.

But I won't actually be a murderer, not really. Just a push, that's not enough, it's too detached, too hands-free. The train will be the real killer and I want that.

I want to be the train.

...

The words painted along the length of the platform are repeated over and over: KEEP BEHIND THE YELLOW LINE. KEEP BEHIND THE YELLOW LINE. But his feet and backpack obscure some of the letters and, for just a moment, it reads: \_\_\_\_\_ BE \_\_\_\_\_ THE \_\_\_\_\_ LINE

He bends down, leaning. I step forward and position myself behind him, not directly but diagonally, just enough that our shoulders overlap.



## A Place to Die

Gaveston Hall was a neo-gothic Victorian manor, all red brick and sandstone. Tall angular leaded-windows gave it ecclesiastic pretensions, while twin turrets and crenelated battlements lent it a historical air, like a crusader fort nestled away in the Home Counties. In reality, it had been a public school, famous for educating a peripheral member of the Bloomsbury group, as well as a noted military engineer. Later, it became a state sixth-form college until property developers bought it wholesale, bankrolling the council's development of a new super-school on the outskirts of town. Now, the grand old hall, along with a few of its satellite buildings, had been reinvented once more, this time into a self-contained and secluded retirement community for the reasonably wealthy.

It seemed to Bond like a strange hotel where nobody checked out alive. It had shops and services like a hotel; a restaurant; a barber; a doctor; a dentist; a library and a swimming pool. There were lobbies and receptionists. Room service was available for a fee. Within the walled grounds, there were crunchy gravel paths winding between neatly tended lawns and flower beds. There was a pavilion, a summer house and an arbour. It was designed in such a way that the residents could live out their days in relative calm without ever passing the gates back out into the wider world. A very pleasant prison, Bond called it.

Although Gaveston Hall was several storeys high, every room and corridor was mobility assisted: lifts and ramps led to and from everywhere. Bond lived up on the second floor of the main hall. His view extended across the rear gardens to a small scattering of converted single-storey villas which some of the staff still referred to as 'the art block.' Behind the villas was a plain square-walled gymnasium, still fitted with a sprung floor and basketball hoops. As the last unfinished phase of the redevelopment plan, the locked and shuttered gymnasium remained as an anachronistic reminder of past glories; haunted by the cheers of victory, the grunts of exertion and shrill whistles blown by out-of-shape teachers, ten years past their sporting prime. And then there was the road beyond.

Bond could see the roofs of cars skimming past, and the top halves of lorries. A bus stop on the far side of the street was mostly visible. Bond would sometimes watch Marina after her shifts, waiting in the cold, stamping her feet and texting on her phone.

Trees, birds, traffic and the ponderous wanderings of silver-sheened residents. That was Bond's view of the world, his new world, his new old world.

Bond's own rooms were simple, almost to the point of being spartan. He had the mid-tier accommodation, not the Gold or Platinum packages. He had a galley kitchen, a compact bathroom, a master bedroom and a single reception room which he barely used. It had a television which was rarely plugged in. The rooms were decorated just as they had been when he moved in four years before. Four long empty years which had whistled past in a flash. Even now, he still missed home, wherever that was.

'We always want what we don't have,' Bond said absently.

'Did you say something?' Marina looked up from her dusting. She was Polish-born and although she spoke relatively fluent English, she still bore clear traces of an accent. She wore the dark-blue uniform of all the care staff, but styled her hair in a more relaxed way than most. She had bouncy curls which she would occasionally swish back over her shoulder as she worked.

'I spent years in the Caribbean,' Bond said. 'Almost as long as I spent here; almost half my life. When I was there, I dreamed of England, but now that I'm here, I miss Jamaica. We always want what we haven't got,' he said with a sigh.

'No point wanting what you already have, is there?' Marina said with a chirp.

'I suppose not,' Bond said, and turned back to the window.

Marina gathered up a small pile of envelopes that were waiting on a side-table and shuffled through them. 'What does "Cmd" mean?' she asked.

'I'm sorry?' he said, looking over.

'Your letters. I noticed. Your name has letters with it. What are they for?'

'It's nothing,' Bond said.

'In Poland, having letters with your name is important. Is it from your university?'

'It means commander. I was in the navy, a long time ago. It's nothing. They're probably trying to sell me insurance again.'

'Commander Bond of the Royal Navy,' she intoned. 'And after? You have letters after your name as well. "KGCM". What do they mean?'

'It's nothing,' Bond said again.

'You won't say. I will look it up on the internet,' she said matter-of-factly.

'It's for a medal. Silly really. I don't use it, I don't use the letters. I don't even have the medal anymore. I don't remember what happened to it. Lost in a house-move, I suppose. Along with everything else.'

'You don't have photos, Mr Bond. Or should I call you Commander, now?' Marina stiffened into a salute and then relaxed, smiling. She sat down next to Bond, never taking her eyes off him.

'I'd rather you simply called me James,' Bond said.

'Your photos, are they lost too?'

'I haven't any family,' Bond said. 'Never really kept photographs, things like that.'

'But you live a big life, lots of people and places. Memories.'

Bond didn't say anything.

'I'm sorry,' Marina said. 'I shouldn't ask.' She got up and finished putting away the clothes, while Bond glanced through his post.

Marina began dusting the living room, working around Bond, lifting his tea-cup and wiping the window-sill beneath. She moved over to the mantelshelf which was empty, save for a small and simple brass carriage clock with a domed top and a bevelled base. The flat back of the clock was engraved with a simple message: 'In gratitude for peerless service.' The number seven on the face of the clock was painted in gold.

'In Łódź, my home, there is a church, a cathedral maybe. It has a very big clock and a dome. It looks like this,' Marina said, flicking the brass with her yellow duster.

Bond wanted to say: 'I know, I've seen it. It's very beautiful,' but he couldn't. He couldn't answer any of her inevitable questions. It had been 1963. He had spent three weeks at Station Z studying advanced explosives. Bond remembered insisting: if anybody was to teach him bomb disposal he damn well wanted his instructor to be Swiss. After Zurich, Bond had crossed into Poland in a microlight aircraft. He had spent a total of nine hours in Łódź. He'd built, planted and detonated a bomb, killing two senior SMERSH officials and seven ancillary workers. Although it was declared a success, the operation had been clumsy and crude. It was the last bombing 007 had been involved with.

'I used to walk past the church on the way to my school,' Marina said. 'The clock would tell me if I was late or early. My grandmother told me that her mother had been married there, but I don't know. Old people like to tell stories, do they not?'

'Some of them do,' Bond said returning to his newspaper.

Marina smiled ruefully and began changing Bond's bed sheets.

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There was an unusual amount of activity in what was ordinarily a rather sedentary courtyard. Where Bond would normally expect to see motorised chairs gliding, and elderly couples taking tea, instead there was a large removals van. Bond hadn't heard of anybody dying recently, although that sort of thing wasn't always broadcast news. Bond reasoned that there must be a new arrival; somebody for one of the newly finished ground-floor apartments over in the east wing. Bond looked across, above the laburnum trees with their drooping yellow blossoms, over to the empty flats. One of the doors was open. He watched idly as the removals men carted boxes and carried odd bits of furniture.

Mid-way through the operation, a taxi arrived and pulled up beside the van. A man in a tweed suit stepped out and paid the driver. The man spoke with one of the removals men and then disappeared through the open door of the apartment.



Although it was all at some distance, and Bond's eyes weren't quite what they were, the new man seemed brisker and more spry than most of the residents. Bond judged him to be aged around sixty-five. Far too young for Gaveston Hall.

It was an hour or so later, after the removals men and their van had left, when the police showed up. Bond was reading in his chair at the window and saw the cars arriving. Three of them. The officers who got out were not in standard uniform, they wore baseball caps and what looked like body-armour. Bond put down his book and watched them fanning out. Four officers filed into the hall through the main doors, while the others took up vaguely defensive positions. They were armed but their guns were still holstered or slung over shoulders, not combat ready, Bond realised. The officers chatted amongst themselves, but didn't seem relaxed. It looked as though they were waiting for further instruction; loaded but not cocked.

Marina hurried into Bond's rooms and closed the door behind her heavily.

'Do you see the car park?' she said. 'The police?'

'Yes,' Bond replied matter-of-factly. 'They've been here nearly quarter of an hour.'

Marina crept over to the window, keeping her head low: 'You should be careful, stay away from the windows.'

'I don't think they are here for me, or you, unless you've done something I don't know about.'

'Cathy said someone saw a gun.'

'Yes,' Bond said. 'They are armed police. Whatever it is must be serious. They don't use them for just anything.'

'No. Cathy said someone saw a gun before. It's why the police have come.'

'Really?' Bond narrowed his eyes.

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Bond rode the lift to the ground floor and walked over to reception. It took the matron-like administrator a moment to register his presence. She usually dealt with visitors rather than actual residents.

‘Can I help?’ She looked slightly confused.

‘Is it true that the police found a gun?’ Bond said at an intentionally high volume.

‘Please keep your voice down,’ she said.

‘It is true?’

‘No. Yes. It’s not what you think. It’s perfectly harmless. Everybody is perfectly safe.’

‘So it *is* true.’

‘There is a gun, yes, but it’s been fixed. I don’t know what you’d call it. Spayed. It can’t be fired anymore. It’s a memento, a gift. It’s in a glass case. It’s not a working pistol. And he’s got all the right documents.’

‘What kind of pistol?’ Bond asked.

‘Oh, I don’t know. A black one.’

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Walking alone through the darkened corridors of Gaveston Hall made Bond feel more alive than at any point during the day. He did this at least once a week – rousing himself late at night, after a short sleep, and then making his quiet way across the building to the rehabilitation pool. The smell of chlorine and bleach grew stronger with each step closer to the double doors.

Inside, the lights came on automatically, triggered by an unseen sensor. Bond moved over to the gleaming tiled wall and manually dimmed them, returning the room to near-darkness. The still surface of the water looked like oil. The stainless-steel steps became hard and cold; darker shadows in the gloom. Bond removed his robe and walked around to the shallow end. His body hung loosely on its skeleton. Weathered like leather, creased like linen, the skin was blotched with dark liver spots

and a spider web of broken capillaries; he was mottled pink like a map of Empire. Even in the dim light, the marks on his body were clear. Scars, some surgical, some otherwise, criss-crossed his flesh like roads and rivers. An ugly starburst on the front and back of his shoulder remained as an unmistakable relic of a Spetznas .45 calibre jacketless dum-dum. Slashes and stab wounds crowded around his liver scar and his botched appendix. His buttocks, although covered by dark-blue trunks were striped with old brown scars. The legacy of Le Chiffre's carpet-beater, so many years ago.

Bond stepped into the pool. One by one, his keepsakes vanished beneath the dark water. He waded down the sloping incline until the cool waves reached his jaw. He stood there, acclimatising, remembering, imagining. Diving. The powerful pull of currents, the pressure, the clear azure water, the thrill and pain of muscles working purposefully, driving him forward or pushing him deeper. He remembered the vigour, the strength, the speed and dexterity, and he closed his eyes.

'Night swimming, eh?' A voice emerged from the darkness. It startled Bond enough to make him jump a little. 'I had the same idea myself,' the voice continued. It was a man. Public school educated, judging by his accent which was clipped and precise; the sort of accent which Bond rarely heard nowadays. The noise of a towel dropped onto a lounge and the flapping of flip-flops echoed from wall to wall. Bond began to manoeuvre back over to the steps.

'Although, I do normally prefer a little bit of light to work with. Would you mind?' There was a slight hum as the lights re-adjusted to the newcomer, fading up automatically to an artificial daylight. Bond reached out for the handrail, trying to move himself faster through the water, back up and out, into his robe again.

'I don't mean to disturb you, old boy,' the voice said. Bond glanced over but didn't recognise him. He hurried over to his clothes and began dressing without drying himself. For the few seconds it took Bond to finish, neither of the men said anything.

'The name's Phillips, Edwin Phillips. I'm new,' the man said eventually. Bond realised, this was the man with the gun.

'I'm finished here,' Bond said. 'It's all yours.' And he walked around the tiled edge of the pool, on the opposite side to Phillips.

'Jolly good. I'm sure I'll see you again though. Phillips is the name,' he said once again.

'Enjoy the water,' Bond said, heading through the doors and towards the lifts.

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Bond woke to the sound of early morning birdsong. Starling chirrups chorused against the caw-caws of crows and the incessant trill of a wood pigeon.

Bond slowly got out of bed and made his way to the bathroom where he took a series of tablets, one at a time, each with a mouthful of tap water. ACE inhibitors for blood pressure, statins for cholesterol, immunosuppressive meds for his liver, and an aspirin.

By the time he was dressed, Marina had arrived. She was in the little kitchen area putting away some fresh bread and a new carton of milk.

'Good morning, James,' she said. 'Can I get you something for breakfast?'

'Is that new fellow downstairs?' Bond said.

'In the restaurant? Yes, I think so.'

'Right. Get my slippers, would you? I think I'll go down today.'

'You want to make a new friend, do you? That's good.'

'No. I just want to have a closer look at him.'

Marina shrugged and carried over his slippers.

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A bespectacled waiter noted down Bond's order. 'And what would you like to drink with that?' the waiter asked. Bond's personalised menu sheet was marked with several boldly-coloured symbols,

well known to the staff but incomprehensible to the residents: type two diabetes; strictly no alcohol; low fat; low sodium.

‘A mimosa, freshly-squeezed with a slice of lime. Dom Pérignon if you have it, but house champagne will suffice.’

‘We have orange juice, grapefruit juice, tomato juice or apple? Unless you’d like milk,’ the waiter said flatly.

‘I’ll stick with coffee,’ Bond mumbled.

‘Latte, cappuccino...?’

‘Just coffee.’

‘One decaf Americano coming up.’

Bond ate his mushroom omelette and grilled tomatoes in sullen silence. Marjorie Forbes and her shih tzu, Bonbon, both vied for Bond’s attention. Marjorie flashed little smiling waves between mouthfuls while the dog stared at him and made occasional coughing sounds. Bond ignored them both. The new resident, Phillips, was also watching. Bond caught his eye, looked down and then up again; disguising the second glance behind a forkful of eggs. He was still looking over. Not smiling affably like Marjorie, Phillips was just watching, as though Bond were a rather bland television programme. He finally turned back to his book and paid Bond no further interest. Bond, however, continued to glance over at the man with his book for the remainder of the meal. There was something about him that set Bond’s nerves on edge; something not quite right about the man with the gun.

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After breakfast, Bond took his time with the newspapers, reading three of them cover-to-cover, as well as the supplements.

The new fellow strode past, dressed as if he were going rambling. He wore heavy shoes, a flat-cap and a tweed jacket. He crossed the lobby and went straight through the front doors, pausing briefly to doff his hat to the receptionist. Once Phillips was out of sight, Bond folded the newspaper and made his way over to the garden.

Bond wandered across the courtyard lawn, flicking at errant leaves with the tip of his walking stick. Apartment number twenty-two was partially concealed by a raised bed of thick shrubs and a rockery. Bond glanced back towards the main building but nobody was paying any notice, so he took a closer look.

Edwin Phillips' apartment was part of a coach-house which had been converted into a terrace of three bungalow-style villas. His was the central unit and it looked very much like those on either side: more expensive than Bond's, but not top of the range. One of the blinds was half-raised and Bond could see that there was a neat pile of pennies balancing on the handle of the window latch. He could count five of them. If the handle were turned for any reason, then the pennies would fall. Without looking, Bond knew that there would be other pennies on the carpet inside the window, out of sight, arranged in an apparently haphazard fashion. There would be no way to enter through the window and then to reset the trap without knowing which five coins to replace. Bond moved past the window to the door and found precisely what he expected: a single human hair, silver in colour, pasted across the doorframe with saliva. When the door opened, the hair would break; simple counter-intrusion tradecraft. Although it was schoolboy stuff, the methods were effective. Bond had employed similar tricks many times himself over the years.

Phillips' basic precautions didn't really mean anything, not precisely, but they weren't nothing, Bond thought. He took another final glance around then sauntered over to a rose bush to smell one of the blooms. For a few minutes he pottered in the sunshine, being sure to look aimless and casual before heading slowly back.

Bond strolled past a small ornamental flowerbed and a rockery spotted with ferns, towards a number of tables and a row of deckchairs. Most of the tables were empty but one was populated by

five residents, sitting together for company rather than for conversation. Marjorie Forbes was amongst them, taking tea and feeding tit-bits to Bonbon. Beside her, Stanley Watkins sat quietly reading a magazine. Stanley had been a naturalist. As a youth, he had published a book about moths but his real passion was for birds, a passion he willingly shared with anybody polite enough to listen. Bond generally avoided the social side of life at Gaveston Hall and was uncomfortable chit-chatting with the other residents, Stanley included, but they had on occasion passed the time of day. Bond stopped beside the table. The residents all looked up at him. They put down their teacups, their crochet and crosswords.

‘Hello there, squire. How are you?’ Stanley touched his forefinger to the brim of his Panama.

‘Well enough,’ Bond said. ‘Well enough. I was hoping to do a little bird watching but I can’t seem to find my glasses.’

‘Binoculars?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve a set you can lend.’

‘I’d appreciate that,’ Bond said.

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The borrowed binoculars were powerful and well calibrated. Not the finest Bond had used, but better than he expected them to be. He settled down beside his window, out of direct sight, and focused the lenses on apartment number twenty-two – Phillips’ rooms. The apartment was eastward-facing; bright in the morning light. Every blind was drawn against the sun, giving Bond nothing to spy upon. He panned the glasses across the horizon, twisting the focus to sharpen up images of distant trees and telegraph poles. There was a spire pointing up between two oaks. Before the tree-line and the church, there was a main road – always busy at this time of day. Bond paused at the bus stop and zoomed in. Marina was waiting there, on her own. Further up the street, there

was a group of youths pushing each other and laughing as they walked, four abreast. One of them shouted ahead, towards Marina, and his companions laughed again. Bond scanned rapidly back to the bus stop and could see Marina turning away, trying to ignore them. Bond put down the binoculars, hurried into his slippers and grabbed his cane.

Muscle memory is a strange thing, easier to learn than to unlearn. In his mind's eye, Bond took the stairs two at a time; his polished leather shoes clipped smartly across the tiled lobby floor. In his mind's eye, people stepped out of his way, they didn't hold the door for him, they didn't watch in surprised concern. In his mind's eye, Bond wasn't wearing a tracksuit with a dressing gown and sandals; he wasn't hunched and he didn't shuffle.

'Mr Bond? Is everything alright?' A woman's voice called out. It was the matron-like administrator. Bond kept going without answering, almost jogging now.

Outside, on the gravel, he wheezed a long breath which tasted of old cigarettes. He could feel his chest tightening and his heart heaving. His hips and knees ached, giving off sharp pangs of pain. He considered slowing down to a walk, or a stroll; stopping even, but he pressed on regardless. What did it matter? Bond thought. If his heart gave out halfway through a rescue attempt; that wouldn't be so bad. Even if he didn't make it, even if he died en route, face down on the path, never reaching his distressed damsel. That would be fine. That would be just fine, he thought.

He quickened his pace as much as his legs would allow, and strained to see through the gates, past the traffic, over to the bus stop. He took a long crackling breath, ready to yell out at the youths, to issue his war cry, but as the cars parted, leaving the road to a moment of undisturbed peace, he saw Marina calmly talking to a man, a different man. The youths were nowhere to be seen.

She was smiling. The man was too; standing with his hands in his pockets. She seemed to be thanking him – her true champion. He said something and she laughed, looking away coyly. As she did so, she caught a glimpse of Bond across the street, leaning on his stick, panting for breath. She gave half a wave before turning back to the man who was, by now, also looking over, through the



gate towards Bond. Bond re-fastened his dressing gown with a tight knot and returned to the care home.

'Is everything alright, Mister Bond?' The woman's voice again.

'Yes, fine,' he said, without looking up. 'I thought I saw something.'

'What?' The voice persisted. 'What did you see?'

'Trouble. But it was nothing.'

From across the lobby came the unmistakable sound of a newspaper crinkling. Edwin Phillips peered over the top of the headline towards Bond, and watched him shuffle, still fighting for breath, over to the lifts. He pressed the call-button over and over.

'What kind of trouble?' the voice persisted. It was a senior care manager called Suzanne. She walked over to Bond with her hand on one hip.

'It was nothing,' Bond snapped, stepping through the sliding doors.

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The following day, neither Marina nor Bond mentioned his gallant gesture. He wasn't even sure that she'd recognised it as that, although she was being rather quiet and efficient; polite but not necessarily friendly. Perhaps she thought he was finally losing his marbles.

'Have you one of those phones with a computer in it?' Bond suddenly asked.

'You mean a smartphone?' Marina said, with a slight smirk.

'I want to look something up on the internet.'

Marina looked cautious, uncomfortable. After a moment, she said: 'You'd be better to use the computer downstairs, in the library room. It's for all the residents. I can show you how to use it.'

Bond thanked her with a nod and left her to carry on folding his laundry.

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The dining room grandfather clock chimed, slow and sonorous; seven hesitant bells, drawing out the hour. As the final chime died away, the staff busied themselves, bringing out jugs of breadsticks and tap water. Dinner was served. Daytime maids and valets, redressed as evening waiting staff, milled from table to table taking orders and collecting personalised menus.

The new man, Phillips, was presented with an ostentatious wineglass like a fishbowl. He held the glass to his nose and savoured the vapour before nodding to the sommelier, who filled it with a generous measure.

Phillips raised his glass towards Bond, but another man, much older, in his nineties, sitting at a different table, saluted back. He was hunched and skeletal looking; all elbows and knuckles. Angular lumps stuck out from his back under his faded tweed jacket: vertebrae and scapular worn into strange new shapes which his skin wouldn't quite accommodate. Bond couldn't tell who Phillips had been greeting, whether it was the hunchback or himself, and so he looked away, scanning the room before returning to his copy of *The Spectator*.

The news and comment sections were filled with failing economies and Middle Eastern conflicts. There was an exposé on a Ukrainian oligarch and a critique of Chinese capitalism.

'We won the war and lost the world,' Bond said.

'I'm sorry, sir?' A round-faced waitress with acne placed Bond's soup on his table.

'It's not your fault,' he said. 'I rather think it's mine, and very possibly his, over there with the fancy wine. But not you, my love. You're not to blame.'

'That's... kind of you to say,' she said quietly and hurried away. She didn't even offer him the pepper-mill.

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After dinner, Bond went back to his room but only to retrieve some books. By the time he made it back to the ground floor, the majority of diners had left and the staff were busying themselves folding tablecloths or sweeping the floor. Bond walked on, past the dining room towards the library.

He didn't read fiction. He preferred facts or opinion, history or text books. He had two volumes taken from the house library: a book of military tactics from Waterloo to the Somme, and another on lepidoptery. He carried them under one arm, his cane in the other hand, into the library and returned them to the shelves. In fact, there was no need for the subterfuge; with nobody there to see him, but he felt better for having a cover story. After signing the borrowing ledger, he settled down at the computer and put his spectacles on. He typed slowly: Edwin Phillips UK.

The search results showed a range of different men: a Scottish architect, an economics academic from the University of York, someone in Michigan who made something called Fro-Yo, and a dentist in Australia. It took Bond a few minutes of scrolling and clicking to find a picture and some biographical information for the correct man – his new neighbour. But, before he had chance to read, the light in the library shifted. The door behind him had opened.

'Commander Bond.' It was not a question or an inquiry, it was an observation, a statement of fact. Bond turned and saw Phillips in the doorway, his face cast in shade.

'Do I know you?' Bond said, touching the power button on the monitor screen. The picture quickly switched to darkness and a quiet sound of static rustled across its inert surface.

'The name's Phillips. I'm new. I'm over in twenty-two, just off the courtyard.'

Bond started to gather his papers, and Phillips continued:

'I Googled you. Asked around a bit. Old habits, you know. I was a journalist for a time. I'm quite the little spy.'

Bond bristled. 'Navy,' he said. 'I was in the navy, a long time ago.'

'I know,' Phillips replied. 'I bet you've a few stories. Had a few adventures. Seen some action, eh?'

'Some,' Bond said.

‘You can tell me all about it.’

‘Another time perhaps. It’s late.’

‘Of course. You’re very wise. Screens at this time of night spoil your eyes. Especially at our age. No, I’m off to bed now myself.’ Phillips waved his rolled-up newspaper and pulled the door closed, wreathing the room in shadows. Bond switched the screen back to life and scanned down the page. In the picture, Phillips was younger. His hair and spectacles were of a different time, a different fashion. Bond couldn’t tell quite when. The eighties perhaps, but he couldn’t say for sure. There were some minor biographical details – born in Surrey, schooled at Rugby, some civil service. There was no mention of journalism. He was bland, hollow. Not quite watertight. It felt to Bond like a legend, like a life made out of paper and data.

What he’d found was a start, useful but not comprehensive, not sufficient. He needed better access to public and private records. He needed researchers. Google had taken him as far as he could manage with his limited skills, and so Bond logged out. He went upstairs and made some cocoa.

Lying in bed, Bond stared at his darkened ceiling and considered which of his old adversaries Phillips might represent. SMERSH had been run by elderly men, Soviet warhorses. They had mostly slunk away to hidden retreats after the rise of Glasnost and the end of Communism. Many to Cuba or Korea; Bond doubted there were any of the old regime left alive. SPECTRE had fallen following a coordinated Interpol and FBI sweep, and then the Supreme Court hearings of the early-seventies, during which Bond had been required to give evidence from behind tinted glass.

It was around then that the exploits of Francisco Scaramanga had first been reported, capturing the public imagination, which later culminated in a film. The agent who should properly have been 007 had been portrayed on-screen by a fashionable young actress. Bond never actually saw the movie. Since then, the various legitimate interests of SPECTRE, including Drax Industries, had grown into a Fortune 500 electronic communications firm.

Bond had lived in the shadow of danger for his entire adult life and had long suspected that something like this would happen. But why now, after so long? Documents had been unsealed perhaps, or a prisoner released. If it wasn't a personal matter, then somebody somewhere must have sponsored this Phillips character.

In the morning, Bond made a quick checklist of all the weapons at his disposal: kitchen knives mostly, although they were rather simple thin stainless-steel pieces. Easily snapped, not combat blades, but certainly sufficient. Then there were the blunt objects, although he lacked the strength of his youth and might find anything heavy to be too cumbersome. But anything too light and the injury wouldn't be mortal. Of course, Phillips had the gun, that was always assuming he could make it capable of firing, but that would not be a difficult procedure for anyone with a basic understanding of firearms. Against the gun, Bond would be powerless.

He locked the door to his rooms, drew all the curtains and got dressed.

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'Three days you stay inside now. Have you even been to swim? You know, if you are not well then you should tell me. Anything at all. You promise?' Marina stood with her hands on her hips trying to look authoritative. Bond couldn't look her in the eye. 'It's no good. You must go out, you must try. There is lots for you to be doing. You know?'

Bond got to his feet and nodded.

He spent the day writing a little of his memoirs and reading in the library. He didn't see Phillips at all, but for the first time all week, he hadn't been looking.

He enjoyed a light salt-free dinner and then retired to his rooms.

The book by his bed looked as though it may have been moved. No, it *had* been moved, Bond was certain. Perhaps it had been Marina but she usually knew better than to move his things around. The window was open. That wasn't unusual during clement weather, Marina believed in

fresh air, but today was rather overcast and bleak. Bond peered outside. There was a drainpipe which Bond had often worried about. But surely not. Surely Phillips was too old to attempt such a climb, and only a fool would attempt to do so during the day, even at lunch-hour. Bond reached out to close and lock the window but stopped and considered. He may as well enjoy the early-evening air.

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After four nights of Valium and unlocked doors, Bond was growing tired. He felt bored. In the back of his wardrobe there was a shoebox containing a few old oddments. He found what he sought and returned to the open window, lit his first cigarette in nineteen years: a dry and stale *Senior Service* from a packet which was so old the health warnings were still quite discrete. He took a long drag and then coughed heavily on the exhale. The cough spiralled into a hacking fit of gasping and heaving. It was all he could manage to flick the burning butt out of the window, down into a flowerbed. With one hand pressed against his sternum and the other gripping the edge of the windowsill, James Bond slowly calmed down and controlled his breathing once more. White spots flashed across his vision while sharp needle-like pains jabbed and stabbed inside his chest.

There was little or no intelligence to be gained from Bond, nothing valuable, not now. All the old files had been opened, facts had been disclosed. The Cold War was long since over and there was a new threat now. Always a new threat, Bond thought. He had no sensitive information worth seeking him out for, no privileged access, no codes. It couldn't be that. Neither was he any use as a freelance operative, not even a strategist; the game had changed, the tools had evolved and the rules of engagement were very different indeed. No, this wasn't recruitment either. That left only one obvious possibility, the possibility which follows every former Double-0 agent, every killer: revenge. Phillips was here for revenge.

The latch on his unlocked door turned and then closed again. Footsteps approached. Bond held what little breath he had left and closed his eyes. Images of the past jostled for attention; mostly images of women, or of the dead.

‘James, have you been smoking?’ It was Marina. ‘You know it’s forbidden. You’ll get kicked out. Or you’ll die.’

‘I’m not sure which I’d rather.’ Bond opened his eyes.

‘You should get out a little. Go for a walk, take a bus somewhere. No?’

But Bond went nowhere. Instead he stayed in his rooms, thinking about the past. He watched the sun sink behind the distant tree-line, he watched the sky gathering heavily, and then he watched the rain. It lashed down from a sky clogged with thick grey clouds. Wind and thunder yelled at one another. Bond watched the drops of water running down the window pane. They slithered downwards in serpentine patterns, surfing the surface of the glass like drunk-drivers careening at full speed towards an inevitable catastrophic end. His eyes followed them, again and again. And then one droplet stopped. All around it rain slid effortlessly, but not this one drop. It hung motionless amongst all the movement and chaos; paralysed. Bond tapped the window with his index finger, trying to dislodge it, to send it to its destiny, but it remained stubbornly still.

After a moment, Bond got to his feet and went to his little kitchen to make some tea. The kettle was rumbling up to boiling point as Bond stood silently waiting, feeling the ache in his hips. He was still stiff from his aborted rescue attempt a few days previous. Before the kettle had reached its culmination, Bond heard the scratching of Marina’s key in the lock. She came in with a rustle of carrier bags and deposited some basic sundries onto the kitchen counter. The kettle clicked off and began cooling. Bond watched her efficiently depositing each item in its proper place. He waited for her to finish and to face him with her fresh rosy smile.

‘You’ve been good to me, Marina,’ he said. ‘I’ve not always been grateful. I wanted to tell you. I wanted to say thank you.’

‘You talk like you are going away. You are not going away are you, Mr Bond?’

'Perhaps.'

'Perhaps where? Where will you go?'

'Where we all go.'

'Oh, I see,' she said. 'You feel sad today. Thinking of the end. We all do this, but it is not soon.

You are strong. Maybe younger than you think.'

'I'm eighty-three, Marina. I've got no illusions.'

'Just numbers. You have a healthy body and healthy mind, I think.'

'Goodnight,' Bond said, gently squeezing Marina's shoulder.

She gave him a sympathetic smile and hesitated at the door.

'You go on,' Bond said. 'Have some fun.'

'Goodnight,' she said a little sadly, and closed the door.

For the first time that Bond could remember, he slept with the door unlocked and the window open. Even in the Jamaican summers he had favoured security over comfort and had always shut the window. But not tonight.

He changed into his pyjamas, took half a Valium and read for three minutes before drifting into dreamless sleep. In the morning, Bond checked the doors and windows which appeared to have remained untouched. Nothing had changed. It was six-thirty AM. The home was still asleep.

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Bond spent the following day in the public rooms and grounds of Gaveston Hall. He read in the library, wandered the gardens, took coffee and newspapers in the conservatory, and watched a game of Petanque.

He made himself available, a clear target. If it was to happen, let it happen in the sunshine, Bond thought. But it didn't. He ate dinner in the restaurant, sitting beside a window, with his back to the door. There was no sign of Phillips, and no trace of poison. Bond was glad of that. He didn't like the



idea of poison. A woman's weapon, they used to call it, before all the Russian polonium attacks. Before Salisbury. It didn't suit Bond. Live by the sword, die by the sword, and all that. He went to bed without incident, but after three or four hours of lying, staring at the gloomy ceiling, Bond finally switched on his bedside light. To Hell with waiting, he thought. He was 007, for Christ's sake. He got up, pulled on his dressing gown and left his rooms. He didn't even take a key. He did, however, take his old pen-knife.

The night was cool, without a wind. Clouds masked the moon, so that they glowed with an oily sheen. There were no stars. Never any bloody stars. Bond missed the Caribbean, the sound of surf and the endless sky. He brushed against a lavender bush. Its sprigs had become top-heavy and were leaning into the path. The scent rose up as he passed. England again. Yes, he thought, England. As good a place as any. Better in fact. Yes, he thought, this was the right place to die.

Edwin Phillips lived on the ground floor of the east wing in number twenty-two. Unlike the other darkened lifeless apartments, in Phillips' rooms a light was on. Bond could see it through one of the canvas blinds which covered each window; two thin strips shone out from either side. He tried to work out which room it would be. If Phillips' flat was the same layout as Bond's then that particular window would lead to the kitchen, but these places were sometimes built with different configurations. And anyway, what did it matter? Bond thought. All he had was an NHS aluminium derby cane and a three-inch pen knife – he was hardly equipped for battle.

Bond sidled around the back, forcing his way between a rough brick wall and a parallel box-hedge. By the time he had scraped his way through, his face, hands and scalp were scratched bloody with grazes. His dressing gown had picked up innumerable twigs and burrs which he tried to pluck free. He smoothed his hair down with the flat of his hands. Might as well try to look at least a little bit dignified, he thought.

Bond peered through the French-window back doors. It was as dark inside as it was outside. The light from behind the blind was now nowhere to be seen. Switched off perhaps, or still burning behind a closed door.

Bond thought of making a ruckus, of breaking a window and bringing Phillips out, but no, that wouldn't do, that wouldn't work. Too much fuss and bother. Too easy to seem like a lunatic. The moment's advantage when Phillips could use the circumstance to manufacture a fatal accident would come too quickly, too late at night. Far simpler for Phillips to wait for security than to improvise; far safer. Bond considered what he would do, or what he would have done. How would 007 have killed James Bond – an old man in a care home? Medication would be one way, but the inquests these days are more thorough. And with modern litigious society, someone could sue the home, that's if there was anyone who cared enough about Bond to fight for his posthumous justice. Nevertheless the home would be over-cautious about such matters. No, faulty meds wouldn't work. A fall, perhaps. A trip down some stairs. Although Bond wouldn't rely on chance. A broken neck from a strangle-hold and then arranged at the foot of some steps. That would be the surest way. But there weren't many stairs here. It was all gently inclined ramps and elevators. Here they lived life on one plane at a time.

Murder is a tricky business. Of course, if it is a matter of revenge then the man calling himself Phillips might have something special planned, something specific. Vengeance can become obsessive and highly creative. Better to force his hand, make him improvise, make him pull that gun of his. The gun. Bond tried to remember the last time he held a gun and the last thing he'd shot at, but he couldn't recall.

Would there be a struggle? Bond wondered. If Phillips were damn fool enough to present Bond with an opportunity, would he take it, would he defend himself, try to win? Bond savoured the thoughts: to fight again, to fire a gun again, to kill again; one last time.

Bond reached out and tried the brassy door handle. It turned noiselessly allowing the French-windows to open. His steps were careful, stealthy and slow. Heel to toe, heel to toe. He felt perspiration gathering between his palm and the plastic-coated handle of his NHS cane. In his other hand, he fingered the pen-knife in his pocket, the blade already exposed. He ran his forefinger along its sharpened edge, feeling its potential.

It was a reception room, much like Bond's own. The furnishings were modern and soulless; Ikea probably. Bond scanned the framed photographs along the mantle shelf, although they were hard to make out in the gloomy darkness: Phillips with a woman, Phillips with a prize bass, Phillips with a smiling young man who had the air of an athlete. There was no sign of the glass case and the gun. Bond crept silently into the hallway, past the bathroom and into what he assumed would be the master bedroom. He considered flinging the door open, taking him off-guard, but he didn't. He pushed the door with a feather-light touch allowing it to gently swing open; quiet and unobtrusive.

Edwin Phillips was lying on his back on his bed with one arm draped down the side of the divan. His fingers were curled against the rug, next to a splayed Graham Greene novel. He wasn't breathing. Bond didn't have to check, he knew immediately. It may have been many years, but Bond knew the feel of death, and it was here, now, just as he'd expected, but it was not for him. He stood for a moment, looking over the man's placid expression. The pale-grey skin looked older than before; Phillips looked tired. Bond slowly lowered himself into a wooden armchair beside the bed, and reached out for the hanging cord, like a bathroom light switch. He felt for the plastic triangular handle which dangled halfway up the cord and pulled once. A red light at the top of the cord blinked on, bathing the lifeless body in a pink glow. Somewhere across the building a subtle little alarm sounded. James Bond took a long deep breath, closed his eyes and waited.



## The Fare

'Here, mate, you'll never guess who I had in the back of my cab.' The man leaned over. He was talking to me, although I hadn't done anything to provoke the sudden remark. In fact, other than his wide shoulders and the three rolls of fat on the back of his bald head, I'd hardly noticed him at all; he was just another man at the bar.

'Dave,' he said in a thick estuary accent. 'Dave Guise.' He held out a big hairy hand and I shook it. I told him my name while trying to attract the barman's attention with a wave. He was busy drawing a pint of ale from a porcelain-handled pump, and didn't look over. A moment passed and I could sense Dave was waiting for me to say something.

'So, you drive a taxi, do you?' I said, without eye contact.

'A London black cab, man and boy. Well, ever since I had my licence, like. But I done The Knowledge when I was still fifteen, so I reckon that counts.' Dave slid a barstool over with his foot; I took a small step towards it, but stayed standing.

'Really?' I said, absently.

'Youngest ever, I was. Some lad's beaten me now, but they've got the internet these days, haven't they?' He didn't give me chance to respond. 'And there's this Sat Nav. Have you seen that? No honest cabbie's got one, not me. It's the thin end, I say, the thin end. What do you reckon?'

'Yes,' I said, absently. The barman had started pulling a second pint, so I began looking around for any sign of other staff.

'They say they have to have 'em, coz the punter expects it. Codswallop. Them things don't know the half of it, they take you right round the houses, they do. Does wonders for the meter but it's the sharp end for the customer. No, I never had one. All up here.' He tapped his temple with a thick forefinger.

I watched a large curly haired man weaving his way between tables, collecting glasses into a wobbly stack – a lipstick smeared Pisa. He too was avoiding my gaze, so I turned back to Dave. He was gulping at a tankard of pale ale. I watched his stubbled gullet bobbing in and out as he sucked down the beer.

‘I give up,’ I said. ‘Who was it?’ He looked at me with one eye but continued drinking. His nose snorted hot air into the emptying tankard, steaming up the foam-flecked glass. ‘Who did you have in the back of your cab?’

Dave finished the final dreg and put the glass down heavily on the bar. He let out a long satisfied sigh and wiped his chin. ‘Oh, all sorts. I just say that coz, you know, it’s what cabbies say.’

Curly strode past us and through a Staff Only door. The stack of glasses swayed over his shoulder like a drunken periscope.

‘Who was the best passenger you ever had?’ I said. ‘The weirdest or the most famous.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. I don’t really recognise famous types, to be honest. I just pick ’em up and drop ’em off. Had my share of oddballs though, I can tell you. Got this one fella, a city type, suit and tie, all that. He’s lugging a great big suitcase; looks like it weighs a ton. Now, I’ve got my light off but he flags me down, pretty desperate like, right in the middle of nowhere, up Bermondsey way. I was heading home, so it must have been about two o’clock in the morning at least, but I pull over and tell him he’s going my way or I ain’t taking him nowhere. Anyhow, before I get my window down, he’s flashing me a couple of fifties. And I think, hey up, here’s an earner.’ Dave paused to watch my reaction. I was still keeping half an eye on the barman, now onto his fourth pint. Finally, a young girl in sunglasses paid him and carried the tray full of beers over to her table.

‘Well, I’m not likely to turn down hundred quid, am I?’ Dave said. ‘So, I asks him, “where to, mate?” The bloke looks me clean in the eye and says, “I need to go to the South Coast, near Brighton, right away.” Strike a light, I’m thinking, Brighton? It’ll take more than a monkey to get me going that distance. He only goes and gets out more money, don’t he. More and more. He gets to five hundred nicker and I’m out on the pavement, offering to help him with his bag. “No thank you,”

says he, "I'll have it in the back with me." Fair enough, I think.' The barman suddenly whisked past us and stopped, looking at the waiting patrons like a meercat; his head skipped from face to face, eyebrows raised.

'I'd like a—' I tried, but the barman had already selected his customer – a woman who'd arrived after I had. Dave continued with his story.

'London to Brighton takes the better part of two hours, even at that time. So it's almost dawn when we get to the edge of the city and I ask him whereabouts he wants, and does he know the way. The Knowledge don't quite go that far. "Do you know Beachy Head?" he says. "It's a cliff." Well, I know it's a bleeding cliff, now don't I? I mean, who doesn't? "That's well out of Brighton," I says. "What do you want to go there for?" He only goes and slips another fifty through the slot, just like that, not a word. Well, what can I do? I mean, if I don't take him, then some other bugger will, won't they? And for all I know he's off to lay flowers or take a photograph, or something.' Dave reached out for the peanut bowl and began stuffing a fistful into his mouth.

'What did you do?' I said, ignoring the barman who was buzzing around, clinking ice and draining optics. 'Did you take him?'

'I did.' Dave said, between peanuts. 'All the way to the end of the road. It's just like a small field. A patch of long grass and then nothing. Just sky. When we got there, it was starting to get light. Sort of half-day, half-night, but no proper sun yet. I turn off the engine and he starts hefting his case out, dragging it along. "You gonna be alright?" I say. "Thanks for the lift," he says. I thought, Gawd, he's bleeding serious, this one.'

'What happened?' I ask but Dave just picked at his teeth with a thumbnail for a moment, making me wait.

'I watched. I didn't drive away. Maybe I should have, but I didn't. I watched him struggle that case all the way to the edge. I could hardly make him out against the clouds. I remember I was trembling. I'd given up the fags not long before, and I was gasping. What with the nerves and that.

'What did he do?' I said.

‘He just stood there, blowing about in the wind. Must have been a good minute or two. Then he came back over. Case and all. I was like, thank Gawd. Silly bugger could have been left stranded. Nothing stopping me from driving off home, was there?’

‘He just changed his mind?’

‘No. That was just it. He came back over to the cab but he didn’t get in. I gave him one of my don’t-mess-me-about stares and started up the engine, like a warning. He bends down a bit, to look in the window and he says – I’ll never forget it – he says, “I can’t do it, I can’t. I thought I could, but I can’t. You’ll have to help me.” And he starts opening his bag up. I’m all “Help you? I just drove you seventy odd miles. What more do you want?” It’s a long zip on that case and it takes him a second or two. I’ve just about got the handbrake off by the time he opens up the big flap, so as I can see inside.

‘It’s only stuffed with cash, all fifties. Bundles and bundles of it. Then he goes and takes out another wad, from his pocket; the one he’s been peeling off all night, and he chucks that one in too. Got to be over a million, easy. “I was going to take it with me,” he says, “so that bitch can’t have a penny. It’s my life savings, everything.” I ain’t never seen more than twenty grand cash in my life, and that was only the once. Here was something like off a bleeding game show.

“‘I thought I could do it,” he says, “but I can’t. You’ve driven me this far, which I’m very grateful for, but now I need one last service. If you push me off the edge then you can keep the lot.” Bloody Hell. Can you imagine? Nearly dawn, edge of a cliff, me – a cabbie, and a million-pound murder-bloody-suicide? Hell of a day that was, mate. Definitely goes down as one of my weirdest.’ Dave’s eyes suddenly flicked to behind me, over my shoulder. I couldn’t help but glance. It was the concierge, holding him a telephone on a silver platter.

‘A call for you, Mister Guise.’ The concierge bowed his head in fawning deference.

‘Bring it out to the terrace, would you?’ Dave said, ‘I’ll take it out there.’ He then turned to me and shook my hand smartly. ‘Nice meeting you, mate,’ he said and got up to leave but I reached out and grabbed his thick arm for a moment.

‘But what happened though?’ I said. ‘What did you do?’



‘What do you think I did?’ he said and clapped me on the shoulder.

I watched him stride over to the wide French windows that led out to the marble terrace and the hotel gardens. He walked between a group of delicate looking women sipping vivid cocktails and a well-groomed older couple sharing a good vintage. My heart was pumping hard enough for me to feel a pulse in my throat. The barman leaned over, polishing the walnut counter with a napkin.

‘You look like you could use a drink, sir,’ he said with a smile.

‘Yes... yes, please,’ I replied, ‘a whiskey.’ I sat there, still watching the bald-headed murderer disappear into the gardens.

‘Certainly, sir,’ the barman said and selected a heavy cut-glass tumbler from the shelf above the bar. ‘May I ask, sir, which one was it?’

‘Oh, I don’t mind,’ I said, waving away the question. ‘A single malt.’

‘Of course, sir. But if you’ll pardon me, I was referring to the story, sir.’ He handed me the glass, half-filled with rich umber waves. The tangy scent of the whiskey vapour tickled my nose and made my tongue feel wet. ‘Which story did he tell you?’

‘Who?’ I said, ‘the taxi driver?’ I looked over towards the windows. ‘Oh, it was... nothing.’ I took a long mouthful of the scotch. It numbed my gums and prickled my taste buds with layers of smoke and fire.

The barman smiled, ‘Ah yes, the taxi. I like that one. I like that one a lot.’



# Nightdreams

I had the dream again. It's not the exactly same dream over and over, like you hear some people say they have. My dream is always the same story but it's told in different ways; never the same, and never different.

The first time I had it was a few days after he'd died, maybe it was the first night, I can't remember many details of that week; just the big things, none of the little things.

I heard his voice from downstairs. I heard my family talking loudly, and they don't do that except for high days and holidays, or for arguments. We show our day-to-day joys more conservatively, we share our love quietly. I moved through my room; walked, maybe ran, floated. It was a dream and physics there is different. I followed his voice and the sounds of my family to the top of the stair and looked down.

He laughed, an amused little chuckle of disbelief, and then let out a long sigh of sympathy and apology: He was sorry. There had been some mix up, some misunderstanding. He hadn't died, and he wasn't dead; the body had been an error. Of course he wasn't dead, he was my big brother. He was more alive than life itself. He was the sun, and the sun can't die. Of course it had all been a mistake, a silly silly mistake. That made much more sense, really.

And I was above it all, looking down the stairs, watching him explain and apologise; telling everyone how sorry he was for upsetting everyone so much. They hugged him in turn. I watched from above as he explained.

It was dawning on him now, the gravity of it all. In the middle of all those hugs, he was starting to realise – oh, how we must have worried and panicked and grieved. But he really was very sorry, and everything was alright now. He was fine. It was just a mistake, a misunderstanding, a dream.

And that's when I wake up, every time.

Last night it was different, and the same, like it always is. This time, it was night time and I answered the front door. It was raining so he came straight in without an invite. I stepped aside and watched him take off his coat and shake himself dry. I knew him as I know myself, but it took me a moment to remember. Of course he recognised me at a glance and didn't seem at all bothered by anything but the weather.

I held out my arms to hug him, and, for a moment, he looked at me sideways, but as I stepped closer, he opened his arms and folded into my embrace. Somehow smaller than ever, younger, perhaps, he seemed to shrink a little. I could feel the fabric of his clothes, the moisture of the rain; I fancy, even, that I smelled him, although I cannot recall it now, as I cannot recall any smell to mind, not even my most favourite. But I do fancy that, at the time, I could.

I felt him weeping, his shoulders sagging up and down. I heard his heaving breaths.

'It's fine, it's fine,' I said. 'You're home again. Everything's fine. You're home again, and you can watch him grow. You can be a daddy to your boy, and you can watch him grow. It's alright. Everything's alright, everything is as it should be. It was just a mistake...'

When I woke that time, the strange awful moment between dreaming and knowing blurred as it always does, so that he was alive and dead at the same time; but on that morning, it seemed to me that his son was young again; that he was still alive, and his son was still a boy, not a full-grown man. The liminal moment shifted, as it always does, into the sharp relief of reality and the dream bleached away, leaving only a lingering sadness. I pulled back the bed clothes and tried to put my feet on the floor, because, that day, like every other day, had to begin somewhere.

## Thirty Three Percent

The average life expectancy for human beings currently stands at a mere 69 years and eight months. Nearly three score and ten. Of course, there are significant skews in the data, largely related to one's economic position and environmental factors, as well as gender and even ethnicity. But the overall mean for human lifespan across the whole species is only 69.7 years. Here, in the West, given average factors of wealth and stability, this number rises to 83 years and 4 months. 83.3 years.

The average amount of sleep for most human beings per night is estimated to be 468 minutes, which is roughly eight hours. There are again skews in the data, which again relate to age, economic position and environmental factors, but calculating the overall average amount of human sleep approximates at just short of eight hours per day. Eight out of twenty four – a third. We spend thirty three percent of our 83.3 years, asleep.

What would you spend to get that back? What would you give? What would you sacrifice for all that life, all that extra life? I can give you back your thirty three percent, I can unlock that one score and three, or however much of it you have remaining. I can take away sleep forever. What would that be worth to you?

*I don't know. A lot probably.*

How much though?

*Far more than I could ever afford.*

But how much would you actually give? What would you bid?

*What do you mean, "bid"?*

Imagine there's no price, just a cost. What would you give?

*I don't know. Five thousand pounds?*

That's not very much, not for twenty-or-so years of life. Imagine what you could earn in that time, what you could do, the places you could visit. Time is our only true resource, time and expertise. The cost of your time equals your value to society.

*Perhaps in some ideal world it does. Okay then, twenty-five thousand. A full year's salary. I couldn't go higher than that. It'd be a burden. I mean, with the interest. Anyway, I haven't the collateral to raise much more than that. Most people don't.*

What about your book?

*What about my book?*

Would you give that up? Sign it over to me. Give me the manuscript and cross out your name. Let me take it and use it as my own. Would you give that up?

*You want my book, I mean hypothetically?*

No. Not hypothetically. For real. I have the documents here, a standard non-disclosure agreement.

*What are you talking about? Philosophically speaking, I see your point: Time equals money. More time is more life, more money, more learning, more processing. If there was a way to reduce sleep time then it would be very valuable. I get it. But what's your point? What exactly are you talking about?*

I'm talking about this pill. It's new. I invented it. It works. It does precisely what I said. It replaces the need for sleep. This here, this tiny little tablet, is thirty years, in capsule form. Do you want it?

*Would I want it? In exchange for what? My Book? That's crazy.*

I'm not asking "would" you want it, I'm asking "do" you want it? This is not philosophy, not hypothetical supposition, this is science. Tried and tested. No more need for sleep ever again.

*Rubbish. That's just an aspirin.*

It is thirty years. Or in your case, probably twenty, twenty two, something like that. How long did the book take you to write? How many hours do you reckon overall? Did your nine-to-five ever get in the way? All that time at the office, your commute, did that ever cut into your writing time?

*Of course it did... it still does.*

So simply stop sleeping. Win back all those man-hours.

*In exchange for my book?*

Yes. For your book. Just sign here and here, initial here and it's all final. The book will be mine and the pill yours. Agreed?

*What if it doesn't work? What if your pill doesn't work? What then?*

It does work.

*But what if it doesn't?*

If you achieve a state of unconscious sleep ever again, I will return your manuscript and publicly renounce my authorship, as well as recompense you with all past and future earnings garnered from the book, and all subsequent licenses and agreements associated with said book. It's all here, just under where I've already signed. Do we have a deal?

*This is ridiculous. It's preposterous.*

Well? What do you say? Think of all you could do.

*But it's my book. It's not even published yet.*

I know, but it's good. It's very good. I want it, and I want you to write more. More time means more writing, doesn't it?

*You're serious, aren't you? You're actually serious. You believe this.*

I don't believe, I *know*. I haven't slept for three years. But I'm not a writer like you.

*Let me get this straight. You want to take my book, my story, my words and pass them off as your own?*

I do.

*Why?*

For the credit. The acclaim. I give you my expertise in exchange for yours. I gain. You gain. Our readers gain.

*But it's not yours.*

It will be, if you sign.

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The average life expectancy for a person in my economic and geographical circumstances is eighty-three years and four months. I have forty-two years and three months remaining, a third of which would ordinarily be spent sleeping. Fourteen years and one month of my remaining lifespan will be spent unconscious. It seemed an obvious decision.

In the six months since I signed the deal, I have not slept for a single moment. I am two months richer, two months wiser.

My book hit the shelves sixteen weeks ago, without my name on the cover. Reviewers are anticipating a clean sweep of the awards. Film rights have been negotiated and re-negotiated. A bidding war erupted, sparking further interest in the novel. Everyone at the office is reading it. I can't say a word. Lawyers have already contacted me with various threats and promises; they have made it clear that any attempt of mine to claim authorship, even privately, will result in immediate law suits, writs and public ridicule; but of course that was the bargain I struck.

Interviews and articles are already remarking on the author's next piece. Already written and given exclusive reviews from selected respected critics. A remarkable work, apparently, but very different to the last one. An astonishing and accomplished departure.

I've not written a word beyond this confession. I can't. I sit and stare at the empty page or the blank screen, but nothing comes. I can't conjure a single imaginative thought, I can't wonder or fantasize or even suppose. To manage even this much, just a memoir, I have had to increase my meditation to far longer sits, sometimes for entire days. It helps a little, but not enough. I'm starting to find metaphors difficult to understand, and decisions almost impossible to make. I know all the words, I remember the craft and the technique, but I can't use them. I think in straight lines and realities, all night, every night. My job at the office isn't going well. My annual performance review



went badly – little better than a final written warning. I won't last the year. I can't write, can't think, can't work; I exist, but little more.



# Trajectory

Stanley winced as he put his coat on. The twisting motion had tweaked his back, sending shooting pains up to his neck. He exhaled slowly until they passed, which left him a little dizzy.

A noise from behind him made him turn gingerly. It was Emma, his daughter, still in her dressing gown.

‘What are you doing up at this time, love?’ he said.

She sighed dramatically and shook her head. ‘I’m trying to sort out Ricky for this silly fishing trip of yours.’

‘Oh, he’s fine. Let him alone. He won’t learn anything with you coddling him all the time.’

‘He’s eleven, Dad. Of course he needs getting ready.’

‘Leave it. Everything’s packed and sorted. All he needs is walking boots and a warm coat.’

‘What about food? What about sandwiches?’

‘He can make his own, or have half of mine. You get yourself back to bed, before that bloody boyfriend of yours snores this place to the ground. Go on, we’ll be just fine, won’t we, Ricky?’

Ricky stood quietly in the doorway, dressed in his pyjamas. ‘Course,’ he said, with a yawn.

‘There’s a good lad.’ Stanley smiled.

The birds were concluding their morning sonata with intermittent chirrups by the time Stanley and Ricky headed over to the car.

‘It’s a nice morning for it. Clear sky, not much of a wind, good light, and not too cold, is it Ricky?’

‘Not *too* cold, no. Will we get wet?’

‘I shouldn’t think so. Not a raincloud in sight.’

‘No, I mean from the river.’

‘Oh no, not at all. Don’t you worry about that, son.’

‘Where are all the rods and nets and stuff, Granddad? Did you bring any maggots?’

‘They’re in the boot.’

‘Real maggots? Honestly? Can I look?’ Ricky rushed over to the boot and grappled with the handle. The hatchback popped open with a hydraulic whine, but Stanley closed it again, his palm firm against the glass.

‘Not until we get there.’

Ricky reluctantly stepped back.

‘Come on now, we have to get going before the light spoils.’ Stanley squeezed Ricky’s shoulder and ushered him further away from the back window. ‘Today, you’re in the front seat.’

Ricky clambered into the car, pulled on his seatbelt and then grinned. His grandfather started the engine and grinned back.

Fields and hedgerows skipped past as the car wound its way through the patchwork landscape. Ricky looked in all directions, through every window, front, side and back.

‘How do you like the countryside, then? Better than the city, eh? Better than all those people and cars.’

‘Well...’ Ricky pondered. ‘The country has things that the city doesn’t, but then there are things here that aren’t there. I think, if I could only have one and never ever have the other one, then I’d probably... choose...’ He looked up at his grandfather who was concentrating on the muddy road.

‘Actually, I don’t know. It’s too hard.’

‘You know I didn’t mean to raise my voice earlier,’ Stanley said.

‘You didn’t,’ Ricky replied. ‘Not like Mum does.’

‘Well, I didn’t mean to snap at you. I just wanted to get going. I’ve been looking forward to this.’

‘Me too,’ Ricky said.

They sat in comfortable silence. Stanley followed the contours of the road while Ricky daydreamed to the drone of the engine. After quarter of an hour or so, Stanley pulled into a wooded lay-by and parked.

'Here we are, son,' he said, and they both got out.

Everything inside of the boot of the car was covered with a thick woollen blanket. Stanley drew it aside. Underneath lay a stainless steel lunchbox, shiny as chrome, along with a small cardboard packet of cartridges, and a rifle.

'Is that a real gun?' Ricky asked in a whisper.

'Of course it is. It's my gun. It's a twenty-two calibre Mauser hunting rifle. That bit is a telescopic scope. Telescopic like a telescope.'

'What's it for, Granddad?'

'You never know. Might be bandits.' Stanley winked.

They took a quiet track, beyond sight of the road. The air was crisp and clear, the ground still damp with dew. There were muddy puddles in the shadier parts of the path, under tree boughs. Stanley stopped but Ricky walked on a pace or two without realizing. He looked back at his grandfather, wondering about the delay.

Stanley took a long deep breath and held his side. 'Nice, isn't it?' he said. 'A nice morning.'

Ricky nodded and smiled. 'A bit cold, but I like it here.'

'Good,' Stanley said. 'That's good.' He unshouldered the rifle, and then flexed the stiff muscles in his arm and neck; winding his arm as if it were a wing. He then cradled the rifle, horizontally, like a ceremonial sword before offering it to Ricky.

'Take the gun. Go on, feel the weight. Can you carry it okay?'

Ricky took the rifle in both hands. 'I thought it would be heavier,' he said. He tried to hand it back, but Stanley was gazing the other way, across a green field of young corn, towards a distant tree line.

'Do you see that poster, over there on that tree? It's quite far off. There's a white square on that grand old oak in the middle there. Do you see?'

'Do you mean that one, Granddad?' Ricky pointed beyond the hedgerows at a thicket of trees.

'That's it. That's the target. It's quite a way away, so you have to hold the rifle very steady.'

Ricky's face was serious, almost solemn. He raised the rifle stock to his shoulder. Stanley helped to guide the gun into position, gently taking the weight of the barrel with one hand until Ricky was set.

'Spread your feet a little,' Stanley said. 'Imagine there's a fierce wind coming and you've got to brace yourself. That's it, you've got it. Now hold the butt hard to your shoulder, your other hand under here, where mine is. Good. Now then, when you fire, it will kick back like a little punch, but it's nothing to be scared of. It won't hurt you, but it will be surprising; it'll push you, but you won't fall and you won't get hurt. Understand?'

Ricky nodded.

'Right then, Ricky-lad, try and find the poster on the tree. See how it jumps around in the sights? That's because you're not relaxed.'

'It's heavy.'

'I know it is, son. Is it too heavy?'

'No. I can manage.'

'Good. Have you got the target yet?' Stanley peered across the field and raised a pair of binoculars.

Ricky stood beside him, feet spread, shoulders square, one eye closed. 'I can see it,' he said.

'You mustn't pull on the trigger. I know it's strong, but you have to squeeze it, as gently as you can. If you pull, you'll move the gun and miss by a mile. You must squeeze, like it's toothpaste. Go on, son.'

Ricky slowly began tensing his index finger against the heavy resistance of the trigger spring. It was too tight, too strong. He released it and then tried again, squeezing slowly and surely, millimetre by millimetre.

To Ricky, the gunshot sounded like Mister Reeve slapping the blackboard with a ruler to silence the class, only much much louder. It filled his ears, filled his mind. It felt for a moment as if he could

see the sound of the vanishing echo, wobbling in the air. A neat black semi-circle had appeared on the edge of the poster; a bite mark.

‘You got it.’ Stanley clapped his hands. ‘You got it, first shot.’ He ruffled Ricky’s hair with his thin fingers. ‘Well done.’

Ricky shook him off and tried to flatten his fringe back down. The whole area around his collar bone throbbed from the impact of the rifle. He stretched his shoulder to try and flex away the pain. Then he peered back through the scope at the notice. ‘I only just got it though,’ he said. ‘Only the edge.’

‘Nonsense. That poster is near two hundred yards off. Hitting the paper at all is more than I could have done at your age, especially with a gun that size.’

Ricky grinned up at his grandfather and then looked back through the sights again, surveying his handiwork.

‘Let’s go and have a proper look,’ Stanley said, and they both headed off towards the poster tree. They walked at a leisurely pace. Ricky enjoyed the weight of the gun across his back. He could feel the rigid wooden stock, pressing against him, straightening him, forcing him upright. He felt like a soldier.

Occasionally, Stanley would stop to point out a woodland detail, or to look out across the fields, simply breathing. He identified tree types for Ricky, and showed him what looked to be a badger’s set. Ricky collected fir cones and feathers and a shiny grey pebble which had tiny intricate veins of green and yellow.

When they got close enough to the tree, they could see that the little poster was in fact a notice for a lost cat. There was a neat hole punched through, touching the left-hand edge of the paper; not quite a complete circle, but almost.

‘The bullet’s gone in too far to get out again. Shame. I should have brought my knife,’ Stanley said. ‘Still, you can keep the poster as a memento.’

‘But what about the cat?’ Ricky asked.

‘Don’t worry about that. It’s got its freedom. It’ll come back if it wants to.’ He took down the notice and rolled it up like a scroll, then slipped it into an inside pocket.

‘Have you got a scrapbook?’

Ricky shook his head.

‘You should get one. I used to love scrapbooking when I was a lad. This would be a good one to start with, your first target paper. You’ll be glad of it when you’re my age. It’s nice to have things to look back on.’

‘Alright,’ Ricky said. ‘I will.’

They turned back and began ambling towards the car, in no particular hurry. They breathed in the smells, and listened attentively to the peaceful sounds of the early morning countryside.

‘Lovely day,’ Stanley muttered to himself. He kept looking out across the fields to the horizon; up at the clouds and then down at the track again. He picked leaves from low-hanging branches and examined them, then let them drift from his fingers into the wind. Ricky stumped along. He was enjoying the strangeness of the countryside but was beginning to feel the ache of tiredness in his thighs and calves. His boots felt heavier than earlier. He lifted up one foot. There was a thick layer of mud. He kicked the hard ground, trying to loosen it.

‘Look.’ Stanley spoke sharply, an edge of excitement in his voice. ‘There. What is it?’ Stanley squinted and pointed into the sky towards distant treetops. ‘Is it a kestrel? No. Too big to be a kestrel. Can you see it, Ricky?’

A fluttering silhouette skimmed the edge of the woodland, too fast to make out clearly. Then it swooped downwards, dart-shaped, like a falling jet plane, into the tall fallow grass.

‘It’s got something,’ Stanley said. ‘It’s hunting and it’s got something.’

Ricky used the binoculars to scan the field for the bird. He saw it take off again with a series of short heavy flaps of its wings,. It glided across the field before gently landing on a fencepost.

Stanley watched through the rifle scope. ‘It’s got a vole. Look, there in its beak.’



The bird was a hawk, smooth-scalped, as if Brylcreemed. The line of its back was proud, military. Its feathers were tawny, flecked with black and trimmed in silver. Its origami wings were folded and compact; poised to snap open and slice the air like a switchblade.

The hawk stood in profile, with only one eye visible – amber with an inner glow, like the gemstone itself, and slashed with a chasm, razor-thin but fathoms deep. The vole wriggled wildly in the granite beak for a moment. Pink loops like wet strands of wool dangled from its fur.

‘It’s still alive, the mole’s still alive. Why doesn’t it just eat it?’ said Ricky.

‘It’s a vole. With a “v”,’ Stanley said. He passed the rifle to his grandson, exchanging the binoculars for the firearm, and they both resumed watching in silence.

‘Steady now.’ Stanley whispered. ‘Have you got it?’

‘Got what?’ Ricky spoke just as quietly as his grandfather.

‘Have you got it in your sights, the bird?’

‘Yes?’ Ricky was a little unsure.

‘He won’t stay perched like that for long. Slow breath now, and spread your feet, like last time. Ready?’

Ricky did as he was told.

‘Take the shot,’ Stanley said.

The hawk splayed in mid-air, thrown back from the fence post with its wings stretched out in a crooked display. It looked like an inkblot; a Rorschach smear. And then it fell, broken, into the long grass.

Stanley took the rifle and cleared the empty bullet cartridge. He looked down at Ricky and then back over at the field.

‘Come on,’ he said, and began striding forwards. Ricky jogged alongside him. Stanley quickened his pace too, until he was jogging and Ricky was running. Grass whipped at their legs, and dragged on their boots. After a few moments, Stanley slowed and then stopped. He pressed his hand to his side and leant forwards.

‘We’re nearly there, I think,’ Ricky cried out over his shoulder.

‘Hold on.’ Stanley breathed deeply. ‘Let me get my wind back.’

But Ricky had already stopped. He was looking down at the ground.

Stanley walked over slowly, breathing hard and still holding his side. The morning light seemed brighter, sharper; it made his eyes prickle, and made Ricky seem a little out of focus. Stanley reached out to his shoulder and leaned on him for a moment, until he’d steadied himself. Ricky didn’t move or look up. He stood stock still, holding the weight of his grandfather.

On the ground, amid the blood-slick grass, lay the dead bird.

‘Well done, son. I’ll not forget this day. And neither will you.’ Stanley knelt down slowly and looked into Ricky’s reddened eyes. ‘You’ll keep this day until your very last, I’ll bet.’ He ruffled Ricky’s hair. ‘Now then, come along. Let’s get you back home for some lunch.’

Ricky nodded and wiped his nose with his cuff. Stanley turned, still kneeling, and lifted the carcass of the bird by its talons. Slowly, carefully, he lowered it head-first into a canvas carrier bag.

They walked a straight route back to car. Neither of them spoke very much. Stanley’s occasional observations of the countryside were now met with quiet nods, or single-syllable answers. As soon as the car was in sight, Stanley beeped the car alarm and door lock. Ricky hurried over and into the passenger seat while Stanley stowed the bag and the rifle in the boot, covering both with the blanket.

The drive home seemed much longer than the journey there. From time to time, Stanley asked if Ricky was alright. Ricky’s answers were brief.

‘Am I bad?’ he said suddenly.

‘Are you what?’

‘Am I bad, for killing the bird?’

‘No, son, no. It’s the way of things; the circle. The hawk kills the vole, then you kill the hawk, and one day, a long time from now, something kills you. Maybe it’s something big, like a war or a plane

crash, or maybe it's something small. It's always something. That's the way it has to be, do you understand?'

Ricky looked at his grandfather.

'A clever man once said that the meaning of life is: it ends. Rocks don't live because they can't die, do you see? If we didn't die, we wouldn't live. It's the whole point. It makes us work, it makes us move, it makes us do things, build things, have babies. It makes us love and fear. So, you see, it's important, dying makes it all important.'

'I suppose.' Ricky said. For a moment they both listened to the quiet roar of the road beneath the tyres, and the wind rushing past.

'Have you ever heard of cancer, Ricky?'

Ricky nodded.

'Of course you have.' Stanley smiled. 'You're a bright lad.'

The car turned onto the gravel drive with a familiar crinkling crunching sound. As soon as Stanley had applied the hand-brake, Ricky uncoupled his seatbelt and pushed open the door. He had scampered inside before Stanley was out of the car.

Ricky tore off his coat and threw it over the banister rail before running upstairs. After a moment, his mother followed him. She knocked gently on his bedroom door and walked in before he'd responded.

'How was the fishing trip, then? Did you have fun?'

'Yeah.' Ricky didn't sound sure. He was sitting in the middle of the floor holding an Action Man, although he wasn't looking at it. His face looked pale.

'Are you alright, love?' Emma said. 'You feeling okay?' She pressed the back of her hand against his forehead. 'You're not warm or anything. Is everything alright? Where's Granddad?'

'Outside, I think.'

'What's wrong, Ricky? Has something happened.'

'I shot a bird.'

'You did what?'

'I shot a bird.'

'You *shot* a bird? With what?'

'A gun. One of Granddad's.'

'Oh my god. What kind of a bird? A real one?'

'A big one. An eagle, I think. Granddad made me. It's in the car.'

'What is? The bird? There's a dead eagle in the car?'

Ricky nodded.

'Christ Almighty.'

Emma found her father at the foot of the garden, digging. The canvas bag lay flat and empty on the grass beside a fresh hole. Inside the hole, she could see the tawny feathers of the eagle stained with flashes of dark-brown. Stanley dropped a shovelful of earth, half-covering the bird. Emma glared at him. He smiled back, affectionately. Neither of them spoke. She watched as Stanley replaced the earth and patted it down with his heel. He stabbed the spade into the ground and then turned to face his daughter.

'Ricky told me what you did,' she said.

'Good. I'm glad.'

'But why, Dad? Why did you do it? And why would you lie to me like that, tell me you're off fishing?'

'You'd only have stopped us.'

'And so you just did it anyway? You took my son as well as lying to me. Then you gave him a loaded gun, Dad. I can't believe you did that. You had no bloody right.'

'No right? Ricky's my grandson. He's got no father to speak of, only me. And there are some things that you can't show him. Important things. Things he'll have to know.'

'Don't give me that macho bullshit. It was wrong and you know it. It's bloody criminal too.

Hawks are protected by law. You realise that?'

'Why do you think I'm burying it?'

'Well, I had *hoped* it was out of some kind of remorse.'

'Today wasn't about the bird, Emma. And it wasn't about me.'

'For what then, Dad? Why did you do it? For Ricky? Such a beautiful bird.'

'I wanted him to understand. I need him to understand.'

'To understand what?'

'Death. Mortality. All of that.'

'He's only eleven, for Christ sake.'

'Exactly. I didn't want his first experience of death to be mine. I needed to move past that, and I needed to see him see death. I needed to know that he would understand. I can't explain it any more than that.'

'Jesus, Dad. Stop being so morbid. This is ridiculous. You're being stupid.'

'No, love. I'm not. Not this time. It's important. I need to know that he understands, properly understands. And I need to know that he'll remember.'

'Remember what?'

Stanley took a slow breath. 'There's something I need to tell you.'



## Apex

You begin at sunset. There is a coach ride along narrow roads, past hawkers and traders; a brightly lit bazaar and falafel vendors. There are scooter bikes, bicycle rickshaws and battered vans. The heat and sounds of the day linger in the close air. Sweat and dust and wood smoke mingle with something foul, something rotten. Together the scents combine into something sweet yet rank. You can smell it through the air conditioning, which blows too warm to be working properly. You can smell the man beside you, smell his toil, almost taste it in the air you breathe. The mountains ahead are wreathed in clouds the colour of ashes. The sight is a painting, a drawing, a photograph; it is not real to your senses, not yet.

You take a sip of water from your bottle, it is already lukewarm. You grip the straps of your rucksack and let the motion of the road rock you into daydreams carved in red sandstone. Midnight creeps up and passes by.

The coach stops in a circular gravel bay, wide enough for it to turn around and leave you all there, in the cooling darkness, with the soft wind and the impossible stars. There are locals and there are travellers, like you. Some of the locals wait in a wooden shelter for another bus to take them who-knows-where, who-knows-when. The travellers disperse into social groups: families, friends, pilgrims. You are alone, surrounded by people, waiting for your eyes to adjust to the new dark, away from the halogen headlights. Cigarettes like fireflies dot the interior of the shelter, they flash this way and that as they are raised and lowered for each drag. A shiver runs across your skin, a nervous cold excitement: preparation.

You walk. You walk and walk and walk. Stony ground, gritty, loose. Patches of the path feel almost unstable, like shale. Your foot slips from time to time, making harsh scraping noises which echo against the mountain or vanish into the vacuum of the night. You are alone on a mountain full of people.

Your legs begin to labour, the effort is more noticeable, the weight of your hiking shoes is becoming burdensome, your backpack aches. First it is the thighs – hot and tight, then the hamstrings as the exertion begins to grip your whole leg, all the way around. Then it is your knees which grow sore, and finally the calves. Uphill, every step. The most you can hope for is short strips of respite where the gradient levels out a little. You keep going, keep pushing yourself, up the hill, into the dark.

Light finds your eye from between rocks and across ravines, a single bulb ahead, to your right. You keep to the path which worms steadily upwards and leans towards the light which grows with each step.

‘Coffee for the climb,’ a voice says. Silhouetted is a Bedouin man, you cannot see his face enough to determine his age, or his intentions. This is the path. There is no other. No other you know. He lives beside the path. Travellers and pilgrims must pass him every night. You are alone, but there are others, and so you step inside, bowing your head beneath the canvas awning which doubles as a roof. It is a single-storey breezeblock shelter. Two rooms with half a ceiling. There are two women and four children who all look like boys, but one is too young for you to be certain. They all sit on a patchwork of layered carpets. A fire burns below a pot like a cauldron. Beside it there is a copper kettle with a tea towel wrapped around its handle.

‘Coffee,’ the Bedouin man says, and you nod gratefully. He pours a dark syrup from the kettle into an espresso cup with a broken handle, and passes it to you. It is hot to the touch and does not smell of coffee. It smells pungent and floral and tastes overwhelmingly of cardamom. The spice flows through you, filling your sinuses and throat, your breath.

‘Long climb,’ he says. ‘Good?’ he points to what he calls coffee and you nod again. The women look at you impassively, not interested but not looking elsewhere. There is little else to focus on beside the children who also watch you calmly.



After a few more minutes rest in the bright and awkward tent house, you thank the man and then the women who respond with broad but brief smiles. You pass him a banknote; limp and thin. A token, but enough for him to shake your hand in his hot dry grasp.

You walk on, blinded to the night, miraged by the glowing memories of the light bulb still lingering upon your retina – like oil in dark water. The path beneath your feet guides you. Onwards, upwards.

‘Hello there, hi.’ It is an American, there are three of them, all riding camels. You wave perfunctorily as they overtake you, and then you forge forwards, pushing your legs like pistons. Your breathing has become hard and regular; strong in, fast out, all through the mouth. You gulp at the thinning air. It is changing: different to the desert, different to the town, different to the coach ride. It is emptier, there is less life. The Americans trot past and are soon out of sight. You walk on.

Others pass you astride lumbering camels. All of them greet you in different ways: There is a ‘Guttentag’, a ‘fine night for it’, a ‘watch out there, sir,’ and one ‘God bless. Jesus loves you.’

You wave to each of them without breaking your stride. The irradiated diodes on your watch-face tell you that you have walked for three hours. You turn a corner on the path as it cuts its zigzag way toward the summit. A loud braying groan emanates beside you, and then another. Hulking shaggy shapes tremble in the darkness. The smell is thick – bitter and animal, sour. Perhaps a dozen camels lie tethered to posts, resting, huddled together against the cooling mountain air. You can see their eyes glittering with stars.

You walk on, gaining speed as the climb evens out. You are mechanical now, not organic; made of one purpose.

Four AM approaches and with it the beginning of the end; the night is nearly spent and you are almost there. You walk on past flagging camel riders, now forced onto two legs straining under the unexpected effort. Your own limbs power on, motor-driven. You wave as you pass but they do not wave back.

The zenith of the climb comes at the death of night. You crest the summit and stand atop the flat expanse. It is far wider than you had expected, a large space for a mountain top. In your mind, the thing had tapered to a claustrophobic tip, not this spacious promontory. There are others already there, waiting, gathered in their groups. Some are chatting, respectfully quiet but loud enough to break the serenity. A few people sit atop rocks wrapped in fleece blankets, others pace up and down stamping their feet and rubbing their forearms. There are several more kneeling.

You find a small comfortable area free of people, secluded by a little jagged boulder. You take your camera from its Velcro-sealed case on your belt, and you wrap its strap around your wrist.

Eight minutes past four. The sky shifts. It changes. Black turns blue and then grey, stars drown in the growing dawnlight; the pre-dawn. And then fire. The deep orange embers of the sun lift above the horizon, beyond the foothills and lesser mountains, across the desert sand and over countless miles of dead silent space. It is sunrise on Sinai.

Cheers erupt. Praise be. Thank Jesus. Oh, Lord, thy presence is precious. And a great many tears are shed for all sorts of reasons. You film every moment of the sunrise, every beam, in high definition, at maximum frame rate. It is real, it is before you, and it is magnificent. You cannot breathe.

‘Quite a sight, wouldn’t you say?’ someone says. ‘Makes you feel pretty small, hey?’

‘Yeah,’ you say without looking around. ‘Thank god for the Big Bang.’

# The Weightlifter

I watched him lift the last barbell of the event. He broke some record or other. Not the Olympic or World record, but one of them; Commonwealth, maybe, or national.

The TV commentator yelled statistics I didn't understand. Everyone in the crowd erupted into cheers and flashing camera-phones. The picture zoomed wildly into focus, settling on a grey-haired couple weeping with joy. They wore matching T-shirts, but I couldn't read the slogan. Flags waved and rippled all about them. I didn't recognise the nation. I looked at the acronym beside his name on the info-bar at the bottom of the screen. It was a strange name and a strange acronym. Uzbekistan, it had to be.

The weightlifter wept. He sank down to his hands and knees, and cried. The audience approved and applauded even louder. They understood. I didn't, not entirely. I didn't understand the ritual, I didn't understand the context. I was watching the spectacle as I might watch a nature documentary.

A man had lifted a weight, a very heavy weight, high above his head and stood there while his neck slowly swelled and his face turned a deep rose-pink. A long electric honk had sounded, and then he'd dropped the great weight; sending it hurtling to the floor. It bounced half-heartedly, and then came to rest.

I wondered if this was a fascination peculiar to his culture; if the people of Uzbekistan had a common interest in weightlifting, as India does with cricket, or Canada with ice hockey. I then wondered, quite to the contrary, if, perhaps, Uzbekistan had no such history, if this was just a momentary fad inspired by a particularly gifted, dedicated and successful weightlifter. Perhaps he had become an unlikely national hero, or perhaps there was nobody else watching, except for the crowd and me. I didn't know.

And then he took his shoes off. The camera zoomed again until they filled my screen. Two old training shoes, scuffed to grey-white. The laces were grimy and frayed. They were working shoes of no particular brand. They looked as though they smelled pretty high; *those* kind of shoes.

The commentator narrated the scene as it all happened, in an absurdly solemn tone: 'He's taken off his shoes. He has laid them side-by-side on the stage, right next to his weights, his record-breaking weights. This is some moment.'

The camera lingered on the shoes. It still wasn't at all clear to me why any of this was happening. Cut to the grey-haired couple. Cut to the flag-waving crowd. Cut to the weeping athlete. Cut back to the shoes. This was more confusing than the statistics; more abject than the straining veins which had led to all of this. Two old shoes.

'That's it! That's... it,' the commentator said, his voice cracking in emotion. 'We have just witnessed the retirement of a champion.'

It seemed such a banal sentence, so simplistic and matter-of-fact, and yet strange, as strange as the name and the acronym. And a strange thing for me to see. Peeking through the curtains of this man, so different to me, so far away.

My wife came into the sitting room to bring me a sandwich and my pills. She changed over the oxygen tank, and kissed my forehead.

'Are you crying?' she asked, with that look she gets when she's worried about me. She smoothed my hair and smiled softly.

'It's nothing,' I said. 'Just something on the telly.'

## Laid Low

He was an evacuee, I was a local. We didn't get on. Not many of us did. The townies all stuck together, while we kept our own company. The locals and the strangers. We would mix from time to time; there were sometimes games of football, or games of war, or hide and seek. Only ever things in big groups. We didn't like to mix one to one, not like real friends.

He used to make fun of my glasses, I used to make fun of his freckles and his red hair. We didn't get on.

On Sundays, after church, a lot of the kids would go to the beach and the thin strip of fields just before the beach, and the bit in-between where the grass grew through the sand. We would gather in groups of boys and groups of girls. The boys then separated further, into locals and evacuees, although the girls didn't seem to make the same distinctions. We would wander up and down the beach looking for things, poking jellyfish with sticks or making up running games.

'Look what I found,' the boy with the red hair and freckles shouted, holding his fist in the air. The boys nearby rushed over to see, those farther away were more nonchalant. Before long there was quite a group, of both locals and evacuees, there were even a few girls. They were looking at something and passing it around. The redhead was watching proudly as whatever it was moved from hand to hand. I insinuated myself into the circle, squeezing between shoulders to get closer. As I got to the centre, a girl with yellow plaits handed me the thing.

'Not Specky,' the redhead shouted. 'Don't give it Goggle-eyes.' He reached out to snatch it from me and I instinctively backed away, bringing the thing close to my chest. It was hard and cold, smooth to the touch but with rough edges, like a stone. The redhead reached again and grasped my wrist tightly. I lowered my arm and opened my fist. He snatched it back before I could get a good look at it. It seemed to be nothing more than a stone. With it back in his possession, the redhead

shoved me once on the shoulder, and then walked away. The rest of the group dispersed back to the sands or the fields.

A few days later, I heard from Douglas, the vicar's son, that some of the older kids were planning a secret late-night bonfire on the far end of the beach, out of sight of the town. Ever since the early days of the war, blackout rules had strictly forbidden any night-fires outdoors, and only recently with the conclusion of the conflict in Europe had the restrictions been lifted. The novelty of fire and its lingering taboo made the plan all the more enticing. There would be jam and crumpets to toast, Douglas had said. 'On Wednesday night, really late. Henry says they'll be no moon, so no-one will see.'

I crept out after dark, swiping half a jar of grandmother's ginger curd from the larder. I made my way quietly through the darkened village streets. Henry's almanac had been correct; there was no moon. But just before I reached the edge of the field, I could make out the dark shapes of people, kids, ahead of me, tramping along towards the cove at the end of the beach. I pulled up my collar, although it was a warm August night, and followed them.

Their driftwood fire was visible from some distance, but not from the direction of the houses on the edge of the village. We were all quite out of sight.

There were about a dozen boys and girls already there, mostly between twelve and fourteen years old. I waved at the group as I got closer. A few heads turned but only Douglas waved back. I slowed my pace as I got closer, letting my eyes adjust to the brightness of the fire and making sure that I was welcome. Douglas shuffled over, making space for me to sit, so I did. He handed me a tin mug of lemonade and I gave him the jar of curd. He passed it around the fire until it got to the feast pile – various oddments scavenged from ration bare cupboards. It looked to be mostly jars and pieces of bread wrapped up in tea-towels or in brown paper.

At least one couple slunk away into the shadier corners of the cove, but most of the kids sat in a circle, tending and feeding the fire or toasting hunks of bread on sticks or long forks. The red-headed boy was there along with a quite a few of the evacuee children. I sat myself on the far side of the

circle, with the flames between us. He was talking animatedly but I couldn't hear what he was saying at first, then he turned to face the whole group and began explaining:

'This, what I found on the beach, it isn't just a stone. It's magic.' He looked down at it, nestled in his palm, and then looked up again. 'It was a snake once, but it bit a witch and she turned it to stone. A witchstone, that's what it's called and it is magic. Look, you can still see the snake, it's all wrapped up, like.'

'Coiled,' the girl with yellow plaits said. Her eyes were rapt, staring at the thing hidden in the boy's hand. He gave it to her slowly, with reverence and she took it with careful fingers. He nodded gravely and she passed it to her left, around the circle. Then the redhead continued while everybody listened:

'Yeah, it's coiled, like it's sleeping. And it is sleeping, it's not dead, it can come to life, and witches can use it to cast spells and that, spells that'll kill you dead, like a snake bite. That's what it does.'

A younger boy sitting on my right passed me the witchstone quickly as if it were hot to the touch. It wasn't, it was quite cool. I examined it, close in my palm. Even in the dim orange light of the fire I could see that it was a fossil, an ammonite; a beautiful rounded spiral, like a snail shell. There were little crystals of quartz glimmering inside of it, embedded within the skeleton, like veins of diamond. I turned it slowly in the firelight, making the crystals sparkle. I held it longer than the others had, not listening to the fanciful tale. I examined it, slowing its momentum, holding up the circuit. The redhead stopped his story and stared at me. After a moment, I noticed the silence and glanced up.

'Give it,' he snapped, making a face like a snarl. Everybody looked at me, and then at him, and then at me again. He started making his way around the circle towards me.

I stood up and backed away. He held out an insistent hand but I raised it out of his reach, high in my fist like he had done on the day he'd found it, and I continued pacing backwards. The sand beneath my feet grew stiff and wet, leaving a trail of footprints which he followed towards me.

‘I’m warning you, Specky,’ he said, getting closer. I stepped back, and then again. My foot snagged on some seaweed and I stumbled, not enough to make me fall, but enough to make me lose my balance, to wave my arms, and to let go of the precious crystal fossil. It plopped noisily into the shore just as a wave surged forward, soaking my socks and shoes.

‘No,’ he said in a voice like a yelp. ‘Where’s it gone?’ He ran a few paces to the sea-line and knelt down to look. He splashed at the water with his hands trying to clear it away enough to see, but it was far too dark. He turned on me, with his snarling face. ‘You did that on purpose, you did. On purpose.’ As he repeated his words, he stabbed an accusing finger at me, and the crowd began to back away. He moved closer and closer. I retreated, moving parallel with the sea.

‘I’ll get you for that, Specky. I’ll bloody well kill you.’ He dipped his hand into the front pocket of his short trousers and pulled out a savage-looking Boy Scouts’ knife. Its blade shone in the firelight.

I ran, as soon as I saw it, I ran, and he chased me. Our feet kicked up clouds of sand, sliding and shifting with each stride. Within seconds, my legs were burning with the effort. I made for the grass and the fields where I knew my feet would gain better purchase, where I could pick up speed and get away from the red-headed boy and his short fat knife.

With the long straggly grass whipping at my bare legs, I pushed myself as much as I could. I was certain that I would turn my ankle painfully and the boy would fall upon me, stabbing and cutting. I could barely breathe for the fear and the running, I felt giddy and sick. My mouth tasted of iron.

There was a light above me – still a relatively unusual sight at night-time. There was a short stone stair cut into the rising hillside, on top of which was a wooden summer house with glass windows. I leapt up the steps, two at a time, reaching forward with my hands as if I might clamber up on all fours. By the time I reached the top, I risked my first glance back over my shoulder. The boy with the knife was at the foot of the steps and climbing. I rushed towards the summer house. It was difficult to see through the windows which still had crosses of tape over every pane, to prevent them shattering in a bomb blast. There was a muffled sound of voices coming from within which grew louder as I pushed open the door.



The summer house was lit by a small paraffin lamp with a bulbous white glass shade. The lamp was on a table in the centre of the room beside a large wireless set. Around the table were a group of perhaps a dozen adults, some sitting, some standing, all of them facing the wireless.

‘Please,’ I gasped, staggering in and falling to one knee. ‘Please.’ I reached an imploring hand and heaved in long breaths. Behind me, I could hear footsteps rushing up the steps. ‘Close the door,’ I said.

‘Sshhhh,’ one of the men said briskly. Three or four faces turned and glared at me before returning their attentions back to the wireless. A portly grey-haired man fixed me with a hard stare and held up his index finger as a warning for me to stay quiet. The footsteps outside were getting louder. I imagined the feel of the knife in my back, sliding between my ribs, imagined what it might be like. I tried to get to my feet but my knees were hot and weak, and my thighs felt heavy. By the time I was standing, the radio was speaking clearly enough for me to hear:

‘There will now follow a statement by the Prime Minister, The Right Honourable Clement Attlee.’ There was a moment’s silence and then a little hiss as a second microphone came to life:

‘The Empire of Japan has surrendered,’ Attlee said in a calm but forceful voice. ‘The last of our enemies are laid low.’

He kept speaking but nobody listened. The war was over. All of it, everywhere. All the wars. Over. It didn’t make sense to me. I had no real memory of peace time, I didn’t really think it was possible. For a second, the grown-ups looked scared and none of them moved, but they soon came to life again; shaking hands and embracing. Two women kissed one another and an older lady cried quietly. It all seemed quieter; the room was somehow muted. Even the radio had paused, at least it seemed that way. The only noise I remember was the sound of that wicked-looking pocket knife clattering against the concrete step behind me. The boy stood on the threshold, red-faced and empty handed, watching the adults’ silent celebrations. Attlee repeated himself; only then did some of the men begin talking and then shouting and leaping up and down. It was over, it was over. They

almost sang. I looked at the red-headed evacuee boy and he looked back at me. The war was over and nothing made sense.

## Reunion

She was arriving at six. I waited in the short-stay drop-off section of the car park to pick her up. It wasn't busy; mostly taxis. It'd been five months since I'd last seen her. Didn't think I'd ever see her again, if I was honest. Hoped, perhaps, but could never conjure a plausible circumstance. My fantasies had been unrealistic, almost Hollywood. In the stark morning light, they were always obvious fictions. She was married; she always had been, ever since I'd known her. She was a newlywed when we met and a dutiful wife when we'd parted. Not my wife, but his. Darren Forbes-Williams. I'd always found the odd juxtaposition of names rather charming. Francesca Forbes-Williams was a different situation. She'd married into a name full of preconception and assumption. In actual fact, it was Darren who was the pseudo-toff with the expensive education and the predilection for brand names. Francesca, or Frankie, was quite the opposite. She'd been my P.A., my Woman Friday, my Katherine Hepburn. She kept me in my job for longer than I probably deserved. When I eventually left to start my own company, she was the first person I offered a job to, but she'd declined. Darren wanted to start a family, and she'd already been putting off drafting her resignation.

And then something went wrong. I didn't know what exactly. Maybe she wouldn't tell me at all. All I knew was that her fast-track no-fuss divorce had recently finalised, and now she needed a roof for the night before some job interview in the morning. I'd moved halfway up the country to start my business, and she'd applied for work in the same area. It seemed fortuitous, serendipitous. It seemed like a bloody miracle.

But I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know what to wear, even. I'd brushed my hair before coming out, which was not unusual. Then I'd brushed my teeth. Mid-day brushing was not a regular habit, but not unheard of. It was only when I reached for my aftershave, after not shaving, that I realised I was making a special effort. Then I realised I'd realised, which made me feel strange. I'd

been concealing the excitement from myself; pretending I was just grabbing my coat, not prepping for a date. Otherwise, I wouldn't have realised, I'd simply have known.

I decided against the scent. I'd caught myself out and felt that, in order to retain control, I needed to reassume my nonchalance. Just forget all about it. She may well be single, just about, and she may be visiting me, but that did not make this a romantic tryst. Not necessarily. Of course, there was no way to know, not without seeing her. But then, how could I simultaneously prepare for both circumstances? Which shirt suited both a platonic meeting and a first date? I chose the one on the top of the clean pile, and left it at that.

She'd always liked me; flirted. She'd even gone so far as to use hypotheticals:

'If I were a single woman...', she'd say, or 'We're such a cliché, you and me – secretary and boss. We *should* be having a steamy affair. It's traditional, you know.' It was always with a smile, never serious. But then you can't tell, can you, not really. I'd never said what I thought, or what I'd hoped. So why should she?

It started raining in soft speckles. I flicked on the wipers and watched them wind back and forth, removing rain which then immediately reappeared, over and over. It was five-to-six. My skin prickled all over – anticipation, perhaps, or maybe a response to the rain outside. It wasn't actually colder, it just looked colder. I turned up the heating and wondered if I had an umbrella in the car.

I checked the backseat and saw the mess, the invisible mess. Nothing horrific, just the usual car clutter. There was a half-empty water bottle on its side; some A4 printouts of Google Maps from ages ago; I couldn't even remember where they were for. There was also a wedge-shaped sandwich wrapper, which could certainly go. I grabbed it and scrunched it up in my hands. The heating was quite high by now and I felt my face flushing. The sandwich cardboard resisted my crumpling, like memory foam. It refused to stay compressed. I threw it into the glove compartment and saw it unfurling as I shut the hatch. And then there she was. Frankie. Standing in the rain, waving at me. I started opening my door but realised that she didn't want me to come out, she wanted me to let her in. I unlocked the passenger door with the press of a button.

'It's open,' I mouthed through the windscreen, and she smiled at me with all of her teeth. I felt too hot, but she would be too cold and wet. Better to leave the heat on, I thought.

Then the door opened and closed, and she was in: inside my car.

'Hey, you,' she said, depositing her bag in the footwell. 'How's tricks?'

'I'm good,' I said. 'Good.'

I smiled.

She smiled.

We smiled.

'Yeah, you know, I'm muddling along. Work's a bit hectic, but that's to be expected. Still, keeping my head above water, making tracks, pushing on. Momentum is important for start-ups. Most fold within the first six months. Jesus. It's been nearly that since I saw you last. What's it now? Five? Must be five months, at least,' I babbled. Hopefully, she wasn't really listening.

As soon as I stopped talking, the car felt uncomfortably quiet. I started the engine and crunched the gears into reverse, glad of the noises.

Frankie was in my passenger seat, for real. Just me and her. And it was her plan too; her design. She hadn't been real for so long, it seemed. Only a memory or an imagination. Now that she was real again, the memories shifted into a new place, a less idealised place. The fact and fiction needed to be sorted, like wheat and chaff, until she was Frankie again; good old reliable married out-of-bounds Frankie.

I wanted to look at her, but I couldn't, just in case. Instead, I turned around to check the rear-view before moving out of the parking space. It was unnecessary. My mirrors were perfectly sufficient, but I wanted to glimpse her, see if I could see something in her expression. I didn't, or couldn't.

'Well, the journey was as bad as I expected,' she said. 'Bawling children, squawking phones and plastic sandwiches. Still, I managed five chapters of my book, and I never get chance to read these days.'

'Who does?' I said.

And as I reversed, I knew: no matter what she thought, or whatever she thought she thought, I was not hers, and she was not mine; we never should be.

I remembered the office, the stress and the fun and the humdrum. I saw myself through her eyes, her real eyes, and I saw her through mine, although I didn't actually look – I didn't have to. Instead, I signalled left to leave the car park, into the grey-lit crawling rushhour.

'Let's get fish and chips,' I said, and she clapped her hands with delight.

## The Wickedest Man

Senora Duende – neither pale nor dark but both. Imposing and yet invisible. She could blend with the shadier parts of town or mingle with the bourgeois glitterati in darkness and diamonds. Known at the finest restaurants and dance clubs, provided it was between dusk and dawn; from Magic Hour to the Hour of the Wolf; those were the times she kept. During the day, she was a mystery to me. All I knew was all I saw, and I saw very little, at first. They said she was a witch, a sorceress; some said vampyr. That’s when I knew she would come to me. She would find this place, and this place would foul her, destroy her, consume her, push her to where she must float bloated yet emptied. I shall husk her; gouts of her will spill from me, until she is me, and I am all of her. If not me, then some other.

Senora Duende could satisfy my most craven desires, perhaps, for a time, so I have invited her to play, to stay at my home, my Pandemonium: a keening organ of flesh and stone.

We are lost in a nowhere-land; not London, city of bilge; not impregnable Castile; nor sick and pious Rome. This shack is made of magic and of tragedy, here in Sicily – the bastard child of Europe. It is a howling cold, stifling hot, rough-thatched villa, invoked from sex and mud.

She is expected at eight, and so I wait...

Sputtering tallow candles light the shuttered spaces and fill the air with their stink. There is chalk and salt on the floor. My guests are unshaven; slouched in opium and laudanum and Latin. They smoke and starve and sleep until someone takes their clothes off. The air is damp and musky – the smell of toil, the smell of sloth, the smell of meat. Things scurry unbidden, unhidden.

There is wax and paper and waxed-paper. There are vials and bottles and jars of powder. There is a barrel in one corner but it is empty now.

She arrives by horse. No car will come this way, and mine ran out of gasoline long ago. A rusted carcass sold for parts.

She says nothing to anyone. The door is already open, the lantern is lit.

The space about her quivers. She is a tense muscle.

Red eyes stir and stare from the gloom, they blear at her; a statue. And then her arm twists serpentine, upwards to a sharp and polished nail. Her neck tilts, her jaw sets; the line of her leg like a marble oak. And then she moves. A dark swirl engulfs her, embodies her, clenches her. Mud-dust clouds her stampeding toes as they castanet against the dirt. Her arms – violently precise. Her eyes now closed to the spectacle; she cannot watch. No one else can look away.

The Wickedest Man, they call me, but she is wickeder still, or will be, one day. Possessed of a magic much deeper and older than mine; purer, darker. She has orgone energy. The music of her movements is deafening. There is nothing but her stamping foot and the snap of fabric as she wails her sleeves. No body breathes but hers. Nobody lives but her. And she is death, she must be.

They want her more than morphine or whisky, more than sex, more than food, more than God. They want her more than they want me.

In a flail of lace and silk, the candlelight folds around her until pitted sweat-walls come alive with her shadows, and with their fearful frenzy.

She whirls and writhes without abandon. As controlled as the sea, as wild as the wind. A sound like a laugh which is not a laugh but a cry of triumph, of victory. And she is still. Her dance is over, the spell complete.

I did not see her leave, nor the others who followed her. I did not see the sun or the sky until I was the last there, alone, possessed, perhaps or polluted; paralysed by her dance. I had sought and found and lost. And now I must start again. Build a new place full of new magic; far from the Senora, but always haunted by her.



## Vacated

'I don't want to go,' she said. 'I've never been as happy.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' he said. 'Of course you're coming. The taxi will be here any minute.'

'I'm *not* going,' she said. 'I've never felt so at home.'

'But you're not at home. You're on holiday.'

She shook her head. 'Not anymore, I'm not.'

'Exactly,' he said. 'Now get your things. We need to get to the airport.'

'No,' she said. 'We don't.'

'I mean it,' he said. 'I'll go without you. I'll go home on my own.'

And he did, but he came straight back; only she wasn't there.



## Gessler

He was the town murderer. Everybody knew him, everybody knew the story. Back in 'thirty-seven, he'd killed his wife with an axe, in the only phone box in town. The telephone still doesn't work. She'd gone to call the police, in her dressing gown, but he'd followed her down the street. He served twenty-five years to the day, then moved back again. Back to the same house in the same part of the same little mining town, where everybody knew him, but no-one used his name. We all just called him Crippen.

Before prison, he'd worked the coalface down the pit, but the years inside hadn't been kind to him. He'd always had a wide face and round waist – a big man with a barrel chest, but now he was gross. Fat hung from him like rain in a canvas awning.

I don't know how or why, but the Coal Board re-hired him. They gave him a helmet and a pick and set him to work with everybody else. But he was no good down the pit, or on the trucks, not anymore. He wheezed and took up too much space in the lift. No-one would work with him. The Coal Board moved him from role to role: first digging, then weighing, then sorting, until finally he ended up as the head-counter on the underground colliery train. He would squeeze himself up and down the aisle every morning and evening, rocking drunkenly with the motion of the rails. It was his job to count the miners heading to and from the coalface. He never spoke, not to anybody. When he passed, checking off names, he would almost always be shadowed by a quip or a barb and then a rumble of laughter. He was the fatman-wife-murderer who'd missed the war – he was easy prey, and, over the years, the passengers began to see the heckling as a competition. The old lads spent time composing and rehearsing their remarks, practising them in the pub like football chants. Myself, I never did, but I couldn't help laughing at half their jokes, which I suppose was just as bad.

On one morning, word spread between the day-shift miners about a television show. *The Adventures of William Tell* had aired on the new channel, ITV, and more than one of the men had noticed a strange resemblance.

‘You seen Crippen’s on the telly, in that new William Tell?’

‘Oh aye, I seen it. Do you mean the fat bugger, like bloody Sherriff of Nottingham?’

‘That’s him. Gessler, he’s called. Landburgher Gessler. He’s the spit of old Crippen, he is.’

And so the daily jests took a new turn. Crippen the killer became Gessler the pantomime villain; blundering and wheezing up and down the bus each day in his bulging uniform and peaked cap.

When he finally left the train, they missed him. The miners missed him. They missed their game of mockery and jibes. I could tell. I don’t think anybody even watched the show after that. Our Gessler disappeared off to the wash plant where he hosed down coal before it was sacked and shipped. I never thought I’d see him again. I didn’t really think about him.

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All the girls know a miner, they see it a mile off. It only takes a nick or a scratch down the pit, a puff of coal dust and you’ve got a nice new tattoo. Bluespots, they call them. All the aftershave and fanciful talk of life down at the office won’t get you so much as a dance, not if you’ve got a bluespot. No, I never much liked coal. But for a lad from a colliery town, who fell short of the eleven-plus, there’s not a lot of other work. Even so, I always fancied myself for something better; I wanted to wear a tie, one day, not a helmet. I read a lot, joined the Labour Party, and then the Union. It took effort, of course, it took study and more than my fair share of sneering looks from the older miners, but I did it. I worked my way in through equal parts of graft and charm. I became a union rep. I bought sharp pencils and plenty of ink cartridges. I had files and pads and even a ruler. I was the best most organised satchel in town.

My dad had been a miners' rep before his accident. He looked over my stationary with approval and gave me what advice he had. Then I went back to the mine, back to the coalface. My satchel waited, along with a pressed shirt and a folded tie, for four whole weeks before I heard from the union that I'd finally been assigned my first case. I walked into work dressed for church and went direct to the foreman. He told me, once he'd done with his jokes about my clothes, what it was all about – the basic details of my first case: I would be arguing for Gessler.

'Keeps burning his arse,' the foreman said. 'On the brazier.'

I gave a surprised but hopefully professional expression. 'His arse?' I said.

'His arse. Fat fucker says he can't work the wash plant 'coz he has to squeeze his-self between the conveyor and the coal burner. It's perishing out there, and what with the water spray and all, they've got a brazier. Elsewise the buggers out there'd freeze.'

'I see,' I said, making scribbled notes.

'Anyways. Gessler, being the shape he is, can't get his-self around the fire without burning either his belly or his rump. Seems he's fonder of his belly.'

'So, there's insufficient clearance for him?' I said. 'He can't operate, can't do his job adequately?'

'He's a waste of bloody space, is what he is. Lots and lots of space.'

'Gessler's been all over, hasn't he? I mean, he's worked almost the whole mine.'

'He's been everywhere, over the years, including Strangeways. There's no job can keep him. Even the train. He got too fat for the aisle, they reckon. Got out of breath going up and back again. Course, the Union won't let us get rid of him, so wash plant is all he's good for.'

'Well it can't be too hard a job to move the brazier and give him a bit more room.'

'It's bolted down.'

'Even so,' I said. 'It can't be too difficult to unbolt it and move it a foot or so.'

The foreman looked dubious but didn't reply. I finished my notes and packed up my satchel then shook the foreman's hand. I had the beginnings of an argument.

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'First order of business then. There's an official request for alterations to the wash-room fixtures on safety grounds. Is that right?' There were four men, two wearing blue suits, two wearing brown suits, all sitting behind a long oak table covered in papers.

'It is, sir,' I said and then swallowed. They looked me up and down – my new tie and shiny shoes, my folded clipboard; they took it all in but didn't seem particularly impressed. I cleared my throat and began: 'The wash-room coal brazier stands twenty-two inches from the edge of the conveyor and is situated between the hose and the pressure handle. The gangway between conveyor and brazier is a necessary pathway for the employees of the wash-room to correctly perform their duties.'

'I know the layout,' one of the board members said. 'What's the problem with it, specifically?'

'Well, it's Gessler,' I said. 'He can't manoeuvre past the brazier without scorching himself. Twenty-two inches is insufficient clearance for him to get past, on account of his waist-size.'

'I'm sorry, who did you say?'

'Gessler,' I said.

'First name?'

I hesitated. 'It's Gessler, you know? They used to call him Crippen.'

'I can't very well put that onto the form, can I? Come on now, lad. This member, what's his full and proper name?'

I nodded and began rifling through my notes. I scanned the foreman's statement. There was nothing. Just Gessler.

'I'm sorry. I don't have that with me,' I said, gathering my papers into a hasty pile and tucking them under my arm.

'Then perhaps we should move on to other business in the meantime.'

I made my apologies and left. I then ran from office to office – the weigh house, the truck yard, the maintenance shed.

‘What’s Gessler’s proper name?’ I asked, over and over. ‘His real bloody name?’

Nobody knew. By the time I made it to the shaft entrance, I was red-faced and out of breath.

‘Does anybody know Gessler’s right name?’ I asked wearily, panting for breath. They shook heads or made nostalgic jokes. It was Old Wal who finally told me. Old Wal had married Gessler’s cousin on his wife’s side. Wal had known, and had never forgotten, the name of the town murderer.

I ran back across the yard, loosening my tie as I went. Damp patches grew under my armpits, spreading across my chest and back. My carefully combed hair began sticking to my forehead. I burst through the doors of the site office, took the stairs three at a time, and then exploded into the tribunal room. I gasped out his name, heaving in great mouthfuls of air between the syllables. I reached out for a chair-back to steady myself. I wiped my forehead, and then said the name again, in full. But nobody replied, because nobody was there. The chairs at the high table were all empty. My first case had finished, and the brazier never moved.





## One-Hundred-and-One

I was five on the day when I first knew that death was not a story. I was five. You were thirty-nine.

Your father, my grand-father, drove a Ford Cortina that day. He took you away, I didn't know where.

She was one-hundred-and-one. Your grandma, my great-grandma. I only met her once – for just a short time. We walked together around her garden. She was one-hundred-and-one. I was five.

When you came home, I saw the Cortina from the window. I ran to the door, and in my childhood haste I kicked the empty milk bottles waiting on the steps, sending them crashing.

You flapped and shouted me back from the shards. And when I was safe, you told me, there on the steps, that Great-grandma had died – you had been to the funeral. All I knew was that I had broken the bottles, and that you had seen. But you told me, as we cried, that it didn't really matter.



## First Draft

Your fever made me and destroyed me. Born out of sweated dreams and aching bones, yellow eyes and bitten fingernails; you wrote me. You.

She mops fantasies from your forehead, washes the sheets and dilutes your pain with water and laudanum. She thinks she is loving you.

My pages are damp with your labour. I am hastily scrawled without copperplate. We are hurried, frantic, passionate, you and I. She doesn't understand. She is jealous. She wants you to want her like you want me.

Night and day begin to separate once more. Lines and angles no longer bend and lean. The bedroom, now sickly sweet with garden garlands, slowly becomes familiar to you again. It is the place I was conceived in, born in. It is the room I died in.

She is always the first, before any other. Hers are the virgin eyes; invading me, scrutinising, consuming me. She hates me. I am disease and madness and too much truth. Both Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde.

They will think you mad, she says to you, but you are sleeping. I am no book to her, no book at all; I am something much worse.

She places me in the hearth under a shovelful of hot coals and sets a kettle of water above me. She thinks she is saving you. She thinks she is helping you to go back to before, back to the other tale, the nice one about Robin Hood. Another *Treasure Island*, she thinks; it is better this way, kinder and easier for everybody. And so, I burn to ash and smoke and nothing.

You wake to find that I am gone; lost forever. Like any grieving parent, you scorn love and try to re-make the irreplaceable. A thin shadow – *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* – a wax-work doppelganger.

That pain you feel in your chest is mine. I am still there, still inside you, still burning. When the pain becomes too heavy to carry, you will find me, waiting. In your last winter, when the air is thin and the sky is dark, I will come back to you. You will hold my pages again, and you will take me with you.

## The World's Only Working Time-Machine

It looks like a hyperbaric chamber – a large stainless-steel cylinder festooned with brass pipes and plaited braids of coloured cables. The welding is not clean, the joins look like scars. There is a rotary door handle, like a steering-wheel, and a porthole-style window. It all looks heavy and industrial. It looks homemade.

There is an optimistically large horseshoe of chairs facing the contraption; enough seating for forty or fifty people. There are only nine of us waiting, and I think at least one man is here by mistake. Nobody is sitting, nobody is fully committed to the event. We're standing around a table under the window, which bears seven large bottles of water and two tall stacks of disposable glasses. Everyone has direct access to the exit, ready to leave at a moment's notice. Some of the people recognise each other, they nod and chat. The other few, myself included, fiddle with their phones or their tablets, trying to look busy, trying to look connected, their finger on the pulse. Eventually, a young woman with pigtails asks me who I represent. I am freelance, I explain, and the conversation dries up. She wanders off to tell someone else I'm a blogger. I consider correcting her, when Brian comes out from a side-door which I had assumed was a cupboard. He carries a microphone with a cable that trails back through the door. He taps his finger on the foam head of the mic and a loud thump echoes across the small hall.

'Here we go,' someone says, and we all turn to face the front. I sit down. I am the only one who does.

'Is this everybody?' Brian says in a timid voice amplified to a booming volume. Somebody off-stage must have adjusted a dial as Brian's voice abruptly dips to a more manageable level. 'Is anybody waiting outside? Are they smoking or something?'

'This is the lot. You better get started, mate,' someone calls out. We all switch on cameras of different sizes and descriptions. There are a couple of tripod-mounted HD digitals, a few have

handhelds, but one or two just use their phones, as I do. I lean my wrists on the chair-back in front of me to get a steady shot of Brian and his bizarre invention.

‘Are you all journalists?’ he asks. ‘Is there not...? Is anyone here from the scientific community?’

A man’s voice from behind me says simply: ‘Whizzbang dot com.’

Nobody else says anything.

‘I beg your pardon?’ Brian replies.

The voice emerges further from behind an expensive tripod: ‘Whizzbang dot com, the internet’s premium non-science site. If it’s whacky and it’s weird then its Whizzbang.’

‘I don’t understand.’ Brian’s eyes flick from face to face scanning the room over and over. His free hand is shivering by his side, like some sort of palsy.

‘We’re a non-science website. You know, nonsense science, fringe stuff. We’ve over a million subscribers,’ Whizzbang says.

‘Are *you* a scientist? What’s your discipline?’

‘Look, mate, is this a press conference or not?’ someone else calls out. The room is fidgeting.

‘Yes, of course, I’m sorry, I’d just... I hoped that. Never mind, I’ll try to explain everything in terms you can understand.’

‘Just get on with it,’ Whizzbang says and retreats behind his tripod.

Brian clears his throat and wipes the back of his stable hand, the hand holding the microphone, across his dry lips. The room quietens and Brian blinks at us all a few times.

‘It’s... ah... Obviously... Given the simple Newtonian basic... ah, regardless of what Einstein...um... Time-machines, that is to say, machines which travel through time, are not... would not... Well, they won’t work. Not for people, I mean. You couldn’t, one couldn’t, no one could do it.’

‘Are you having a laugh?’ a voice calls out. I look to see who it is. Judging by the irritated expressions, it could have been any of them.

‘Did you arrange all of ...this, just to announce that?’ Whizzbang says. ‘Jesus Christ... *Stop the press, hold the front page. Time-machines don’t work.* This is ridiculous. Let’s get out of here.’

Cameras power down, bags are gathered, and the double-doors creak open. Brian looks anxious, almost panicky. He waves his arms a little, trying to hold our attention:

‘Please. I’m trying to explain. Sorry. Hold on a moment. What I’m trying to say is that Doctor Who was right.’

The little crowd stops at or around the threshold. They sense a meltdown. Not merely a nutter, but an entertaining nutter. A possible viral newscast. Such things make careers in the internet entertainment news community. The crowd returns to the hall and switches their cameras back on.

‘Say that bit again. About Doctor Who.’

Brian clears his throat: ‘Doctor Who was right,’ he states, firmly and clearly.

An amused murmur rolls around the room. ‘Was he now? Know him, do you? Close personal friend, is he?’

Brian continues: ‘Or Verity Lambert. Whoever it was that first wrote Doctor Who. She was right. HG Wells was wrong. And the other one, Marty McFly, he was wrong too.’

‘Please, do go on, professor,’ someone prompts. A woman, sporting girlish pigtails lets out a shrill laugh.

I am still filming, but it’s starting to feel uncomfortable. I didn’t come here for this. I thought it would be a lecture of some kind. I don’t know what I thought. But I keep filming.

‘Well, he had the right idea, Marty McFly, but didn’t get it right. No. Eighty-eight miles per hour is so arbitrary. There are no calculations, you see. It wouldn’t work.’

‘What about the flux capacitor? Does that bit work okay?’ There are more sniggers. Brian doesn’t seem to notice. He simply carries on.

‘And Wells, he didn’t compensate at all, not at all. His method is impossible. It couldn’t possible work. You see, there’s no such thing as a time-machine.’

The room releases a sigh. Brian seems to be returning to something like sanity, there is no sign of a fanciful or grandiose announcement, no David Ike moment.

‘It simply can’t be done,’ Brian says as a conclusion.

‘Right then,’ Whizzbang says. ‘Thanks for that.’ And they all begin to pack up their gear for a second time.

‘You can’t have a time-machine,’ Brian continues, ‘you must have a time-*and*-motion-machine. You can’t *only* move in time. You have to move in space as well. Doctor Who knew that. McFly too, but he got it wrong. So did Wells, and all the others. Only Doctor Who is right.’

‘I’ve heard of obsessed fans, mate, but this one takes the cake. Go to a convention or something.’

‘Get a fucking girlfriend.’

‘Only Doctor Who and me. We’re the only ones who got it right. No one can make a time-machine. It has to be a time-*and*-motion-machine, like this one... you can’t *just* travel in time. That’s what I’m trying to say. It’s fundamental to the science of it.’

Nobody seems to be listening now. Brian raises his voice a little to overcome the discontented hubbub, but nobody pays him very much attention, except for me.

‘Why not?’ I ask. ‘Why can’t you?’

‘Because the earth moves. The orbit of the planet and the rotation on the axis,’ Brian says.

I don’t understand. ‘Say that again,’ I say, and Brian explains:

‘If I were to travel twelve-hours forwards in time, then the Earth would have spun 180 degrees, halfway round, as well as shifted 0.47 degrees around the sun. I would transport myself 743 miles into deep space, facing the Malaysian seaboard. I would die and the machine would drift forever in space. Although it is not designed for deep space pressure, so it would likely break up immediately. I wouldn’t want to do that. So you see, Marty McFly, even at his eighty-eight miles per hour, he’d die, in space. Where he is going there are no roads.’ Brian tries a smile. ‘Did I get it right? I watched the films last week. I thought it might help with all of this.’

‘Jesus,’ somebody says. ‘He’s got a point. That’s weird isn’t it? I never thought of it like that. Shit. Yeah, if you travelled in time then when you arrived, the Earth would be in the wrong place. That’s pretty cool.’



‘He’s just ruined some of my favourite films.’

‘So my machine,’ Brian continues, ‘technically, travels in time *and* in space.’

‘Hold on. Are you saying you’ve invented a teleporter as well as a time-machine?’

‘No. Not really, not quite. It doesn’t work like that. That wouldn’t be safe. I’ve created something like an anchor, a cosmic anchor, if you will. It ensures that whenever you travel in time, you remain *here*, so to speak, assuming that here is still here.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well we are on the fourth floor. Were we to travel a few years into the past, then there would be no floor, only... fourth, if you see what I mean. We would be in mid-air and we would immediately fall, probably to our deaths. However, if we were to go down to the car park outside, which is wide and flat and on ground-level –’

‘Then we’d be safe. We wouldn’t fall.’

‘We wouldn’t fall. But in the past, the ground around the car park was sloped, like the edge of a little hill. So, we would be fused into the earth and we would die. The machine would also be destroyed.’

‘Right...’

‘It’s very important to take relative geography into account,’ Brian says in a solemn tone. ‘Soil erosion and plate tectonics, too. If we went back too far, then England wouldn’t be here. We would fall into an ocean – which would eventually become the Atlantic. And although the machine is waterproof, it would sink. We would be stuck at the bottom of an ocean. Were we to then return to the present, we would be miles beneath the surface of the earth.’

‘Because England would be back?’

‘Exactly. Ah, well, technically, England didn’t go anywhere, we did. Only when we came back, we came back under what later became the ground. A long way under the ground, an equal depth to the seabed. So, we must be careful. I shall only do a little demonstration. Nothing too big. Not yet.’

Brian appears to be growing in confidence. He is now slowly pacing the stage and looking up at us, his audience. The room is quieter. We are all listening more closely. Most of the reporters move vantage point to get better angles. They fan out, trying to avoid each other's sight-lines.

'Now, I understand that you might be sceptical,' Brian continues, 'and you will want to see proof of my findings. I suppose the easiest way is to use a clock of some sort. Does anybody have an iPad? Or a phone perhaps? Something with a clock on it. A watch would do of course. Or one of each?'

Chronological oddments are accumulated and filmed by the various web-journalists. One of them, a man in sunglasses, tries to marshal everybody but without much success; he fancies himself as a director of some sort. I stay seated, filming them filming clocks. Brian turns the naval-style door handle and opens the front hatch of the machine with a metallic clang. The collection of clocks and phones are then deposited inside, all the time being filmed by each of us, while Brian keys something into a numeric pad on what looks like a dashboard inside the machine. I zoom in to try to catch whatever it is he types, and I notice that there are several different keypads, many with labelled buttons covered in hand-written symbols; strange-looking symbols, like Greek; the sort of symbols you'd find in a mathematical equation.

Once finished, Brian swings the door shut and then turns the handle before stepping back and sitting down.

The air fills with a smell like ozone. A vibration reverberates around me, like deep bass. A sound like a popped party balloon suddenly echoes throughout the room, startling every camera and making our footage jolt and judder. We all blink involuntarily. We all stare at Brian and the stage. The machine has gone. We all film furiously. Panning or zooming in on the empty carpet. The machine has simply gone.

'Oh my god,' someone says. 'Oh-my-god-oh-my-god-oh-my-god,'

'It's a trick,' another voice calls out. 'It's a good trick, but it's a trick.'

'SShhhh. I'm filming.'

I look across the faces of the small crowd. Some are frowning or grimacing, convinced they don't want to believe. Others are both focused and anxious, keen to collect every moment, every detail, but nervous; this is too good to be true. I am suddenly aware of the room, the simple magnolia-painted conference room, the kind you'd expect find in a mid-range hotel in a minor city. It's all too normal. This can't be the place where history changes.

Then two of the journalists slowly walk over, pointing their handheld cameras forwards as they do so.

'You should keep back,' Brian says. 'Wait until it's all finished.'

'Not likely,' one of them says, throwing him a disdainful look. 'They'll be a mirror somewhere. Everyone, look for a mirror. Or a projector.' Both of the journalists begin to explore the empty space, looking up and down, around and around. Everybody is filming everything.

Brian looks down at his wristwatch. His hand shakes vigorously, so much so that he has to steady it with the other. His eyes finally focus on the time, and he looks up again, a little startled.

'No, no, please. You must step back now, please.' Brian stands up. I notice he has a little trouble; his knee perhaps. 'Move back,' he says, but nobody listens, except for me.

There is something about his hapless nervousness which disturbs me. Perhaps they are about to reveal the secret to his trick, or perhaps not. I'm not certain, but something makes me shout, as loudly as I can: 'Get back, all of you, get back.' I rush forward waving my arms and ruining my footage. My behaviour is strange enough to make them move away, away from the stage area. They look at me oddly for a moment and then there is another smell of static and a sudden startling pop. We all stop dead. This time, nobody blinks.

The machine is back, just where it was. Just as it had been only three-minutes before.

'It's a projection,' somebody says in a quiet voice. 'Has to be a projection.'

Nine cameras focus on the machine. It does nothing. It simply is.

Brian walks over; he does have a slight limp, I thought so. He turns the door handle again and swings open the hatch. He steps back, without touching anything else; his hands are raised, as though he faces a gunman.

‘You’ll see that they are all three-minutes slow. All of them. They did not exist for three-minutes. For these watches and clocks, time has not passed. You can all see. I haven’t touched them.’

The man in the sunglasses took off his shades and stared, open-mouthed.

‘Film me, for Christ sake, film me,’ Whizzbang says, thrusting his camera at one of the other journalists. ‘This is Chris Matthews live for Whizzbang dot com. If it’s weird or its wacky, then its Whizzbang, and this, folks, is all three. WWW dot stop the clocks. We’ve just invented time-travel.’

I have to hand it to him, nobody else seems in any way capable of doing anything much like reporting, and this is big news. History deserves more than some shaky footage of people swearing in disbelief. One guy looks like he might be sick.

‘Er... Brian. It’s Brian, right?’ A man in an expensive-looking suit steps forward, wielding a small microphone.

‘Yes,’ Brian says. He seems less nervous than before.

‘Marco Paulitto, *Huffington Post*. How does the machine work? What can it do, Brian? Can it go anywhere? I mean, anywhen?’

‘Yes, theoretically.’

‘Can it take humans on board? Have you tested it yourself yet?’

‘Of course, many times,’ Brian replies.

‘You’ve travelled in time?’

‘Yes,’ Brian says, quite simply, and then: ‘Can I have a volunteer?’

There is nothing but silence until Brian continues:

‘I’m not sure that the clock test is quite sufficient, you see. I suspect that people will still not quite believe—’

A woman behind me, tapping at her tablet speaks without looking up: 'We're getting Tweets already. A few wows, but mostly bullshits. They're saying it's another moon landing.'

'I'll do it,' I say, I'm not sure why. 'Can I film it from inside the machine?'

'Certainly,' says Brian.

And so, I climb inside. Brian helps me as best he can while eight grey faces look solemnly at me through various lenses. Brian leans inside to key in another quick formula on the keypads. I can't make out which of the buttons he presses. He then smiles at me and clangs the door shut. The air inside seems warm. It smells of ozone. I raise my camera-phone to the porthole. The image is slightly distorted through the thick glass or plastic window, but the row of camera operators facing the machine is clear enough. So is Brian, as he steps backwards, away to a safe distance.

There is a pop. Muffled by the thick chamber, it sounds more like a distant car backfiring. Nothing changes, not really. I expected darkness, or a sensation like falling, but instead, there is nothing. I breath in, I breath out.

Brian steps forward, but he is not where he was. Now he is to the left of the door, not the right. Two of the journalists have gone; vanished. As the door swings open, I can see them, over by the table taking long drinks of water. One of them looks very pale and there is a smell of vomit in the air.

'Hang on,' I say to group at large. 'This isn't right. One moment you were there, the next you were...' I realise what I am saying. 'Did it work?' I can't hide my child-like excitement. 'Is this the future?'

'For you it is,' Whizzbang says, pointing his camera at me, and the man by the table is sick again.

'Now, if you wouldn't mind. I'd like to perform one final little test,' Brian says. I stay inside the machine, still trying to comprehend what has happened. I had ceased to exist for four-minutes, but I hadn't noticed. Before I quite realise what is happening, the door swings shut again.

I resume filming. The watching faces appear on my phone screen once more; slightly distorted as before. Brian smiles through the porthole, and nods. I nod back, and then they vanish, all of them. It is a difficult thing to explain, easier to experience through the artificial medium of a television

screen. That blink, that shift, that jump cut. There and then not there. I am thankful for my phone, it makes it all easier to process. For a moment, I stop filming, somewhat overwhelmed by the sight of the empty room through the port-hole, now seen with the naked eye. Everyone has gone. After a second or so, I resume documenting for posterity, although I have to put the phone down while I turn the inside door-wheel and clamber through the hatch.

Outside of the chamber, the room is empty. The table is there with the same water bottles and cups, but now the bottles are unopened, and the cups are still neatly stacked. There is another machine, identical to the first. It leans against a wall, positioned on a two-wheeled trolley like an enormous box-lifter. I look closely. It is the same machine, not a copy, not a duplicate, it is the same. The smears and marks on the steel hull are identical. The crooked rough welding is precisely alike. It's the same machine. It just hasn't been moved into position yet.

The clock on the wall is set at ten-minutes to one o'clock. Just as Brian said it would be. I hurry over to the window. I look down, through the slats of opened Venetian blinds.

We are there, some of us, most of us, down in the car park; a small gathering of wannabe reporters or entertainment correspondents all driving cheap cars. I step back, suddenly terrified that I might see myself – that I, the I who is down there would see me, the me who is up here. But then it occurs to me, I didn't look up. Did I? If I had, then I would have already seen myself, I would remember. I close the blind before I have chance to know for sure. I spin around, still frightened in a strange and discombobulating way. The world seems to throb. I stare at the quiet little side-door, the door that looks more like a cupboard. Brian is behind that door. I could go over and open it. Should I? Did I? Brian didn't mention it in his instructions, so I don't go over, I don't check. I could just run, I think, run away. I could just hide out for a while, sneak away whilst my other self was in the meeting. I could just keep going. Head home. My other self would find me later and then there would be two of us. It would shake the world. We'd be famous. We'd be the world's most famous freaks.

I hurry back over to the window. The group of journalists are filtering inside. The last few of us are still parking up and sauntering over. The clock says twelve-fifty-five. We are going to gather downstairs and wait in the lobby, but not for long. Brian needs time to set up, to move the machine back into position. He'll be in here any minute now. Any minute. Any minute at all.

I get back into the chamber and close the door. There is a clock, like an egg-timer, it is seconds from its finish. I wait until the dial clicks to its terminal position. There is that smell again, that electrical smell, like ozone, and they are all back: The room is filled with activity. Blurred slightly by the porthole, it seems busier than before. This time, Brian doesn't come over so I turn the inside handle myself. The men on the other side who face me are not the reporters or bloggers I expect, they are policemen. The journalists are nowhere to be seen. Brian is talking to three men in suits and the policemen help me, carefully but insistently, out of the chamber. They all call me sir, while making it abundantly clear that it is they who are in charge.

As I am led out of the room, I look back at the strange machine, which appears to be steaming. Beside it, on the far side from the entrance hatch, I can see what look like paramedics huddled together around a man on the floor. I don't see who it is, or what has happened before the doors are shut behind me.

I am put into a van without windows. and driven for a long time; over an hour. I can't tell exactly how long because they have taken my phone. The van stops in an underground carpark. I am escorted by police into a lift and then into a small office, a secure office. Two men are waiting for me, not police. They're from the security services, MI5, or something even less accountable. The policemen sit me down, and then leave the room.

'And that pretty much brings us up to now. That's everything that happened,' I say.

Neither of the men respond. They're silently watching my phone footage on a laptop for the fourth or fifth time. I can tell because one of the agents, or officers, whatever they are called, he's wearing glasses and I can see the images reflected on the lenses.

'The man who was injured,' I ask. 'Is he okay? What happened? Was he in the way of the machine when it... returned?'

The spectacles look up. 'Sergeant Cooper. He lost half his foot, might lose the whole thing.'

'That's horrible,' I say.

The other agent closes the laptop. 'Tell us more about this Brian. His surname, for a start.' He has a public-school accent.

'I don't know. He never said. And like I keep saying, I really don't know him.'

'You weren't a stooge?' The word seems uncomfortable in his mouth, distasteful.

'I'm sorry?'

The other agent takes over again, leaning forward over the Formica-topped table. 'A plant? Part of the trick?'

'There was no trick,' I say. 'It would be impossible. I can't see any way.'

'Oh, come on now. Smoke and mirrors. Projections. A duplicate room. You were probably rotated, so when you stepped out it was into an exact copy of the room, only with the clock changed.' He makes circular gestures with his hands, as if conjuring. But as he does, I can see his confusion, his doubt. He can't work it out... So many witnesses, so much video, and that poor policeman's foot...

'Is there a room like that?' I ask.

'There must be.' He leans back and folds his arms, trying to look convincing.

'But I saw myself outside. I was in the car park.'

'Did you though?' the posh one says. They sit there, staring at me, as if they expect me to suddenly crack and confess.

'Look, I've answered all your questions. You know everything I know. It's been hours, and I want to see a lawyer.'

'I'm afraid you're being held under the Prevention of Terrorism Act,' the spectacled one says. He almost sounds smug.



'Terrorism? Seriously?' I look to the quiet one, the posh one, in the hope that he's the favourable half of good-cop-bad-cop dynamic, but he looks back at me with the same grave expression he's worn since I got there.

'A police officer was seriously injured following *your* operation of an as yet unidentified machine. Until we can assess the full extent of the situation here, you are to be regarded as—'

'A terrorist?' I try to sound more indignant than scared, but it doesn't work. I keep swallowing, over and over. I look from one agent to the other until the smug one in the spectacles replies.

'Basically, yes.' He smiles, ever so slightly.

'I'm just a journalist. That's all... I wasn't operating anything apart from my phone. I was only a passenger.' I feel faint. My hand keeps shaking.

'That has yet to be established,' says Posh. 'This is also for your own protection. There are clear and present dangers to your person.'

'Abduction,' Spectacles explains. 'We don't want you kidnapped by the Chinese.'

'Which is it? Am I a terrorist or am I being protected?'

'That has yet to be established.'

'You can't just keep me here,' I say.

'No. Not here. You'll be held in a secure location.'

They don't answer any more questions, nobody does. They take me in the same van to a beige room in a beige building, somewhere near a petrol station, just off a minor A-road. The door is locked. I don't get a key.

It's like a hotel room, only it's not a hotel. It has a kettle, a radio, a tv, a hairdryer, a fridge and a phone. Everything works except the phone, which only dials some kind of reception. They won't allow me an outside line. The mini-bar has soft drinks, water and some chocolate. Any booze has been removed, if there ever was any.

I turn on the TV with the volume down low, but then turn it back up. If they're listening, which they almost certainly are, then it makes no difference.

There is nothing on the news. Not until the following day. Less than twenty-four hours after Brian's demonstration, questions about the machine have been raised in parliament, and in the US senate. It seems that one of the quieter reporters, in fact worked for NASA. According to the news, he was on vacation in London and heard about Brian's press release through a jovial email from a friend at the *New Scientist*. Following the demonstration and the arrival of the police, he'd flown directly to back to the States where he made a number of statements to the wider press, although he's not made any appearances since. Various video uploads of the time-machine went viral almost immediately. It still wasn't clear why the police had arrived. One station mentioned a local power-cut being related, but I can't believe they could have got there so soon. Perhaps it was one of the bloggers, the one who threw up, maybe. I don't know, it would have been during the period of time when I wasn't there, or anywhere. When I didn't exist.

The BBC daytime magazine programme, *Weekday*, intersperses its regular kitchen and DIY segments with an interview featuring an Oxford physics don and a pop-science TV presenter. Doctor Who is given a repeat prime-time schedule. It seems as if everyone is talking about time-travel. By the evening, Russian bombers are photographed cruising above the English Channel. The American Ambassador demands a meeting with the British Home Secretary. The EU Commissioner for Innovation, Research and Science flies to London. Then reports begin to emerge that the UN is convening an emergency meeting of the Commission of Science and Technology in New York. The UN issue an official demand to the British government for full unrestricted access to both the machine and its creator, Brian, and everyone stops being so flippant. I am now very worried again. All my requests for access to a lawyer or even a phone call have been ignored. At least I have a TV.

'The Inventor' and 'the Test Subject' seem to be the names the media are using. Brian is shown over and over, twitching and stammering through various sections of his demonstration, although at no point is he named. I am shown entering the time-chamber, and the footage of my journey into the past is played, although the newscasters don't quite know what to make of it. '*...And as you can see, the clock has changed,*' seems to be the best they can muster.

The BBC broadcast helicopter footage of an ominous looking flotilla of American warships crossing the Atlantic – a ‘defence fleet’, apparently. Sky News focusses on the Russian bombers.

I stay in my room, eating sandwiches. Nobody visits me unless they are bringing food. I am still too intimidated to ask them very much, and when I do I don’t get any real answers.

*Transparency* is the keyword that the diplomats on TV are using, while *paradox*, *catastrophe* and *apocalypse* seem more popular with the rest of the media. According to a shock-jock DJ on the radio, #*Lottery* and #*KillHitler* are trending on Twitter. In between reruns of *Quantum Leap* and *The Time Tunnel*, I find a parliament-style debate show with members of the public sitting on opposing sides, facing each other across a colourful set. A rabbi in a wide-brimmed black hat has the floor. A fluffy microphone hovers uncertainly above his head:

‘Now that we have the technology, we can go back and change things, make things right. We can stop the horror and make right the ultimate wrong.’

The host gives the rabbi an earnest look, nods sagely and points a second microphone towards him. ‘Stop the Holocaust, you’re saying. Go back and stop Hitler?’

There is a general murmur of approval and some clapping and then a voice cries out:

‘No! You can’t do that.’

There is a collective gasp from the audience.

The host turns around to find the heckler. ‘You disagree, sir? I have to warn you we won’t condone any anti-Semitism. We’re a family show.’

‘I’m not racist, I’m a realist. Think it through. You want to go back to, what? 1905, something like that, find Hitler and Hess and anyone connected with the birth of the Nazi Party, and then stop them, kill them? Yes?’

‘Yes,’ the rabbi says with fierce conviction. Another ripple of applause begins but then dies as the heckler continues.

‘So, there are never any Nazis. There is never any war. All the Jews murdered at their hands survive.’

‘Yes!’

‘And the soldiers on both sides – not in parts of the Far East, of course, but in Europe... along with a great many Russian and American servicemen – none of them die.’

‘That’s right.’

‘And so, many of them, they have children, and their children have children; children who were never born. And anyone who *was* born as a result of the war, by the vast movement of peoples, they won’t be conceived at all, but others would, in this new peaceful Europe. There would probably be no Israel, maybe no end to Imperialism. No Space Race. Vast numbers of people who exist now or have existed would not exist, they’d never have been born. And there’ll be vast numbers of others who *are* born. Everything will change. You might well rid history of Auschwitz, but you could take with it the Summer of Love, Nelson Mandela and very possibly yourselves, your families. Can anyone in this room confidently say that had the Second World War not occurred that they would still exist? If we were to go back and do this, as you say – stop Hitler – then none of us here has the slightest clue what would happen, what would remain. Nobody can know.’

That’s when I turn off.

The following morning, the third day after the demonstration, I am driven once more in the windowless van. I ask for a lawyer over and over, but the security, whoever they are, don’t respond with anything more than the occasional cold stare. There is little point resisting. I wonder if I have the chance whether I have the courage to try and run. Probably not.

We arrive at some kind of manor house, not particularly big but built to look impressive. It has a long, secluded driveway and a poorly-kept lawn. Inside, the house is decorated as I had half-expected: opulent but a little mismatched. Gilt-framed mirrors and computers sit side by side. Cameras stud the ceiling cornices. I am led further, still by the same two silent security personnel, down creaking floorboards into a large parlour or state room, I’m not sure what it would be called. It has now been converted into a boardroom.

The committee are seated around a long table, each of them has a sheaf of papers and a desk lamp. Although it is not quite the afternoon, the room is westward-facing, making the outside light dim. And so, the lamps are lit, illuminating the polished walnut table, creating a glare and casting the edges of the room into shadow. I am quietly seated at the back, by the wall, next to a stenographer. She is the only woman in the room. She manipulates her clunky-looking machine, making strange shapes with her fingers, like a pianist playing complicated chords. At the head of the table is a man in military uniform, replete with ribbons and bibbons. He seems like a general or a brigadier and is apparently holding court. Beside him are several men in nondescript suits, (lawyers, probably,) then a grey-haired man in tweed, and one in a corduroy jacket without a tie. Academics. There is also an Indian-looking man in half-moon spectacles, and the last one, who I recognise. He is a politician, a minister, I think. I can't remember which. None of them seem to notice my arrival; they are mid-discussion and don't appear to want interruption.

'Exactly what kind of experiments are you proposing, professor?' the military man asks the tweed.

'Causality. We need to better understand the concepts involved when changing elements of the past. Interventions, so to speak. I am envisaging something simple, with mice, initially. The machine and its science need to be subject to strict laboratory conditions.'

'But a laboratory controlled by whom?' one of the lawyers chips in.

'That's not for me to decide. While it is a British discovery, there are wider implications which can't easily be ignored.'

'These experiments aim to achieve what, precisely?' the military man asks.

'Knowledge, of course. To broaden the field of human knowledge and understanding.'

'But with what intent? You spoke about "interventions".' The general frowns across the table.

'I am speaking scientifically, mathematically. Not ideologically. We should, of course, consider our duty as scientists. I think that, ultimately, we will need to develop temporal laws. Not merely scientific laws like thermodynamics, but legal laws to control and restrict its use.'

‘Is there precedent? Gavin?’ The minister turns to the lawyers, and one of them replies in a soft Scottish accent: ‘Well, now, there’s space law? Moon law? The 1967 Outer Space Treaty. It’s all a bit shaky from a lawyer’s perspective. It’s governed a lot like maritime law and international waters. I don’t know if it would apply here, but we have begun preliminary drafts for legislation, very early days, of course, but I think it’s important we take point, try to maintain some control of the language. Temporal Law is a new field and there are already some very exciting young PhDs and junior associates looking to create specialties.’

The minister doesn’t seem satisfied. He looks down at his notes again while the general continues:

‘Time-travel isn’t about borders, not geographical borders. Incursions into the past could have ramifications which can’t be contained by usual means. Would we even know if there had been a... what did you call it, professor, an intervention?’

‘This is my point, precisely,’ the professor replies, his tone rising with excitement. ‘We need to understand the practical physics of causality, not just the theory. But if you wanted me to guess, I would say no. In all likelihood we would not know. Logic would suggest that all events following the intervention would be, shall we say, re-written. But would these events then proceed in the same way a second time? Would unconnected events with unclear outcomes go the same way as before? Across the whole world? Would the same horses win the same races, or would the new reality, the post-intervention reality, consider each variable to be fresh and unresolved? Would every horse now have the same chance of success or failure as before, or would the conclusions, the winners, always be the same? And how would we know if they had changed or not? These are the key conundrums which we can now, for the first time, begin to unravel.’

Unravel. I don’t like that word. Things unravelling is what I’m worried about. I think about the TV debate show, about the rabbi and the realist. I think about my grandfathers – both of them soldiers. I think about how they met my grandmothers. If there is to be one of these interventions, if the

Second World War is averted and never occurs, then I will never have existed. I've been thinking about it all day.

'But what then, professor? After you've conducted your mice tests and published your new *Laws of Temporal-dynamics*, what then? What are we going to use this thing for?'

'Well, minister, that is what we are gathered here to decide, surely,' the professor replies.

'I'm sorry to interrupt, but does anybody actually know how it works?' It is the Indian man in half-moon glasses. It's the first thing I have heard him say.

'That's what we are discussing, or trying to,' the professor snaps irritably.

'Not the theory, the machine. Does anybody know how the machine actually works, from an engineering perspective? And this anchor thing that the inventor mentioned at the demonstration, what do we really know about that? Why isn't the inventor here? Or why aren't we wherever he is?'

'He's not been well. He passed out. The doctors say that he is mildly anaemic and has a slight fever. It seems that he found the public demonstration to be quite stressful. The doctors have advised that he should rest for another day before we speak to him. He's under close surveillance.'

'But in the meantime, is anyone investigating the machine itself?' the Indian engineer asks.

'No. It's locked down. From what I understand it is being held under guard. Along with about a hundred cameras. This way nobody has to worry about trust. We can't do anything with it. Nothing. Nobody will back down. The Chinese are adamant, and the Russians. The White House too. Nobody knows what anybody wants but they definitely don't want us anywhere near it. Now the Vatican have got involved, and Iran. It's becoming a real a mess.'

'Cameras?' the general says. 'Which department authorised that?'

'They are not online yet...'

'Online?!' The general's eyebrows shot up behind his fringe.

'Right now, we are preparing for just about anything. The EU, the UN, everybody wants access. This way we can keep them happy for now.'

The engineer removes his half-moon spectacles then speaks up again: 'But if we don't have any access to the machine or the inventor or any data of any kind, then what is this committee expected to achieve?'

'Well, we do have the Test Subject here,' the professor says.

Test Subject. I realise they mean me. Over the next ten-minutes, I describe my experiences during Brian's demonstration, if 'during' is the correct word. I can't tell them much more than they already know. They have already studied my phone footage in exhaustive detail. They ask me to clarify some of the shakier moments of the filming, which I do, but they don't seem very pleased with my answers.

'What can you tell us about the equation?' The professor asks me. I don't understand, but he presses me anyway: 'What can you tell us about the equation, the formula? What is it that he typed into the machine? There are mathematical symbols on the keypads—' He lifts an electronic tablet, its screen filled with a frozen image from my recording. It is a zoomed-in close-up of the dashboard panel, the buttons labelled with hand-written symbols. '—but we can't make out what he's typing.'

'Neither could I,' I say. 'All I saw is what I filmed.'

'Well, then,' the general says with a slight sigh. 'I think that'll be all.'

There is an air of disappointment in the room, of anti-climax. I begin to stand but the professor stops me: 'Just a moment, sorry. Only, while you are here...'

'Yes?' I sit down again.

'There *must* be something else. There simply must be. The inventor – he has to have said *something* to you.' He sounds desperate. Like he can sense something slipping away.

'It's all on the video there,' I tell them. 'It's on loads of videos. There must have been half-a-dozen recording, at least.'

'Did you change anything, then? Did you interact with the past and interfere with the future? In some minor way, perhaps?'

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



'Are you absolutely sure? You didn't touch anything?'

'Only the blinds. The Venetian blinds – I closed them. I didn't want anyone in the carpark to see me.'

'And you didn't see yourself?'

'No, I did see myself. I said so.'

'But did you look *up* and see yourself? Did Past-you see Present-you? Can you remember?' He leans forward, eager.

'It's difficult to remember,' I say, because it is. The memory seems blurred. Having seen it from one angle, I imagine I saw it from the other angle as well, but maybe I didn't. It feels artificial. Like the memory of a dream. 'I don't think so,' is all I say.

'Is any of this relevant?' the general asks, bluntly.

The professor ignores him. He stares at me intently. 'In the footage, all of the footage, the farthest blind is always drawn shut, the slats closed.'

'But I did that. I closed them. You can see me do it in my video.'

'Yes, we can. And that is why, when everybody arrived at the demonstration, yourself included, the blinds were already shut. You had just closed them, moments before.'

'Before I went back.'

'Or forward, to be precise. But you have no memory of the blinds being open before you went into the machine?'

'No. I don't think so. The video is better at remembering than I am.' I try a smile, but nobody responds in kind.

'Fascinating,' The professor drifts quietly into thought.

'Can't we at least investigate it, just a little? Find out what powers it, at least?' says the engineer. He can't seem to decide whether to wear his glasses or not.

'No, not yet,' the general replies. 'But neither can anyone else. Reverse-engineering is a serious prospect here. We know that Beijing have already sanctioned a billion-dollar time-machine

programme, the Pentagon too, no doubt. They will all be desperate for any information they can get.' He looks directly at me and repeats himself: 'any information at all.'

'Well, of course. Anyone who examines it will get a vast leap forward in terms of development, surely,' the engineer says. 'This has become the new Space Race. And that inventor, what's his name? He's the new Werner Von Braun.' He can't hide the excitement in his voice, the wonder.

'So unfortunate that it was leaked,' the minister says quietly, as though to himself.

The professor clears his throat: 'As a matter of fact, minister. We have begun to formulate a preliminary plan. It is very much in the developmental stages, but we have some top minds contemplating the viability of altering the circumstances surrounding the initial discovery. If we can take control of the device, even for testing purposes, then theoretically we could go back to before the demonstration—'

The general raises his hand and throws a stern look: 'Professor, this is neither the time nor place to discuss classified matters. I will hear the full and proper briefing later, at a more appropriate time.' The general then turns to me, the lowest security rating in the room. 'Thank you for your testimony,' he says. 'You're dismissed.' And with a curt nod, he looks away.

'I'm sorry.' I hold up my hand. 'Did you say "go back to before the demonstration"? You mean try and secure the device before it becomes public knowledge?'

'Precisely.' The professor clicks his fingers and points. He looks like a teacher.

'But you can't do that,' I say. Two security guards suddenly flank my chair.

'Thank you,' the general says again, in a clear cold tone, louder than before. 'That will be all.'

I feel a hand on my shoulder, but I don't move. 'That's my life,' I say, 'my memories. They're mine. Anyway, you'd create a, what-do-you-call-it, a paradox. How would you know to go back and secure the time-machine if you never saw my footage, never even knew about the demonstration?'

'Well... as I say,' the professor begins to mumble. His excitement seems to have ebbed leaving a kind of nervous uncertainty. 'We have top minds working—'

'You can't just re-write my past.'

The minister interjects: 'Hold on a moment. I'm just a little confused about how all of this will work. I mean, I understand the need for us to have access, and a say in how the legalities are drafted, but I wonder if we aren't being just a little hasty with talk of interventions and classified operations. My grand-daughter had a baby the day before yesterday.'

'I don't think I understand your point, minister.' The general speaks slowly and gently, trying to hide his irritation, and the minister continues:

'If we change the past – go back to get the machine – then, I don't know, maybe something might...'

The general lets out an audible sigh and the minister tails off.

'I'm sorry, minister, can we please just stick to what we know?'

'But you don't know,' I say, I almost shout. 'You don't know what you know. That's the problem. Only Brian knows.' I am pulled to my feet so swiftly my chair falls backwards.

'Wait,' the general says, narrowing his glare, and my guards halt. 'You *do* know something,' he says.

But before I can plead ignorance yet again, the man in the corduroy jacket stands up. He's blonde and looks younger than the others. 'I'd like to raise a suggestion,' he declares. His sudden movement demands attention. Even the general stops to listen to him: 'I think we should destroy the machine now, before anyone has the opportunity to study it. I think we should forbid any form of temporal experimentation anywhere. We should ban time-travel like chemical weapons.' The young man in the corduroy jacket remains standing. For a moment, nobody has anything to say. It is as though they are having difficulty processing this new option.

'That seems somewhat hasty,' the professor eventually says.

'Reckless,' the Scottish lawyer adds, angrily. 'It's one of a kind.'

The young man in corduroy continues in a firmer tone: 'Don't you see? Humans are linear beings. We're designed to perceive time and reality in one direction.' He is lecturing. Switched into a

familiar pattern. He uses his hands for emphasis. 'Events occur and then they have occurred; they can't be changed. If we can change the unchangeable, the results could be catastrophic.'

'Your concerns have been noted, Doctor,' the general says with a note of finality.

'The potential for misuse is significant and totally unpredictable,' the doctor continues, speaking faster. 'You must realise, the implications could be—'

'*Thank you, Doctor Briggs.*' There is silence in the room for a moment and then Doctor Briggs slouches back into his seat. The general looks over his notes, flicking through the file. My guards wait patiently for the nod, still gripping my shoulders. I can't tell if they are breathing or not.

The general keeps on checking his papers.

Without his chairmanship, questions and answers are muttered across the table – lawyer to scientist, engineer to politician, and back again:

'What about the inventor? What's stopping him from making another one?'

'We make it illegal, and then we keep an eye on him. Keep him controlled. You could give him a job in the government.'

'I don't think the Chinese would like that, or the Russians.'

'It's none of their business. He's British.'

'Ah, but you know how the Americans are – what's yours is ours, what's ours is our own.'

'It doesn't matter,' I say, silencing the melee. 'It won't make any difference, none of it.' My guards take the initiative and start marching me again, but the general countermands them:

'Wait. What do you mean?' he says.

'You can't legislate against something which can delete the past,' I say, twisting to face them. 'The Chinese or the Russians or whoever, they'll travel back to before all of this happened, before your laws are written.'

'Hang on though, he's right,' say the other lawyer, the one who isn't Scottish. 'They could be here any second.' He looks about the room in sudden alarm. 'Couldn't they?'

'Ah, but the fact that they *haven't* stopped us already would suggest that they never do. Isn't that right, professor?' asks the Scot.

'Well... perhaps... but... I think I need to think about this.'

'Thank you, for your... contributions. I think we've heard enough,' the general says, and I am finally ushered to the door, but as we reach it, my security and I, the door swings open and a young woman stands in the way. She is holding a Post-it note with both hands. She looks pale and nervous.

'What is it, Sandra?' the minister calls over

'It's... it's Brian, sir,' she says.

'Brian? Brian the inventor?'

'Yes, sir. He's dead, sir. He had a series of seizures this morning. Doctors were there as it happened, but they couldn't save him. Some kind of aneurism, they think. I'm terribly sorry,' she adds.

Nobody speaks. Sandra backs away and closes the door. My guards release me at some imperceptible signal from their general. And then, one by one, the men at the table gather up their papers and files, they switch off their lamps and make their way quietly outside, until only the stenographer remains, packing up her gadget in the gloom.

The intermittent sound of gravel under car wheels can be heard for the next half an hour.

It has now been three months since Brian died. The UN has arranged twenty-four-hour public surveillance on the machine. It can be accessed online by anyone in the world. It doesn't seem to be very popular, but those who want to see what's going on can take a look. The machine, however, doesn't work. Officially, it never did.

After the International Committee had finally been able to agree on terms for an initial investigation, they discovered very little. From what I can gather, Brian's time-machine shouldn't work, it shouldn't be possible. The electronics are relatively simple and the mechanics are quite crude. Nothing appears to be powering it. It shouldn't work.

I keep logging on to the surveillance website to see if they have found anything new, but there's never anybody there, just a few yawning guards wearing the sky-blue helmets of the UN. Brian's machine is under a dust-sheet and any talk of temporal disruptions or catastrophic paradoxes has faded like so many other old-fashioned news fads. The delegates and experts, observers and diplomats have all gone home. The fleets and fighter wings are back in their bases, ready for some new calamity to loom.

Unless they ever do manage to get the machine to work, which, without Brian seems highly unlikely, then I will have the distinction of being the only living man to have travelled both forwards and backwards in time. But I haven't much of a story to tell, not like Brian's, and nobody seems particularly interested; not the scientists, not the newspapers, not even the MOD. I wrote to them last week to tell them all about my hand and how it's started to shake all of the time, like I've got some kind of palsy. But they haven't written back.

## A Thousand Bulbs of Light

Edward Madison stood at the curtains, beside his Christmas tree, looking out at the house opposite.

‘Hannah? Have you seen what the Latimers have done?’

Hannah Madison was sitting at the coffee table, tying a wreath of winter evergreens and holly berries. ‘You mean their decorations? Of course I have. I think the International Space Station can see them. Oh, well, each to their own, I suppose.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry, Hannah. I don’t mind a bit of live-and-let-live, but this is too much, far too much. This is beyond the pale. I mean, it’s not “each to their own”, is it? It’s the whole street suffering the Latimers. It’s pollution, that’s what it is. Light pollution.’

A car passed between Edward and the offending house. The sudden movement made him flinch and duck back, behind the curtain.

‘There should be laws. Like building regulations,’ he said. ‘I mean, just look at it – there must be hundreds of lights, thousands even. Not to mention the ornaments. It’s like bloody Disneyland.’

‘It must cost them a fortune,’ Hannah said. ‘I still don’t know what he does.’

Edward scratched his beard. ‘I always thought he was an artist or something, a musician maybe. One of those computer ones, all clicks and beeps, no real instruments. That’s what I thought. I don’t know why.’ He came away from the window and sat down on the sofa, beside his wife.

‘I seem to recall her telling me she’d been a teacher back before their boy was born, a maths teacher. It *is* a boy, isn’t it? I can’t remember. To be honest, I’ve hardly spoken to them since they moved in. There was that barbeque they did in the summer, the housewarming thing, do you remember?’

Edward wasn’t listening. ‘It shouldn’t be allowed,’ he said. ‘I should write to the council. What do you think? Should I write to the council? I think I should write to the council.’

‘They’re not doing any harm, though. Not really.’

'It's pollution, Hannah. Light pollution.'

'But it's not really worth it, is it? You hear about these things – feuds. They never go well, do they? They're always a lot more trouble than they're worth.'

'But, Hannah, if you give them an inch...'

'Then they take a mile, I know. But if you start a fight, then the lawyers take acres and acres. Better sometimes to just hand over the mile and be done with it.' Hannah wrapped twine around the bunches of leaves and fir, then pulled it tight. It began to open up like an iris, into a ring. She laid the wreath down on the polished tabletop. It looked like a crown. 'I wonder what he *does* do,' she said. 'They've invited us over for Christmas drinks, you know? It'll be a party by the looks of it. There's an invitation by the microwave. I was going to send our apologies with a jar of my chutney, but maybe we should go.'

'Go? Oh, I don't think so.' Edward stood up again and went back to the window. He pushed aside a bough of the Christmas tree to get a clearer view. It made the baubles tinkle softly. 'A party? Over there?' He looked back at his wife. 'No, I don't know about that.'

'I just thought it might make things easier, in the future. Perhaps next year, instead of writing to the council, we could, I don't know, maybe we could talk to them about it. We could talk to the whole street, even. See if we can't all compete for one of those civic prizes they do. Best dressed neighbourhood, or something. It's worth a thought.' She rotated the wreath on the table in front of her, trying to determine the best way to hang it. She frowned, squinted and cocked her head a little. 'Would you pop out and cut me some more holly? Three or four sprigs with good leaves.' Hannah handed him the secateurs, and Edward put his coat on.

Little flashing coloured dots reflected from the frosted soil of the flower beds and from the few remaining patches of snow, left huddling in the shade of the shrubberies. Even with his back to the road, Edward could still see the Latimers' lights. The hour chimed and an electronic 'ho, ho, ho,'



emanated from across the road. Without looking, he knew that their animatronic Santa would be doing a robotic dance. Edward viciously cut the holly sprigs and then tramped back inside.

Martin and Karen are having a PARTAY!

Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> at EIGHT.

Bring a BOTTLE or some MISTLETOE

and don't forget your DANCING SHOES

Edward dropped the little card back beside the microwave and then called into the sitting room. 'Are you really serious about going to this thing. Because I don't think—'

'Oh, come on. It might be nice to go out for a bit.'

'Not *there* it won't.'

'Just for half-an-hour, Edward. It's the night before Christmas Eve, it won't be difficult to make our excuses. Come on. I want to have a look at the place, see what they've done with it.'

'Put in a bar probably. And one of those disco balls. I'll bet we're only invited so we don't phone the police about the noise.'

'Other neighbours will be there. The Morgans. You like *them*, don't you?'

'Alright then,' Edward said, sighing. 'I'll put on a tie,'

Forty-one minutes later, they were home again.

'That was simply chaos.' Edward hung up his coat.

'Oh, it wasn't that bad. They were all just having fun.'

Edward took his tie off. 'I feel irradiated. I think those lights have given me a tan. Either that, or it's the uranium they must have it all hooked up to.'

‘Actually,’ Hannah said. ‘I asked Karen how they powered it without a generator, or blowing all the fuses. She said they got in an electrician. He put some kind of booster box in the attic, it all goes through that. Can you imagine? Getting in professionals. That’s real commitment.’

‘Ridiculous. It’s all so garish. It’s like bloody Blackpool or America. I can’t bear it.’

‘The house was nice, inside. No disco ball or anything. I liked their Christmas tree, oh, and the downstairs bathroom – they’ve done a really good job with it.’

Hannah sat down and picked up the bumper-sized Christmas *Radio Times*. ‘Let’s see what’s on tomorrow,’ she said.

Edward stood in front of the mirror which hung above the fireplace. He ran his hands through his thinning silver hair, and looked at the red lines in the white of his eyes.

‘I thought you said the Morgans were going to be there,’ Edward said, without looking away. ‘I didn’t recognise anyone from the street at all. The whole thing just made me feel old.’

‘You’re not old, you’re distinguished. A wise owl. A white one, obviously. Maybe one with spectacles.’

‘I’m going to bed,’ Edward said. ‘Don’t be late coming up. You’ll wake me.’

But there was no danger of that. The lights from across the street were still on, glowing through the bedroom blinds, flashing. The gloss magnolia window sill kept changing colour as the cherry-red lights spelling ‘Merry’ were joined by the pine-green ‘XMAS’, every few seconds. Edward closed his eyes and listened to the low bass sounds of the party, seeping across the night.

‘Two hours,’ Edward said, sitting up and waking his wife. ‘Two hours, I’ve been trying to sleep. Nothing but thump, thump, thump. How long is that bloody thing going on for?’ He climbed out of bed and got dressed. Hannah rolled over, trying to ignore him.

The door to the Latimers’ was ajar. Someone who Edward didn’t recognise was standing on the front lawn, smoking, next to an inflatable snowman. The music was still playing, but softly now. It seemed

as if in the time it had taken Edward to get his shoes on, they had lowered the volume. He crossed the street and went inside, nevertheless.

The hallway was empty, but the doors were all wide open. Edward could see people sleeping on sofas and bean-bags, or else talking in hushed tones over wine dregs and dried-up canapés. There was no immediate sign of either Karen or Martin. The lights were on upstairs, so Edward decided to look. He moved aside for a couple who were coming down. They said goodnight and merry Christmas. Edward agreed with a thumbs-up. The couple then retrieved their coats from the heap on the newel post and let themselves out. Edward kept going.

Upstairs, he found closed doors, and no sound of any muffled conversations, although there was some snoring. He began to head down stairs, when he noticed something. Balanced in the corner, there was a short pole with an L-shaped end, like an over-sized Allen key. He had one just the same in his own house, stored in the airing cupboard. It was designed to open the catch to the attic access, and to hook the built-in ladder which was folded away inside. Edward looked up. On the ceiling, beside the lampshade, he could see a neat square door, just like in his own home. He stared at it for a moment and wondered.

Alone, on the landing, surrounded by bedroom doors, Edward decided what to do.

The attic was dark, but Edward could just make out a white string, like a bathroom light switch, dangling from the roof insulation. It lit a low-watt bulb on the far side of the loft, casting long shadows of boxes and crates. There were suitcases and a roll of carpet, a baby crib half-covered with a sheet, and, in the middle of it all, not too far from the entrance hatch, was a shiny red children's bicycle; about half the height of a standard bike. Behind that was an enormous cluster of wires, tied together in a huge plastic braid. The wires snaked away to a blue cylinder that looked like a barrel, or a little boiler. Edward climbed the last few steps and crawled into the attic.

Unlike his own loft, the Latimers' attic wasn't fully boarded. Instead there were planks crisscrossing the ceiling beams like railway sleepers. Edward realised that getting over to the booster

box, or even getting to his feet, might be a task difficult to negotiate. Difficult, but not impossible, he thought, and slowly stood up to half his height.

After a few short careful steps, Edward felt his knees straining under the effort walking in a crouch. The booster box was just ahead of him, twinkling with green lights. How appropriate, Edward thought. Then his foot slipped between two planks, through the insulation foam and the soft brittle ceiling bellow. He tumbled to one side, as his leg slid through the new hole, up to his thigh. He clutched around for something to hang on to, and grabbed a box with his flailing left hand. It tipped, but righted again, acting as a counter-balance. His other hand thrust down to break his fall and followed his leg, right through the floor.

Edward was leaning at an acute angle, using most of his strength to stay as he was. With a little shifting of his knee he was able to get stable enough to let go of the box and withdraw his arm. It left a small dark jagged hole. And then a light came on. Edward didn't move, he held his breath. He realised his leg was dangling into the room below and his cover was blown. He peered into the hole and saw the face of a little boy blinking up through a gentle rain of plaster dust.

Edward tried to pull his leg free but it wouldn't budge very far. He needed to haul himself, at the same time, but there was nothing really sufficient to get any purchase on. He wriggled around, twisting himself, like a corkscrew. He heard footsteps, climbing the aluminium ladder. Quiet pings, and then a voice:

'My name is Thomas David Latimer. People call me Tom. I'm six-years old and seven months, but then... you know that already, don't you.' He held out his hand, as if to shake.

Edward couldn't reach, but he waved back. 'It's... very nice to meet you, Tom. I'm afraid I'm a little stuck here. Do you think-?'

Tom suddenly let out a long gasp and pointed at the red bicycle. 'Is that for me?'

'Well, it's not mine,' Edward said.

'Really? Is it really for me?'

'Of course it is.'

‘Thank you, thank you. Thank you so much.’

‘Don’t thank me,’ Edward said. ‘You must have been a good lad to deserve a present like this.’

Tom nodded.

‘But you’re not to say anything until Christmas,’ Edward continued. ‘Understand? You mustn’t spoil the surprise.’

Tom looked serious and nodded again.

Edward winked. ‘Come on, now. Give me a hand,’ he said. ‘Can you move that piece of board? Just a little bit nearer, then I can lever myself up. You should be able to manage, there’s a good lad.’

With some shifting and shoving, Tom was able to move a piece of wood, the size of a chessboard, over towards Edward, who then positioned it between two of the roof beams. It gave him a handhold. Enough for him to pull his leg free of the ceiling plaster and to clamber entirely back into the attic and back over to the hatch. Tom climbed down the ladder and Edward followed.

He left the booster box and the Christmas lights alone.

Tom stood at the bottom of the ladder, holding it steady with his little hands. Edward climbed down as quietly as he could manage. Then stowed the ladder away, closed the hatch and replaced the L-shaped pole. Tom waited patiently, never taking his eyes from Edward.

Edward brushed himself down, and rubbed the flesh of his thigh, trying to determine if he was any more than merely scraped. The little boy was still watching him, wide-eyed and nervous.

‘Are you...? Are you alright, Tom? Do your parents do this sort of thing a lot?’ Edward asked.

‘What sort of thing?’

‘All of this.’ Edward waved his hands in vague directions. ‘Parties,’ he said.

‘Not really. Only at Christmas, I think, and for my birthday. I had a Star Wars birthday last time, but... I suppose you know about that, too.’

‘It sounds nice.’

‘It was. It was really fun.’

‘I really should get going, and you should be asleep.’

'I know,' Tom said mischievously. He began creeping back down the corridor towards the stairs. Edward followed him.

The light in the hall downstairs had been turned off. So had the music. The coat heap looked much slimmer than before. Tom turned to Edward and placed a single finger across his lips. Sssshhhh.

Edward agreed with a thumbs-up.

Together, they sneaked down to the hall, being careful not to creak any of the steps too loudly. The sound of several people snoring breathed throughout the house, like wind in a forest. Tom crept on, towards the front door, past the open entrances to both front reception rooms. Light spilled out from one of the doorways. Edward stopped: no-man's-land. The last few meters before he was at the front door. Safe and free. Tom waited, expectantly. He looked like a little maître de. Edward held his breath and crept across the searchlights. Nothing happened. No-one stirred.

'Oh, I nearly forgot,' Tom said in a hushed but excited voice. Then he scampered back up the hallway and through a door.

Edward froze. He could still hear snoring coming from every room. He looked at the front door, which had been locked and chained. Carefully, he slid the catch across, and then crouched down to lift the deadbolt. Finally, he turned the stout brass key which stuck out from the lock, and heard the mechanism click like a gunshot.

He waited for a moment, feeling his heart juddering in his throat, but the snoring sounds continued from all around without missing a breath. Edward smoothed down his moustache and beard and then swallowed. He gripped the doorknob and twisted it as quietly as he could manage. It began to turn.

'Would you like a mince pie?' Tom said, and Edward stopped. The little boy was standing there in the hallway, proudly holding a plate in both hands. There was single shortcrust pastry pie in the centre, dusted with icing sugar. Tom smiled broadly and inched the plate closer.

Edward let go of the door handle. 'Well... I suppose so,' he whispered. 'That's very kind of you, Tom. Thank you.' Edward took the mince pie and bit into it.

Tom watched the crumbs catch in Edward's beard.

'It's very nice,' Edward said. 'I'll take it with me. Now you should get back off to bed. Quietly, though. And lock this up behind me. Do you know how?'

Tom nodded, and Edward turned back to the door, but Tom stopped him again. He reached out a tentative hand and tugged on Edward's sleeve, then fished in his dressing gown pocket. Before Edward could ask him what he wanted, Tom had pulled out a single carrot, like an orange wand. He offered it to Edward.

'You mustn't forget this.' Tom waved the carrot. 'For Rudolph.'





## Resolution

I killed a man once, on New Year's Eve. I was drunk, like everybody else, and I was driving. It was 1979, before breathalysers, before Clunk Click. He was in the road, his head bowed, shuffling rather than walking. I turned the corner too fast and didn't have time to stop; I didn't even try, not until after it was already over. I watched him make one or two little shambling steps before he slammed against the bonnet of my Ford Princess. It was beige; a company car. I hadn't had it long. He broke the driver's side headlight and the indicator before getting dragged under the car. It bucked twice as I drove over him, making my stomach lift, like a humpback bridge.

I stopped as quickly and safely as I could manage. The tyres screeched and left tracks on the road. It is the only time I have ever done that. Never before or since have I left tyre rubber on the road like that. It looked strange, I remember, seeing the two black trails leading directly to my back wheels. As if I were one of those paint-roller cars that do the road markings. Strange. I'd never seen skid marks attached to a vehicle, only the traces left behind – a suggestion of an accident or a high-speed chase. Now, whenever I see them, they always make me slow down.

I peered at the body. From the short distance in the dark, I couldn't see much. Just a dark shape, huddled in the middle of the carriageway. It was obscured by a heavy grey winter coat; I remembered that from before, from through the windscreen. I held my hand to my mouth. The sight and the thought of it all made me heave a few times, but I'd already been sick at the party and didn't have much left to bring up.

There was nobody around. I was on a stretch of road between two pubs, both were brightly lit and still carousing, but neither were very close. One on each horizon. The rest of the street was empty. All boutique shops and cafes; every one of them closed, some of them shuttered.

The body was the wrong shape. It was face down with one leg stuck out at an impossible angle. I could see the tyre impression running across the coat; I could see the furrow it had ploughed. Lumps

stuck up from beneath the fabric, lumps which shouldn't have been there. It was a mess. I stood over it and looked down. There was a grey beard and long straggling hair, matted with blood that was already turning syrupy. Cutting through the butcher smell, was a rank tang of vagrancy, thick and choking.

I reversed down my tyre trail and stopped just short of him this time. I got out, rolled him over and lifted him from under the armpits. He was heavy and unwieldy. His weight seemed to shift, to roll and fall as I manoeuvred him, like a half-filled sack of coal. By the time I had him semi-upright and slumped into the boot of my car, I was slick with his blood; my hands and shirt, my thighs, even my neck and chin. I managed to lift his legs, which made horrible unsettling noises, and folded them into the boot along with the rest of him. I saw a group of patrons staggering out of the pub ahead; four of them, all men by the look of it, but they were too far away to tell. I decided to turn around, avoid driving past them, and take the longer route home.

We had agreed to plant a tree for the New Year. Kayla, my daughter, was very excited and had insisted we go and pick one out on the day after Boxing Day. She decided on an apple tree; a handsome sapling with all round growth and a sturdy-looking trunk for its size. I was quite impressed with her selection. We bought it and took it home to show her mother.

'We can't plant it yet, darling,' Emily told Kayla. 'It won't be New Year for a few more days. Mister Apple Tree will have to stay in his tub for now. But he won't mind.'

'It's a girl,' Kayla announced before slamming the door and rushing up to her room.

'Don't worry,' I said. 'She's got plenty of new things to keep her occupied.' And we thought no more of it, but Kayla was determined. She spent the next few days in a quiet tantrum, stony-faced and stroppy. Emily remained firm: 'A New Year's Tree is a New Year's Tree. We can't plant it until nineteen-eighty. Doesn't that sound strange, "nineteen-eighty"? It's a special New Year, this one, a new decade. That makes it a special tree. Can't spoil the magic, can we?'

Kayla agreed. She watered the tree-tub every morning under Emily's watchful eye. 'Not too much,' she cautioned, and Kayla would stop, dutifully examining her work and watching the water drain into the soil.

That was why we had a hole in the garden.

On January 1<sup>st</sup>, before breakfast, Kayla would be expecting me to be in the garden with a shovel, adding Missus Apple Tree to our family. The weather reports had said it would be frosty but with no rain overnight, and I knew I'd have a hangover after the party, so I wanted to keep the heavy labour to a minimum. That is why there was already a hole in the garden that night. It was too shallow for a body, but it was a start, a good start.

I took off my coat, rolled up my sleeves and finished the digging. The whole thing took less than an hour. Emily looked out from the bedroom window at one point, but the light soon went off again once she saw what I was doing. I was drunk and I was digging.

I used a wheelbarrow to move some of the earth. Then I used it to move the man across the lawn and into the pit. I covered him in several bin liners, then the rest of the earth went back into the ground. I left a big enough hole for the sapling so that Emily wouldn't suspect anything, and to save me the bother of more digging in the morning.

We decanted the sapling from its tub on New Year's Day at just after seven in the morning, well before anyone on our street had showed any sign of being awake. Kayla was red-faced with excitement and the cold. Emily stood just inside the opened back door, wearing my duffle coat over her nightie and slippers. I dug over the soil a little to loosen it and to give the impression of a full and formal ceremony. Just the surface, I didn't want to delve any deeper. I had visions of unearthing a pale-skinned hand or a long lock of lank hair.

I put the spade aside and took the sapling by the trunk. Kayla stabbed at the earth around its roots with a trowel.

'Hold the tub,' I said. She knelt down and wrapped both arms around the big plant pot, hugging it tightly. I pulled the tree upwards and it came free, gripping a huge clod of earth in its juvenile roots.

'Put her in, Dad. Put her in the hole,' Kayla said over and over.

I lowered the sapling into the centre of the hole. 'You'll have to hold her steady, Kayla, like I am.'

Kayla took over, grasping the trunk in both of her little hands and then leaning her weight against it, to keep it upright. I moved shovel after shovel of earth onto the roots, covering them, and the grave.

'Can we have breakfast now?' Emily called. She seemed less concerned with New Year's Magic than she had been the previous week. Kayla clapped her hands to brush away what dirt she could and then ran over to Emily. After taking off our shoes and coats, we ate our first meal of the nineteen-eighties together.

I stopped drinking. It began as a resolution, but it took until later that March to properly take hold. Wine was the last to go. After that, I stayed sober for most of Kayla's childhood.

She grew quickly over the years, and she grew tall. So did her apple tree. It dominated the garden, casting long shadows in the early evening. We held barbeques and birthday parties there, in the garden, beneath the tree. We spread rugs on the lawn in summer and built a family of snowpeople in the winter. Kayla would sit and read with her back against the trunk, telling it stories.

When she was eleven, the tree had a bough sturdy enough to hold a swing, and so I built one for her birthday. It's still there, just like the body tangled under the roots. Still there.

Emily left me in eighty-seven and moved in with a man from Surrey called Angus. She divorced me, took Kayla away, and then married Angus two years later, in eighty-nine, when Kayla was fifteen.

Angus had always liked scuba diving and had convinced Emily to like it too. She died on their honeymoon in the Galapagos Islands, after a problem with her air regulator. Kayla had been staying

with me at the time; jealous that she couldn't go on holiday with her mother, but glad to be back at the old house.

With Kayla living so far away, I'd realised that the court-approved weekend visitations wouldn't be fair; too disruptive. So I always came to visit her. I would drive down first thing Saturday morning and then head back again at night. Sometimes I'd get a hotel, but as she got older she wanted her weekends to herself a little more. I took what time I could, but she rarely came back to stay at the house. Since the divorce, Kayla and I had probably spent more time in the Guilford Odeon than at home, at her old home.

It was nearly New Year. Emily and Angus had wanted to have a Christmas wedding. She'd died on the 29<sup>th</sup> of December. I got a phone call from Angus' father, a man I'd never met. He told me my daughter's mother was dead, the woman I'd spent eleven years married to, the woman I'd loved since university.

Kayla and I stood outside under the apple tree, wrapped in our long coats and the home-knit Christmas scarves sent from my Auntie Julie.

'She looks good, doesn't she, Dad? The tree, I mean. She looks healthy and happy, even with all her leaves off. Do you think we'll get many apples this year? I hope so.'

She didn't see what I saw, what I always see. She didn't see the bones sticking out of the trunk, splintered and raw with marrow. She didn't see the stubbled skin fluttering on the tips of the branches, or smell the bitter tang of vagrancy. To her it was just a tree.

'Who was on the phone, Dad?' she said, stamping her feet to keep warm.

I reached out with both arms and held her close. She buried her face into my chest and I shut my eyes. I didn't want to tell her, not then, not that night. She was my little girl, and this was a special time of year; this was a special place, still special to her. I didn't want to spoil it, not then, not there. I just wanted all of it not to be true.



## The Eight-Ball

Hendrix was playing for the third time because it was easier to just press play again than to dig out a fresh CD. I was thirsty and I wanted a piss, but Terry had just lit another joint, so I stayed where I was, listening to the music and waiting for my turn.

‘The thing is, the more you buy, the cheaper it is. Quite a bit cheaper,’ Terry said, finally handing it over.

‘What is?’ I said.

‘You’ve not been listening at all, have you?’

‘Not really. I got the first bit. You’re going to a rave while I’m at my Dad’s wedding. I zoned out after that.’ I took a long drag on the joint. It was Moroccan Black hash. It was particularly pungent and gave off a thick haze of smoke. There were still little patches of the resin stuck to my fingertips, like dots of black Plasticine. I sucked my fingers and scraped the skin against my bottom teeth, then chewed the residue. It was soft and rubbery with a strong flavour, like cinnamon and soil.

‘Cocaine,’ Terry said.

‘What, the Eric Clapton song?’ I began singing the chorus into an imaginary mic. Terry reached over and took the joint out of my hand.

‘If we put in together, a couple of us, then we can get more. It makes the trip worthwhile, and it works out at a better price.’

‘What *are* you talking about?’ I said.

‘An eight-ball. It’s about twice the price of a gram, but we’d get three and a half grams.’

‘A what?’

‘An eight-ball. One eighth of an ounce.’

‘You mean a Henry? A Henry the Eighth? What’s a fucking eight-ball? You sound ridiculous.’ I started giggling.

'No, you idiot. Coke. Coke is sold as an eight-ball. Henry's are only for pot. Don't you watch movies?'

'Did you just say "pot"? What is this, the fucking Sixties? You sound like my mum.'

'Look, do you want any or not?'

'Yeah, of course I do. Now hand it back, Bogart.' I reached out a lazy hand.

'Not the damn joint, the coke. Brian's in and Will, but we need someone else. If we buy more, we get it cheaper.'

'What coke? What are you on about?'

'I hate you when you're stoned.' Terry passed back the stubby remnant of spliff. 'Just listen.' He leaned forward.

'I'm all ears.'

'Dave the Goth knows a bloke in Coventry, well his cousin knows him. We've sorted it all out.'

I drew down the last few puffs before the plume of smoke turned black as the roach started to burn. I crushed the whole thing into the ashtray before I realised that Terry was still talking:

'So, do you want any? Like a gram or whatever?'

'Of what? Cocaine?' I said.

'Yes,' he said.

'For real?' I said.

'Yes.' This time he spoke clearly and deliberately; like I was a child, or an idiot.

'Really for real?' I sat up a bit, but it turned out to be quite an effort, so I resumed my slouch on the sofa.

'Oh, fucking hell, mate. Do you, or don't you?'

'Alright then,' I waved a hand in surrender. 'Alright.' I reached for my wallet.

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I forgot all about it. I assumed I'd spent the cash on pizza or more dope, and only realised I was broke at the supermarket checkout. I had to put everything back. I went over to my parents that night for a catch up and a hearty meal, then I went to find Terry. He was out.

The following day, he turned up all jittery and excited. He waited until I'd made him a cup of tea before handing me a small rectangle of paper. It was a wrap. I'd seen them before. Little origami envelopes used to contain illicit powders, usually speed, but in this case, something else.

I hate speed. Dirty dirty speed. It tastes like paracetamol and hits you like a gallon of espresso. It is the yin to marijuana's yang; it is the antidote; it renders one temporarily immune to cannabis. The one thing speed is good for is housework, which I also hate, so for me, that's a lose-lose.

'What the fuck is this?' I said.

He looked pissed off, affronted. 'It's a gram. A good gram, at a fucking good price.'

'Jesus. I totally forgot about that. So, is this the...?'

'Yeah.' He beamed. 'I better go. Still have to see Will.'

'How did you get it?'

'Dave the Goth. Remember? Martin's mate from the pub. His cousin knows this guy in Cov. We went in Martin's car last night. A total one off. I'm not going back there, I tell you. The guy had a hunting knife stuck in the table. Just for show, you know, but still.'

I carefully unfolded the paper. It was torn from a glossy magazine. As it unfolded, it became more and more flimsy. I handled it carefully and slowly. I realised it was porn. Underneath the neat flattened square of white powder, was a creased nipple. I folded it away again, allowing the anonymous woman a small measure of dignity.

'You off in the morning?' Terry said.

'Yeah.'

'Family thing?'

'Wedding,' I said.

‘Well, have fun. Not as much fun as me though. I’m going ballistic. Rave the fuck on.’ Terry let himself out. He hadn’t touched the tea.

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Will got one gram, I got one gram, Terry got one gram and Brian got the half. Brian, by all accounts, reckoned it didn’t look like much, so he did it all in one go. He went to the pub, picked up the wrong pint and got beaten up. Brian’s fight involved three men, one bottle and two broken bones. He took five weeks to heal.

Terry got searched at the rave, which turned out to be more organised and legitimate than advertised. He then spent the night in a village police station. His dad picked him up in the morning and drove him straight to rehab. Actual rehab. For junkies.

Will only did a little bit of his share, but it was enough to turn him into an asshole. He pressured his new girlfriend for sex. He was so insistent that she phoned for a taxi and hasn’t called him since. I heard he tipped the rest of it down the sink.

My first time was different, though. I was careful. I was on my own. I’d eaten, but not heavily. No booze for days beforehand. I bought extra cigarettes and emptied the big ashtray. I rented some DVDs – a few old favourites and a couple of new ones. I was settled and comfortable, with my phone on silent.

I took the bathroom mirror off the wall and carried it through to the living room coffee table. I measured out a small amount of the powder. Just like in the movies. I chopped at it with the edge of my library card. I wasn’t really sure why. I moved the powder around a bit and then straightened it out: a little white line.

I rolled up a five pound note and stuck it up my nose. I was surprised at how easily it sucked up the granules. They vanished into my sinus, which burned cold and then went numb. I took the banknote out of my nostril and breathed deeply. Mucus slid down my throat, like I suppose it always

does, only this time I could taste it. Sort of. It was like a throat spray, only not minty. It numbed everything: my throat, the back of my tongue, and, of course, my sinus, which was a brand new sensation, and not a particularly pleasant one. With all of this going on, it took me a while to register the change to my heart rate and skin sensitivity. My eyes felt wider; my smile, broader. I prickled with anticipation. Adrenalin, I thought, but it didn't recede into tiredness, it remained. The excited prickle. It wasn't adrenalin, it was the cocaine.

I lit a cigarette and it tasted like honey. I felt great. I wanted more. The powder tantalised me. It was exciting and forbidden, but this was not what I'd decided beforehand. I stuck to the plan. I put the mirror back on the wall and hid the wrap inside a book. Then I started *Some Like it Hot*, which was better than ever, and enjoyed the buzz while it lasted.

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The second time was a week or so later. Same deal. I was settled and comfortable, in a safe space with pre-prepared entertainments. I played a computer game. A racing game. Spaceships hurtled down a winding rollercoaster track at incredible speeds while I played faster and faster dance music through headphones: Eighty beats per-second; one-hundred beats. I barely blinked all evening. But, just as before, it was only the one little white line. I still had most of it left. At least half, I guessed.

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The third time was only a few days later. Mark, my cousin, texted me: 'Are you coming round, then?'

We didn't have any plans that I was aware of, but I remembered he had this new video game. I'd played it with him once already. The game came with two light guns which we would shoot the screen with. It was strictly two-player. And he'd enjoyed it, so it stood to reason he would want another go.

I wondered. He was cool, a bit of a hippie. He'd find it funny. So I thought: what the hell?

I took the bathroom mirror down from the wall and got out my library card. I emptied the remainder of the powder and straightened it up: a not-so little white line. Then I put my coat on.

It was the best walk of my life. Every breath through my numb nose soaked into my chest, clean and pure and perfect. Every stride had purpose and grace. I was flowing. My shoulders were back, my head was high; my legs were longer than ever. I was fantastic.

I wanted the walk to be twice as long, to keep the blood going, coursing. I was a race horse, a greyhound. But Mark's home was not that far from mine, and after a cruelly short quarter-of-an-hour, I was there, at his house, at the party. My pulse sky-rocketed.

The first face I saw, through the window, was a grandma, Mark's wife's grandma. I forget her name. And then, there were kids. Kids in the kitchen. Jesus. My phone chirruped in my pocket. I only just heard it above the noise of blood in my ears. The whole world sounded like a seashell.

I fumbled my phone free and read the message. It was from my mum: 'Why outside? About 2 blow candles!'

Jesus. I looked up. My pupils wouldn't dilate properly, and it took a moment to adjust to the shift in contrast; from a tiny backlit screen, to the dour evening gloom, and then to the soft light of my cousin's kitchen window. I squinted and shaded my face with one hand. I could see Mum waving for me to come inside. My throat felt so numb I wondered if perhaps I'd been rendered mute. I could feel my heart thumping in my stomach, and nothing else. I had to think about my legs in order to get them going, and even then, they didn't seem as graceful as before. I tried not to stagger. I tried not to pass out. I tried to look normal.

A drink was thrust into my hand as soon as I walked through the door. My cousin's wife, Molly, wrapped herself around me in a bear-hug. She squeezed tightly and kept telling me, amidst waves of perfume, that she was glad I was there. She was worried I'd forgotten. It was all I could do to keep my wine from spilling.

It was Cava. Fizzy fizzy Cava. It looked like a very bad idea. I tried to hand it back but my cousin suddenly appeared and gave it back to me. Then he hugged me, forcing me to repeat the juggling act, only this time I was choking with aftershave. He started talking, telling me about his work, asking me questions about mine. Mostly, all I could hear was the seashell. I breathed faster and faster, felt hotter and hotter. I tried to get my coat off, but my niece grabbed my leg, hugging my thigh. She wiped her chocolate-smearred face against my trouser until she was clean, then she ran off again. Mark took my coat, but I was already sweating. I could feel it tickling down from my temples.

‘Sorry ’bout that,’ he said, slurring just a little. ‘D’you want a cloth?’

I looked at my jeans. The floor seemed to be closer than it should be. There were chocolate stripes above my knee. I shook my head and waved him away.

Mark looked closely at me through bleary eyes. ‘You alright?’

I nodded.

This was not cool. I was not cool. I’d arrived coked up, to whatever this was; somebody’s birthday, presumably. A grandma, or, worse, what if it was one of his kids? I didn’t think it was, but as I tried to remember, I realised I couldn’t recall what today was; not even the month.

‘Come and sit down,’ Mark said. He led me into the living room which was significantly louder, warmer and busier than the hallway, then he wandered off to tend to something else. I realised I was dressed for video games, in yesterday’s clothes. Everyone else had made an effort. Some had made a lot of effort: Jacket and tie; little black dresses; kids in waistcoats. I took Mark’s advice and looked for a chair. I needed somewhere shady. A corner. Or an attic. I found what looked like a good bet – a comfy-looking armchair. I had to negotiate my way past various friends-of-friends and vague acquaintances only ever seen at similar gatherings. I can’t recognise half of them unless they are holding barbecue food. But they all knew me, for some reason. They shook my clammy hand dry. Some people wiped their palm afterwards. I was revolting, and very obvious. I was sure I was obvious. They knew. They all knew. Soon, someone would stop the music and make an announcement. All eyes would turn on me, and narrow. Shame on you. Shame. How could you do

that to Grandma? Or Grandpa, or Aunt Joan? Or whoever this was all in aid of? Taking cocaine at a family party. Shame. Mark would have to throw me out, even if he found it funny. His marriage would depend on it.

I was weaving. Trying to deflect them as they approached. I was nearly at the armchair, where I would probably become besieged, but would, at least be off my feet. The chair lurched towards me, or I at it. Something lurched at something. I was about to spin around and flop backwards into its soft embrace when Mum intervened.

‘What kept you? We’re about to do the cake. Why didn’t you dress nicely? And where’s your wine? You have to join the toast.’

I raised the glass which was trailing from my fingers. It seemed pretty full, but I may have spilled some. I was past caring. I just needed to sit down. My heart was fluttering, it felt less like a rhythm, more like a hum.

‘What on earth is wrong with you?’ Mum said, and then the lights went out.

The room glimmered with candlelight. The drunken drone of Happy Birthday began like bagpipes and ended like cymbals. Then everyone clapped. I got right out of the way. By the time the lights came back on and the music had fired up, I was upstairs.

My sudden burst of opportunism had filled me with another unwanted jolt of chemical energy. It had sent the cocaine pulsing through me once more. The upstairs landing throbbed and swayed a little. I was breathing too fast and needed to calm down. Just a few minutes. Maybe half-an-hour. No-one would notice, not if I reappeared after. It’d be fine. I opened the nearest door and walked in.

She had her top off, but her bra on. He had no trousers. They were both probably young enough for me to be breaking the law just by being there. No more than seventeen.

‘Fuck!’ he said.

‘Not while I’m here, you don’t,’ I managed, and thrust forward a warning finger.

I vaguely recognised the girl. She was related to Mark’s wife. A niece or a cousin or a second-cousin.

‘Don’t tell Mum, please.’ She covered her chest with the nearest thing to hand: the boy’s jeans. The boy grabbed a pillow. I’d met him before, last year some time, at another one of these parties, but I had no idea who he was. He threw a quick glance over to the bedside table. I saw what he was looking at. We both went for it at once. He dropped the pillow and scrambled across the mattress, but, being performance-enhanced, I beat him to it and then backed away beyond his grasping reach.

It was a joint. A rather expertly crafted joint. Clearly meant for a special occasion, which, it would seem, I had seriously interrupted.

‘No,’ he said in a sort of strangled whine.

‘Please don’t tell,’ she said.

I backed away and held up the joint, vertical, between my forefinger and thumb. It looked like an exclamation mark.

She looked terrified. He looked pretty much the same, although I was trying my best not to look at either of them at all.

I ran the joint along my upper lip, inhaling deeply, smelling the contents through the tightly stretched rolling paper. It was strong weed. I slid it, wordlessly, into my shirt pocket.

‘I didn’t see you and you didn’t see me. Deal?’ I said.

‘Deal,’ they said.

‘Don’t let me catch you doing this again.’ I wagged my finger at them. ‘And use a condom,’ I said. Then I left the room, stopping only to turn the light off.

The upstairs hallway was plastered with framed photographs of grinning gap-toothed kids at different ages. Faces everywhere. I wanted to duck into another room, out of sight. I picked a different door and slowly turned the handle. It was a master bedroom. Mark and Molly’s room. The duvet was crumpled. The chair by the window was heaped with clothes, some folded some not. The mirrored dressing table was cluttered with make-up, perfume and hair brushes. On top of the chest of drawers were various glasses of water, all drunk down to different levels. There was an unused outfit laid across the bed; a shirt and jeans, arranged into a hollow person.

It was a room on pause. But, in my mind's eye, I could see the activity, the life lived in here. It wasn't presentable, it wasn't meant to be. It was strange and alien, unfamiliar, but at the same time homely and secure, comforting and private. Very private. I felt intrusive, voyeur-like. I was skulking around the most roped-off area of the house. Even Mark and Molly's kids probably weren't allowed in here.

I turned to leave, convinced I would already be too late, that someone was right outside, ready to catch me creeping around. I opened the door tentatively and scurried out, into the less forbidden zone. No-one was there, save for the smiling children, frozen in photographs. Nevertheless, my heart raced with adrenalin, and what remained of the cocaine. It was going sour in my blood. Lactic acid was starting to take over my system. My face throbbed, as though I'd been blushing heavily. I caught my reflection in one of the pictures. It was hard to make out clearly, but didn't look good. I tried to straighten my hair, then headed back downstairs towards the music and chatter. Molly caught sight of me coming down the last few steps.

'Where've you been?' she said.

'Nowhere. Upstairs. Bathroom.'

'You alright?'

'I'm fine. Bit under the weather.'

'You do look a bit peaky,' she said.

'Yeah, I might go.' I swallowed, feeling my throat for the first time all evening. It felt sore. 'Is my mum here?'

'She's gone. Joan drove her back. Want any cake?' she said.

I shook my head.

'You can't go before you've had some cake. You have to have some cake,' she said.

It was homemade. Uneven and vaguely oval-shaped. Some kind of caramel-coloured icing appeared to have been smeared onto it, followed by a spray of brightly coloured adornments: chocolate buttons, sugared almonds, jelly tots, hundreds-and-thousands. A gelatinous red sauce had



then been piped all over it in a crude spiral. There was a ring of wounds across its cluttered surface, where the spent candles had been removed. It was a war of a cake.

‘No, honestly,’ I said.

‘Oh, go on. The kids made it.’ She carved me a slice and transferred it to a fancy-looking paper plate. I don’t like cake at the best of times, and this was not the best of times, but I could feel the pressure to conform to the ritual.

I took a bite. The cake immediately turned clod-like in my mouth. I felt my marble-sized stomach disagree with whole idea. It closed its doors. My mouth went dry, and then very wet. There was a lump growing inside my chest, a stone behind my ribs. I felt the stone shift uncomfortably. All the while, I kept chewing and smiling and nodding my appreciation, as well as sweating. I could feel the sweat scratching beneath my forehead and then leaking out; first, tiny dots of perspiration, but soon they gathered into droplets which began to trickle. My back, between my shoulders, grew damp enough to make my shirt stick. I was breathing too quickly while still chewing and smiling, when my stomach lurched upwards towards my throat. Air moved in a pressurised space. My poor beleaguered sinuses throbbed, my eyes blurred, my mouth filled beyond capacity and my lips could not contain the event. I sprayed Molly in caramel-coloured streaks. Her little cream dress became a Jackson Pollock of chocolate-snot and icing.

I coughed over and over, and tried to keep what little there was in my stomach where it belonged.

Molly said nothing.

I kept coughing and swallowing. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I thumped my chest, like I’d seen on TV but it didn’t seem to help. After a woozy moment on the edge of a faint, I managed a long clear breath and everything began to calm down again. My heart steadied, and now that the threat of cake had been removed, my stomach seemed to have relaxed. I wiped my eyes and my vision cleared. I wish it hadn’t.

Molly looked down her dress and back up at me. Her eyebrows disappeared behind her fringe.

'Jesus,' Mark said from behind me. 'You alright?'

'I'm fine,' I managed. 'Went down the wrong way.' I looked from Mark to Molly and back again.

'I didn't mean you,' he said, grabbing a tea-towel.

I fussed around with kitchen roll and found a sponge in the sink, but the damage was already done. Without a word, Molly went upstairs to change while Matt and I wiped the floor.

'Maybe I should go,' I said, on my hands and knees.

Matt nodded, but then reached over and clasped my shoulder. 'Thanks for coming though. At least you made it a night to remember.'

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The sweat frosted to my skin as soon as I stepped outside. I wrapped my arms around my body and walked straightjacket fashion. I could feel my teeth, the roots ached. The tingling prickle across my skin had turned into a softly stinging itch. I walked on, with my skeleton feet. Bones in shoes.

I felt both tired and wide awake. I had nowhere to go. Home felt like an empty place. A lifeless place. I shuffled onwards, even though it hurt. I ended up walking the mile-and-a-half to Terry's house, or rather, to Terry's parent's house. It was well past midnight and most of the street was dark and quiet. A sleepy little terrace, fast asleep.

I took a handful of gravel from a neighbour's drive and threw four of the little stones, one at a time. They rattled against Terry's window and, eventually, I saw his curtain move. His face appeared and nodded at me, then vanished. A few moments later, he emerged from his front door, fully dressed. We walked a few metres in silence, out of earshot of his house. Then Terry turned to me:

'Alright?' he said.

'Alright,' I replied, and offered him a cigarette. The packet was partly crushed and the cigarettes were creased, but still intact. My hand was shaking.

'How was the wedding?' he said.

'Alright,' I said. 'How was rehab?'

'Shit,' he said. 'But I reckon I'm done with all that. You know?'

'Done with what? Coke?' I said. 'Or raves?'

'Yeah,' he said.

And I wondered.

We walked our cigarettes down, and flicked them away. Terry finished faster than I did.

'You seen Brian? He still got his arm in plaster?'

I nodded.

'I should have listened to you,' he said.

I wasn't exactly sure what he meant, but I nodded again anyway.

'So, I know you've been to rehab and all,' I said. 'But, do you fancy a proper smoke?' I pulled the joint out from my breast pocket. It was long and tapered – cone-shaped, with a little twist at the tip, holding it all together.

Terry smiled and handed me his lighter. I shivered, or shuddered; my muscles sort of rippled from head to foot. I pulled my coat tight, and Terry draped his arm around me. He pulled me close, and for a few steps we walked together, as a single huddle of two. Then he let go and smiled again. It was a grateful smile, but different to the last one. We stopped as I lit the joint. Terry cupped his hands around the flame to shield it from the wind. Then we walked on together, in the darkness, over to the swings in the park.



## Penny for the Guy

Well, there was this one time, when I was a kid. There were a few of us on my street, like a gang, but not really, just neighbours hanging out together. I was eight, so was Hannah and Ben and Luke. Then there was Lucy, Hannah's little sister and her friend, Ben's sister, I can't remember, Katie maybe, they were both six. And last was Zoe, Hannah's elder sister, she was ten. Anyway, we used to play together, in the churchyard at the back of our houses or on our street. We had our Green Cross Code Man, so we were alright, in and out of each other's houses as we liked. You probably don't remember the Green Cross Code. It was road safety for kids, on TV. Same fella as played Darth Vader, it was. Anyway, it was a different time, the eighties, early eighties too. Bit of Stranger Danger stuff – don't take sweets from strangers – but mostly we did as we pleased. None of us ever got bothered or touched or nothing; least, I don't think so. I never did. I mean, summertime, Lucy used to wander around in her knickers, just her knickers; in the street, like. She was only six, but still, these days, it doesn't bear thinking about. But, no, it was nothing like that.

This would have been winter time, near enough. Late October. Weather was like you'd expect, which made it harder for us to play. Back then, rain was about the only thing that kept us indoors, rain and mealtimes.

Luke's mum had been some kind of an artist, dunno what type. I never saw any paints or clay or anything. She drank a lot of wine and dressed a bit different to the other mums, lots of silk scarves and chiffon things that floated about. Anyway, she had these shop mannequins, loads of them, all in bits. Bloody creepy, so of course, we wanted to play with them, somehow. Only, they weren't Action Man; they didn't, you know, *do* anything. We pretty much lost interest right away. Then, as November got nearer, someone mentioned Penny for the Guy. Now, I was eight, and even though I had older brothers I'd never heard of this. Or if I had, it hadn't made much of an impact. But now we had the mannequins. Ben got an old wheelchair from somewhere, probably belonged to a dead nan

or something. I scrounged up some old clothes and we put him together – Guy. Dressed in an old donkey jacket, flat cap and corduroy trousers. We had, like, the torso, head and arms all propped up in the chair, inside the jacket, I think there was a pullover too, then the separate legs on the foot stirrups. He wasn't fully connected. We couldn't work out how to put him together in a sitting position, so we just left him in two, or three, whatever. We covered his lap with his coat and a bucket with a big label saying Penny for the Guy. Zoe must have told us what to do, there wasn't an adult involved at all; just us lot.

Anyway, our street, I lived in Oxford back then, our street was pretty central. Nice road. Houses must be worth a bomb these days. At the top, literally on the corner, was Folly Bridge. If you know Oxford then you'll know where I mean, but it's not important. It was busy – *that's* what you need to know. Come rush hour it's all slow moving for miles. I used to like the lights from my bedroom, red and white and orange, twinkling. After school, we get together. An hour or so before our tea. Time enough to take Guy up to the bridge. It's easy in the wheelchair. Seven of us: four eight year-olds, two six year-olds and Zoe along with this weird old shop dummy in his flat cap. There are a few pedestrians up there, but mostly it's just cars. We ask the passers-by, kind of timidly, and they all look a bit taken aback. We're close to being too far from home, see? Right on the edge, right at the kerb. It feels unstable. I want to go back, go inside, but it's ages until dinnertime and there we all are. We've got a plan, so we stick to it.

'Penny for the Guy, mister? Penny for the guy, miss?'

We get a few coins, here and there, coppers rattling hollow in the massive all-but-empty bucket. Then it happens, on that first night. This must have been, I dunno, a few days before the fifth, you know, after Halloween. Someone winds down their window and just chucks a coin into the bucket. We haven't said a thing, none of us. We just blink at the fella as he crawls away through the traffic. Then, slowly, others do the same. Some ask a question or two, 'what's his name' being the most common, probably. 'Where's your mum and dad' being another. Hannah lies. She points to the nearest house and said we all live there, like it's a home or something. It seems to work. As the cars

line up before the bridge they can see us up ahead, see other cars passing coins or throwing them straight into the bucket. We become an unofficial toll bridge. A group of innocent little charmers with a homemade creepy statue like a retired crash-test dummy as our troll. They can see us in front, on the pavement, waiting. It's inevitable, they have to drive past us, so they get ready, they dig in their pockets and fish out their money. By the time we're called in for our dinners, we can't see the bottom of the bucket for all the change.

The following day we did it again, right? Who wouldn't? Straight after school, we put on our gloves and scarves and wheeled Guy up the street. That time we were even more successful.

This is November, which is well into the run up to Christmas. Adverts are on TV. Lights are up in town. Shop windows are all Made in Japan, you know what I mean. Every ad-break was filled with Mega Truck Monster Battler including detachable rockets, or Executive Barbie with her own personal computer and a law degree. Chocolate bars were bigger and better and came on stocking-shaped cardboard with cartoon Santas. We were already shopping in our heads.

Ben wanted an Atari, I wanted a Millennium Falcon, Luke wanted all the Roald Dahls, but then he always was kind of prissy. The girls were the same, colluding and planning, clothes and toys and make-up and stuff. Everything they wanted but weren't ever given. Catalogues had always been a thing with us kids. You remember them? Like an aspirational thing. It was a book of stuff. Sometimes we would choose one item from every page. Hannah used to decorate her dream house, cut out the pictures for a scrap book. Her mum would go ballistic. That year, we all had catalogues, even Lucy was at it. We didn't know how much money we'd made, but we knew it was something, enough for everyone. It was like buying a present for ourselves, spending our Christmas money before the holidays. It was bloody exciting is what it was, and it made us desperate to get back out into the cold, plying our trade.

I thought we could all go together to a big toyshop. I asked my brother what the biggest one in England was and he said Hamley's, in London. That was it. I told everyone. We're going to Hamley's.

They've got everything; whole rooms full of Lego, I told them. All the board games ever; even My Little Pony, they've got all of them. Dolls too, probably.

We moved up to the hard-sell. Standing right by the road. Knocking on windows. Luke tried singing some carols, and the coins kept coming. There were old folks bewitched by our rosy cheeks – aren't you just precious? Or boyfriends impressing their dates with a kind-hearted gesture – I think I've got a fifty pee here somewhere, mate. It kept rolling in. Coppers, silvers, occasionally, not often, but sometimes, there'd be one of the brand new pound coins, like a shining sovereign.

We started dressing nicer and brighter, brushing our hair, you know? Like we were off to see grandma. We'd never emptied the bucket. Just let it stack up. It got so people would comment. You're doing well. So, we switched bucket. Zoe said we should do it or we'd get robbed, but I knew it was because we looked too rich, we needed to shake that bucket a bit more, make out we really needed it. You can't get pocket money from Dad if he knows you've already had it from Mum, you see what I'm saying? Even as kids we knew sales.

You get the picture though. For like a week, every day, we were out there on the bridge cadging coins from cars, and it went well. November fifth was coming, and after that it would all be over. Market crash, receivership, workforce unemployed. That was upsetting; we all felt it, but at least we had our pay off, our redundancy coming, and Hamley's.

There must have been bonfires and whatnot. Family stuff. I don't remember spending it with the kids at all. Guy, of course, was put safely away in someone's cellar. He'd been too lucrative and too loyal to be burned in effigy. Our golden goose was safe for next year. And since it was over, we had to split the loot. We'd been putting it off, and not just because of all the maths. I don't know when it was exactly, but there'd been a point when each of us had realised, in silence, that it was a lot of money, maybe too much. We talked about counting it, but in whispers, and when we did eventually count it all up, we did it in secret, in the woods at the back of the churchyard. Ben dug little holes in the earth with a trowel for us to use as bowls. We filled them with each denomination,



then counted them into stacks, measuring the heights to see they were the same. It was pretty clear, pretty soon, we could have an Atari each.

We were in Hannah's basement, all of us, moving the coins to a safe place, behind the boiler, but it was kind of gloomy down there, even with the light on and Ben knocked over some old paint tins. Made a hell of a clatter. Hannah and Lucy and Zoe's mum came down to see what we were up to.

'Bloody hell, that's like a mortgage payment,' she says. 'That's a trip to the Algarve.'

It wasn't, but it was close. It was certainly a lot of money for a bunch of six-to-ten-year-olds.

I stepped forwards: 'We'd like to go to Hamley's. It's in London. We can all go together in a trip and get all the things we want in one go. It will be a lovely day.' I thought it was the sort of thing my mum might have said – positive and authoritative and final. It didn't quite work out like I'd hoped.

Hannah's mum phoned Ben's mum and together they knocked on my front door. There was a discussion. Then Lucy had an idea. Now, Lucy is six, right? Runs around in her knickers, remember? But she'd been trailing behind her mum and staying quiet, sucking her thumb, listening to the grown-ups, and she suddenly comes out with this idea. They love it, the parents. Big sigh of relief. All sorted. Someone's even phoned the newspaper. Yeah, the newspaper. Local one. The Oxford Mail. But I'll get to that in a bit.

All of this is going on while we're waiting to find out which dads are going to drive us to London and when. Probably a Saturday, we decide. Probably this weekend. And probably my dad will be one of them, because we have an estate car with a big boot for all the toys; maybe Hannah's dad too, if he isn't busy. We'd worked it all out. It takes hours. No sign of parents, or of Lucy.

Then the delegation arrives, beaming. All the mums, even Luke's, along with Lucy, of course. Bloody Lucy. 'Okay, kids. This is what we've decided,' Hannah's mum says. 'You've all done really well. We are all very proud, well... impressed, aren't we?' she says. 'But it really was a lot of money, wasn't it?' I go cold. You heard it too, right? 'And with Christmas just around the corner,' she goes on. 'And Halloween the other week... well, you've got lots to be going on with, haven't you? And we

wouldn't want to upset Santa.' Playing the Father Christmas card, in front of the six-year-olds; that was a low blow. We're dumbfounded – Ben, Zoe, me, Hannah. Luke seems to be okay, he's with the mums on this, but then he always was. Little Katie still didn't get it. She still wanted to go up to the bridge, still wanted to 'go play Guy.'

Hannah and Lucy and Zoe's mum carried on, the other parents deferring to her numerical advantage. 'So, we thought what was the best thing to do, you know, with all the money? And Lucy had the most darling suggestion, didn't you sweetheart?'

Lucy nodded, her thumb in her mouth. She knew we were pissed off, and we knew she knew. She'd done a bad thing.

'Earlier today...' and Hannah's mum starts walking away, slowly-like. We're supposed to follow her, even though none of us wants to. '...We went out and, look, we bought *all* these fireworks!' The kitchen table was heaving with them. Rockets and bangers and God knows what. Colourful cardboard tubes of different sizes, different thicknesses. Katie reached out but was held back – 'Careful, darling. They're dangerous.' – so, Katie got scared while we just stared at them all. 'Look how many we got for them,' Hannah's mum says. 'Such a good idea, Lucy. A huge display for the children's hospital. It will be marvellous.' We let it sink in. We didn't have much of a choice. Fireworks. For the children's hospital. All of our money. Every single penny, (and there were a lot of pennies.) No Atari. No Millennium Falcon, not until Christmas at least.

'Aaaaaand,' she says, giving us a glimmer of hope, like there's a second surprise, only this one might not be so crushingly disappointing. 'There's a man from the newspaper coming round this afternoon, to take your photograph. You've all done so well.'

We weren't being spoiled, it wasn't extravagant, we'd earned it. It was our idea, our Guy, our hard work, our charming little smiles. We earned it, hadn't we? And it wasn't like we could just do it again. Not for another year, anyway. What would be the harm? But no. No, no, no. Too much too soon, and too easily, that's how they saw it. Not for eight-year-olds. Or six-year-olds. Katie didn't

know what she wanted to spend it on. For her it was too much, maybe. But she'd loved earning it, collecting it, counting it. And it was hers, right? It could have been an Atari each. And why not?

So, the guy came round and photographed us all sitting on the front steps of my house. We made the front page. We're waving handfuls of fireworks. Everyone is smiling their heads off except for Little Katie who looks scared, and me, I look downright angry. I've still got a copy of it somewhere.

Actually, no. But it's funny you should ask. I don't think we did. I certainly didn't. Maybe it was a safety thing, like the hospital was secure or something. They had a lot more places like that back then, didn't they? Institutions. But I don't think so. I didn't even know there was a children's hospital, and I certainly didn't see any firework display. Maybe some of the kids went along and I couldn't go for some reason, but I don't think so. I think that would have been a thing we'd have talked about. Instead, we didn't. We never mentioned it. Didn't do the Guy again the following year. And then I moved away.

Well, I don't know, you're the expert. Maybe. I don't understand all this stuff. You asked me when I first started, so I told you. It was after then, I reckon. Pretty soon after then. I wasn't the only one, either. Most of us did, even if we didn't have to. It just became something we did. We all started stealing.



## Jiggity Jig

The room is all so eerily familiar, it hasn't changed at all. After so long, I can't tell if everything is precisely where I'd left it, but nothing seems absent or out of place. It is noticeably clean. It hasn't been locked up and forgotten; quite the opposite. It has been visited, tended, like a grave. It makes me feel cold and slightly numb, incapable or unwilling to move. I can't bring myself to step inside, as if it isn't safe, or isn't proper. There should be a cordon, or glass. And so, I am nothing but eyes, settling and scrutinising before flitting away to some other half-forgotten detail of the room.

I'd left for a girl, a girl I can barely remember. There were so many girls, for a while, so many pursuits and conquests, so many sacrifices and choices, either to satisfy or impress them. So many lies I told, so many lives I lived. Sophie, that was her name, Sophie. She had webbed toes.

We ran in the rain, just after dawn, and took a coach to London; all rucksacks and carrier bags. We split up before we'd unpacked; only lasted a few days, maybe a week. I didn't see her again. But I never went back, I never went home. I stayed there, sucked in, locked out. Not trapped, just stuck.

For a while, it was like an adventure – different squats, different girls, different drugs. A whole new world. But everything got tired pretty quickly. I saw it dragging people down around me; 'friends,' I suppose you'd call them, but they didn't mean very much to me, nor I to them. 'Acquaintances' sounds too grand. Back then, I saw too much. I saw people just trying to cling on, people scratching and thieving, doing whatever they had to do to stay alive. I saw a murder once, but I don't like to talk about that.

The lampshade isn't the same. Maybe it is. I don't really remember what it looked like before.

Eventually, I got myself a flat, and a job early in the mornings, cleaning. After that it was deliveries, which meant a car. I never got a licence, not in twenty years. I had a wife for a few weeks, before she annulled it. Then there was my business, while it lasted. I'd done all of it on my own, for the most part. I'd done it without family, without charity, I'd done it alone. That's what I'd always

thought. I thought I'd stepped off that coach a new-born; blank, fresh and empty. Just me. But that wasn't how it was, I could see that now. Looking around at the faded posters and the Music Centre record player, it all started to come back to me in hazy 8mm memories. My family, my town, even that God awful school. They'd made me. London was London, it would always be London, but without those first seventeen years back here, I don't know, maybe everything would have been different; better maybe, or worse.

My eyes flicker around the room, searching across bookshelves and curtains, to the squat square television and its set-top aerial. There are board games stacked under the bed. I wonder if my *Playboy* is still there.

Nobody forced me away, not really; not like most of the stories I'd heard on the street, and a few of the ones I'd made up myself. It wasn't a violent or abusive home, it wasn't even crowded. I'd chosen my exile, I'd chosen solitude.

Standing there at the threshold, on the brass carpet-gripper, I start to see my life like cracked glass with a thousand spidery lines spraying out from a fractured centre. A bullet-hole pattern. There'd been other options, other cracks to slide down. Great fissures and tiny rivulets; big choices, little choices – they all seem to start from here, from this bedroom.

I realise, as I stand there for the first time in so many years that this place isn't to blame. I was to blame, or maybe it was Sophie.

Nothing has changed. Everything has changed. The room has become a shrine in my absence. I always seem to be living one life on top of another, erasing and replacing the old with the new. Here, it is different. Here, there is a memorial which I knew nothing about.

I try to bring it all back to life in my mind, to apply the defibrillator paddles of nostalgia and imagination, but they don't work. There are no ghost-like projections of my parents, bringing me dinner or folding my clothes. No laughing, no crying, no shouting or slamming. I have to close my eyes to see it and when I do, it doesn't seem real, like I'm making it up from a collage of clichés, from TV and films. It all happened in a different place. A place like this but further away. There was

something different about the flavour of the air back then, the tone of the light. Life used to have a different quality about it, a different texture. I suppose that a time will come when I'll look back on today, and it too will seem distant and different. Minor details will merge and amalgamate into other memories of other funerals.

I breathe deeply. My chest expands, sending fresh blood to my brain, enough to jar me from my reverie. It feels like I am moving for the first time in hours, in days, in twenty years.

From down the hallway behind me, I can hear my sister's nervous steps coming up the stairs. She'll be carrying a cup of tea for me, the brother she barely knows; a cup of tea that will be far too sweet.





## A New Song

Talia O'Brien wrote a song, the only song she had ever written. She sold it and the song became heard all over. But as time passed, the money she'd earned began to dwindle.

She flew from JFK to Donegal looking for inspiration, with nothing but a backpack, and walked to where her parents had been born. She found both of the little houses and the schoolyard where they'd met, but the apple tree they'd spoken of all those times wasn't there anymore, nor the bench underneath with their initials carved deep into the wood. For a week, in that cold strange familiar place, Talia wandered her parent's lanes in silence.

She found an inn which looked out across a moor, under heather-tinted clouds as thick and heavy as sheep's fleece. She rented a room, but just like at home, the songs wouldn't sing to her there. She ate a simple meal and drank local beer on her own in front of the blue-flame of the peat fire, while the patrons of the bar drank themselves to bed.

There was a painting of a man above the fireplace; a handsome man but pale and thin and bookish. Lit by a single candle, he sat in almost darkness. The black of his jacket bled into the shadowy background so that only his face and a sliver of shirt-front were distinct. He watched Talia as she ate and drank; he shared her table.

As the beer flowed and the hubbub became more raucous, she heard him, she heard the man in the portrait, and she started to write. First lyrics but then a melody. Clinking glasses echoed against soft laughter and muttered drunken debates. Talia heard it, she heard the song amongst it all.

In her room, after closing, she sang it to herself; over and over until the sun came up.

Talia went home to America. She sold the song and bought another year, but it was not a happy year. The days grew short and the money ran low so she spent what she had on another flight, back to the Old Country.

She stayed in the same inn, in the same room. She ate the same food, drank the same beer beneath the portrait of the same handsome man. She moved there, lived there, in a cottage near the inn where she ate and she drank and she listened, waiting for him to sing her a new song.

## Braque

Once, I had a friend – the Spaniard – who saw as I do, but he is far away now, far from this filthy sodden war. Although I should feel lonely without him, there is no place to be alone here. But I find no comfort in the company of other men, not like I have with him, with the Spaniard. Nobody else thinks as we do, as we used to, in such straight lines. What I once saw only in my mind and in our art, I now see all about me. Everything stripped to its innards. So much mud and blood, so many dead. Wet clodded earth is everywhere, even in the food.

There are sights here which defy understanding; twisted men and horses made one by the mud. Gas-choked or tangle-wired. It is a suffering too stark to see, and too real to imagine. But I see it now, right before me, in its true guise and without veil. I am the only one here who can.

I need no brush or canvas. The war is paint enough – its pallet is chillingly familiar: greys, beige and brown. It is my own pallet, our own; the Spaniard and I. For a moment, I wonder if I made all of this come to be, if our paintings became sorcery or alchemy – art made flesh, but I realise that I have not conjured this, it is not our doing. We saw it coming, the inevitable. It was unavoidable. We saw it before it happened, the Spaniard and I. We tried to share it in pencil and oils and make sense of the impossible. Lines and angles and the form beyond the form. This world is made of telegraph wires, motorcars, aeroplanes and a once blank map now filled to bursting. Crowded shouting voices. It is all a new life in a new world and it is everywhere, it is unavoidable.

I wanted to find meaning beyond colour, form beyond shape, shape beyond form. Associations which justify themselves. Metaphor must be invited. But none of that matters here; or perhaps it matters more than anything else. More than winning or dying. Perhaps all that matters now, here and now, is this vision of new angles and shapes, and of this strange new time.

Two-pound shells have been falling since dawn – persistent but intermittent, like spring rain. Sometimes there are three or four volleys in quick succession, sometimes only one. The sound has

become as inaudible as it is deafening. We must all ignore the only thing in our world, or else we scream, but then nobody hears us and nothing changes.

We are all in uniform, we all look uniform. What was once green is now brown and grey, like the world around us. We have all become part of this France; not the France I once knew, the France I had tried to paint jaunty and gay, but another other France – older, newer. Shadows stretch across time from a hundred years of war, from the banners of the Grande Armée, and beneath clouds of Agincourt arrows which darken the sun. This is no place for sunlight, not here.

There is a pervasive smell of latrines everywhere. It suits the place. Anything else would not be at all correct. Everything is wet all of the time. The wooden floorboards have long since sunken into the trench mud. The walls of hardened dirt are rendered in blood and bone. Roots and grasses have made way for discarded canteens, bullet cases, ammunition boxes; two worlds on top of one another. I can't tell them apart. I no longer know which of the men are alive and which are dead. There seems little distinction. I worry that perhaps, far away, the Spaniard may have died, or that I am dead and he is not.

Hun shells hail us. We salute them with our cowardice, huddled under helmets. Men scabble like animals into the hard dirt walls, digging with tin dishes or gun butts, or their fingernails. We are desperate sextons, all of us, even the officers. Some of the men sing songs or chant prayers, some laugh, some cry. I do not know what I am doing, I cannot see. I only see the fierce spectacle outside myself with the colourless vision of the damned.

*Carency, Artois, France*

*May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1915. 7:45 am*

*Second Patrol*

The last thing I remember is smoke; a broken wall with tall-stemmed dandelions, and then smoke – black and grey, like storm clouds. My rifle-butt punches against my shoulder joint, worrying the

bruise which never seems to heal. I fire into the smoke, shooting wraiths and waterfalls, adding my own smoke to the cloud, until the smoke shoots back. The bullet clangs against my helmet, burning a brand into my scalp. The teeth on the right-hand side of my mouth all ache at once. I can hear a sound like breathing in one ear and nothing in the other. I raise the barrel again and look along the sights into the grey-black swirl. I fall to one knee and aim again, at the darkest point of the smoke; the blackest heart, where there is nothing at all, nothing but the dark. I fire the last bullet in my gun, feel one last thump from the stock, and then go blind.

I look upwards to where the sky should be, but there is nothing; nothing but the dark. Blood runs inside my helmet, warming my collar and clotting in dried-up riverbeds along my back. I fall forward into the mud and let it drink from me.

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Time passes relentlessly. I do not know where I am. I am lying on my back, out of the rain, on a flat hard surface. The voices around me are French, not German. Everything is dark. It feels as though I am blindfolded.

I feel fingers peeling the gauze from above my ear. My blood-clotted hair grips and has to be pulled away. It hurts but I don't complain. I can't, I feel asleep. I feel as though I am hearing a story about myself; a midnight story, in the dark.

One of the voices is closer and clearer. It is a man's voice, gruff but articulate. He sounds as though he might have a sore throat.

'It looks like a ricochet or small shrapnel. The helmet took some of it, but it's a very bad graze. Possible skull fracture.'

'He drifts in and out, Monsieur. Seems to be blind though.' It is a second voice, another man but younger. His accent is southern. Marseilles, I think.

'Blind?'

‘Yes, Monsieur. Seems to be. The stretcher bearers said so, anyway. They said they found him wandering. He was waving his hands in front of his eyes.’

I feel the fingers again, pushing at my eyelids this time, forcing them upwards. My eyes sting with the air, but I can’t see anything. I want to speak. I try. I say the words in my mind, but my lips won’t move; I am too tired.

‘There doesn’t seem to be any obvious damage to the eyes, but the pupils are not responding,’ the older voice says. ‘It must be the head wound. I know what to do.’

I hear noises like a cutlery drawer.

‘Are you sure?’ the younger man says. ‘Have you done this before?’ His voice is quieter now. I try to raise my hand and it seems to work. I can’t look to see, but it feels as if it is moving.

‘I have,’ the older voice responds. ‘On a number of occasions. It’s a simple procedure. It’s just to let the air in.’

I feel strong hands holding me down, at my shoulders and my knees. Then a strap is fixed across my forehead and tightened. The back of my head presses hard against what feels like a wooden board; a table, perhaps. I can feel the groove between two planks against my scalp. There is a sharp little pain like a pin, on the crown of my head. It pricks once and then again. The second time, it lingers; the pin has not been removed. It stings a little deeper, it twists. And then a noise like thunder fills my head. I stare wide with blind eyes and have to breathe before I can scream. The hands grip me tighter. The pin in my head burns hotter. I feel my heart galloping, my stomach clenching. Every muscle in my body seethes and writhes, but the hands hold me fast, the hands in the darkness.

‘Nearly done,’ the older voice says again. I can hear it clearly above my screaming, I can hear everything. ‘Nearly done.’

And then it stops. I feel the burning pin removed from my skull. The hands relax and almost release me. The strap across my forehead is loosened. There is a soft pressure, like a flannel, pressed to the top of my head, where the pain used to be. It still hurts, but not like before, with the pin.

I roll onto my side and I am sick. That is all I remember.

When I wake I am in a bed. I have a dry mouth and a headache worse than I can ever remember feeling. My head is bandaged but my eyes are not. I am still blind.

Without light, the hours becomes slippery. Days pass, certainly, weeks perhaps. I stay with the medical unit. I move when they move. Somebody always leads me from one chair to another, sometimes a seat in a car, other times it's simply to a bunk in a different tent. It is hard to be certain. I spend my time trying to remember colours.

The first thing I do see is mud – grey-brown and comfortingly familiar. I wait a few frozen moments before blinking. I am scared that it will go away. I move my eyes but not my head. I move them gently, tentatively, so as not to disturb them.

Fields of ochre stretch before me with tents spotting the horizon. They are calico-coloured, like plain canvas. The sky is filled with rainclouds and the light is dim. The only life I can see is a single wild flower, bowing in the breeze. It is red.

There are dark lines cut into the landscape far away. Deep furrows in strange geometries. As I trace their shapes with my eyes, I realise that it is not just myself – we all see it now, all of the soldiers, on both sides. Every fighting man has seen it, and none of us will remember how it was before, before this sudden future, before we saw the angles.





## The Plunge

'No chance. I'll do it next time. Next time I find myself in Auckland,' I said as we drove past the base of the Skytower, the highest building in the Southern Hemisphere. 'Not *this* time,' I said.

'Fair enough,' my brother replied. I was glad he wasn't making it into a thing. For a while, it felt like they would both just keep ragging me into feeling even more of a coward than I am. My brother was driving. It was his car. It was his country now – the birthplace of his wife. A planet away from his last home in Middle England. New Zealand – you can't go further without going to the moon. Still, it felt homely enough to me. The accents were familiar, and so were a lot of the brand names. The English language was everywhere, they even had *Malteasers*. The other passenger, in the back seat, was my girlfriend. She was still my girlfriend then, but only just. Neither of us said anything, but I think we both knew, New Zealand would not be a good place to break up. We had a long two weeks ahead of us, not including the flight home.

It was difficult. She was difficult, I was difficult, everything was difficult. The weather was changeable, switching from hot and humid to cold and rainy. We never had the right clothes, which made matters worse than they really needed to be. My sister-in-law was equally irritable. As though we – my girlfriend and I – had encroached on her space. I always thought the whole point of New Zealand was all the space. Although, in truth, it was probably our fault more than it was hers: we were guests at her home, at her family home, and we were being difficult.

The next two weeks slugged by. I was ill. My girlfriend was ill. My brother and his wife had to run around to chemists and convenience stores. It was none of it convenient, not for anybody.

Eventually, we went on a road trip, just the three of us, without my sister-in-law. From the window of our Ute, we saw landscapes, vast amounts of endlessly varied landscapes. It was like being inside the *Discovery Channel*.

I tried my first Jacuzzi, drank Victoria Beer, ate Peanut Slabs and learned to hate sand flies even more than wasps. There was a jet boat ride and a canyon rope-bridge made of steel cables. I tried surf and turf, but left the shrimp, and got a sunburn. Then the holiday was all but over. There was just the airport to go. Auckland airport, in Auckland.

‘So...’ my brother began as we entered the shadow of the tallest building in the Southern Hemisphere. ‘Here we are again. What’s this then? It must be... let me see... it must be your second time here now, Jon.’

‘I suppose it must,’ I said, feeling car-sick for the first time in twenty years.

At three-hundred-and-twenty-eight meters high, the Auckland Skytower creates a very unusual-looking skyline. A simple, quite standard financial district of variously-sized glass and steel towers adds cosmopolitan crenulations to the horizon – the mark of modernity. It is all quite familiar and inoffensive to any seasoned city-traveller. The Skytower, however, looms. Like a basketball player at a children’s birthday party. It is simply too tall. It hurts everybody’s neck, and leans a little in high winds.

And I *have* to go up. Not just up, up is easy, all manner of people do up, even pensioners do up. They all take the *Smoothlift* high-speed elevators to the observation deck where they look out at the rooves of more modest buildings. They stand on four-inch glass plates and stare down at the distant semi-pedestrianised abyss six-hundred-and-ten feet below them. The deck is a place full of gasping and of souvenirs. I, however, will pass by, having paid a large sum of money to wear a bright blue and yellow jumpsuit with matching crash helmet instead.

My brother and my girlfriend went to get ice cream while I signed forms wielded by two very pierced girls, both with deeply suntanned tattoos. They first instructed and then assisted me into my high-vis jumpsuit and some kind of pelvic harness made of nylon straps and brass buckles. They did all of this whilst at their sales desk on the ground floor, before parading me through a public mall towards the central elevators. People, and not just tourists, took photographs. One of the pierced

girls pressed the topmost button of the lift; it was the sort of button which I felt should probably require a key.

The lift rose rapidly, enough to make my knees sag a little. This was thrill enough, I thought, and looked around the little steel room for somewhere to be sick. It took an uncomfortably long time to arrive on my designated floor – the top one.

I stepped out of the lift onto the Sky Deck, and passed the maître de of Orbit 360, the revolving restaurant. He stood elegantly beside a glass framed menu. I sloped past in my lurid jumpsuit and felt my stomach clench into nausea. I continued towards the sci-fi-style sign to the Sky Jump. There was a woman waiting, sitting on a couch upholstered in the same blue and yellow as her jumpsuit. She looked up and smiled at me. I ran my fingers through my hair and began pacing up and down.

‘Do you want a seat?’ she said. She was American, around thirty. She seemed perfectly calm.

‘No thank you,’ I said, shaking my head. ‘I’d rather stand.’

‘Would you like to go before me?’ she said. ‘I’m next up, but I don’t mind. You look a bit...’

‘Yes,’ I said suddenly. ‘Thank you. I just want to get it out of the way to be honest. I’d change my mind if I hadn’t paid so much.’ I tried a smile which I suspect came out rather badly.

‘It’s all yours,’ she said, motioning to the only door which didn’t lead back to the lift. Ahead, I could see daylight. I thought I could feel a draught.

Outside, I was outside; on the outside of a skyscraper. A very bloody big one too. The floor was mostly steel grille, like a gantry. Ahead, in between me and the harsh glare of the sun, there was a man crouched down in silhouette. I could see his hair fluttering in the wind. He waved me over, towards him, towards the wind, and the sun. It felt larger than usual, fiercer. I had never stood this close to it before.

‘Come over here then, mate,’ he said in a thick New Zealand accent before standing up and stepping towards me. I clutched a handrail and inched closer. When he reached me, he took a rough hold of my harness, producing an unexpected wedgie, and then attached it to the handrail with a

karabiner clasp. 'Right, you're safe enough so let's have you follow me, eh?' And he walked back away from me, towards the wind and the sun, and the edge.

I realised that the construction of the area was essentially a narrow steel platform extending into thin air. It jutted out from the side of the building to give sufficient clearance to lunatics like myself and the kind American woman ahead of me in the queue. A narrow platform into thin air – I was, quite literally, walking the plank.

He looped my arms into another harness, like a rucksack but without the sack. Between my shoulder blades there was a steel ring to which he attached a second karabiner – a larger, more heavy-duty version of my waistline clip. It connected to a thick steel cable which led away to an enormous spool, like a fire hose only far larger. The instructor grabbed a radio from a hip-holster and held it to his mouth.

'Okay,' he said. The radio crackled in response. If there was a voice to be heard I didn't catch it. 'We've got a jumper coming down in three, two, one, jump.' He looked at me and raised his eyebrows.

'Did you mean me?' I said.

He sighed a little and looked into the radio as he spoke: 'We've got a no jump. I repeat, we've got a no jump.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I wasn't ready.'

'Right, mate. After three, okay?'

'I just jump?' I looked down at the lip of the platform and gripped the handrail a little tighter.

'That's it, mate. Easy as falling off a log.'

'Okay,' I said unconvincingly.

'Three, two, one, jump,' he said into the radio once again.

I stepped off with one foot and leaned forward, trying to shift my weight, trying to take a single pace, off the edge of the building.

'Jump!' he said again, much louder this time.

And

so

I

did.

I stepped forwards against every natural impulse I possessed. I voluntarily walked into mid-air and fell, about a metre. Not the plummet I had anticipated. It seemed that my feet had performed as instructed but my hands had been less obedient – I clutched onto the rail with a death grip. The jolt to my shoulders had been hard but not enough to pull me free. And so I dangled.

From above me, I heard the radio crackle again, and then the instructor:

‘We’ve got a no jump. I repeat, we’ve got a no jump.’

I looked up. He looked down. ‘Okay, mate,’ he said. ‘I’m gonna need you to let go, understand?’

I nodded. I had become an obstruction, an obstacle. I had visions of Kiwi firemen and a very public rescue. I nodded again. He gave me an encouraging look, and I let go. I watched him shrink away as I finally plummeted backwards, downwards, but not for long. With a second jolt, the cable snapped taut, and I was dangling again, only this time I was hands-free, as well as legs-free. I hung, suspended on the cord, slowly rotating for the amusement of the gallery.

As I turned in mid-air, like a Christmas tree bauble, the fifty-first floor observation platform slowly became visible. The wall of curved windows flashed brightly, catching the reflected glare of the many tourist cameras documenting my star-shaped figure.

‘Okay,’ I heard from above again. This time the voice was distant and windy. I looked up and saw him make a thumbs-up gesture, just before the world dropped away.

I fell directly downwards towards an ominous-looking target of concentric circles on the street six-hundred feet below. Within twelve seconds I was travelling at eighty-five miles per hour. Terminal velocity. My breath stopped. I was lost in some kind of primal fear, experiencing the unsharable.

I saw a horse, a black horse. Huge, galloping towards me. I stared it in the eye and it stared right back. The plummeting sensation overwhelmed me and refused to stop. The horse hung there, in mid-air, as I had, while I fell.

It was a billboard for a bank, a British bank, my own bank. It was an image I was intimately familiar with, and suddenly I was aware of everything passing by me. I was somehow missing out on the irreplaceable strangeness of these unique moments – my pseudo-suicide. I tried to look everywhere at once, anywhere but at the horse. I twisted my neck wildly, trying to find a view but it all moved so quickly. The wind, the fear, the exhilaration and something like awe encompassed my senses and my eyes filled with tears.

I could see nothing with any clarity, and all I could think about was that horse. I tried to breathe and to wipe my eyes clear but I could already feel a shift in my descent. An unnatural braking, as though the air below me was thicker, denser, like a duvet. The whole thing felt like taking off on an aeroplane, only in reverse; almost as unusual as the fall itself. I had slowed over the final thirty feet. The mechanism within the great fire hose spool above me had calmed my freefall to a gentle landing, right in the bull's-eye centre of the target. My feet touched down and my knees slowly buckled. I fell into the arms of yet another over-tanned instructor. Without ceremony, he began unfastening my harness. My brother and girlfriend were already laughing, I could recognise the sound even through my blurred tears and weak knees.

'You okay, mate?' the instructor asked.

I breathed a few long lungfuls.

'Mate?' He held me by the shoulders and looked me in the eye. 'Are you alright?'

'Can I do it again?' I said, finally managing to stand unassisted.

# **The Short Answer: An Analysis of the Use of Short Fiction in the Teaching of Creative Writing**





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## Introduction

It is a rainy day in 2012, and I am standing in a classroom in front of fourteen aspiring novelists, wondering how to explain to them why they should read and write short stories. I look out of the window at the weather and it reminds me of Elmore Leonard's rules of writing<sup>1</sup>, which leads me to think of George Orwell's rules of writing<sup>2</sup> and then his essay on tobacco. It makes me want a cigarette, but I am trying to quit, and I'm stuck here standing in front of fourteen students.

'For sale,' I say, and write it on the board, followed by a colon. 'Baby shoes, never worn.' Six words and three punctuation marks. I let it settle in.

'Is it a story? Who are the characters? What is the plot?'

It doesn't take long for the students to interpret the implicit narrative – the loss of a child, and the unfortunate financial circumstances of grieving parents forced to sell the shoes.

'Why didn't they just throw them out? They must be poor,' someone says.

I change to a red pen and circle each of the three pairs of words. Act one, act two, act three.

The start, the middle, the end.

We talk and we talk about the six words, we talk about the possibilities; we create subplots and backstories for the characters, we put them into different eras, into different cultures, historical, sci-fi, even a comedy about an obsessive shoe collector.

By then expanding the ideas into longer short stories, we were able to compare adaptations, and consider what might have been gained (or lost) in the expansions. Had we continued

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<sup>1</sup> Elmore Leonard, *Elmore Leonard's 10 Rules of Writing*, (New York: William Morrow, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*, (London: Penguin, 2013).

the process, we might have extended and expanded into a range of novel manuscripts with a shared 'acorn', so to speak. But that was not the intention. The intention was to demonstrate how short fiction can be immediate, inspiring, experimental, and highly suited to class discussion and peer review.

Outside it is still raining, but I realise I can do this. I can do this because it is true. Short stories are where I learned and grew, they were where I found inspiration and fascination, and where I built the confidence to call myself a writer. But I wanted to know more. I wanted to understand why short fiction had proved so valuable to me.

This study focusses on identifying, isolating and investigating the key qualities of short fiction which have contributed to it becoming the principal pedagogy within Creative Writing. Firstly, I aim to produce a persuasive argument for the promotion and development of short fiction in teaching, and to expand theoretical interrogations of the form. I argue for the use of critical investigations into published short stories, in concert with creative production, as a foundation for understanding theory as well as practise.

Secondly, this study introduces a range of theoretical tools and applications for student-writers, designed to explore the concept of 'writing strategies' and how a writer might better understand their own work and creative practice.

Thirdly, this study will examine some of the aspects of writing in-situ, and the effect location has upon Creative Writing teaching. And finally, this study will consider the motivational qualities of short fiction, and how creating a body of completed work for feedback and assessment, as well as potentially for publication or competition consideration, has important beneficial effects for student-writers finding their voices and styles. It will also consider how the short story form is well suited to cooperative writing as well as for critical

workshops, and how regularly sharing a variety of short stories acts an inspirational forum, as well as critically fruitful one.

## Reading as a Writer

As Creative Writing students are required to produce their own fiction, it seems entirely correct that they should be encouraged to examine the work of past masters, and of illustrative examples of particular literary techniques; the purpose should be for students to better understand the creative process and possibly how they might employ similar techniques within their own writing, and find ways to be innovative. One cannot hope to create anything new if one is not familiar with the variety of work already part of the canon. This is a familiar practise in the teaching of fine art, where students would be expected to investigate the work of established artists and schools of art. I believe the resulting output of these investigations should focus on the creation of original writing, rather than upon literary analysis; students are not responding to texts by writing an essay, but rather they are responding with work of their own. They are reading as a writer, exploring how stories have been composed, what devices or styles are used and to what effect. The results are twofold: by exposing students to a wide range of works, each of them illustrative of specific writing styles or effects, student-writers develop not only a better understanding of technique, but also a deeper appreciation of the established literary landscape, and some of its existing traditions.

Jeri Kroll explains that acquiring disciplinary knowledge about contemporary writing and media developments helps students to contextualise their projects, giving them a sense of historical embeddedness.<sup>3</sup> Robert Miles maintains that the study of canonical literature

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<sup>3</sup> Jeri Kroll, 'Originality and Research: Knowledge Production in Creative Writing Doctoral Degrees', in *Creative Writing and Education*, ed. By Graeme Harper (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2015), p. 159.

affords the student of Creative Writing ‘solutions to generic and expressive problems.’<sup>4</sup> I would suggest that this effect is further quickened via discussion and debate within a seminar.

Short fiction is more than a repository of useful literary techniques or a mere steppingstone towards longer work, it has rich and varied traditions of its own

I have observed that student responses to the critical reception of published literature within Creative Writing courses, differs from traditional literature courses, which are strictly theoretical. In Creative Writing, aesthetic opinions and emotional responses are evaluated from a production and impact perspective – the writer’s perspective. This promotes a greater ownership of the arguments, and students feel more confident in their responses; more at liberty to negatively criticise works. ‘The hierarchy of the [Creative Writing] seminar is broken down, inviting a democracy of judgement.’<sup>5</sup>

John Singleton, however, observes a problem: ‘For first-year students, the lack of determined content and pedagogic authority take some adjusting to, and apprehensiveness about voicing the personal can be creatively debilitating. Our teaching and assessment strategies have had to recognise these important psychological dimensions to the student as writer.’<sup>6</sup>

‘With maximum tutorial support in the first year and... emphasis on the generation of ideas. [The course] aims to build up competence and confidence through workshop sessions, and introduces students to a wide a range of writing as early as possible.’<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Miles, ‘Creative Writing, Contemporary Theory and the English Curriculum’, in *Teaching Creative Writing*, ed. By Moira Monteith and Robert Miles (London: Open University Press, 1992), p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> John Singleton, ‘Creative Writing and Assessment: A Case Study’, in *Teaching Creative Writing*, ed. By Moira Monteith and Robert Miles (London: Open University Press, 1992), p. 69.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 74.

Many courses are principally practical and do not provide a prescribed reading list. The core modules MA in *Writing* at Warwick University ('Fiction 1', and 'Fiction 2') included an advisory list of texts that would benefit students but were not directly referred to within classroom discussion or through assessment. More like a further reading list than a description of course content, which focussed entirely on student-produced work. Although an MA level course, the student cohort contained many self-taught student-writers unfamiliar with formal creative writing education, and in some cases unfamiliar with English literature courses beyond secondary school level.

One method of teaching I have found particularly successful is providing a specifically chosen reading list of published short stories. Seminars begin with the analysis of a pre-determined story; its technical and creative strengths are then isolated and examined by the group. The class then attempts to determine how the piece achieves what it achieves, both on the sentence-level, and as a whole. Discussions might then lead to emulation; either through a set exercise or from students' own self-directed investigations. Students who are exposed to particular literary effects and their uses often attempt their own versions, learning through practice.

Figure 1 is a reading list of short fiction I have developed during my time teaching short fiction which can be used as a ten-week postgraduate seminar module. This expanded list of signature stories details the related concepts or discussion areas they are intended to provoke. The works have been selected for their illustrative properties; they each effectively demonstrate particular effects or techniques that, together, form a sound foundation for any developing writer. I have also used the same reading list (with minor alterations) for undergraduate classes, but over a longer period of time.



Week	Author	Title	Class Discussion
1	Ernest Hemingway	'For Sale: Baby Shoes' 'Hills Like White Elephants'	Six-Word Story/Brevity, Suggestion and Implication
2	Raymond Carver & Gordon Lish	'Beginners' and 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love'	Editing and Rewriting
3	Tobias Wolfe	'Bullet in the Brain'	Setting and Cliché
4	Dorothy Parker	'Mrs Carrington and Mrs Crane'	Character and Narrative via Dialogue
5	Don De Lillo Emily Simpson	'The Runner' 'Lapped'	Structure and Shape
6	Ray Bradbury George Saunders	'A Laurel and Hardy Love Story' 'Sticks'	Temporal Management, Compression and Expansion
7	Elmore Leonard James Kelman	'Hanging Out at the Buena Vista' 'Acid'	Pathos
8	Helen Simpson Franz Kafka	'Millennium Blues' 'The Judgement'	Free Indirect Style
9	Saki Stephen King	'Sredni Vashtar' 'The Boogeyman'	Sympathy/Antipathy
10	V.S. Naipaul Lydia Davis	'The Night-Watchman's Occurrence Book' 'Letter to a Funeral Parlour'	Alternative Narrative Media, 'Found' prose

Figure 1. Example course reading list.

Critical reception of published works differs from peer review; without the author present the class is more likely to feel free to voice any negative feelings about the piece, and, as a respected and established story, the piece is likely to garner praise. In my experience, this process warms up the class and helps to ensure that once the critical discussion has concluded, the group are fully engaged; ready to begin peer-review of their own submitted

work in the remaining seminar time, which, ultimately should take priority. Courses that focus entirely on composition and production risk become overly technical and staid, lacking sufficient creativity energy to provoke original inspiration. The process of exploring set texts should be seen as a vehicle, introducing students to a range of potentially fresh ideas and practical techniques which might be employed within their own work, further expanding their writing toolkit.

Using established short fiction also helps to provide flexibility to the course. Set texts can be swapped out if other pieces more appropriate to the particular needs and interests of the student group are available. If, for example, a group tends towards speculative or fantasy writing, then their teaching should help facilitate this (without limiting them) and make alterations to the class content. With short fiction, running mid-programme changes such as these does not tend to disrupt the group too much, not to the same extent as dropping an entire *Madame Bovary* seminar might. Close study of extensive works that are later removed from the discussion schedule may feel to some students like an inefficient use of their study time – *We've already read the Flaubert novel, so we'd like to discuss it, even if analysing the Dorothy Parker story would be more useful.*

The length of short fiction, and its propensity to compress complex circumstances into concise texts, makes it an eminently suitable form for this kind of teaching. Having a class read and then discuss an novel will produce its own benefits, but a collection of short fiction texts (ten to twenty) can augment a practical criticism class with a wide variety of ideas and approaches without the need for extended teaching sessions or large amounts of reading, giving students the opportunity to write and develop their creative work. Texts can be distributed on, for example, a Monday to be discussed on a Wednesday, making the critical reviews fresher and

more immediate, as well as allowing sufficient time for the students to pursue their own Creative Writing.

I use 'Lapped', the story by Emily Simpson,<sup>8</sup> because it is an excellently crafted piece of prose, highly illustrative of structure and the use of theme, as well as having a very well-constructed central character. It compares to the Don DeLillo story in a number of ways, and contrasts in others. De Lillo's story, 'The Runner'<sup>9</sup> concerns a jogger circling a cul-de-sac. There has been an accident or incident at one of the houses, and on each circuit, the jogger observes the escalating emergency services, making guesses as to what has occurred. Simpson's story is largely an internal monologue from the perspective of a bitter and resentful older man at a public swimming pool. He is scathing in his opinions of his fellow bathers, particularly resentful of the women who remind him of failed love affairs. A power-swimmer, a woman, eventually collides with him, but it is the protagonist who apologises with the only word of dialogue in the piece. Stylistically the pieces are very different, but they share a similar internal perspective, and both use laps (or lengths) as part of the overall narrative structure; the comparisons always produce a lively discussion. But, most importantly of all, I use the Simpson story because it was written by an MA student of mine and then subsequently published. After a programme of analysing the short fiction of established luminaries, I have found that seeing such strong work written by a fellow student often encourages and emboldens the class.

The texts (in Figure 1) have also been selected to give a good foundation for tutorial discussions; suggestions for different approaches which may have already been revealed from

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<sup>8</sup> Emily Simpson, 'Lapped', in *Inklings* (Coventry: Ball Bearing Press, 2013), pp. 15–20.

<sup>9</sup> Don De Lillo, 'The Runner', in *The Angel Esmerelda: Nine Stories* (London: Picador, 2012), pp. 47–54.

the reading list can be revisited and applied in a more direct way to student work. – *What if you tried to do this scene more like the Ray Bradbury we looked at, picking up on key details and compressing the time period?* Techniques that may seem obliquely theoretical can be of more practical use to a student-writer, provided they are given strong examples to illustrate their functions.

If appropriate to the course, writing exercises should be set, aiming to replicate some of the techniques demonstrated in the reading list stories. For more experienced student-writers, such as postgraduates or third-year under-graduates, prescribed exercises can become a distraction from their writing rhythms; having developed a body of work and (hopefully) an effective writing schedule, experienced students can draw from the demonstrated techniques as and when they judge them appropriate or effective.

For smaller class sizes, where the submission cycle might become too frequent for the students to keep producing fresh material, critiquing published texts makes fruitful use of seminar time; whilst replication exercises can produce extra copy for analysis. Wallace Stegner took the opinion that when Creative Writing students do not produce sufficient copy for peer review then there is little point in continuing with a seminar and the class should simply adjourn.<sup>10</sup> Presumably this was intended to shame students into becoming more productive. I find this policy to be unnecessarily punitive and a very inefficient use of the limited seminar time students have during their period of study. If the class already has a body of work to draw from, either provided beforehand as part of a reading-list or presented and

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<sup>10</sup> Wallace Stegner, *On Teaching and Writing Fiction* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 60.

distributed in class (even read aloud where appropriate), then the learning need never stagnate in this way.

This cannot become a regular replacement for the criticism of student work, or else students will not have sufficient support in their editing and further narrative composition; students must understand their own role in the learning process.

Throughout my own learning, I have found the process of isolating particular techniques, and analysing them as devices or tools, to be fascinating. Extracting process from a work, or attempting to reverse-engineer narrative effects, has directly encouraged me, inspiring me in ways that more conceptual theories of structure and style have not. This has influenced my writing as well as my teaching and my approach to writer development. Reading fiction is a necessary part of my writing process, particularly short fiction, but I have also found a similar source of inspiration from non-fiction research.

My story, 'Braque', was intended to explore some of the aspects of Cubism, but after researching the biographical history of Georges Braque, I was drawn to the circumstance of a painter rendered blind, and then having his sight restored. Some of the original concept remains, but the focus of the piece shifted to the abject confusion of First World War trenches and PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). The combination of theme and style aimed to echo the surreal horror of Picasso's *Guernica*, as well as elements of Braque's own work and life. While it is true that the final version of 'Braque' lacks the originally intended angular nature, and the prose became less experimental, it has not lost its Cubist roots entirely. Attempts to produce multi-angled perspectives and to blend the landscape with the character did not have the desired effect, and ultimately the piece ended up as a more tentative investigation, which I felt chimed well with Georges Braque's vision of the First World War,

being a beginning of his further artistic development, not the end, and reflected some of the more dramatic moments from his oeuvre.

Writing this story became an example of how setting out to use one short-story technique can inspire further experimentation; the resultant piece can end up as something quite different from the intended and yet still worthwhile. Students should not be penalised if they set out to do one thing with respect to a given piece of short fiction but end up with something else. Quite the contrary, this is something that students should be encouraged to embrace and to interrogate; reflecting upon their processes helps students to track their own development. Any associated critical reflection they write (usually required as part of HE Creative Writing assessment) can draw from and explore any adjustments and alterations to their plans or processes, further illuminating any developments (or frustrations). This is valuable to both student and tutor, who can seek to correct any issues or strengthen any weaknesses in the future.

### **Writing as a Reader**

Short story writing provides student-writers with foundations to build upon. As a compact medium, short fiction can be less intimidating to apprentice writers, and completed works can be composed in a relatively short time. Short Stories can be entirely redrafted as experiments and tests, without becoming untethered. The freedom to start each piece fresh can be more liberating than the constraints that might occur midway through a novel. Such freedom often allows for a more fertile environment to develop new characters, voice and styles which might not otherwise 'fit' into a pre-existing project. Short story writing allows a writer to tackle a range of challenges in different pieces; to attempt numerous perspectives, styles, genres, voices, historical periods and so on. The short story form, being both brief and

multifarious, affords the student the opportunity to experiment and vary the prose they produce, and through doing so, explore their own style. Writing short fiction might also be seen as a process of walking before running, reducing the mammoth task of composing an entire novel into something more immediate and achievable.

The confidence that students gain from producing a finished work should not be underestimated. The ability to publish, or disseminate the work, whether digitally or amongst friends and family, provides even further validation and helps to cultivate a sense of identity within a writer who may be coming to know their own style. Short fiction, being short, presents less of a commitment to readers; feedback can be almost immediate, and the publishing possibilities are far simpler than for larger manuscripts. Short fiction may also be used as prototype-writing, like a rehearsal or maquette for later work, even for more experienced writers. Characters or plots can be further developed following critical feedback. There are many examples of authors expanding or adapting their already published short pieces into full-length novels,<sup>11</sup> and many characters first appearing in short stories later appeared in novels, such as Bertie Wooster, Biggles, A.J. Raffles, even Lassie<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, many characters first made famous in novels have later sojourned in short fiction by their original author; characters such as James Bond, Clarissa Dalloway, and Count Dracula<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Two notable exponents of this method would be Raymond Chandler and Philip K. Dick. *The Big Sleep* (1939) is an amalgam of two previously published shorts: 'Killer in the Rain' (1935) and 'The Curtain' (1936). The science fiction novel *Ubik* (1969) by Phillip K Dick builds heavily upon his previous short story 'What the Dead Men Say' (1964), going so far as to repeat an entire page verbatim.

<sup>12</sup> Bertie Wooster first appeared in 'Extricating Young Gussie' in *The Strand* magazine, 1915; collected in: P.G. Wodehouse, *The Man with Two Left Feet*, (1917). A.J. Raffles first appeared in 'The Ides of March' in *Cassell's* magazine, 1898; collected in: E.W. Hornung, *The Amateur Cracksman*, (1899). James 'Biggles' Bigglesworth first appeared in 'The White Fokker' in *Popular Flying Magazine*, 1932; collected in: Capt. W. E. Johns, *The Camels are Coming*, (1932). Lassie first appeared in 'Lassie Come-Home' in *The Saturday Evening Post*, 1938; later expanded into a novel of the same name: Eric Knight, *Lassie Come-Home*, (1940).

<sup>13</sup> Clarissa Dalloway appears in five short stories, collected as *Mrs Dalloway's Party*. 'The New Dress', Virginia Woolf, was written in 1923 before the novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), but not published until 1927. James Bond appears in many short stories. The first was published in *The Daily Express* newspaper as 'James Bond and The

Ian Rankin's Detective Rebus appears in several short story collections<sup>14</sup> (alongside non-Rebus stories) while Sherlock Holmes features in only four novels by Conan Doyle himself<sup>15</sup>; the majority of his adventures are documented in short fiction.

By writing as a reader, students can respond to various texts and the resulting discussions via their own creative work – they might experiment with specific critical concepts such as Freud's Theory of The Uncanny<sup>16</sup>, or they might dabble with structure and perspective, using epistolary writing, frame narration, limited narration or a polyphonic piece containing many narrators. By utilising techniques discovered through seminar discussion and tutorial support, as well as through their reading, student-writers can use the short story form to more fully investigate their writing interests and abilities within complete and contained narratives.

In his somewhat cynical (and aptly succinct) appraisal of the form, David R Slavitt hits upon some of the elemental properties which make short fiction such a suitable and effective medium for the teaching of creative writing:

'Short stories are what you can read aloud in class and talked about for an hour or so.'<sup>17</sup>

And yet it is principally because of these practical qualities of size and versatility, as well as its developmental potential, that the short story should be regarded as a particularly fertile mode within Creative Writing courses and should feature extensively. My experience studying and composing short fiction has been essential in my becoming the teacher and writer I am.

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Murder Before Breakfast', Ian Fleming, (1958). Count Dracula reappears in 'Dracula's Guest,' Bram Stoker, (1914).

<sup>14</sup> Inspector Rebus appears in seven of the twenty-one stories collected in: Ian Rankin, *Beggars Banquet*, (London: Orion, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), *The Sign of the Four* (1890), *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901–1902), *The Valley of Fear* (1914–1915).

<sup>16</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock, (London: Penguin, 2003)

<sup>17</sup> David R. Slavitt, 'Short Stories are Not Real Life', in *Writers and Their Craft: Short Stories and Essays on the Narrative*, (Detroit MI: Wayne State University, 1991).



It is my firm belief that student-writers should be encouraged to engage in the form as a foundation to literary theory and be required to produce a portfolio of their own complete short narratives as a significant part of their overall assessment.

## How Writers Learn

In their 1987 study, *The Psychology of Written Composition*, educationalists, Bereiter and Scardamalia identify two distinct models of teaching, which they define as ‘knowledge-telling’ and ‘knowledge-transforming’.<sup>18</sup> Their distinction is immediately applicable to the teaching of short fiction. They define knowledge-telling composition as a ‘what next?’ process, where each idea is used to produce the next. This is how young children compose, forward-focused with a highly diachronic narrative. Bereiter and Scardamalia observe that ‘novice writers plan less often, revise less often and less extensively, and are primarily concerned with generating content from their internal resources.’<sup>19</sup> But this is not restricted to children. I have found it to be a very common practice for adult creative writers, both in their first draft writing and in their initial planning.

Knowledge-telling requires the writer to ‘hold the idea in working (short-term) memory while writing it down. Then, as soon as it is finished, while it is still current in working memory, the writer must summon up a related idea to replace it. The writer’s mind is entirely devoted to creating and transcribing a chain of associations; there is no space for reflection. Reflection means halting.’<sup>20</sup> Knowledge-telling incorporates techniques such as automatic writing, Morning Pages<sup>21</sup>, and in-class writing prompt exercises, as well as a great many first drafts, particularly with short stories or flash fictions.

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<sup>18</sup> Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia, *The Psychology of Written Composition* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia, quoted in *Teaching and Researching Writing*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn by Ken Hyland (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Mike Sharples, *How We Write* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> Julia Cameron, *The Artist’s Way* (New York: Putnam, 2002).

This method is immediate, personal and raw. As a consequence, it might lack finesse or consistency. I have found that for prose composition, knowledge-telling techniques to be profitable to begin with but often result in a creative cul-de-sac; the writer risks running out of steam or producing hasty and sudden conclusions. However, the compact nature of short fiction helps to prevent this becoming a perennial problem for students. Whether through self-directed development or through guided exercises, working on a number of shorter works helps to refresh the creative pallet by providing variety, multiplicity and momentum. As a foundational approach to writing, knowledge-telling techniques can be explored and developed with first-year students before moving on to more organised methods of planning, devising and redrafting.

The other model, knowledge-transforming, considers how more practiced writers use the task of writing to analyse problems and to set goals. During these processes, writers are able to reflect upon complexities and resolve issues of content, form, audience, style and structure, so that there becomes a 'continuous interaction between developing knowledge and text.'<sup>22</sup> This approach forms mental spaces where the writer tackles separate aspects of more complicated narratives (or more complex arguments). Bereiter and Scardamalia describe this as being an internal dialogue between content and rhetoric.<sup>23</sup>

This would incorporate the editorial phase of rewriting or redrafting. In a workshop or tutorial environment, this 'internal dialogue' would also become externalised. Class discussions and critique create a pool of ideas and concepts for an author to draw from, but final selection remains with the writer. This discussion and critiquing process is also vital for the completion

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<sup>22</sup> Ken Hyland, *Teaching and Researching Writing*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia, *The Psychology of Written Composition* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1987).

of finished pieces. Students, both authors and critics, can track the transformation of a story as it develops, sharing the learning outcomes within the class by critically observing the changes and evolutions it goes through.

Bereiter and Scardamalia conclude that 'knowledge-transforming thus involves actively reworking thoughts so that in the process, not only the text, but also ideas, may be changed.'<sup>24</sup>

It became apparent to me that novice student-writers will likely be aware of the need to plan and reflect in order to produce higher quality prose, but will tend to fall back on knowledge-telling strategies, having not developed the necessary techniques to prepare an appropriate writing strategy, something which practiced student-writers seem to adopt more 'naturally'. This increased level of expertise is *not* in fact natural, but rather it has been nurtured through practice and conditioning. Skills eventually develop to an automatic level – musicians no longer pick out individual notes, mathematicians no longer calculate digit by digit. They 'perform skills as a holistic procedure apparently without conscious deliberation.'<sup>25</sup>

Just as an expert musician can play scales, chords and melodies from memory, as an architect knows standard forms and properties of materials, and a chess player can recognise and respond to over 20,000 chess positions, a skilled writer gains tacit knowledge of language, style and structure.<sup>26</sup>

To facilitate this, a writer must be dedicated and devote time to both creative composition and critical contemplation. This can be encouraged and accelerated through the use of more compact forms, like short fiction. One would not expect an English Literature course to devote

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<sup>24</sup> Ken Hyland, *Teaching and Researching Writing*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> Annette Karmiloff-Smith, quoted in *How We Write* by Mike Sharples (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Mike Sharples, *How We Write* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 32.

all of its attention to the analysing a single book, or the study of Art to use only one painting, but student-writers who create long fiction do this, to some extent – they focus their learning and development through the funnel of one long project, and, in my view, limit their experience and slow their growth. This philosophy is similar to that of educationalist, John Dewey, who considers the differential between education and experience: ‘To know the meaning of empiricism we need to understand what experience is... Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other.’<sup>27</sup>

Writers develop new skills through a variety of inputs: mentorship and direct teaching; trial and error or play; sometimes learning occurs through serendipity, but, over time, there tends to be a combination of inputs working in concert.

But how is a student to know which approaches best suit them as a writer and best suit their intentions for their work if they do not explore a range of alternatives?

Short Fiction production allows students to develop using a variety of different pieces, smaller and more manageable – songs, not symphonies. Short Fiction affords students this breadth while longer fiction can corral them; the demands of consistency are likely to create limitations and restrictions upon a writer. Their novel is perhaps in a fixed perspective, or a fixed time period, or a consistent genre. Short fiction portfolios allow students to make forays into all sorts of territories and make their writing experience more like their reading experience. Short Fiction courses also allow for tutors to suggest more radical interventions. I have found it much easier to convince students to write a fresh piece using a particular theme or technique, rather than to introduce it into more extensive ongoing work. The

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<sup>27</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), p. 25.

resulting discoveries might then be used by the students within their longer works, either for existing or future projects. This way, the student maintains a sense of ownership and control over their work while at the same time exploring and developing a variety of skills.

It became clear to me that for successful development student-writers require a combination of learning techniques that encourage inspiration for getting started but which also allow (or even require) students to reflect and to define their own writing strategies as they progress.

### Teaching Approaches

In her work 'Establishing Creative Writing as an Academic Discipline', Dianne Donnelly defines four principal pedagogical theories or approaches:

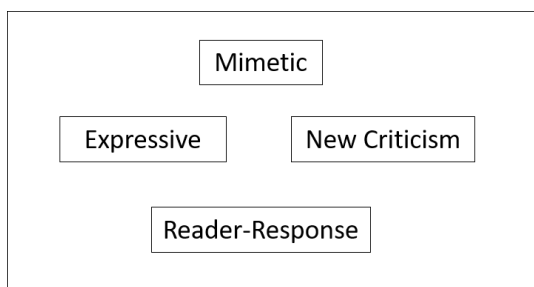


Figure 2. taxonomy of pedagogical theories in Creative Writing (Donnelly).<sup>28</sup>

These might be considered from a student's perspective as:

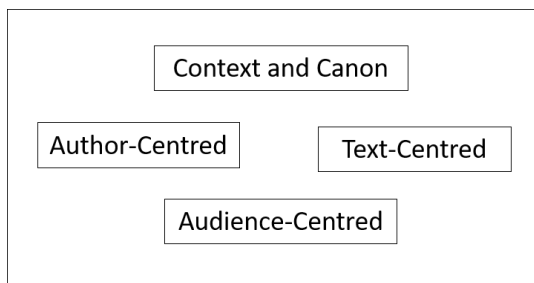


Figure 3. Taxonomy of pedagogical theories in Creative Writing from the student perspective (Mycroft).

<sup>28</sup> Dianne Donnelly, *Establishing Creative Writing Studies as an Academic Discipline* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2012), p. 23.

Using the six-word story as a starting point ('For sale: baby shoes, never worn' – attributed to Ernest Hemingway<sup>29</sup>), students can be swiftly introduced to a range of critical and creative approaches via these four principal teaching positions, one after another, with each informing upon the others:

- Audience-Centred

*Re-tell the story in your own words. What has occurred and to whom? What is the story here (if any)?*

With an audience-centred approach, the unwritten elements of the text are discussed in class; assumptions can be compared. Students then try to determine how these effects might have been produced through the use of implication and suggestion.

- Text-Centred

*Conduct a close critique and analysis*

Despite there being no more than six words and three punctuation marks, a text-centred approach is both valuable and immediate. When considering narrative structure; there emerges a simple three-act structure – a beginning (context), a middle (development) and an ending (resolution/revelation).

- Author-Centred

*Consider the use of register, style and form*

This is author-centred in the sense that it considers the initial strategy of the author and the specific techniques employed. Although not strictly expressivist, a discussion regarding alternative forms of discourse (in this instance, a newspaper small-ad) and how this

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<sup>29</sup> *For Sale: Baby Shoes, Never Worn - A Collection of Flash Fiction Based on a Single Theme* ed., By Hache Jones, (Scott's Valley CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017).

approach has contributed to the narrative is a useful way of inviting students-writers to explore other forms of written communication and perhaps experiment with how to extract narrative potency from them. The effect and impact can then be compared to JG Ballard's story 'The Index'<sup>30</sup> and/or VS Naipaul's 'The Night-watchman's Occurrence Book'.<sup>31</sup>

Alternatively, for a more explicitly expressivist exercise, students might attempt to rearrange random words into meaningful phrases, like word-collage, and then expand these into poetry or fragments of prose. This exercise can be compared to Bob Dylan's found poetry footage from *No Direction Home*,<sup>32</sup> Samuel Beckett's short story 'Ping',<sup>33</sup> or William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*.<sup>34</sup>

- Context-and-Canon-Centred

*Write your own six-word story*

Students are invited to explore brevity and the potentially complex nature of deceptively brief narratives. Attempted as an in-class exercise or set as an assignment, this is quite a challenge, but the experience of wrestling with such constraints is a valuable learning experience in itself. The tutor should provide examples of six-word stories by other authors, written as a response to Hemingway. Similar contemporary examples can also be shared, such as pieces from *365*, a collection of flash fictions from 2013 each story being precisely 365 words long, or examples of 'Twitter prose' which consists of 280 characters or less (formerly 140 or less). This provides students with further context in terms of current writing and of the literary canon.

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<sup>30</sup> J.G. Ballard, 'The Index', in *That Glimpse of Truth*, ed. By Miller, David (London: Head of Zeus, 2015), pp. 943–947.

<sup>31</sup> Naipaul, V.S., *A Flag on the Island* (London: Penguin, 1975).

<sup>32</sup> *No Direction Home*, dir. by Martin Scorsese (PBS, 2005), <<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0367555/>> [accessed 18 August 2018].

<sup>33</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Ping', in *First Love and Other Shorts* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), pp. 67–72.

<sup>34</sup> William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove Press, 2005).



It should be possible to explore most texts in a number of different ways, and by not prioritising one particular teaching approach, students have a greater range of learning opportunities. However, when it comes to their own work and that of peers, students need to be made aware of the differing teaching approaches, not only to better grasp their own understanding but also to have a fair preparation for the assessment mechanics of their course. As Siobhan Holland says: 'It is not fair to students to find their work praised in workshops and criticised in assessment feedback.'<sup>35</sup> There must be a consistency and transparency to a tutor's critical responses and criteria.

Short prose portfolios offer a spectrum of work for assessment and evaluation, enabling students to showcase a variety of skills and techniques without resorting to concocting lengthy convoluted pieces incorporating a range of literary effects to the same ends. Exploring selected short fiction, (reading as a writer) exposes students to available techniques and writing strategies, how they might be employed and to what effect. Similar stories can be compared and contrasted to help identify elements of composition process. Authorial decisions can be extrapolated and evaluated. The compact nature of the narratives makes this a more practicable and efficient mode for demonstration and discussion.

### **Practical Application of Pedagogical Approaches**

*Expressivist* teaching prioritises imagination, experimentation and play. This is a knowledge-telling process, immediate and instinctual. It might incorporate techniques such as written

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<sup>35</sup> Siobhan Holland, quoted in *The Author is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else* by Michelene Wandor (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 127.

responses to audio or visual stimuli, unorthodox writing conditions, impromptu in-class exercises, and so on.

*Mimetic* teaching prioritises imitation and replication, including the examination of traditional tropes and genre conventions. It is a knowledge-transformation process, involving close analysis of the source material, taking process and function into consideration. It is best applied through homework assignment briefs based upon specific texts and/or specific techniques and then complemented with a group discussion afterwards.

*New Criticism* covers close reading feedback from peers as well as editing technique. It produces text-centred analysis, examining elements such as structure, pace, rhythm, poetics and appropriate language, often in concert with relevant theory and terminology. Criticism can be conducted in-class without significant preparation (knowledge-telling) or individually as an assignment, producing written feedback or notes (knowledge-transforming). Ideally, students will engage in both, as the two processes produce different results and different learning opportunities.

*Reader-Response* largely consists of peer review workshop criticism; responding to, and evaluating, the various suggestions and criticisms. Students might consider aspects of audience and (where appropriate) marketability, as well as clarity, originality and aesthetic concerns. This is best achieved in tutorial consultation to avoid any confrontation between critic and author, although in a well-managed and experienced class, comparing and contrasting reviews might also be suitable for group discussion.

Any of these techniques can incorporate different theoretical approaches, i.e. a teacher might adopt mimetic teaching of Marxist readings, or applying New Criticism to feminist critiques.

Short fiction analysis affords a course leader the opportunity to vary their teaching style in ways which do not seem incongruous or disjointed. To switch styles mid-way through the study of an extensive novel would not be as appropriate as approaching a range of different stories by different authors in differing teaching techniques.

### **Encouraging Creativity and Developing Originality**

Decisions to drop the word 'Creative' from academic course titles, and insist upon merely 'Writing' was, as John Singleton remarks, 'only partially based on philosophical grounds... In certain quarters, the term "creative" was disreputable, a synonym for indulgence, for undisciplined and egotistical expression.'<sup>36</sup>

But 'creativity' is, in reality, at the very heart of the discipline. Students who write concise and didactic copy, more appropriate to instruction manuals, might well be producing effective communication and clear 'writing', but they will be highly criticised by both peers and assessors for a lack of creativity, of flair, of appropriate ability. Whilst the word 'creative' might be omitted from the course title, it is certainly not omitted from course requirements; instead, it becomes an invisible word, spoken in hushed tones. 'Early discussions about including stylistics and linguistics as major elements in our courses were fuelled by a desire to seem intellectually rigorous and academically worthy.'<sup>37</sup>

These discussions of theory, however, threaten to erode the original purpose of creating a subject distinct from existing Literature curricula. The purpose of Creative Writing courses is

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<sup>36</sup> John Singleton, 'Creative Writing and Assessment: A Case Study', in *Teaching Creative Writing*, ed. By Moira Monteith and Robert Miles (London: Open University Press, 1992), p. 69.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p. 68.

to produce creative writers, to train and develop writers, poets, screenwriters and playwrights, yet with too high a demand upon stylistics and analysis, there is a risk of focus shifting away from creative production and towards creative appreciation and critical perception.

In order for students to benefit from short story writing and portfolio development, they must have access to inspirations and creative challenges to base their writing upon and assist them in producing multiple narratives during the course. Martha Pennington observes that 'writing pedagogy does not always help student writers find a good idea... Rather than focussing on ideas, writing pedagogy often focuses on written structure.'<sup>38</sup> She goes on to explain that 'attention on structure limits their writing process and options and may discourage them.'<sup>39</sup>

The elusive 'original idea' is perhaps an element which cannot be taught, but it can potentially be fostered within a writer. Field trips or writing activities are more direct approaches at trying to inspire, but also coaching students in research and in the identification of elements of narrative that can make for a successful story can also provide students with techniques to maximise their 'dreaming potential'.

Professor David Morley led a series of seminars at The University of Warwick designed to assist with inspiration and promote imagination. His classes (which I audited) involved, amongst other things: meditation, very loud music, remote control vehicles, sword fighting (actual sword fighting, with actual swords), helium balloons and apples; no books to speak of, and only very slight demands for formative assessments or assignments. Alongside the more

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<sup>38</sup> Martha Pennington, 'Writing Creativity and Discovery: Process and Pedagogy', in *Creativity and Discovery in the University Writing Class*, ed. By Alice Chik, and others (Sheffield: Equinox, 2015), p. 77.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

rigorous text-heavy modules on the course, this seemed like the ‘good-cop’ class, the doddle. And perhaps for some it was, but to others it provided unique insights into the creative mind, into the possibilities afforded by a walk through the woods (that was another part of the class, woodland walks). Although the academic content focused on poetry composition, the techniques demonstrated were immediately transferable and the insights benefited the prose writers as much (if not more) than the poets. Every year, the course produced excellent results<sup>40</sup>; it legitimised play and serendipity as part of a student’s process; it added to the overall writing toolkit provided by the whole degree; it complemented the reading-heavy and the writing-intensive elements of the course and freed up possibility. Those skills and approaches were then carried by the students into other classes and beyond, like a story or poem tied to a helium balloon.

I believe this kind of teaching is a valuable addition to more orthodox techniques but should not dominate serious Creative Writing courses. Considering Lester Faigley’s essay ‘Competing Theories of Process’,<sup>41</sup> Expressivist approaches to Creative Writing teaching – which prioritise vague notions of self-actualisation and concepts such as originality, integrity and spontaneity – are, as Ken Hyland observes, ‘hazy and culturally variable’.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, despite being somewhat under-theorised, they remain important elements in the development of student-writers who have yet to establish their identities as writers or fully explore the possibilities afforded to them, and should not be dismissed out of hand. I have found that introducing a contrasting teaching style can illicit useful changes to the class dynamic and can ‘shock’

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<sup>40</sup> As well as producing high grades within the course, a number of graduates have gone on to publish collections of poetry, including Kate Edwards whose ‘Frequency Violet’ poem (developed from an original piece of short prose) was a highly commended Forward Poetry Prize finalist 2018. <<http://www.inkswheatandtears.co.uk/pages/?cat=85>> [accessed 16 April 2019].

<sup>41</sup> Lester Faigley, ‘Competing Theories of Process: A Critique and a Proposal’, *College English*, 48(6) (1986), 527–542.

<sup>42</sup> Ken Hyland, *Teaching and Researching Writing*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 24.

unexpected work from students. Although, tutors should be aware that favouring discovery and imagination at the expense of structure, style and language can result in formless learning. By relying entirely upon the winds of happenstance, without the guidance of theory and active peer review, students can lack the direction needed to develop confidence or ability.

Since their development in the 1960s by scholars such as Peter Elbow<sup>43</sup> and Donald Murray<sup>44</sup>, Expressivist approaches have been instrumental in the development of Creative Writing pedagogies, but as a guiding principal, Expressivism can reduce teaching to romantic notions that prioritise creation over development and neglect the vital skills of criticism and editing. Consequently, such elements should be limited, to better incorporate a broader view of writing, criticism and prose development. Short fiction production and criticism particularly supports this format of varied teaching, allowing students to create and ‘play’ with more manageable stories of appropriate complexity, and then to reflect and rework any successful elements for critical reception in workshop classes. Over the limited period of the course, pieces can be developed entirely (rather than as excerpts, or treatments,) and then added to a portfolio before moving forwards to a new story and further challenges.

John Singleton suggests that this need for balance can also be reflected through assessment criteria: ‘Assessment, following teaching, stresses originality and innovation in Year 1, but in Years 2 and 3 lays increasing emphasis on formal elements in writing.’<sup>45</sup> This system allows the student-writer time and freedom to experiment and interrogate their own writing

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<sup>43</sup> Peter Elbow, “‘Personal Writing’ and ‘Expressivism’ as Problem Terms’ in *Critical Expressivism: Theory and Practice in the Composition Classroom* ed. By Tara Roeder and Roseanne Gatto (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015).

<sup>44</sup> Donald Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing*, 2nd edn (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1985).

<sup>45</sup> John Singleton, ‘Creative Writing and Assessment: A Case Study’, in *Teaching Creative Writing*, ed. By Moira Monteith and Robert Miles (London: Open University Press, 1992), p. 74.

interests before later concentrating on improving their writing skills, use of language, rhetoric and style.

For student-writers who are developing their skills, this form of sudden creativity and experimentation lends well to the production of poetry and short prose more so than novel-writing. Using serendipity and creative association in order to develop an existing longer project is, I believe, less effective than using expressivist techniques to provide initial inspiration for new pieces.

In my experience, this balance between creative and critical content is highly suited to the short story course format. Critical analysis and discussions of literary aesthetics can effectively punctuate a course of short fiction composition; I have found that regularly returning students to the creative process following new influences has proved very profitable. By creating short fiction portfolios students have a range of writing opportunities, and room to develop more immediate ideas. Classes exposed to the same influences can exchange ideas and criticism from a shared contextual (and often theoretical) base. With a number of projects combining as a collection, students can afford to try and fail without feeling that they jeopardise their assessments, and can broaden their creative experiences and avoid opting for the 'safe choice'.

One student of mine had grown up beside the New Forest and had used it as her principal source of inspiration. Prior to attending the course, she had written a number of short stories, as well as some poetry and an aborted novel, all concerning the New Forest, often with animal protagonists. The stories seemed safe and similar to one another, and did have a great deal of substance, but as our course progressed, she found it possible to meet each writing opportunity with another forest story, applying different techniques, voices or perspectives

to different pieces. After exploring some unfamiliar writers and their styles, as well as discussing the elements of her own work with both the class and in tutorials, her work developed from being placid and repetitive, into much darker territory, as if she had ventured farther into the woods. She began deepening the meaning of her work and seeing the potential to develop into areas she had previously avoided. Meandering stories of bored teenagers killing time in the woods, or melodramas of terrified foxes pursued by huntsmen now combined with stranger, more unusual tales. The stories were then carefully combined to reflect the changing nature of the forest, its darkness and its light.

The multiplicity of the short story course provided her with creative influences outside of her usual sphere but did not prevent her from continuing with her own personal themes, quite the opposite.

One particularly effective piece concerned a wild hermit who analyses his fingernail-dirt through an old (possibly broken) microscope and then tells himself stories about what he 'sees'. The piece took direct inspiration from the critical discussions of her previous work as well as the theoretical analyses of the reading list. The work of ETA Hoffmann<sup>46</sup> and of Doris Lessing<sup>47</sup> proving particularly influential.

Her final story seemed like a culmination of her development. It concerned two teens, a boy and a girl, who bunk off school to look for an escaped leopard. It enabled her to showcase her intimate connection with the forest location and to explore her favoured themes of pursuit and freedom, and of sexual awakening, but introduced a more impressionist approach, similar

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<sup>46</sup> ETA Hoffmann, *Tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>47</sup> Doris Lessing, *To Room Nineteen: Collected Stories Vol One*, (New York: Flamingo, 2002).



in tone to Joseph Conrad. This proved more appropriate to a story of looking for something one does not actually want to find.

### **Rewriting and Editing**

As Sir Ken Robinson has said: 'If you are not prepared to be wrong, it's unlikely you will ever come up with anything original.' Which is a neat take on the Einstein quote: 'A person who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new'<sup>48</sup> – essential advice to all creative artists. However, in the context of formal education, being 'wrong' is not a desirable position for a student to be in. This sense of 'wrongness' can lead to student-writers avoiding attempting anything original or new, anything unusual. Tutors (especially for their first-year undergraduates) must be careful not to discourage experimental writing, and to praise its virtues where possible before pointing out any shortcomings. Originality and imaginative strategies or structures should be applauded, and the revision/editing process should be presented as being vital and valuable rather than as some kind of necessary evil. Robinson concludes that 'Creativity moves through different phases. Trying to produce a finished version [of anything] is usually impossible. Not understanding this can make people think that they are not creative at all.'<sup>49</sup>

During the formative years of my teaching, I was very surprised to discover that the majority of my first-year undergraduate students were not practised in editing or redrafting their own work at all. Over the duration of their studies, they hoped to develop their first-draft-composition skills sufficiently to create high-quality prose without the need to rewrite or

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<sup>48</sup> Albert Einstein, quoted in *Research Design Explained*, 7<sup>th</sup> edn, By Mark L. Mitchell and Janina M. Jolley (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2012), p.73.

<sup>49</sup> Sir Ken Robinson, *Out of Our Minds*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Chichester: Capstone, 2017), p. 135.

polish. The revelation that redrafting and close reading were the most effective means to improve their writing was something I had assumed was self-evident, but I have, over the years, realised is an important point of teaching and a valuable part of student development. I suspect that this naivety arises from the secondary school education system which generally requires a pupil to submit their homework, receive their grade and then move on. From the students' perspective, the idea of rewriting and resubmitting seems punitive rather than developmental. Secondary schooling emphasises momentum and growth, and while going back over old work in order to identify strengths and weaknesses is a standard part of assessment and feedback, requiring pupils to rewrite last week's homework produces a sense of paralysis or stagnation; they are seen as 'falling behind', when in fact, they may be being denied the opportunity to reflect and develop.

These findings would suggest that Creative Writing teaching should borrow approaches from those subjects and pursuits that *do* prioritise repetition in order to develop excellence, such as music, athletics, foreign languages, and fine art. Repetition techniques are familiar in fine art – sketching the same life model in different poses, painting the same landscape over and over, or a variety of flowers in a range of vases. Claude Monet famously painted and repainted a pond near his home, developing his expressionist style<sup>50</sup>. Andy Warhol did likewise with screen-print and images of celebrity<sup>51</sup>. More recently, David Hockney produced sixteen different pictures of the same subject: a wooded lane (also near his home)<sup>52</sup>. Together, the collection marks the changes of the season and are entitled *The Arrival of Spring*. This effect

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<sup>50</sup> The earliest example of Monet's 'Pond Series' was 1886, the last was 1886.

Claude Monet, *Jardin D'eau a Giverny*, 1920, oil on canvas, Museum of Grenoble, Grenoble.

Claude Monet, *The Japanese Bridge*, 1886, oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

<sup>51</sup> Andy Warhol, *Marilyn Triptych*, 1962, screen-print on canvas, Tate Modern, London.

<sup>52</sup> Hockney's iPad paintings were displayed across a range of media but were eventually collected and published in book-form.

David Hockney, *The Arrival of Spring*, (London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 2014).

can also be true of short prose and of poetry. Writing several pieces in the same style, or on the same subject, or using the same character can hone a writer's technique in the same way as with drawing or painting. Although not exhaustively, my own work often uses themes of funerals, aging and the change of generations as a principal focus. Another example of this might be Roald Dahl's celebrated collection *Someone Like You*<sup>53</sup> which contains a peculiarly common theme of wagers backfiring, or in some way reversing upon the gambler: 'A Dip in the Pool', 'Taste', 'Skin' and, most famously, 'Man from the South' all involve a bet or transaction. Whether it be guessing a wine, judging a cruise ship arrival time, buying another man's tattoo or 'winning' another man's finger, invariably the cheater is themselves cheated. Alternatively, there are collections of separate stories set in the same locale with different protagonists (who sometimes cross from one story to another), such as: *Kolymar Tales* by Varlam Shalamov<sup>54</sup> or V.S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street*<sup>55</sup>, even Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*<sup>56</sup>. This is a fruitful exercise to set students, expanding upon an existing work or on previous research to create new (perhaps parallel) works. However, the process of reworking prose, of redrafting, polishing and perfecting, requires several investigations; work must be read and reread, either by the writer or by a test audience. The resulting feedback will help to identify any shortcomings or errors as well as highlighting strengths and successes. Therefore, effective courses will also provide students with a regular forum to discuss their work, and to facilitate their editing and planning.

Students can be encouraged (or even obliged) to rewrite and revise their work, to polish and improve. This is best achieved in peer review via workshopping seminars, or through a one-

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<sup>53</sup> Roald Dahl, *Someone Like You*, (London: Penguin, 2010).

<sup>54</sup> Varlam Shalamov, *Kolymar Tales*, trans. by John Glad, (London: Penguin, 1994).

<sup>55</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *Miguel Street*, (London: Picador, 2011).

<sup>56</sup> William Faulkner, *As I lay Dying*, (London: Harper Collins, 2013).

to-one tutorial with a tutor or experienced mentor; however, a more valuable approach is to combine the two, allowing the student a range of opinions and observations to consider during their revisions.

Psychologically speaking, redrafting is a different skill to initial composition, and involves a different form of cognitive organisation, occurring within different 'mental spaces'. The processes of inspiration, and the resulting drive to create, are different from the processes employed when formulating effective writing strategies – first the writer discovers the 'what' and the 'why', then they must determine the 'how'.

For the initial planning of my own story 'Resolution', I had decided I wanted to write a 'confession' narrative (this might be considered as the 'what'.) I wanted to explore representations of secret guilt and remorse and some of the psychological perspectives which might be provoked (the 'why'.) I'd already decided that I would incorporate concepts of repetition and of the recurring, and some kind of totemic anchor or symbol running throughout. I decided upon a tree. As a symbol of life and growth it felt suitably antonymic to provide a narrative contrast to the guilt of a hit-and-run accident. In terms of perspective, I wanted a first-person point of view with hallucinatory or delusional aspects. For further stylistic inspiration (and to settle upon my 'how'), I revisited the work of Jorge Luis Borges<sup>57</sup>, MR James<sup>58</sup>, HP Lovecraft<sup>59</sup> and Neil Gaiman<sup>60</sup>, largely to provoke a kind of suitable mindset before embarking on a first draft.

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<sup>57</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley, (London: Penguin, 1999).

<sup>58</sup> M.R. James, *Collected Ghost Stories*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>59</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, (London: Penguin, 2002).

<sup>60</sup> Neil Gaiman, *Fragile Things: Short Fictions and Wonders*, (London: Headline, 2006).

Creative Writing courses should offer a balanced range of content, allowing for both planning and play; aiming to develop students' breadth of experimentation and depth of competence. To take this teaching further and to develop the necessary holistic skillset, pedagogical priorities must be formulated with this in mind.

## **Applied Theoretical Tools**

### **Reception Theory**

Reception theory, or reader-response theory, was developed in the late 1960s by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, members of the Constance School of criticism, but was not a fully developed field until the mid-1970s, incorporating the work of US theorist Stanley Fish. Reception theory stresses the critical importance of individual interpretation. It emphasizes that the meaning of any literary text is necessarily developed by the reader who uses their own personal context and prior knowledge to formulate their understanding.

Given the current dominant pedagogy of the workshop seminar, and what I consider to be the vital importance of close tutorial support in Creative Writing teaching, placing additional emphasis upon the reader and the examination of active critical reception by a contemporary audience has always seemed to me to be relevant to the examination of Creative Writing education and learning.

During my own development as a writer, I found Jauss and Iser's theoretical concepts of 'Implied Reader', 'Horizon' and 'Repertoire' (theoretical tools first developed within reception theory) to be most illuminating.

By considering my own work from a more external perspective and posing questions to myself regarding audience and familiarity, or of originality, I began to interrogate my intentions and aims as a writer, and to begin developing a more conscious sense of literary style. I later found that exposing students to this field of thinking often provoked useful discoveries and helped clarify the more philosophical concepts associated with originality and intention. I have found that my application of these terms, adapting them for Creative Writing purposes, has

contributed to a clearer language of criticism and discussion between peers in the classroom, as well as for self-reflective student evaluations.

Reader-reception teaching approaches are also in line with the principles laid out by the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Creative Writing, which requires that graduates ‘acquire knowledge of the context of their writing: literary, cultural and personal’ and ‘contextualise their own work within the writing traditions that precede and surround them’, while having the ability to recognise ‘the contribution that readers and audiences make to the realisation of [a] text.’<sup>61</sup>

### **The Implied Reader**

Iser’s book ‘The Implied Reader’<sup>62</sup> presents the idea that all writers write with a recipient in mind, not an actual flesh-and-blood reader (such as the recipient of a letter) but an imagined, ideal reader; what modern marketing might refer to as ‘a key demographic’. The implied reader is a hypothetical model of someone assumed by the author to have access to any knowledge necessary to fully understand the text. The implied reader must be able to comprehend the language and context, as well as any complex concepts or ideas within the text. Using this concept, literary historians can gain insight into the readership of the past, or of differing cultures. By reverse-engineering this implied reader, a critic can better understand the literature, its intended purpose and any subsequent impact it may have had upon following works.

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<sup>61</sup> The English Association, *Subject Benchmark Statement Creative Writing: Draft for Consultation* (The English Association, 2015), p. 5, <[www2.le.ac.uk/offices/english-association/news-1/qaa-draft-subject-benchmark-statement-for-creative-writing](http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/english-association/news-1/qaa-draft-subject-benchmark-statement-for-creative-writing)> [accessed 15 September 2018].

<sup>62</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

The implied reader is a versatile theory which has been applied to a variety of studies. John Dixon Hunt's historical exploration of architecture and landscaping, *The Afterlife of Gardens*, adapts Iser's theory into an 'implied visitor',<sup>63</sup> while Eef Masson introduces the 'implied viewer' as part of her critical study of film and media.<sup>64</sup> For the purposes of teaching Creative Writing, Iser's initial use for the implied reader – to extract socio-historical data from a text, would not be at all relevant; nevertheless, it does prove useful when considering the practice of writing, simply by inviting students to closely consider the question: *Who is the writer writing for?*

This then provokes an investigation incorporating broader questions of audience and marketplace, possibly even genre conventions and tropes. Given that publishing companies have a material interest in identifying a customer base and securing a market for their products, it serves writers well to know their own target audience and to have a sense of who they are writing for, and why; not merely for commercial concerns, but also for aesthetic reasons and for consistency. Investigating one's own implied reader can also help a student-writer to better determine their creative intentions, and what they hope their work might ultimately achieve, which ideas or emotions it might provoke in a reader and why. This is an important step towards developing an appropriate and effective writing strategy; first, the writer decides what they want the story to do, then they work out how best to make it do it.

## **The Horizon**

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<sup>63</sup> John Dixon Hunt, *The Afterlife of Gardens* (London: Reaktion, 2013).

<sup>64</sup> Eef Masson, *Watch and Learn: Rhetorical Devices in Classroom Films After 1940* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).



In his thesis *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Hans Robert Jauss attempted to produce a historiographical theory which sought to extract socio-historical data from works of literature via an analysis of their initial impact and contemporary reception.<sup>65</sup> Some of the theoretical tools he developed have been of particular interest to my teaching.

Hans Robert Jauss' notion of 'The Horizon of Expectation(s)' (*Erwartungshorizonte*) considers how a reader of a text is necessarily influenced by their own cultural codes. In essence, it explains that what a reader 'expects' of a text will vary over time and place (and socio-economic factors). An Elizabethan Venetian reading Machiavelli will have a different reading experience and interpretation from that of a Victorian American reader (or for that matter a Victorian Venetian). Jauss intended the theory to be used to extract from literature socio-political data regarding their initial intended readerships, but the concept is equally valuable, I have found, if reversed, and used by writers as a conceptual tool to consider questions of originality and reader-reception.

'Horizon thus describes our situatedness in the world, but it should not be thought of as a fixed or closed standpoint; rather, it is "something into which we move and which moves with us".'<sup>66</sup> When each new development becomes established, the horizon moves accordingly, as the novelty fades and imitations emerge. Expectations are shifted. As well as changing over time, horizons will also vary from audience to audience, depending on their particular expectations and requirements. Horizons will vary wildly from one culture to another, or one generation to another. I am perhaps bending the original concept to fit my own needs, but

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<sup>65</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

<sup>66</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, quoted in *Reception Theory* by Robert C. Holub (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 42.

for the purpose of my pedagogy, the horizon represents the limit of current standards or expectations from any given position, at any given time.

Ian Maclean writes: 'It is possible to measure the "aesthetic distance" of a new work (that is the degree by which it departs from the horizon of expectations of its first readers)'.<sup>67</sup> I would argue that this definition is perhaps too definite, in that it implies that the horizon of expectations provides a high level of certainty in its findings, almost empirical in nature. This is certainly not the case. However, I have found that the concept of aesthetic distance and the related considerations of audience appreciation/comprehension to be valid investigations for Creative Writing students, even if the findings will necessarily be both subjective and transitory.

Maclean continues: "aesthetic distance" becomes an important measure of literary value, creating a spectrum on one end of which lies "culinary" (totally consumable) reading, and on the other, works which have a radical effect on their readers' expectations'.<sup>68</sup> Much like the structural axis, this concept helps students to consider important aspects of their writing, in this case, aspects beyond matters of plot, character and setting. Students can begin to see their own work in relation to the work that informs and surrounds it.

Using Jauss' ideas of horizon and aesthetic distance, I developed a simple diagram (shown in Figure 4) detailing four creative spaces – the radical, the original, the established and the flawed – and their position in relation to each other and to the horizon:

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<sup>67</sup> Ian Maclean, quoted in *Modern Literary Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn by Ann Jefferson and David Robey (London: Batsford, 1993), p. 139.

<sup>68</sup> Ann Jefferson, and Robey, David *Modern Literary Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Batsford, 1993), p. 139.

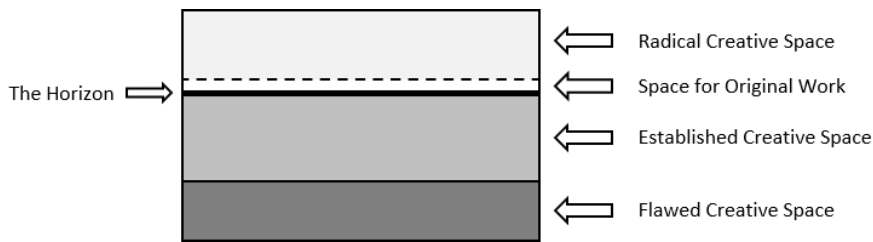


Figure 4. The four creative spaces.

The diagrams below demonstrate aesthetic distance in terms of these four spaces:

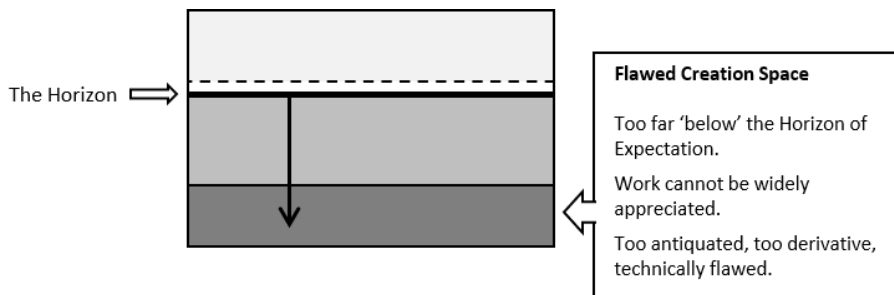


Figure 5. The flawed creation space.

Work which falls far below the horizon would represent antiquated, outmoded or irrelevant work, possibly exhibiting crude technique. Or it may be considered 'done to death' and be so familiar as to be boring.

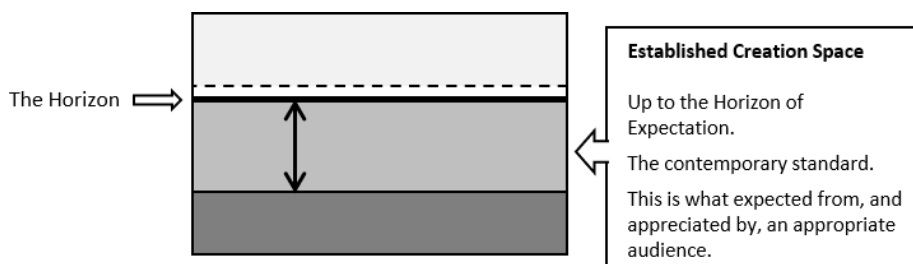


Figure 6. The established creation space.

Work which falls just below the horizon (Figure 6) would represent familiar, understandable conventions and techniques. It might be considered accomplished or even excellent in its

execution, and might be a fine example of its type, but it does not challenge the horizon or extend the limits of current standards.

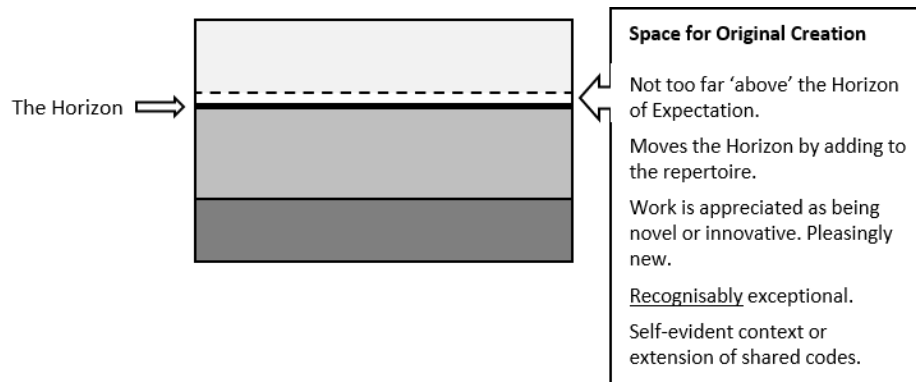


Figure 7. The space for original creation.

Work which rises just above the horizon (Figure 7) would be considered original and innovative, revolutionary, perhaps, but not to the point of being radical. It is immediately appreciated and establishes a new horizon, a new maximum standard. It is within this Goldilocks position that the most accomplished work often emerges.

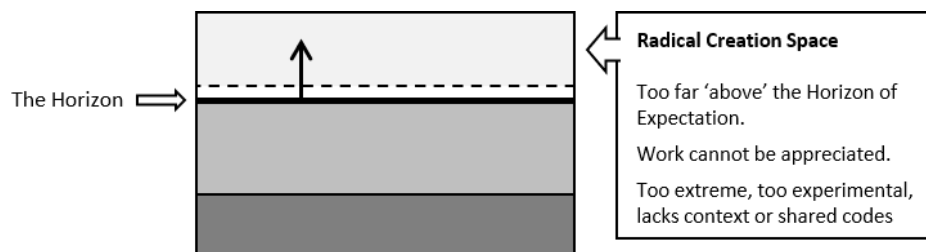


Figure 8. The radical creation space.

Work which rises too far above the horizon (as shown in Figure 8) would represent highly radical work which challenges conventions or taboos to the extent that it fails to be widely appreciated. This work often informs other proceeding works and may come to be seen as 'ahead of its time', where in fact, it is ahead of its horizon.

Conceptual or Avant-Garde writing often does not bear line edits or close reading criticism and might be viewed as the de facto opposite of suitable workshop material. For example, 'Day' by Kenneth Goldsmith consists of a list of thoughts the author had over the course of a single day.<sup>69</sup> The content is fractured and tangential, by design. It is supposed to illuminate to the reader the way the mind works, and, as such, cannot be 'polished'. The combination of concept and approach either works or it doesn't work. There would be little point suggesting to Goldsmith that this or that articulated thought might be 'wrong', or needed rephrasing, indeed such interventions could be seen as a corruption of the original concept. The thoughts came as they came and then were frozen in place – that was the purpose of the project. The work is the idea, and the idea is often immutable. This is also the case for works in different art-forms or media composed within the radical creation space. Peer review criticism of Derek Jarman's art house film 'Blue'<sup>70</sup> or Tracey Emin's installation 'My Bed'<sup>71</sup> would be as futile as attempting to edit Samuel Beckett's soundscape short story 'Ping'.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, tutorial guidance and peer reception, (rather than peer review) can still be very useful, particularly in the formulation stage – by testing the concept upon a fresh audience and gauging their reactions the author can make judgements on its effectiveness and potentially find ways to increase this. Under such conditions, workshop seminars become more of a discussion regarding the overall effect and personal interpretation of the piece, more like art criticism, with less of a focus upon formal aspects of writing or upon editing. Short fiction and poetry

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<sup>69</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, *Day* (Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 2003).

<sup>70</sup> *Blue*, dir. by Derek Jarman (Channel Four Films, 1993), <[www.imdb.com/title/tt0106438/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0106438/)> [accessed 16 September 2018].

<sup>71</sup> Emin, Tracey, *My Bed* (1998), <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/emin-my-bed-l03662>> [accessed 16 September], (now in private hands).

<sup>72</sup> Samuel Beckett, *First Love and Other Shorts* (New York: Grove Press, 1974).

are eminently suitable for this kind of writing: innovation and experimentation are well suited to compact forms, which can focus the attention of the reader.

Intertextual or mimetic writing also plays an important role in my own work, and teaching, and is perhaps the easiest strategy to identify. For example, 'A Place to Die', uses an existing literary icon (James Bond) in a deliberate use of intertextuality, taking advantage of the implied reader's repertoire, but with the intention to reimagine the more obvious fantasy into something more like a plausible reality. 'First Draft' is written from the perspective of the original manuscript for *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*<sup>73</sup>, which actually was burned by Stevenson's wife. He then rewrote the text, producing a second variation (a most appropriate and poetic circumstance for a story of personal duality). This second version was published as the renowned short story familiar across the world, but I have always wondered about the original version.

### **The Structural Axis**

Drawing from the binary concepts of synchronic and diachronic writing, the structural axis is a simple device I have designed to help writers consider the shape and flow of their narratives and learn how to make appropriate changes (see Figure 9). I have found it a very useful way to help students identify and then assess particular structural qualities of a story, and to familiarise them with specific terminology, which can be highly illustrative during criticism.

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<sup>73</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

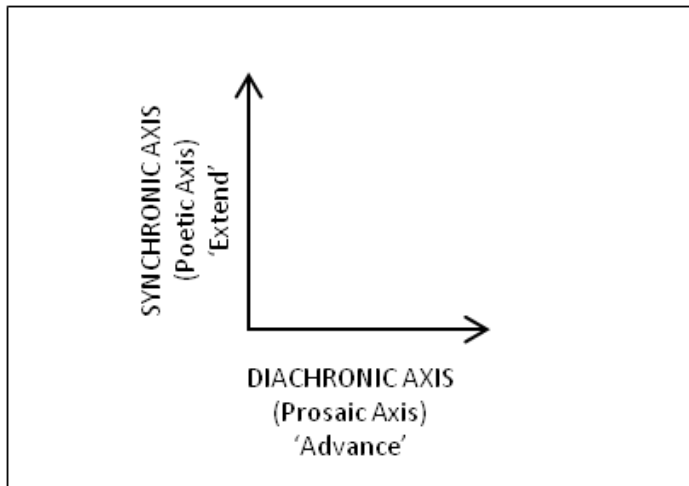


Figure 9. The structural axes.

One would not plot a graph line against these axes, that is not their intended purpose, nor would it be a useful way to collect data. Rather, this diagram helps to demonstrate the two differing (although concordant) structures, and how they relate to each other.

Example Prose:

*Example 1*

A car was parked on the runway, in front of the concourse. Beside it stood a woman with an umbrella.

*Example 2*

A lone black car was parked on the runway, in front of the concourse. Rain evaporated from its cooling chassis, rising again as soft grey steam. Beside the car was a woman in a dark suit, carrying an umbrella. She stood perfectly straight with her heels pressed together.

In Example 1, the diachronic has been prioritised (see Figure 10). The prose moves forward at a faster pace; it establishes the key details to determine the scene and then moves on. Any incidental elements are either omitted or left to the reader to imagine (although, given the pace of the prose, contemplation seems unlikely.)

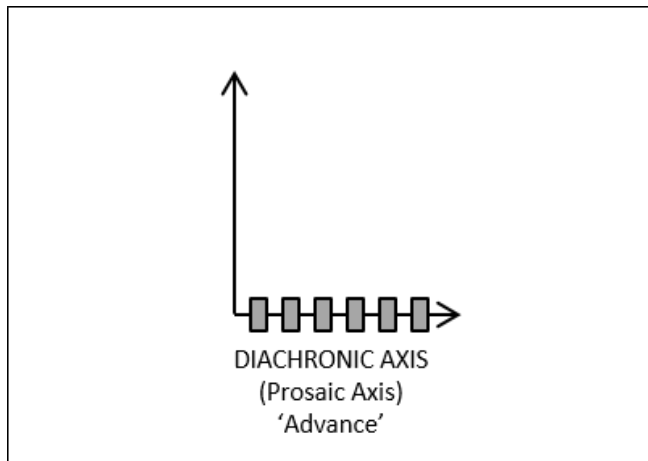


Figure 10. The diachronic axis.

In Example 2, the synchronic has been prioritised (Figure 11). Here, the pace is more lingering, the images more defined.

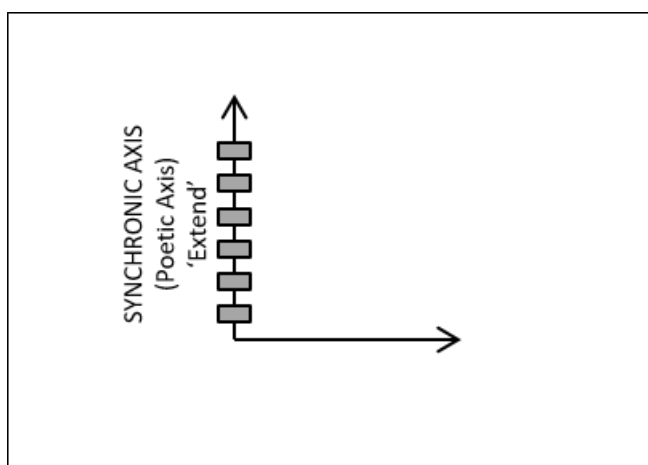


Figure 11. The synchronic axis.



Depending on the story's overall narrative, and the energy of the preceding and proceeding scenes, either example might be considered more appropriate to use. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer, necessarily, but writers who are aware of the difference, and of the impact of both approaches, find themselves better equipped to make the desired choice.

The 'synchronic' and the 'diachronic' also become useful terms within the critical reception of student prose and add to the overall language of criticism available to the class, enabling peers to articulate a problem with structural elements of the writing (or indeed to praise them) using precise terminology and without prejudice.

Writing that over-uses the diachronic will become relentless in its pace, never allowing the reader time and space to contemplate the story without physically putting down the text. If nothing is afforded a second description or an alternative perspective, then images can become plain or two-dimensional. However, writing that over-uses the synchronic may well become plodding in its pace, constantly stopping or slowing to reassess and readdress images and ideas. If everything has several descriptions, then nothing seems fixed. Prose can become purple, with superfluous adjectives or adverbs, or it can seem hesitant via a multiplicity of descriptions. The key to success, as with any element of the writing strategy, is to be judicious, appropriate and deliberate.

The Ray Bradbury short story 'A Laurel and Hardy Love Affair' demonstrates a fine command of synchronic and diachronic storytelling across two pages and serves as a fine illustration of the technique. The story can be read, discussed and then related to structural theory, in a short span of time. This can then be further demonstrated in practice, through a simple writing exercise of 'Extend and Advance', where writers begin a piece of prose, possibly via a

prompt, with a single sentence and are then instructed to extend or advance: either continue with further details or move on to a different image or action.

'Extend and Advance' can be done randomly (with shuffled cards, for instance) or it can be done arbitrarily by the writer, who opts for one or the other as they see fit (preferably without too much thought). Or it can be more methodical. I have provided students with lists such as: 'extend/extend/advance/extend/advance/advance' and so on, then instructed them to consult the list after each sentence, or whenever they can't see a natural decision to make. The results are supposed to make the authors realise the significance and impact of pace and of detail. By attempting the same scene but with a different list of extensions and advancements, the prose becomes wildly different. Learning to harness these effects can dramatically improve a student-writer's command of their narratives, but to do so, they must first understand the concept and the terminology.

'Penny for the Guy' is a piece I wrote which specifically prioritises the diachronic by constantly pushing forwards, paying less attention to detail and description. It is an experiment in pace and in the vernacular use of tense – shifting into a more performative present tense and then back into a contextual past tense depending on the demands of the monologue. 'Jiggity Jig', however, is a piece presented principally in the synchronic. Temporally speaking, the story lasts for little more than a few seconds; time is almost frozen. The protagonist is overwhelmed by nostalgia, lingering on images before digressing onto a related tangent. It is the story of a life shown through a moment.

## Practical Teaching Methods

### Creative Writing Workshops

Dr Johnson reported to Boswell that he had written a bad poem the night before. Johnson felt that this was not a serious problem, provided that he was aware when his poetry was not good.<sup>74</sup> Likewise, it may be ‘considered unimportant if students write badly, so long as they know they have, and that they, crucially, know the difference.’<sup>75</sup> But how is a writer to know? Not all authors, particularly novice writers, are as critically self-aware as the great Dr Johnson. The protagonist of Primo Levi’s novel, *The Wrench*, is a fictional novelist who struggles with this very problem – accurately assessing his own work to determine if his prose is ‘right on the bubble’<sup>76</sup> or not.

In the job of writing, the instruments, the alarm systems, are rudimentary: there isn’t even a trustworthy equivalent of the T-square or plumb line. But if a page is wrong the reader notices, and by then it is too late, and the situation is bad, also because that page is your work, only yours: you have no excuses or pretexts; you are totally responsible.<sup>77</sup>

However, this does not always have to be the case; peer review and mentorship can behave like a makeshift measuring device, giving writers the opportunity to test their work on a critical audience, to receive direct feedback, all prior to the immutable state of publication, when the poured concrete is set, so to speak. It is for many of these reasons that, in practical terms, the Creative Writing peer review workshop has become the dominant pedagogy for

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<sup>74</sup> Miles, Robert, ‘Creative Writing, Contemporary Theory and the English Curriculum’, in *Teaching Creative Writing*, ed. By Moira Monteith and Robert Miles (London: Open University Press, 1992), p. 38.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Primo Levi, *The Wrench* (London: Abacus, 2012), p. 62.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

the discipline. Anna Leahy observes that, from the student/consumer perspective, a lecture functions precisely the same whether the size of the audience is 15 or 500,<sup>78</sup> and while lectures may still be of some value to the students, small-group seminars are far more productive, in so far as ‘the workshop depends on the mentorship of a practicing writer, on a class size that allows for all students’ work to be discussed regularly, and on the time necessary for complex interaction with individual students.’<sup>79</sup>

Creative Writing workshops allow for a critical dialogue to exist between the teacher and student, and between the students themselves. By encouraging a form of Socratic Questioning, using the classroom cohort as a critical forum, students can give their personal and aesthetic judgements on a piece, while the tutor might highlight any technical aspects of literary style.

### **Social Learning Theory and the Creative Writing Workshop**

In 1962, Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist and teacher, examined the learning process in relation to social environments and context.<sup>80</sup> His theory focused on the interactions students have with their peers, teachers, and other experts. Vygotsky argues that environments that maximize students’ ability to interact with each other through discussion, collaboration and feedback produce more effective learning results. These ‘constructivist’ teaching approaches prioritise the development of what Vygotsky termed ‘learning communities’ through the use

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<sup>78</sup> Anna Leahy, ‘Teaching as a Creative Act: Why the Workshop Works in Creative Writing’, in *Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?*, ed. By Dianne Donnelly (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2010), p. 66.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> L.S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1962).

of collaborative learning methods, and group work focusing on discussion-based interactions and Socratic questioning.

This philosophy seems eminently suitable to the development of creative writers, given that the particular requirements of the subject are somewhat fluid or plastic, being dependent on the individual student and on the fluctuating demands of the literary marketplace. Vygotsky maintains 'that language is the main tool that promotes thinking, develops reasoning, and supports cultural activities like reading and writing.'<sup>81</sup> Highlighting the need to develop a shared language of criticism within a class, by introducing students to a wide variety of writing approaches and critical terms, they become better able to articulate their opinions and discuss the influence of individual elements within writing.

It is relevant at this point to mention Paulo Freire's analysis of the 'banking system' of education, where the teacher serves as depositor and the student as depository.<sup>82</sup> Freire strongly condemns teaching practice which imposes a strict hierarchy within the classroom, limiting the students' opportunity to engage in collaborative discussion. Such passive learning is not appropriate for Creative Writing teaching, where the fundamental role of the tutor should be that of an experienced and knowledgeable facilitator, capable of creating an environment where directed and guided interactions can occur. I would argue that, again, short fiction and the production of a portfolio better helps to avoid this circumstance. When a student is struggling with a longer, high-credit piece, the tutor's temptation might well be to give rigorous instruction and precise guidance. For short story collections, it becomes more

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<sup>81</sup> L.S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 24.

<sup>82</sup> Irwin Jones, *Paulo Freire's Philosophy of Education: Origins, Developments, Impacts and Legacies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 49.

useful to provide directions for further study and less authoritative suggestions; as the creative and academic investment in the piece is lessened, the pressure is reduced.

### The Review Cycle

Once prose has been drafted, critiqued, debated, edited and proofed, how is a writer to know if their work is 'finished'? How many times should a story be reviewed and redrafted when, as Paul Valéry said: 'A work is never completed except by some accident such as weariness, satisfaction, the need to deliver, or death: for, in relation to who or what is making it, it can only be one stage in a series of inner transformations,'<sup>83</sup> more often paraphrased as 'art is never finished, only abandoned'? It can seem like an endless cycle (Figure 12).

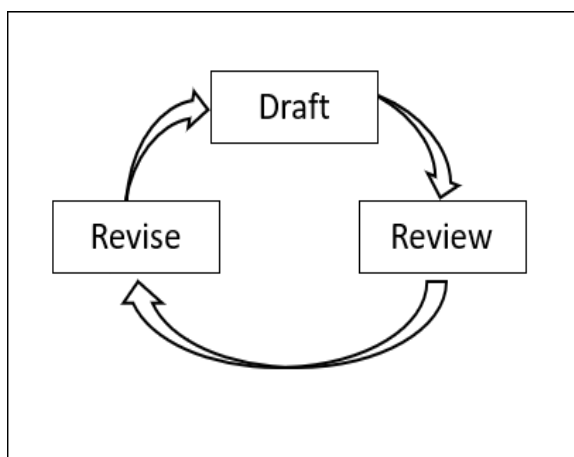


Figure 12. The review cycle.

Answers to these questions are of course entirely subjective and relative to circumstance; different professional writers and teachers have different ideas about the average number of drafts required to complete a project.

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<sup>83</sup> Paul Valéry, *Collected Works of Paul Valéry, Volume 1*, trans. by David Paul (Princeton: Princeton University, 1972), p. 18.

In the words of AL Kennedy: 'I rewrite all the time. For stories and novels there will be between 3 and 7 major rewrites, all manner of tinkering and tweaks as I go forward... I rewrite after the editor has said he finds the work acceptable for publication. I rewrite until I am sick of it and then do it some more.'<sup>84</sup>

For my own work, I have on rare occasions, written very short pieces which have required little alteration, but none of my stories, not even flash fictions, have ever come out fully-formed and without the need for any correction or improvement whatsoever.

'Nightdreams' is a snap-shot short story, designed to explore the lingering melancholy which dreams can evoke. It was important to keep the story compact, and for it to have a hazy, liminal, almost other-worldly feel, and for the recurring elements to play a role in the structure and language. A first draft came very quickly but needed a raft of alterations to find a suitable combination of elements.

Howard Gardner's study of creative people concludes that: 'creators often revise their work over extended periods of time,' and that a 'local solution needs to be abandoned in favour of a far more extensive reorientation or reconceptualization.'<sup>85</sup>

Composing multiple and simultaneous pieces of short fiction will be of more developmental benefit to students than various parts of a much longer piece. A story can be 'put in a drawer' so to speak, and time afforded to the revision. Ideas emerge over time, and a fresher perspective on a text will provide new insights or opinions. In the meantime, other work can be tackled, either new work or unfinished pieces, perhaps retrieved from 'the drawer'. For

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<sup>84</sup> A.L. Kennedy, *A.L. Kennedy – Writer and Performer* (2015), <[www.a-l-kennedy.co.uk/for-writers/rewriting/](http://www.a-l-kennedy.co.uk/for-writers/rewriting/)> [accessed 10 August 2018].

<sup>85</sup> Howard Gardner, *Creating Minds: An Anatomy of Creativity Seen Through the Lives of Freud, Einstein, Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, Graham, and Gandhi*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pp. 33–34.

example, my story 'The Platform' (included in the attached portfolio), spent over four years in various notebooks before it was collated, redrafted and extensively edited, and then subsequently published. Appendix II is an editorial document showing the edits and additions made to 'The Platform', tracking its journey from a complete draft to the final version.

Workshopping and tutorial support can help to kick-start these reorientations or 'reconceptualisations', as Gardner puts it, as well as providing a forum to discuss any changes in progress via a before-and-after comparison and contrast. John Singleton goes further by organising his teaching to maximise these particular effects, offering 'maximum tutorial support in the first year and... emphasis on the generation of ideas. [The course] aims to build up competence and confidence through workshop sessions and introduces students to a wide a range of writing as early as possible.'<sup>86</sup> This is then supported, within years two and three of the course by 'increasing the emphasis of the formal elements of writing.'<sup>87</sup>

While this makes a certain didactic sense, I have found that without providing a foundational understanding of structure alongside more creative exploration and experimentation, students may feel as though they are treading water rather than gaining any genuine insights. Criticism and analysis become more challenging for the critic and less useful to the author without a shared language and an understanding of structure. Students who lack experience with the more formal aspects of writing will find that they cannot always access the discussion and may be dissuaded from contributing at all. Without any focus on the essential elements of grammar, stylistics and structure to help support the development and criticism of student

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<sup>86</sup> John Singleton, 'Creative Writing and Assessment: A Case Study', in *Teaching Creative Writing*, ed. By Moira Monteith and Robert Miles (London: Open University Press, 1992), p. 74.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*



prose, the 'competence and confidence', Singleton aims to foster may be more difficult to obtain.

From research on writers we are familiar with the idea that composing is non-linear and goal-driven, and that students may benefit from having a range of writing and revising strategies on which to draw.<sup>88</sup>

However, as Petty observes: 'research on texts themselves shows the value of formal knowledge and the positive effects of language proficiency.'<sup>89</sup> That is to say, composition relies upon a certain degree of creative and temporal freedom, allowing time and space to conjure ideas, whilst at the same time (or certainly as part of the same learning environment) focus must be placed upon more concrete and technical aspects, such as grammar, style, and narrative consistency. Courses must be both creative and formal, rigorous and relaxed. This is perhaps a difficult balance to concoct but one which can be paramount to the success of a Creative Writing course.

For 'The World's Only Working Time-Machine', I had to rewrite the majority of the story a number of times, particularly the second half. The more significant problems revolved around matters of tone and pace, as well as some research issues. The piece lost momentum and became staid well before the narrative had concluded. Problems within the early drafts were not something that could be fixed by minor cuts and simple alterations. It was through close discussions with Helen Kidd, a former tutor and practising writer, that I was able to identify necessary changes that might have taken much more examination and

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<sup>88</sup> Ken Hyland, *Teaching and Researching Writing*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 77.

<sup>89</sup> Audrey Petty, 'Who's the Teacher?: From Student to Mentor', in *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom*, ed. By Anna Leahy (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2005), p. 79.

deliberation if done in isolation. There were some scenes which were not fully visualised for the reader.

*'You know what the place looks like, Jon, because you invented it,' she said. 'I don't know what it looks like because you haven't quite told me – your reader.'*

It is a classic problem; one I can quickly spot in the work of others, but sometimes overlook in my own writing.

*'There are too many active characters,' she continued, 'it is confusing for the reader who cannot "see" the distinctions without you having described and defined them.'*

The scene in question involved an argument, a debate, between various people with different agendas. Without the benefit of a long narrative beforehand, to establish the *dramatis personae* well enough to have them interacting en masse, this became a significant challenge. I wanted to use the chaotic nature of the debate, without alienating or confusing the reader but still leaving the narrator/protagonist a little mystified. Cutting back the number of characters and having a few of them speaking less frequently helped to neaten the text and to maintain a closer narrative perspective with the protagonist, as well as allowing for more description. However, it was only after critiquing the story with a workshop group of professional writers that I found the sections which could be removed entirely. 'Jump-cutting' to the initial interrogation helped to compress the story, removing relatively superfluous moments. I was able to reposition the reader without too much extraneous detail and to lend a sense of discombobulation, which is relevant to the narrative. Adding a time-shift narrative effect seemed so obvious in hindsight. By improving the transition, adding a structural effect and streamlining the active characters, I was able to

produce a more coherent finale. The story could perhaps be pared back even further, but for this piece I had intended for the protagonist, (and the reader,) to go through something of a journey, albeit a slightly confused one.

Of course, each different story will require a varying amount of editing, a different number of circuits; some stories take hours, others take years. There is no formula that suits every story, or even every writer. Most authors will have their own routines and methods, they may even recommend them as being particularly efficacious, but beyond the maxim attributed to Dorothy Parker that ‘the art of writing is applying the ass to the seat,’<sup>90</sup> none of them seem to work as a one-size-fits-all rule.

Shorter pieces are, of course, easier to proof-read, but not necessarily easier to perfect. Consider Mark Twain’s pithy remark: ‘I didn’t have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead.’<sup>91</sup> However, once I find myself changing lines *back* into previous incarnations of themselves, then it seems to me to be a good time to settle on a final draft and try to place it somewhere, whether within a developing collection or in a separate publication. Having peers and tutors (as well as strict deadlines) to advise whether a piece is of a completed standard helps to avoid getting into an editorial loop, but the final decision always remains with the writer.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> However, this is not always the case. Ernest Hemingway liked to write standing at a lectern, often naked. And both George Orwell and Jean Rhys liked to write in bed (although not together).

<sup>91</sup> Mark Twain, quoted in *English for Writing Research Papers* by Adrian Wallwork (London: Springer, 2016), p. 93.

<sup>92</sup> It is interesting to note that during the collation of his *Collected Stories*, acclaimed short story author Bernard MacLaverty read over several pieces he had originally published decades previously. ‘Looking back at the early stories, I could not resist the urge to correct where there were mistakes and clarify where there was fog.’ [Bernard MacLaverty, *Collected Stories* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013), p. xviii.] By doing so, MacLaverty had created several entirely new drafts, despite them already being well-established stories. The desire to continually tinker with one’s prose can be irresistible; tutors need to be aware of this when dealing with students who might be considered perfectionist.

Lectures and visiting speakers do have their own value, of course, and focusing too heavily upon the workshop model risks unbalancing the course content. Over-reliance upon student-to-student learning somewhat abrogates the responsibility of the faculty to provide guided instruction. However, active learning in a communal environment remains the most effective way to develop writers, and in order to ensure that each student correctly understands class content and has had an opportunity to exercise these terms in practice, it is best to complement Vygotsky-style seminars with tutorial instruction and discussion. Learning is a constant and dynamic process, significantly influenced by environment, with some environments being more conducive to effective learning than others.

Learning is provoked through both student-student and expert-student collaboration; when students talk together, share results, and engage in a dialogue with the subject, they help to form a collaborative learning environment. This is particularly the case for Creative Writing, where writers can 'riff' off one another, providing suggestions and observations that can be critically and creatively valuable. I have found this to be more immediately useful with short fiction as the form assumes a single-sitting reading appropriate to workshop criticism. There becomes less of a problem with identifying irrelevant criticisms which are due to be resolved later in a longer text. 'Of course, you may be intending to do this already, but, in case you are not, you will have to ensure that X or Y.' Or finding writers, feeling constrained by the 'silencing' of workshop guidelines, becoming desperate to explain how 'that will all be explained later in the novel'. Short story criticism avoids much of the need for explanatory disclaimers and reduces the likelihood of irrelevant commentary, particularly for inexperienced critics. With short fiction, discussions can be direct and complete, and can help

to strengthen the critical faculties of the students involved, enabling them to pursue lengthier projects in the future with more confidence.

Tutors should regularly manage directed seminar groups, using Socratic methods to interrogate an apposite subject of discussion, allowing the class to pose any questions they might have and demonstrate a fuller understanding of the subject, but without allowing seminars to lose focus and meander or to become a polarised debate over a trifling matter. These qualities should underpin the pedagogy of a Creative Writing workshop; where criticisms are collated and discussed, opinions are formed, and debates ensue. There is a Hegelian process of negotiation, where critics may revise their opinions based upon the suggestions and observations of others. All the while, the tutor maintains context and ensures relevance, but it is the community of writers and critics who form the raw material of the class. Short fiction remains the most suitable medium for this process, being far easier for peers to absorb than longer pieces, even excerpts, which often require added context to fully appreciate.

It was in 1952 that Professor Philip Hobsbaum determined a set of workshopping guidelines for Creative Writing peer review which are still widely used to this day: 'Scripts were distributed beforehand, so that the group discussion tended outwards from the words on the page, rather than moving peripherally through biography, intention or even less relevant backchat.'<sup>93</sup> He asserts that 'it is very important that all members of a group should be active participants, contributing work, whatever its nature, for discussion in due course. It is important too, that the comment should be multifarious, including, as so far possible,

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<sup>93</sup> Phillip Hobsbaum, 'The Teaching of Creative Writing', in *Teaching Creative Writing*, ed. By Moira Monteith, and Robert Miles (London: Open University Press, 1992), p. 24.

everyone present.’<sup>94</sup> Hobsbaum also made one final stipulation, that ‘the author speak as little as possible.’<sup>95</sup>

This fly-on-the-wall approach removes any defensive counter-arguments, which may be irrelevant or insufficient. A writer receives a relatively ‘cold’ reading from a range of readers, revealing a more honest interpretation. An author who responds to each criticism may produce a mildly adversarial atmosphere, and may prevent other readers from expressing similar concerns, which may in turn validate the original criticism. Robert Miles adds that the student should always be afforded the right to reply but should ‘remain silent until the class collectively invites comment.’<sup>96</sup>

Dianne Donnelly highlights how the decision to ‘silence the author’ becomes ‘a necessary function of minimising the writer’s defence and maximizing her processing of the workshop response.’<sup>97</sup> However, this temporary ‘gagging’ during what can become an uncomfortable period of critical scrutiny should be regarded as ethically problematic to better ensure that tutors remain vigilant against problems of student anxiety or even bullying.

In my experience, the problems of a defensive (and therefore disruptive) author outweigh the problems of a silenced one, but a right to reply and an opportunity to explain motivations is an important part of the process for both writer and critic. Better still, the author’s responses should be prompted and assisted by the tutor via questions or statements aimed at furthering

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<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>96</sup> Robert Miles, ‘Creative Writing, Contemporary Theory and the English Curriculum’, in *Teaching Creative Writing*, ed. By Moira Monteith and Robert Miles (London: Open University Press, 1992), p. 39.

<sup>97</sup> Dianne Donnelly, *Establishing Creative Writing Studies as an Academic Discipline* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2012), p. 81.

the discussion. This combats any 'stage fright' experienced by the recently critiqued author as well as helping to justify any valid contradictions with the critical peer group.

Although students should be given ample opportunity to share their learning experience and to support one another through constructive criticism and shared exercises, seminar discussions must be carefully managed to avoid excessive confrontation. Robert Graham's 2001 report on classes conducted at Iowa University by Frank Conroy in his particularly competitive and combative style found that: 'Conroy believes he isn't doing his job unless the occasional student bursts into tears or faints.'<sup>98</sup> Michelene Wandor observes that 'methods which cannot fail to be discouraging and educationally disempowering is not a context where genuine learning can take place.'<sup>99</sup>

When conducted well, the workshop model should be an invaluable part of any Creative Writing course, when conducted poorly, it risks becoming destructive. The level of scrutiny necessary within the workshop system can make students vulnerable to emotional distress. 'What goes on in a workshop can be outrageous, ethically questionable... untheorized, awkward, embarrassing.'<sup>100</sup>

Short story production does not necessarily guard against this, but it can be less likely or frequent as student-writers tend to be less precious about shorter pieces which are more open to alteration than more extensive works in progress that may well involve a greater sense of investment.

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<sup>98</sup> Michelene Wandor, *The Author is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 128.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>100</sup> Gaylene Perry, 'Potentially Dangerous: Vulnerabilities and Risks in the Writing Workshop', in *Does the Creative Writing Workshop Still Work?*, ed. By Dianne Donnelly (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2010), p. 117.

One writer I worked with laboured over a historical novel for several years, never allowing anybody (including myself) to read the manuscript. At the same time, she developed a number of short stories that she was happy to share with critics and receive opinions and feedback. The stories developed and were distributed a second and sometimes third time, each draft proving more successful. In time, she published a number of pieces, and was shortlisted for a writing prize, but is yet to complete the novel.<sup>101</sup>

As AL Kennedy has observed:

‘Short stories are precious in their own special way, but don’t have the same kind of proprietary secrecy [as longer works]. Novels stay in the vault until they are ready for the world, but, at public readings I have used short stories which aren’t quite in a finished state, like a comedian practicing their material, I suppose.’<sup>102</sup>

### **Writing in a Collaborative Environment**

Although his language is a little alarmist, I would agree with Phillip Hobsbaum’s suggestion that ‘for most writers, isolation is harmful, and that contact with an alert audience can only be beneficial.’<sup>103</sup> An author working in isolation must act as creator, planner, writer, first-reader/critic, editor and strategist (Figure 13). The conception of the story and determining a writing strategy is usually done alone,

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<sup>101</sup> Robin Leigh, ‘The Changing Room’ <[https://picciolettabarca.com/issues/issue-16/the-changing-room/?fbclid=IwAR2wl9n6fg218BGXJV1KQfPTqEWDSEmdS5mankN5EsYdSw\\_9-UJ09a8X2cl](https://picciolettabarca.com/issues/issue-16/the-changing-room/?fbclid=IwAR2wl9n6fg218BGXJV1KQfPTqEWDSEmdS5mankN5EsYdSw_9-UJ09a8X2cl)> [accessed 9 February 2020]. Robin Leigh, ‘Playing to Type’ was shortlisted for the *Alpine Fellowship Writing Prize* 2019.

<sup>102</sup> A.L. Kennedy, *A.L. Kennedy – Writer and Performer* (2015), <[www.a-l-kennedy.co.uk/for-writers/rewriting/](http://www.a-l-kennedy.co.uk/for-writers/rewriting/)> [accessed 10 August 2018].

<sup>103</sup> Phillip Hobsbaum, ‘The Teaching of Creative Writing’, in *Teaching Creative Writing*, ed. By Moira Monteith and Robert Miles (London: Open University Press, 1992), p. 33.



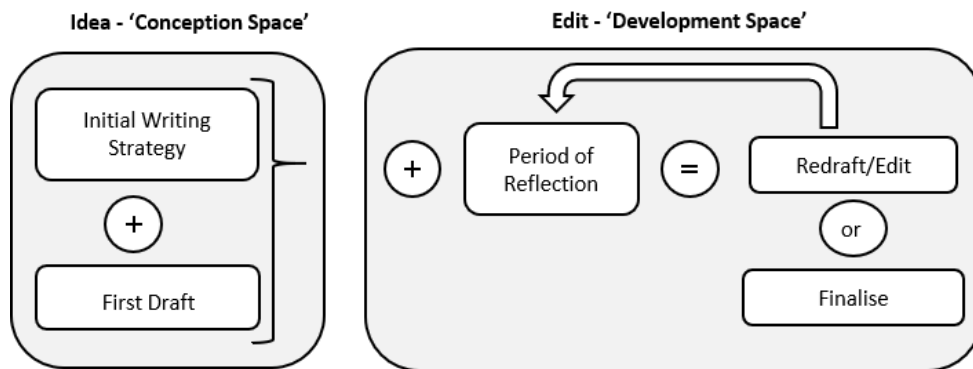


Figure 13. Writing in Isolation.

but the processes which follow (development, redrafting, proofing, etc) would benefit from being shared within a collaborative writing environment (Figure 14). Although this is true for any working writer, I would argue that this effect is even keener for student-writers who are, by definition, developing learners. A workshop critique combined with an experienced mentor can relieve some of the burden by providing outside opinion and identifying unseen problems or suggesting suitable improvements; a tutor can then advise a student accordingly, regarding technique and methodology.

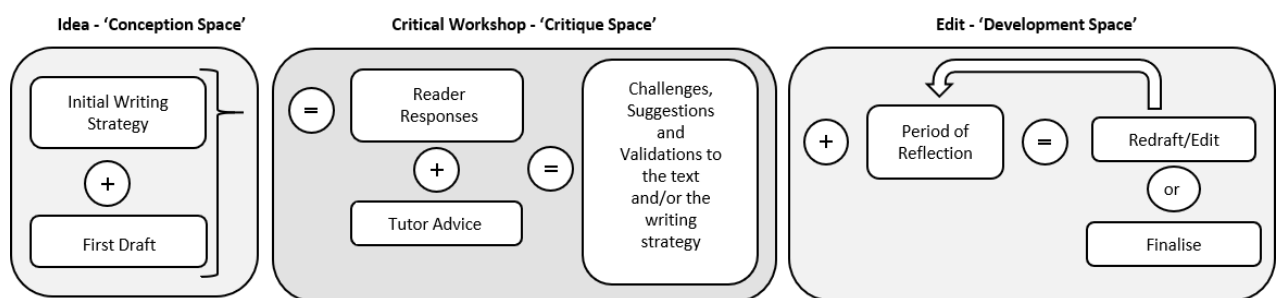


Figure 14. Writing within a collaborative learning environment.

The addition of a critique space widens the available opinions and deepens the analysis, asking questions of a piece which the author (and indeed the tutor) may not have observed or considered. By broadening the field of inquiry and inspiration, these observations can, in turn, lead to further narrative developments, cuts, alterations or additions.

Figure 15 simplifies the content of figures 13 and 14, demonstrating the creative processes within formal teaching of writing, and how they relate to one another.

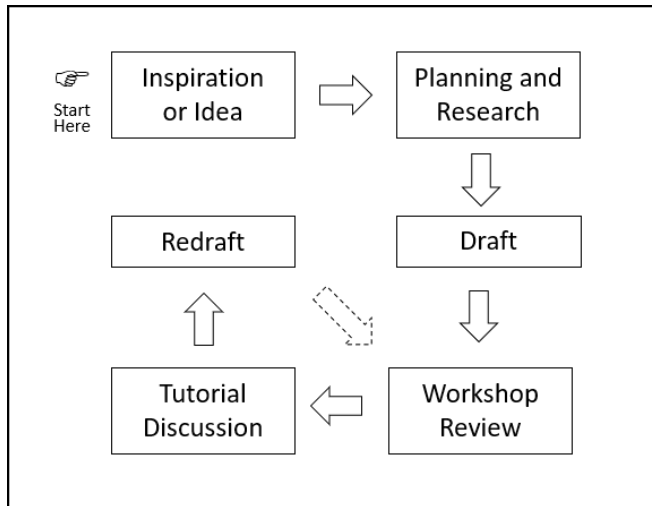


Figure 15. Workshop and tutorial process.

Introducing students to a taxonomy of terminology at the start of a course enables a tutor to identify and articulate key concerns within writing and criticism, and to form a framework for students to work and communicate within. It becomes a suitable forum to discuss ideas of ‘implied readers’ and the ‘horizon of expectation’, as well as ideas of perspective and tense or structural devices, such as framed narration or limited narrators, before exploring the students’ own work directly. Petty suggests that, for new groups unfamiliar with one another, postponing peer review for a number of sessions can be valuable to the dynamic of the class. ‘I delay the sharing of student work until students have begun to learn together to read as writers and to use a common vocabulary to talk about writing concepts.’<sup>104</sup> I have found this approach to be very successful. By allowing the group to discover criticism from a creative compositional perspective, and exploring the work of published authors, or of previous

<sup>104</sup> Anna Leahy, ‘Who Cares – and How: The Value and Cost of Nurturing’, in *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom*, ed. By Anna Leahy (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2005), p. 18.

students (with permission), the class has an opportunity to bond as an academic collective, and the teacher has the chance to determine if there are any problems which might impact on the discussions going forward; those confident enough to excessively dominate discussions can be kerbed, the shy or silent ones can be encouraged, all within a neutral context where no individual within the group is under direct scrutiny.

Robert Miles is a proponent of a slightly different system and feels that peer review should take immediate precedence. Miles agrees that the writer should remain silent during critical review, his second 'protocol', which he deems to be 'crucially necessary', is that students should first read their work aloud to the group.<sup>105</sup> I disagree. Apart from the obvious fact that removing the need for student-writers to read their work aloud saves valuable workshop time, Miles' approach produces two concerns for me. First, there is an increased sense of anxiety felt by those students who dislike scrutinised public speaking; this additional performance anxiety can simply be avoided via the distribution of the text beforehand. Second, following a cold reading, student-critics are required to give immediate responses without serious consideration. It is my opinion that any good critical reading should involve two full read-throughs. If critics are provided with texts beforehand, they can make far more detailed notes, than if presented with the work in class. They can stop and start their reading to do so, rather than making shorthand observations during the performance. They can prepare line-edits and suggestions for adjustments and then provide the annotated text to the writer (or indeed to the teacher, should the students' ability to comment, critique and edit be a part of their academic assessment and development criteria, something which I feel is currently under-represented in final assessment.) Sharing annotated scripts can help one

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<sup>105</sup> Robert Miles, 'Creative Writing, Contemporary Theory and the English Curriculum', in *Teaching Creative Writing*, ed. By Moira Monteith and Robert Miles (London: Open University Press, 1992), p. 39.

critic to inform another critic, just as much as it might inform the original writer of the submission. It is also worth noting that unprepared, or 'cold', critiques are also useful for critical development (and to avoid any unwanted internet assistance.) They are particularly good for small group work and are well suited to short fiction, being manageable enough in size to be read, discussed and debated in class without prior preparation.

In her essay 'Wrestling Bartleby', Leslie Kreiner Wilson charted the development of her teaching practice.<sup>106</sup> Kreiner Wilson's initial approach was, by her own admission, somewhat naïve and insufficient, but through research and experimentation she ultimately evolved her course into something more successful. Initially, her students 'sat in groups of four, read one another's work [for the first time], offered compliments and criticism [within their groups].'<sup>107</sup> These groups were self-governing and without direct tutor support, although she would move from table to table making suggestions. This inevitably led to a slew of problems, including dominant characters taking critical precedence in the discussions – many students reported feeling a growing sense of malaise and disenchantment. This crucial problem came about as a result of the repetitive and limited feedback provided from such small and static groups. It also resulted in a reduced ability for the tutor to chart students' progress. Kreiner Wilson concluded that: 'They find it hard to focus on work, really hear, really remember, and really be able to respond effectively if they don't have a copy of the piece in front of them to look at during the reading and to review in the subsequent discussion.'<sup>108</sup> This might seem somewhat elementary, but it emphasises the need to allow critics time and space to form their opinions. It also seems far more relevant to me to have any test audience (whether

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<sup>106</sup> Leslie Kreiner Wilson, 'Wrestling Bartleby: Another Workshop Model for the Creative Writing Classroom', in *Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?*, ed. By Dianne Donnelly (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2010).

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*

consisting of classmates or not) consume the product as it is generally intended to be consumed: as a personal reading, not as a performance. Furthermore, punctuation, spelling and other problems with presentation cannot be heard, but must, of course, be read.

Kreiner Wilson's final discovery was how the use of short forms proved to be far more practically useful than studying longer fiction, and that encouraging her students to develop a number of different short pieces proved more enthusing and more rewarding than pursuing a single longer work.<sup>109</sup>

J.T. Bushnell of the University of Oregon has suggested that 'more and more [student-]writers seem to be responding by rejecting the system that produces it,'<sup>110</sup> and that 'writers who reject the workshop experience are the writers who make little or no progress with their work and their vocation.'<sup>111</sup> This is quite a strong statement and is not immediately supported with any statistical data. In my own experience, students who reject the workshop process need to be given consideration. Room for critical feedback must be made within one-to-one tutorials, where possible, and strategies should be discussed with anxious students for alternative methods of peer review – perhaps sharing their concept ideas and planning, rather than their working copy, might feel less exposing, particularly within new peer groups. Students should be encouraged as much as possible to engage in the workshop environment, not merely to be present but to participate; however, it is vital that tutors (and supporting pastoral staff) are aware of the emotional/psychological aspects of the workshop process and remain sensitive to the needs of their students via an open dialogue and access to private

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<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*, p 208.

<sup>110</sup> J.T. Bushnell, quoted in *Establishing Creative Writing Studies as an Academic Discipline* by Dianne Donnelly (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2012), p. 116.

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*

consultation time. It is the responsibility of Creative Writing faculties to ensure that tutors are provided with appropriate training and support to prepare and assist them.

I have found that having first-year students develop a range of short stories and respond to a variety of exercises produces less of a precious feeling towards their work. Pieces that have been developed for class to a provided brief are more easily shared and critiqued than more personal (and potentially ambitious) projects – material that the student may be quite invested in. I have known student-novelists to wait several full years before sharing a single word of their manuscript, during which time I have successfully coaxed from them various short stories for review and development (and often for publication). Despite having separate intrinsic value, for the aspiring novelist the short fiction they produce has seemed to the writers to be less defining than their embryonic manuscripts; their short fiction seems to them more sharable, less permanent, less significant to their developing literary identity than a debut novel would. One can publish a science fiction short story without necessarily hitching one's star to the sci-fi wagon, but, to a sci-fi novelist, genre remains a substantial part of the author's identity.

Whether for marketing purposes or for deeper questions of professional identity, there is a history of authors demarcating their genre writing – the distinction between Ian Banks and Iain M Banks being a clear example; making no attempt to disguise authorship, there is still an explicit intention to define one writing style from the other. This is not necessarily the case with short story writers. George Saunders' celebrated and award-winning collection *Tenth of*

*December*<sup>112</sup> included an out and out genre sci-fi story ('Escape from Spiderhead') nestled between two contemporary literary fiction narratives.

Short fiction affords a writer, whether they are established or developing, opportunities to explore new fields of creative inquiry, to stretch their professional identity and experiment, such as Hilary Mantel moving from historical epic to speculative crime ('The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher').<sup>113</sup>

Short fiction is a space which allows for reinvention and promotes freshness. Writers who do not feel the need to demarcate their genre work, such as Doris Lessing<sup>114</sup>, Margaret Atwood<sup>115</sup> or J.G. Ballard<sup>116</sup>, tend often to have published short story collections alongside their various novels.

Short fiction, in my experience, allows students to present a whole raft of ideas, some silly, some wild, some banal, some moving, and to attempt numerous strategies without needing to remain within the plot structure or style of an existing project.

I have noticed too that having students critique consecutive excerpts from a longer work, tends to privilege clarity over imagination, risking Donald Platt's assertion that 'the "soul" can easily be sacrificed on the altar of technique.'<sup>117</sup> By not giving student-critics as much licence to interfere with, for example, plot structure or character dynamics, they often become mere error-hunters, looking to add clarity and accessibility to the reading experience rather than

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<sup>112</sup> George Saunders, *Tenth of December* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>113</sup> Hilary Mantel, *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher and Other Stories* (London: Fourth Estate, 2015).

<sup>114</sup> Doris Lessing, *To Room Nineteen: Collected Stories Vol One*, (New York: Flamingo, 2002).

<sup>115</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Good Bones and Simple Murders*, (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

<sup>116</sup> J.G. Ballard, *The Complete Short Stories of J.G. Ballard*, (London: W.W. Norton, 2010).

<sup>117</sup> Dianne Donnelly, *Establishing Creative Writing Studies as an Academic Discipline* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2012), p. 117.

considering deeper questions. Shorter fiction can more easily be examined for unusual or extreme elements and become the subject of theoretical or philosophical discussion, rather than comma-spotting and word-juggling, which, although useful, has a limited value in of itself. Excerpts from longer fiction can also curtail criticism, when authors assert that the issue at hand is adequately explained later (or earlier) in the book; the critics are not able to challenge this, and their current opinions are undermined.

Whether short fiction encourages variety or variety is attracted to short fiction, is something that is beyond the scope of this thesis and warrants further study, but the form and the quality seem at first glance to be very happy bedfellows. In her study *The Creating Brain*, Nancy Andreasen determines that ‘five circumstances must be present to produce a cultural environment that nurtures creativity’<sup>118</sup> which she identifies as: intellectual freedom and novelty, a community of creative people, a fair but competitive atmosphere, mentors and supporters, and economic prosperity. Andreasen, (who is both an MD and an English Literature PhD) is discussing creativity in general, detailing the ideal conditions for promoting a conducive environment where creativity might flourish, but it sounds to me very much like a Creative Writing workshop seminar.

Social learning, peer-to-peer, is highly suited to Creative Writing which, as an explicitly communicative artform lacking empirical parameters, directly benefits from aesthetic and critical responses throughout the process. Although the workshop system has become open to neglect and can be used as what I might call ‘a replacement for teaching’, the Creative Writing workshop, when well led and complimented with tutorial support, performs a vital role within Creative Writing education. The system developed by Philip Hobsbaum remains

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<sup>118</sup> Nancy Andreasen, *The Creating Brain: The Neuroscience of Genius* (New York: Dana Press, 2005), p. 127.



an effective way to conduct peer review, provided that the author does not feel marginalised or subject to unhelpfully negative criticisms. Effective, but not exhaustive, the workshop should not dominate the syllabus at the expense of other teaching and learning.

### **Writing Communities**

Novelists and writers often seem to the world to be isolated individuals beavering away on their manuscripts, perhaps in a lonely garret, perhaps in an ivory tower. They are seen as autodidacts who have either a natural writing gift or a lost history of trial and error, of aborted books and lost stories. And this is often the case, but not always. It is perhaps easy to forget the fraternity of artists and writers, as well as the professional relationship which exists between the author and their publishing editor or agent, and to view the formal study of Creative Writing with suspicion.

But I have found that one of the principal draws for a student seeking to pursue a formal Creative Writing course (particularly at the level of a master's degree) is becoming a part of a community of active writers and having access to the forums of discussion provided by the course, as well as experienced mentors and editors. There has been a strong and successful tradition of writers working in collaboration or in consultation with one another. Unions such as the Bloomsbury Group, the Algonquin Circle, The Inklings, and The Grantchester Group have been famously profitable. Irish novelist and short story writer, Bernard MacLaverty, recalls his own formative development:

One of the best learning experiences was long after leaving school, when Phillip Hobsbaum... invited me to join the 'Group'... There were an amazing number of talented people in the group, all unpublished. It included... Seamus Heaney, Michael

Longley, Frank Ormsby, Paul Muldoon, Jimmy Simmons, Joan Newman, [and] playwright Stewart Parker.<sup>119</sup>

Few workshops can boast such a cohort of students, but this example goes to show how the critical collaboration of creative writers can be a springboard for highly successful professional careers in literature. There are also many instances of literary apprenticeships or patronage. Pat Barker has described how she enjoyed a long and successful relationship with Angela Carter following an *Arvon Foundation* short course in the writing of short fiction; from being an unpublished amateur to an award-winning novelist: 'I went on a writing course led by Angela Carter and I wrote a short story about two old ladies during the miners' strike, and part of that became the final chapter of *Union Street*, which was published in 1982.'<sup>120</sup>

In both examples, MacLaverty and Baker developed their short fiction in a critical environment as part of their literary development. It is clear that even for established and successful writers, there is often still a need to share ideas or to discuss current projects with interested and involved experts, and find likeminded peers, and that short fiction serves as a good foundational medium for pre-published writers.

### **Writing Strategy**

The principal role of a Creative Writing mentor should be to encourage and develop the writer-apprentice, and to facilitate their writing. One-to-one tutorials offer an opportunity for creative or intellectual interventions, and interrogations of texts through close analysis and discussion. By maintaining active input and interest in each story throughout its development,

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<sup>119</sup> Bernard MacLaverty, *Collected Stories* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013), p. xv–xvi.

<sup>120</sup> Jessica Salter, 'The World of Pat Barker', *Daily Telegraph*, 1 September 2012, <[www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/9514160/World-of-Pat-Barker-novelist.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/9514160/World-of-Pat-Barker-novelist.html)> [accessed 30 August 2018].

a tutor can get a better sense of a student's progress, and the student can gain a much clearer insight into the redrafting process – a critical skill for any successful author.

But *what* is a mentor to advise, and how might these interventions and facilitations manifest?

While being in both an educated and experienced position, the mentor's perspective will be necessarily subjective; the student-writer remains the author – in control of the composition as the principal decision-maker. It is the student's responsibility to make creative determinations and to apply applicable literary approaches – what I refer to as the writing strategy. This incorporates all elements of development, from the initial inspiration and driving motivation of a story, to its planning, revising and finessing. The writing strategy might be considered as the 'How' of the writing process, the method.

Edgar Allan Poe's essay 'The Philosophy of Composition' considers how a writing strategy develops, by attempting to describe the genesis of a story:

I say to myself, in the first place, "Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?" Having chosen a novel [an original], first, and secondly a vivid effect, I consider whether it can best be wrought by incident or tone — whether by ordinary incidents and peculiar tone, or the converse, or by peculiarity both of incident and tone — afterward looking about me (or rather within) for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the construction of the effect. I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be written by any author who would — that is to say, who could — detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition' in *The Poetical Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (Memphis, TE: General Books, 2012), pp. 24–25.

This would be, as Poe realises, an excessive and exhaustive process, one that is more usually replaced by examining works in relation to their early drafts in order to try to extrapolate some of the decision-making and strategy of an author. A resource I have found to be particularly illuminating in this regard is the editorial document published in the *New Yorker*<sup>122</sup> which combines two drafts of Raymond Carver's short story originally published as 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love',<sup>123</sup> (edited by Gordon Lish) and then later published separately in its pre-edited form as 'Beginners'.<sup>124</sup> In the *New Yorker* document, two drafts of the 'same' story appear together, with the edited text marked in bold and the excised text marked with strikethrough, any added or removed paragraph breaks are also marked with the correct proofreading symbol (¶). Using the same document, both stories can be read separately, or they can be read together making the alterations and additions strikingly clear. In this particular example, editor Gordon Lish has changed the name of the story's protagonist, removed over half of the words (including whole pages) and written an entirely new ending. The narrative voice in the revised version is far firmer and more strident. The result is quite startling. The two stories have markedly different styles and content. Consequently, they produce very different effects upon their readers despite having so many necessary similarities. Having students see the impact of such extensive editing helps to dispel any myths that writers (even celebrated writers) can 'do it right' on the first attempt. (See Appendix II for my own version of this combined document technique.) This is an important point of learning, as Sir Ken Robinson explains: 'Trying to produce a finished work in one move

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<sup>122</sup> Raymond Carver, *New Yorker* magazine, 24 December 2007, <[www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/12/24/beginners](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/12/24/beginners)> [accessed 16 September 2018].

<sup>123</sup> Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (London: Vintage, 2009).

<sup>124</sup> Raymond Carver, *Beginners* (London: Vintage, 2010).

is usually impossible. Not understanding this can lead to people thinking that they are not creative at all.<sup>125</sup>

I have also found that the Carver/Lish document encourages students to be more rigorous and/or more experimental with their own drafting and subsequent redrafting, and to regard first and early drafts as being mutable objects in transitional states. Writing is, as the saying goes, ninety percent rewriting.

Short fiction presents less of a commitment in terms of character arcs, extended plots and overall longevity, and so this point of learning is best expressed through revisions of various pieces of short fiction.

Although I do use the Carver and Lish document in my teaching, I do not use the combined text version of 'The Platform'. I feel that despite (usually) being an author, a Creative Writing tutor should avoid becoming a subject of study in their own classes. In order to maintain a certain level of authority and distance from the student group, tutors should feel free to share their professional experiences and creative processes, but not their own written prose, published or unpublished. A tutor who puts forward his or her own work for critical discussion invites a raft of different problems. First, any belligerent members of the class are given free licence to attack their tutor without a referee, whilst any sycophantic students are open to do the reverse and wax lyrical. Amongst any inter-personal politics may well be some interesting observations or points of learning, but I would hazard a bet that those same lessons could be more easily demonstrated using neutral material.

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<sup>125</sup> Sir Ken Robinson, *Out of Our Minds: The Power of Creativity*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Chichester: Capstone, 2017), p. 135.

One way I have used to try to involve the students in my own creative process has been to share development notes. Having set the class a creative research exercise based on an Ian Rankin short story ('Glimmer')<sup>126</sup> students were asked to write a story or single scene set during an historical event, but from the perspective of an observer rather than any of the principal players – this could be during a World Cup final or a political assassination or a royal jubilee, any specific event, provided the writers were able to take an outside perspective. Students would then use their research to include any essential details and narrative moments. I asked them to keep hold of all the notes they made, whether they were abandoned drafts or lists of bullet points. I then tried the same exercise myself, allowing my story, 'Laid Low', to evolve and develop somewhat freely, all the while taking notes or making brainstorm diagrams of my own. I then asked the students to bring in their notes, *not* their stories, and to share them in small groups, to discuss them, and ultimately to explain the stories they had resulted in, but from a writing/crafting point of view. I was able to share my own notes as a starting point to explain the decisions I had made or dismissed and how the final story eventually strayed from the brief a little (see Appendix I); most importantly, I showed them how it had evolved and why I felt comfortable with that. I was able to give a verbal synopsis of the story and my intentions for it but avoided sharing the text itself. This approach is in line with QAA Benchmark Defining Principles for Creative Writing, which stipulates that the subject 'operates on the principle that process is as important as product, since both generate knowledge.'<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Ian Rankin, *Beggar's Banquet* (London: Orion, 2002).

<sup>127</sup> The English Association, *Subject Benchmark Statement Creative Writing: Draft for Consultation* (2015), p. 5, <[www2.le.ac.uk/offices/english-association/news-1/qaa-draft-subject-benchmark-statement-for-creative-writing](http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/english-association/news-1/qaa-draft-subject-benchmark-statement-for-creative-writing)> [accessed 15 September 2018].

In *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy*, Patrick Bizzaro makes the case for teachers to 'spend less time telling our students what they should do when they write and more time showing them who they can be.'<sup>128</sup> Bizzaro feels that the teacher's role is to assist and equip the writer with the necessary lenses with which to critique their own work and the work of others, while retaining a strong sense of authority and authorial control over their own work.

This personal investigation approach is particularly suited to short fiction, as the exercise itself should be multifarious. 'Discovering who they can be' becomes a less revealing process and less fruitful when applied a more limited range of writing projects, or to a single long piece of prose. While this approach empowers the student, it also requires more self-direction. It is a more mature approach to learning and produces more involved work.

By limiting prescribed writing assignments (particularly for their second and third-year students), courses can reduce lacklustre responses from students who feel that the exercises do not meet their desired outcomes. Martha Pennington describes this as 'real writing' or 'writing in which the writer has personal involvement and investment.'

I have found that determining the purpose of a work and exploring whatever inspires or motivates the writer to write it, is perhaps best achieved through individual tutorials (or perhaps in pairs of students with a tutor, if practicality necessitates this) or in an informal discussion with the writer. This may take a number of sessions, and perhaps a number of writing examples, (short story portfolios are an appropriate practical medium for conducting these inquiries.) but taking the time to investigate a student's identity as a writer, their

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<sup>128</sup> Patrick Bizzaro in Wendy Bishop and Hans A. Ostrom, *Colors of a Different Horse* (Urbana, IL: National Council for Teachers in English, 1994), p.234.

current tendencies as well as their ambitions, is I believe an important part of Creative Writing teaching.

This change in the authority dynamic affords the student-writer more autonomy and ownership, which permits greater freedom of expression and increases the likelihood of more advanced narratives. 'As I began to trust students... I changed from being a teacher... to being a facilitator of learning' – Carl Rogers.<sup>129</sup>

Martha Pennington makes the useful distinction between 'Internal Research' and 'External Research.'<sup>130</sup> Internal Research encompassing personal interests and experiences, first-hand knowledge and immediate influences, while External Research is, essentially, everything else; everything that requires *significant* amounts of new learning. Pennington suggests that student-writers should first explore their internal resources before embarking into more 'alien' areas. This does not necessarily preclude genre writing, such as sci-fi, fantasy or crime but, rather, students might initially be encouraged to use a protagonist of their own gender, to use a vernacular which is natural to them, or to consider quite simple themes against a more challenging context. Once again, I find these investigations are most profitably conducted by composing and critiquing short stories, rather than excerpts of planned longer projects, or through a single extended narrative.

### **Writing Prompts and Exercises**

For student-writers, especially those who may lack creative inspiration, writing prompts or soft constraints can become very profitable and help to produce short pieces of prose.

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<sup>129</sup> Carl Rogers, *Freedom to Learn for the 80s* (Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill, 1983), p. 26.

<sup>130</sup> Martha Pennington, 'Writing Creativity and Discovery: Process and Pedagogy', in *Creativity and Discovery in the University Writing Class*, ed. By Alice Chik, and others (Sheffield: Equinox, 2015), p. 81.



However, writing-on-demand can also prove to be disappointingly unproductive, or seemingly arbitrary, lacking any serious preparation and often any initial inspiration. Providing students with regular in-class exercises is, in my opinion, an inefficient use of valuable contact time, much like requiring students to read their assignments aloud rather than having the class read (and critique) the work in private beforehand. Courses should limit the amount of reading or writing conducted during classes to a minimum, and any exercise that can be performed at home probably should be performed at home.

Writing exercises can, of course, be developed by the tutor and distributed in class. The results can later be discussed within the group (although this may prove more fruitful if kept for individual tutorials); however, extensive amounts of writing should not be performed during the limited amount of seminar time. If students feel that writing together in small groups is beneficial, then they should be strongly encouraged to meet up outside of class. Alternatively, courses can include occasional active writing events, providing students with structured time and support for their writing.

Short fiction courses can easily adapt to, or incorporate elements of inverted classrooms, or ‘flipped learning’<sup>131</sup>. As discussed earlier, Robert Miles observed how the Creative Writing workshop system already redefines the traditional classroom hierarchy and invites a greater level of critical engagement and opinion from each student than many other subjects. Student-writers in consultation with their tutor and/or peers must, to some extent, ‘teach’ their intentions and writing strategy, being the ‘expert’ of their own narrative, and reversing

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<sup>131</sup> Jonathan Bergman and Aaron Sams, *Flip Your Classroom: Reach Every Student in Every Classroom Every Day*, (Washington DC: International Society for Technology in Education, 2012)

Freire's depository system<sup>132</sup> – in Creative Writing tutorials/workshops, the students must occasionally deposit knowledge as well as making regular withdrawals. By engaging with their own work on an instructional level, expressing their writing strategy and justifying any creative decisions in context, student-writers can become more attuned to their readers' needs and expectations (whether to support or subvert them). Published short fiction also offers opportunities for fully flipped classrooms, where students can conduct short seminars using contained and accessible material to convey their concepts.

Courses must maintain a sensible and efficient creative/critical balance, ensuring that students are exposed to a strong foundation of critical theory and language to express their opinions, as well as being given opportunity and time to develop their own creative work. Too demanding a critical programme will hamper creative work, while devoting too much teaching time to creative classes and writing exercises will stunt critical growth. It can be effective to provide creative content in concentrated bursts.

In a manner more familiar to independent writing courses, such as those organised by the *Arvon Foundation*<sup>133</sup> or *The Guardian* newspaper,<sup>134</sup> which condense the teaching into short concentrated periods, the University of Birmingham introduced occasional 'bootcamp' writing days to the standard Creative Writing curriculum. These all-day events were designed to serve as auxiliary learning, supporting the students' overall development, rather than being targeted towards a particular individual assessment or module criteria.

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<sup>132</sup> Irwin Jones, *Paulo Freire's Philosophy of Education: Origins, Developments, Impacts and Legacies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 49.

<sup>133</sup> Arvon Foundation, *Arvon Residential Creative Writing Courses and Retreats UK*, <[www.arvon.org/](http://www.arvon.org/)> [accessed 30 August 2018].

<sup>134</sup> The Guardian Newspaper, *Masterclasses by The Guardian* (2018), <[www.theguardian.com/guardian-masterclasses/writing-and-publishing](http://www.theguardian.com/guardian-masterclasses/writing-and-publishing)> [accessed 30 August 2018].

Students were invited from across the entire year-group, mixing together the members of separate seminar classes, much like a lecture group, but in a more informal classroom setting (albeit a very big classroom). Various teachers and postgraduate students delivered short presentations including optional writing exercises and active assignments to be completed throughout the day. I held a short talk about naturalism, found-dialogue and observation technique, that culminated in a short observation exercise which the students completed over the lunch break and then developed within small groups in class. Other teachers conducted sessions on visualising narratives, flash fiction, found poetry and others. This resulted in a mixed-bag of results – with each student having the opportunity to engage with several exercises, one after the other, affording varying degrees of success or engagement. It felt to me like ‘tapas teaching’, and proved to be both enjoyable and valuable. Of the fifty or so students who attended the day, everyone either developed existing short fiction or discovered new approaches for fresh stories, and nobody dropped out part-way through (despite the day being an optional event.) Several of the students’ bootcamp pieces were later developed further into formally assessed short stories. I have since conducted similarly successful days, or weekends, at the *Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning*, based out of the University of Warwick, as part of summer-school events for international students, and have found them to be very productive. Focusing on short fiction, it is possible to conceive, draft, workshop, edit, redraft, proof and present an original piece in a single day, giving students momentum and confidence. Intensive full-day sessions offer an additional form of learning and are valuable additions to more orthodox timetabled courses. They are best positioned roughly halfway through each term, as the experience of creating a variety of fresh (if rough) drafts and engaging with a number of ideas and exercises one after the other can provide confidence and momentum as well as inspiration to flagging students.

My story, 'Thirty Three Percent', began as a writing challenge to: 'Write a Faustian pact'. The first draft was deliberately written without planning or research, and as quickly as possible (the statistics in the story were estimated and then corrected afterwards). As a result, the punctuation is stripped back, and italics are used to demarcate the two voices. The initial draft needed significant revision due to the knowledge-telling process of immediate writing, but the essential narrative remained the same; through focussing on the back-and-forth dialogue I was able to form the final structure.

### **Flexibility and Bespoke Teaching**

I worked alongside one tutor who, as part of their induction seminar for brand new students, declared having no interest in genre writing of any kind. This prompted several students to try switching classes, and one to leave the degree entirely. The same tutor, the following year, laid out their own highly prescriptive rules for acceptable submissions, including a need for an inciting incident on page one, to open with some action or dilemma, and only to hand in whatever work had been submitted to the peer review workshops (after significant revision, where deemed necessary). This resulted in some students having to provide work in their second or third week of the degree which would ultimately have to be polished to a high standard but could not be replaced, regardless of whether the work had sufficient potential, or if other, more engaging prospects, might have developed later in the term.

I found that it became necessary to de-program students, and assure them that, in fact, inciting incidents were optional openings, not mandatory. The levels of anxiety students demonstrated when faced with submitting their work-in-progress seemed to be worryingly high, having been unnecessarily exacerbated by such a rigid system beforehand. This convinced me more than ever that a flexible approach to assessment criteria and a student-

focused (or student-informed) seminar programme would be a more successful approach. In my courses, I allowed space to insert relevant discussion topics or examples of prose which better suited the demands of the group, or individuals within the group, one topic at a time. World building, for example, would be an irrelevant topic to some students but very valuable to others.

Fundamentally, writing is learned, rather than taught, and the teacher's best methods are flexibility and support. This means responding to the specific instructional context, particularly the age, first language and experience of the students, their writing purposes, and their target writing communities, and providing extensive encouragement in the form of meaningful contexts, peer involvement, prior texts, useful feedback and guidance.<sup>135</sup>

Ken Hyland makes some interesting observations here. First, he identifies the need for highly flexible teaching, based upon listed criteria. Second, he establishes the need for a forum where students can give and receive critical feedback. This supports the argument that small group seminars, or better, one-to-one tutorial teaching are critical during the early stages of the course – how is a teacher to know the context, writing purposes, target audience, etc, without an investigation of a student's creative intentions?

Understanding the general make-up of a group and their current writing endeavours should become obvious enough to an attentive tutor over time, but cannot necessarily be determined beforehand and would have to be incorporated into the latter stages of the course. However, some concepts, such as a keener understanding of setting and tone, are rather more universal to writers and would very likely be of use to the whole class. These more universal elements precede the more bespoke sections for two reasons: first, broader topics help to draw the

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<sup>135</sup> Ken Hyland, *Teaching and Researching Writing*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 79.

whole class together with shared learning that is of immediate value to their individual writing, rather than making sections of the class feel that some sessions are purely academic, having no relevance to their own projects. And second, it allows time for the tutor to determine and prepare new seminar discussions and handouts where appropriate.

This helps to promote the somewhat vague notion of a 'writer's identity'; whether a student aspires to write dramatic fiction, satirical comedy, science-fiction or a blend of all three. It may well be the case that these ambitions develop and change over time and with exposure to new work, fellow writers, a fresh environment, etc. As Graham Harper puts it:

A discussion of Creative Writing and education is not one conversation with various viewpoints but many conversations – much as creative writing is not one action but many, and creative writers are not defined solely by a culture or society but also by the nature of their individual self and their personal experiences.<sup>136</sup>

Vygotsky's position considers the student to be at the centre of the learning process, responsible for building their own knowledge and understanding, rather than simply acquiring it pre-packaged. This requires the tutor to play more of a flexible role as facilitator rather than as instructor, and for students to develop their own creative aims. Therefore, the course requirements should be somewhat broad, to enable assessment for a range of writing styles and genres. Assessment criteria should reflect the essential purpose of the work. It is important that students feel licence to experiment and are encouraged to attempt writing outside of their usual patterns; but for a writer to begin work, it can be valuable to have a formative sense of identity and direction. Wallace Stegner points out that: 'Only [the student]

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<sup>136</sup> Harper, Graeme, 'Creative Writing and Education: An Introduction', in *Creative Writing and Education*, ed. By Graeme Harper (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2015), p. 2.

knows what is intended; only he or she can perform or realise it. A teacher should understand that intention, but not try to control it.<sup>137</sup>

One quality which all writers share is a motivating influence of some kind. These motivating influences are, in my experience, not often short fiction writers (not prolific short story writers, at least<sup>138</sup>) and most students do not harbour ambitions of becoming a specialist short story writer; they are inspired by novelists, or occasionally screenwriters, and so aspire to be novelists or occasionally screenwriters. However, they are also seeking an education and a structured environment, and I have found that students soon come to appreciate the practical values of the medium and the benefits of pursuing complete narratives.

The structure imposed by a course which demands the production of a varied portfolio of short fiction regularly produces manageable projects that do not sprawl or meander, making development more precise and the process of charting any improvements easier (or more accurate); students can be assigned bespoke writing briefs to address particular weaknesses or to build upon strengths. And, given a rich and varied reading list, I have found that students come to find firm favourites in what may have been an unfamiliar medium, and, through doing so, find new motivations and inspirations.

One problem for teachers is that across any class cohort there will likely be a wide variety of influences, making a single universal approach difficult to successfully produce. Some students will fall between the gaps and fail to meet their potential, others may be corralled into writing prose which they do not feel really represents their creative identity or ambitions.

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<sup>137</sup> Wallace Stegner, *On Teaching and Writing Fiction* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 52.

<sup>138</sup> Neil Gaiman is an exception to this rule, as a writer whose short fiction is regularly cited by students as an immediate inspiration.

By exploring a wide range of shorter pieces, and having students share a selection of different stories (rather than focusing on a single longer project) the chances of become provincial or repetitive is reduced and the spectrum of influences can be more easily expanded.

### **In-Situ and Campus Writing Resources**

My cousin's twelve-year old daughter expressed an ambition to become a writer and wanted my advice.

'What should I do?' she asked.

The most valuable answer I had ever received to this question myself was: 'If you are really serious about being a writer then the most important thing to do is limit your expenses and lower your overheads.' But this wasn't particularly appropriate to her current situation, so, I considered for a moment. What *should* a developing writer at her level pursue to increase her potential and ability? Certainly, she should read, well and often, that much was obvious, but what else?

'Make your life as varied as you can manage,' I told her. 'Explore and investigate as much as you can. Do something new as often as possible. Go fishing, try gardening, or pottery, visit a market or a mosque or a fire station, anything, so long as it is new. Watch documentaries, expand your vistas, and observe people very closely. Then, when you are a little older. Find other writers. Share your work with them and read theirs.'

Campus universities offer a rare opportunity to student-writers in the form of research and inspiration. The benefits for a science-fiction writer having direct access to laboratories and scientists are plainly obvious. The same might be said about a crime writer studying cheek by



work with pathologists, forensic scientists and criminologists; or for a historical fiction writer, a legal drama enthusiast, etc. Campus universities are full of information, facilities and experts – people and places fascinating to a fiction writer looking for ideas. I have found great value in organising inter-disciplinary activities and tours; taking advantage of the facilities at hand to encourage creativity and spark inspiration, or simply to offer writers the chance to engage a professional academic in an informal interview or Q-and-A session. I have included tours or talks by specialists in architecture, human rights law, fractal mathematics, chemistry, falconry, dance, game design and others.

Given the apparently arbitrary nature of the influences provided, students were encouraged to develop fresh ideas for new short stories, rather than to incorporate elements into existing projects unless they felt them to be particularly relevant. Having an opportunity to engage with a fresh story often invigorated students' existing work as well as providing the potential for new pieces. The influences have in fact been chosen to contrast one another, and to provide a range of narrative possibilities and to encourage multiplicity.

In-situ writing, as a form of in-class/out-of-class exercise, can be difficult to organise for large groups, but where possible should be included as part of Creative Writing courses. A simple trip to a museum, a churchyard, or a market can provide new ideas and clear parameters for student-writers to work within. Writing in-situ can help writers to create evocative and plausible settings, perhaps by using unexpected sights, sounds or smells discovered during the visit, or by noticing intimate details about a place.

Having students initially write at a location but to then develop the work in-between sessions or incorporate elements into existing projects alleviates the pressure for students to produce prose to order. Any work that they feel has potential can be included in workshop seminars

or produced for tutorial discussion, but merely demonstrating the value of writing or researching in a particular and appropriate place can be in itself illuminating for developing writers.

Following my own set exercise, I toured with my parents a newly-converted retirement community during an open day. The imposing gothic red-brick buildings had previously been a school; my own school in fact. The interiors were now entirely different and yet still intimately familiar. The apartment which the salesman hoped would interest my parents had once been my chemistry classroom. I found the whole experience to be somewhat unique and it prompted several pieces of exploratory writing. But it wasn't until a classroom discussion about ageless characters appearing in a continually contemporary moment (such as Batman or James Bond,) that the idea for my story 'A Place to Die' began to emerge. Taking Ian Fleming's original literary character as my protagonist (as opposed to the various cinema adaptations), I positioned him in the modern day, as an elderly man, inside an interpretation of the same retirement community. By combining the in-situ notes and observations with some intertextual research, I formed the context for a story about fading identity, age, masculinity, social care and the treatment of retired servicemen. Some familiar themes emerged, but, having been directly inspired by the open-day visit, I found I was able to approach them through a quite different perspective and frame. I was also able to share the process with my students, who had themselves visited evocative locales and were able to craft their own short stories as a result

Another story of mine, 'Trajectory', owes a great debt to a day spent with students and teachers of Creative Writing engaging in an afternoon of falconry. After a short talk covering the history and significance of falconry, including its cultural and social associations, we

watched a professional demonstration, before getting the opportunity to try ourselves. The experience of being so close, of actually holding a living bird of prey and experiencing first-hand the strength of its talons against the hard suede of the gauntlet, the depth of colour found in its feathers, and in its eye, was unlike any photograph or documentary film, unlike any aviary or bird sanctuary. Whether hawk or falcon or owl, each of the birds affected each of the writers in their own personal ways, and it was no surprise to me that, soon after, a number of short pieces emerged, some prose, some poetry, all related to the impressive birds in one way or another. My own story tried to capture the sense of majesty I felt radiating from the gyrfalcon I had held, as well as the master/servant dialectic between the bird and its owner. I wanted to use elements of movement, speed and the concept of 'the hunt' in order to reinforce an underlying theme of mortality, generations, and aging; the transfer of skills and knowledge from one generation to the next. But along with that, I wanted the piece to explore the inherent responsibilities of adulthood, and, within the narrative instance, feelings of regret. The falcon, it seemed to me, held many of the properties I had already been ruminating over and exploring in other pieces, such as 'The Funeral'; the bird's sheer presence gave it a powerful sense of legacy: I knew I would not forget that moment. I was able to revisit questions of memory, identity and inheritance. 'The Funeral' explores a failure of responsibility, while, in a different manner, 'Trajectory' does likewise.

Not all institutions have access to campus resources but arranging visits to resonant locales for groups of writers can certainly be achieved. Coffee shop writing is all well and good, but writing about a graveyard whilst in a graveyard, for example, offers up a whole range of different possibilities.

### **Completing Work and Publication**

A student-writer who completes a short story can gain a significant amount of confidence and, indeed, momentum, in a way that a student-novelist completing the first quarter of their potential debut novel might not. The ability to produce and publish a complete piece in a relatively short period of time, or in the case of my student, Foye McCarthy, to write and develop a piece which, prior to his graduation, won *The London Short Story Prize*,<sup>139</sup> is a valuable ability indeed.

It is for this reason that faculties should take advantage of any chance to encourage student publication or entry into competition. Facilitating a published anthology of student work is an ideal addition to a course. While many universities produce and publish an anthology of short fiction, it is usually as an optional extra-curricular project, but, given the beneficial impact it can have I feel it should be integrated into courses where possible. The University of Birmingham includes an 'editing' module for second year undergraduates which aims to produce an anthology as part of its formal assessment criteria. This provides the students with editorial experience in a collaborative environment, working on anonymised submissions received from both undergraduates and postgraduates. The authors of the works chosen for inclusion in the anthology then receive further feedback throughout the editorial process. This system benefits both the student-critics and the student-writers and seems to be an ideal addition to any three or four-year course.

Short story anthology production introduces students to some of the vocational realities of the publishing industry (a possible career path for some graduates) as well as providing an excellent opportunity to exercise editorial skills, both individually and within groups. Having

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<sup>139</sup> Foye McCarthy, 'Oh No, A Bank Robbery! Fuck!', in *London Short Story Prize Anthology 2016* (London: Kingston University, 2016), pp. 1–15.

overseen several published student anthologies, I have witnessed the value of the pressure-cooker atmosphere of anthology meetings. The need to edit a great many individual stories to a high standard whilst working in concert with each individual author, and adhering to strict deadlines, provides high-intensity learning without any added academic pressure. Students can choose to focus on typesetting, proof reading, design or advertising, all highly relevant skills for aspiring writers, agents or publishers. A published anthology also provides the opportunity for a public launch event where student-writers can meet with agents and publishers, providing valuable vocational experience, or potentially developing a professional relationship. Warwick's short fiction anthology launch event of 2010 paired one student with an agent, resulting in a best-selling novel selected for *The Richard and Judy Book Club* of 2013.<sup>140</sup>

Creative Writing courses should try to incorporate the business side of writing and publishing; offering access to agents and publishers or, for example, The Society of Authors, via visiting speakers is an ideal way to complement the practical literary production and critical reception elements of the curriculum.

### **Teacher as Writer, Writer as Teacher**

Audrey Petty remarks that 'just as conferencing with a student requires that we [student and teacher] both focus on their text, being a Creative Writing professor demands, for me, that I remain immersed in my own writing and share that experience as a teacher.'<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Joanne Rossiter, *The Sea Change* (London: Penguin, 2013).

<sup>141</sup> Audrey Petty, 'Who's the Teacher?: From Student to Mentor', in *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom*, ed. By Anna Leahy (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2005), p. 78.

The Associated Writing Programs concurs: 'The AWP reminds institutions that a teaching writer needs time to do his or her own work,' and that 'as with any other arts, the writing teacher will be effective as a teacher only insofar as he or she is active and engaged as a writer.'<sup>142</sup>

During the course of this study, I have taught a range of undergraduate and postgraduate Creative Writing programmes across a number of institutions: principally, the University of Birmingham and the University of Warwick, all the while continuing to pursue my own fiction in the form of the collection attached. The direction of my teaching has partly been led by the requirements of my students, and, as a consequence, the further reading for seminar preparations has, at times, informed upon my own work or inspired entirely new pieces. Whenever I construct and present writing exercises, prompts or challenges, I always try to attempt them myself, not merely to test their efficacy but to provide myself with a structured space to compose new ideas or stories.

Petty continues: 'What is more difficult than honing my syllabus, conferencing with students, or creating dialogue during workshop, is going to my desk regularly and working on a piece of my own. I now believe this to be crucial to my effectiveness as a teacher.'<sup>143</sup> Petty also points out that the institutional demands required of a Creative Writing practitioner to be both an active writer and a scholar should ultimately result in becoming more widely-published and more actively engaged in the discipline, especially in light of the REF system,<sup>144</sup> (Research in Education Framework) which prioritises the published work of tutors in order to determine

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<sup>142</sup> Association of Writers and Writing Programs, *Association of Writers and Writing Programs* (2018), <[www.awpwriter.org/about/overview](http://www.awpwriter.org/about/overview)> [accessed 23 September 2018].

<sup>143</sup> Audrey Petty, 'Who's the Teacher?: From Student to Mentor', in *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom*, ed. By Anna Leahy (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2005), p. 78.

<sup>144</sup> Research Excellence Framework, *REF 2021* (2018), <[www.ref.ac.uk](http://www.ref.ac.uk)> [accessed 20 September 2018].

the qualities of an academic department; faculties rely on prolific author/scholars to maintain academic standards as well as public profile. The introduction of the new TEF system,<sup>145</sup> (Teaching in Education Framework) which prioritises classroom teaching and student development, places a stronger onus on the tutor to maintain strong pedagogical standards as well as maintaining a research presence, whether as a creative writer or as a critic and commentator on modern writing. Creative Writing tutors generally embrace the opportunity to develop new work with the support of their departments, while universities are keen for tutors to maintain a relevant literary profile. This focus enables contemporary teaching which engages with new writing, rather than falling into established trends and canonical methods. Research leave is essential for academics, but the slowly growing recognition of the TEF system of evaluation is changing the landscape, allowing tutors to focus on teaching more often than previously, making courses more consistent. As a short story writer, I have been able to publish various new works and perform public readings alongside my teaching without needing to take extended periods of leave, which can be disruptive to the continuity of the course.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Office for Students, *TEF Outcomes* (2018), <[www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/tef-outcomes/#/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/tef-outcomes/#/)> [accessed 20 September 2018].

<sup>146</sup> Jon Mycroft, 'The Platform', in *HCE: The Brutal Issue*, 6(2) (2017) 69–70.

Jon Mycroft, 'Introduction' in: Oscar Wilde, *A Portrait of Dorian Gray*, (Vancouver: Misfit Press, 2018).

## **Assessment and Continuing Development**

The rarefied atmosphere of Creative Writing courses can create a collegiate bond between contemporaries, who share a language of criticism and a keen understanding of each other's motivations. Indeed, even amongst cohorts where creative chemistry between peers does not prove particularly conducive, I have still found that students can become acclimatised to an environment of shared criticism and support, and can begin relying too heavily upon tutorial guidance for encouragement and motivation, benefits which they often lose access to following their graduation.

Once let out into the real world, Creative Writing students can experience the transition as disheartening or overwhelming. Far from being free to pursue individual projects, graduates can find themselves without a forum, working with only themselves as an audience; without deadlines or parameters, they lack structure. Graduates can find themselves pursuing publication and further creative development in a new and unfamiliar autodidactic fashion. I found this to be the case with my own gap year, between my BA and MA. I certainly noticed the difference from writing in total isolation, prior to beginning my first degree (aged 30), to the circumstances of writing within an organised cohort of similarly driven individuals.

In order to help develop graduate and postgraduate writers following the completion of their studies, departments can advise on ways to form alumni writing groups, potentially allowing a limited use of university facilities, such as access to library resources and a classroom space.

In 2013, as a form of continuing development and life-long learning, I established the Milverton Workshops, serving as leader/facilitator, as independent weekly seminars for groups of graduate writers of different ages and experience levels, aimed at producing a wider



network of active writers. The majority of members attend in person, but I also include distanced learners, via online streaming video-links, with members joining from Vancouver, Canada, to Cardiff, Wales, and Mumbai, India. The groups contain several successful novelists and writers, including prize winners and short-list nominees, as well as a number of developing academics or teachers.<sup>147</sup> Another benefit of short fiction writing is the adaptive potential for film and television; one member of the Milverton Group developed a short story under my tutelage which was then adapted into a teleplay for *Chanel Four Television* as part of an ensemble series of stand-alone dramas, *On the Edge*<sup>148</sup>.

The Milverton Workshops follow the same procedures as the university seminar workshop classes I conduct within academic courses. Using Hobsbaum rules, the writer being critiqued observes the discussion without interference. The critics deliver their responses one at a time, but I try to engage the critic in conversation, supporting or challenging particular observations in order to produce a more personal dialogue, rather than having the critics simply read out pre-prepared notes one after another. This approach is designed to elaborate and interrogate particular criticisms in order to validate them beyond a single subjective opinion. Other members can chip in, but, as the facilitator, I try to prevent any significant digressions or extended debates over minor points of disagreement. This system is best managed by having an arbiter, or tutor, who can call discussions to a halt and allow the selected critic to continue reporting their critique.

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<sup>147</sup> Foye McCarthy won the London Short Story Prize 2016. *London Short Story Prize Anthology 2016* (London: Kingston University, 2016), pp. 1–15. Charlotte Salter completed and published her first novel whilst a regular member of the workshops. Charlotte Salter, *The Bone Snatcher* (New York: Dial Books, 2016).

<sup>148</sup> 'For you', *On The Edge*, Channel Four Television, 23 March 2020. Teleplay written by John Servantes.

As an informal, yet organised and collegiate discussion between experienced peers, this system results in a number of conversations between myself and various student-critics where we discuss the submitted work in detail whilst in the presence of the author. These discussions and evaluations, combined with annotated copies of the original manuscript or feedback notes, provided by each member of the class, give the writer a good sense of how the piece might be received by a wider audience, but, perhaps more usefully, this system provides them with a raft of corrections and suggestions, often improving the technical qualities of the prose at the same time as providing a sense of momentum and validation.

As with university seminars and workshops, after each of the readers has expressed their opinions, the process concludes with the writer's 'right to reply', during which any clarifications can be made and any particular queries the writer might have can be directly addressed.

As I have discussed previously, a tutor-turned-student does interfere with the prevailing class dynamic. However, with such experienced and qualified members within the group, I have, occasionally, been able to receive my own workshop peer review sessions and become, to some extent, a student of my own methods. Consequently, a number of the associated portfolio stories have undergone critical reception and been redrafted as a direct result; 'The Fare', 'Reunion' and 'The World's Only Working Time-machine' all received a workshop critique and feedback during their development.

The benefits of encouraging (or requiring) students to compose a portfolio of varied work, as opposed to examination or single dissertation-length submissions, extend to the assessment process as much as to creative development. Portfolios give students the chance to demonstrate a range of skills and techniques and present a broader picture of their overall

abilities, particularly if accompanied by any critical commentary or reflective essay by the author. From an examiner's perspective, multiple examples of a strength or a weakness become easier to identify, leading to more confident judgements and improved assessment accuracy. Also, self-critical commentary is better justified alongside a selection of examples, which is more likely to occur within a collected portfolio.

Having students write multiple shorter works also helps to freshen the workshop discussion environment; student-critics struggling to understand or appreciate the work of a classmate might respond better to different pieces. One bad workshop can be disheartening for writers, particularly if they are invested in a single project which their peers are not fully engaged with.

When looking at the QAA higher education benchmark points for Creative Writing tuition,<sup>149</sup> it becomes clear that no single approach to teaching will satisfy these rather broad requirements and that a varied teaching body would be necessary. In order for faculties to determine whether they have a sufficient spread of pedagogical strategies, it is necessary for tutors to have a firm grasp of their own teaching philosophies. And in order for teachers to understand their own teaching processes, they must become familiar with the pedagogical theories that best define them, and ideally seek to explore alternative methods, deepening their abilities.

Beyond the obvious desire for students to complete full-length manuscripts with publication potential during the course of their studies, there are few or no drawbacks to producing a

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<sup>149</sup> The English Association, *Subject Benchmark Statement Creative Writing: Draft for Consultation* (2015), p. 5, <[www2.le.ac.uk/offices/english-association/news-1/qaa-draft-subject-benchmark-statement-for-creative-writing](http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/english-association/news-1/qaa-draft-subject-benchmark-statement-for-creative-writing)> [accessed 15 September 2018].

portfolio of short prose. There are, however, a great many advantages, both from a teaching and a learning point of view.

### **Critical Commentary Assessments**

A lot of the development a writer makes will be incremental and partially instinctual. Developing a sense for the active and the passive, for rhythm and pace, for plausible dialogue, etc, comes through a simple understanding and a great deal of practice. However, assessing one's own advancement (or indeed one's shortcomings) is not always a simple matter, nor necessarily a particularly valuable one. The reflective essay or critical commentary, which invariably accompanies creative submissions, serves to produce a reportage-like account of the academic progress each student has made during the course. This is an opportunity to highlight any theoretical investigations a student may have undertaken, any fields of study they have encountered, and also an opportunity to discuss the formal elements of their writing. A certain amount of aims and intentions, as well as elements of process might also be relevant. Critical commentary has become a common method of formal assessment for undergraduates, and does have its benefits, both for examiners and for the students themselves. Articulating ideas and opinions in class discussion is a vital part of student development, but composing a reflective self-criticism takes this process even further.

Short fiction portfolios provide a strong foundation for comparison and contrast and can be used as stronger evidence of a developing style and ability to manage appropriate tone and voice. Development becomes more evident to a tutor and indeed to the writer.

The critically reflective essay is best applied to a body of work composed (or attempted) during the course of a term, rather than to a single piece; otherwise, the critical response can

become more like a study guide, or worse, a didactic memoir of ‘how I wrote my homework’. Genuinely insightful reflective commentaries can be illuminating and assist with the formal assessment of student development (particularly for external examiners) but allowing room within the assessment criteria for innovative critical writing which might take a different form to the more traditional reflective commentary can be far more profitable.

I encouraged a student of mine who was struggling with the self-analytical perspective of the critically reflective commentary to write an ‘essay’ which more resembled a short story in the tradition of Jorge Luis Borges<sup>150</sup>, placing himself as the first-person writer-protagonist explaining to a zookeeper why he is studying primates to better develop his writing. It was drawn from the real-life research for one of his stories but was presented more like a fiction. There was a narrative position, dialogue, scene descriptions, and yet within the story there was a close discussion of the application of character dynamics, perspective and of fantasy writing tropes (as well as appropriate footnotes and bibliography). The essay-story focused on themes of development, understanding and revelation. It contained much of what I would expect from a reflective essay but was presented in a fresh and creative format. The critical assessment element accompanying any creative submission should always be seen as another creative opportunity, although with the added criteria of self-criticism and critical analysis. Students invariably request clear guidelines, which makes this a substantial challenge; clear guidelines for an assessment of this type tends to corral students into a didactic writing space. ‘Try to be creative’ is not always the best help. As a consequence, I tend to suggest that well-written accounts will be favourably received as will innovative and creative solutions to producing an associated commentary on the piece.

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<sup>150</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley, (London: Penguin, 1999).

In my own experience, I have found critical self-reflection of my own writing to be challenging but rewarding. The habit of reviewing my own methods and motivations, and considering how a story might be received by an appropriate audience, has enabled me to consciously develop my writing style and identify areas of strength or weakness. The process of composing a portfolio of short pieces has helped me to see my own work from different angles – to identify key themes and concerns, as well as allowing me to experiment with a variety of narrative or structural techniques. From a developmental point of view, portfolio composition has been both revealing and instructive. While drafting a first novel might well produce its own learning experiences, some of which are *not* present in portfolio composition, such as consistency and sheer endurance, short fiction composition has provided me with an efficient and illustrative way of exploring my own literary identity, in preparation for my longer works, perhaps.

## Critical Development of My Own Work

Edmund Wilson said of Ernest Hemingway: 'The people of his short stories are satisfactory because he has only to hit them off: the point of the story does not lie in personalities, but in the emotion to which a situation gives rise.'<sup>151</sup> However, David Hughes observes that '[Hemingway's] gift for always tackling vital issues while hardly dwelling on them – marriage, death, abortion, adolescence, war and divorce, to name only the least happy – keeps his short work more vigorous and deeper.'<sup>152</sup>

Reading these two slightly contradictory criticisms, gave me a fellow feeling; it seemed to me that the concerns of my own short fiction are somewhat similar: a good many of my stories consider sudden visceral moments of emotion, narratives particularly suited to the short story form; specifically, 'The Plunge' and 'The Weightlifter', but also, to lesser extent with 'Resolution' and 'Jiggity Jig'.

'As painters often paint the same subject many times, so the modern short-story writer often returns to where he has been before in search of another angle.'<sup>153</sup>

This seemed to be the case with myself, whether I'd realised or not. By collating my work, prevailing themes have become similarly evident – marriage, death, adolescence, and war. In retrospect, it seems to me that the aesthetic reason for my pursuing these themes is to produce vigorous and sudden prose, and to encourage an introspective reflection within my

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<sup>151</sup> Edmund Wilson, 'Hemmingway: Gauge of Morale', in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views*, ed. By Harold Bloom (Langhorn, PE: Chelsea House, [1939] 2005), p. 12.

<sup>152</sup> David Hughes, 'Introduction', in *Short Stories by Ernest Hemingway*, Ernest Hemingway (London: Folio Society, 1986), p. xv.

<sup>153</sup> William Trevor, 'Introduction', in *Essential Stories*, by Pritchett, V.S. (New York: Modern Library, 2005), pp. xii–xiii.

reader, often by avoiding the principal subjects of the narrative, or by 'hardly dwelling on them'.

John Letts, in his introduction to a collection of short stories by Saki, observes that: 'There is a certain clinical cruelty' and that 'our sympathies are neatly but firmly engaged against the victims and in favour of the aggressor.'<sup>154</sup> I would suggest the same about many of the short stories of Roald Dahl; in the short fiction canon of both writers, there is an indulgence in the cruel and in the macabre, a joy in observing the dastardly clever. These narratives, if extended into novel-length works, could well become less palatable, or uncomfortable and so seem to me far better suited to the shorter mode. 'A tighter form allows the writer to express emotions – conflict, dissonance, fear or love – that could be overwhelming or trite given too much free-form space.'<sup>155</sup> Raymond Carver, on the contrary, used the short form to express observations and philosophies via the everyday, even banal matters, which also would not adequately expand to fit a larger narrative.

I have experimented with different structures, trying twist-endings akin to Dahl and Saki, as well as more contemplative conclusions, more like Pritchett or Mansfield. I have tried grand themes and everyday circumstances, all in an attempt to discover and develop a sense of my own literary style through a continuum of varied pieces. As a form more accessible to an exploratory writer discovering their own strengths and interests, the short story proved to be instrumental in my growth as a writer and then as a teacher, allowing me to develop a literary style as well as an effective pedagogy.

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<sup>154</sup> John Letts, 'Introduction', in *Saki Short Stories* (London: The Folio Society, 1976), p. 10.

<sup>155</sup> *Single Scene Short Stories*, ed. By Margaret Bishop (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2007), pp. 13–14.



## Conclusions

As an academic discipline, Creative Writing differs from many of its artistic cousins, and lacks established pedagogical 'schools'; unlike, for example, drama, which boasts disparate and distinct theories of education and practice such as Stanislavskian, Brechtian, Method, Le Coq, and so on. Creative Writing has few clearly defined teaching approaches. Whilst theories on expressivism, formalism and stylistics have been published, they have not emerged into the academic discourse as effectively, or become as recognised, as they might have been in other disciplines. Of course, all teachers have their own methods and favour certain approaches over others, but I have yet to hear a Creative Writing teacher describe themselves as belonging to a particular teaching school of thought. Nobody is 'Atwoodian' or even 'Hobsbaumian', few tutors (if any) describe themselves as expressivist, or as lyricalist. It is perhaps this lack of demarcation which has slowed the development of anything like competing theories of Creative Writing.

For the subject to grow as an academic discipline, Creative Writing needs to advance beyond the foundations of Rhetoric. Aristotle aside, there is not currently a unified language of academic criticism unique to the subject. As a consequence, I have found that borrowing relevant concepts from related disciplines and using them as a part of practical seminar discussions has helped students not only to articulate complex criticisms, but also to identify particular issues in the first place. Whether adopted from reception theory or formal stylistics, tools such as 'repertoire' or tools of my own, such as the 'the structural axis', they create contextual frames for student-critics to use; lenses which they might examine a work through. There is a need to build upon this and to formulate a language of Creative Writing criticism. Looking forward at potential future developments in the subject, Creative Writing requires

further illustrative theory, or theoretical devices that might be applied as creative tools, which in turn might develop into diverse schools of thought or new approaches to teaching student-writers.

This thesis argues for a more considered approach to the teaching of Creative Writing, through the use of short fiction. To be successful, Creative Writing courses should introduce literary theory through the critical analysis of short fiction alongside peer review of student writing, and should include close supervision tutorials. In addition, through the teaching of short fiction, tutors should endeavour to become more attuned to their teaching abilities and developmental needs, as well as those of their students.

As has been shown in this thesis, the use of short fiction in the teaching of Creative Writing is an ideal way of achieving the following best-practice principles:

- To introduce student-writers to concepts and terminology that might assist them in the articulation of their ideas and critical responses.
- To enable student-writers to better understand the aims and ambitions they have for their own work, and to develop a sense of a writing identity.
- To expand upon student-writers' literary inspirations and influences commensurate with their own work and development.
- To give opportunity for variety and experimentation; avoiding too much lingering in 'comfort zones'.
- To encourage redrafting as well as rigorous but judicious editing practice.
- To familiarise student-writers with a range of writing strategies, demonstrating the importance of planning and/or research.

- To prepare students for the vocational practicalities of literary agents and publishing as well as emerging alternatives in digital media. Short fiction is an ideal medium for early forays into publishing and competition.

Tools	Environment	Outcomes	Extension
Articulation of ideas and language of criticism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rhetoric</li> <li>• Repertoire</li> <li>• Structural Axis</li> <li>• Horizon</li> </ul> Selected resources and reading list Internal/external research methods Extra-curricular activities, events and lectures Vocational applications of creative writing Exposure to publishers/agents	Workshop seminars  Individual tutorials  Field trip exercises  Tertulia with expert professionals	Formal qualification  Creative and critical development  Original portfolio  Expanded personal literary repertoire  Network of peers and former tutors	Publication and/or competition  Adaptation into larger work  Further studies

Figure 16. Methodology.

I have shown how short fiction works as a unifying medium, bringing together literary analysis, creative composition and critical peer review over a practical timeframe appropriate for formal education. As a compact and variform medium, short fiction encourages student-writers to actively pursue a variety of challenges and projects, and allows institutions to more accurately gauge development and ability.

The use of short fiction reduces the reading burden and increases the variety of materials that students will be exposed to. Any concepts being explored should be immediately identifiable and should facilitate a classroom discussion without the need to reiterate or relate to previous chapters etc. The syllabus can contain a variety of short works, demonstrating the breadth of literature, and can relate to any compositional assessments, where students may be required

to write their own prose. And because of their limited length, short stories can be added or substituted to make classes more appropriate to the needs of the students.

It is important to remember that although student-writers often want assistance in developing a particular project, the actual purpose of their study is *to become better writers* – to better understand their discipline and the work of their professional contemporaries (or future contemporaries), not to produce a finished manuscript ready for publication. A student does not embark upon a degree in Architecture in order to build their own house, at least not during their studies. They would expect to graduate with the skills and knowledge sufficient to build their own house, theoretically, but not to have *already* built it as part of their coursework.

Student-writers sometimes seek product more than they seek aptitude, or rather they expect the aptitude to develop on its own during the practical process of producing the product – learning purely by doing. This can be successful, to a point, but only if the student is relatively gifted and supported by a strong peer group of critics. Without the additional content of structural analysis and a foundation in literary theory, the external learning will be very limited. Students learn how to write *that* book, that particular book; sometimes paragraph by paragraph, without necessarily grasping the underlying principles that might enable them to write, for example, a different book. As I have shown, short fiction, compared with longer works, affords the student authority over their work without being corralled into a limited creative space. It prepares students for a wider range of creative problems to solve and strategies to employ; it demonstrates a variety of possibilities.

The use of short fiction also greatly assists in the development of student-critics who are faced with an ever-changing selection of work to critique, as opposed to the next part of a novel

where many of the observations and suggestions might be reiterations of the previous week's criticisms or may become reduced to an analysis of grammar and phrasing. Persistent problems become more easily identified when occurring in disparate works by the same author, and critics improve when faced with a range of challenges. To make best use of the system, courses must allow for increased contact time between tutors and students, including scheduled tutorials into the syllabus to ensure that students receive a full and focussed education in writing.

This thesis adds to the literature on the teaching of Creative Writing by considering how the use of short fiction can benefit students and developing writers, but also calls for practising tutors to be more consciously aware of their teaching approaches in order to form more coherent pedagogical techniques. To develop distinct fields of Creative Writing teaching, tutors should bear responsibility for investigating their own practice, recognising what distinguishes themselves from their peers. Examining their favoured teaching tools and defining their own particular techniques can begin by investigating their signature works – the stories which they find most efficacious in their classes – and how they use them to educate.

I believe that short fiction is the ideal medium for variable teaching methods and for the demonstration of specific literary styles, devices and traditions. Short fiction can be a means to an end, serving as a gateway medium, or it can be an end unto itself, affording opportunities in competition, publication or adaptation. Being innovative, accessible, infinitely variable, neither culturally-specific nor temporally-specific, the short story remains a natural and practical way to go about the business of learning how to be a writer; whether

as a script writer, speech writer, journalist, comedian, novelist or poet, short fiction should be regarded as a vital first step.

## Literature Review

### **Moira Monteith and Robert Miles, *Teaching Creative Writing***

This anthology of essays claims to be ‘the first book published in the UK to address the role of Creative Writing and how it is best taught,’ and contains a strong selection of critical investigations into Creative Writing pedagogy from some of the first professional practitioners in HE. It seeks to define the academic parameters of the subject and to distinguish it from the study of English Literature.

Despite being published nearly thirty years ago, the anthology largely remains relevant to contemporary teaching practise, particularly the essays by Miles, Hobsbaum and Singleton, which all informed upon my study.

### **Phillip Hobsbaum, ‘The Teaching of Creative Writing’ in: Monteith, Moira and Robert Miles, *Teaching Creative Writing***

Philip Hobsbaum was instrumental in the development of Creative Writing as an academic discipline in Britain. This essay followed a speech made before a specially convened panel at the *1988 Higher Education Teachers of English (HETE)* annual conference, where Hobsbaum argued for a greater representation of working fiction writers within university English departments, in the interests of developing Writing as specific discipline. The essay describes the system and impact of his Cambridge-based writing group<sup>156</sup>, and establishes a set of peer-review workshop guidelines which have since become widespread within critical practise in Creative Writing. My study explores how these guidelines are applied to short fiction criticism and how best to manage them.

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<sup>156</sup> First formed in 1952, Hobsbaum facilitated a writing criticism workshop known simply as ‘The Group’. It relocated, following Hobsbaum, to London and later to Belfast and Glasgow; members included the poets Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney, and short story writer James Kelman, amongst many others.

**Robert Miles, 'Creative Writing, Contemporary Theory and the English Curriculum' in: Monteith, Moira and Robert Miles, *Teaching Creative Writing***

Robert Miles identifies the crucial need to interrelate critical theory with Creative Writing. Taking an essentially Barthesian<sup>157</sup> approach, Miles observes that short fiction encourages a sense of the decentred subject and is more open to critical intervention than poetry. Miles identifies the need for students producing poetry to read 'extensive quantities of poetry' but does not highlight the need for short story writers to do likewise with their own medium. He focuses his argument on the introduction of theory without providing suggestions for supporting sources or appropriate reading.

**John Singleton, 'Creative Writing and Assessment: A Case Study' in: Monteith, Moira and Robert Miles, *Teaching Creative Writing***

Singleton explores how best to assess the progress and development of Creative Writers in a formal context. He critiques the self-reflective essay and identifies a number of problems with formal assessment and objectivity, some of which I feel might be resolved through using a portfolio of short fiction.

Singleton highlights diversity as being an 'issue' within the subject which, on the contrary, I consider to be a particular strength. He assesses the likelihood of a class cohort having wildly different intentions and inspirations for their own work with a degree of suspicion. Singleton then outlines a full course structure and the principal learning objectives, although does not highlight specific class content or reading content, nor does it explore the benefits of short fiction in particular.

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<sup>157</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in: *Image – Music – Text*, (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977).



**Anna Leahy, *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom***

This anthology of essays debates the role and position of the Creative Writing tutor in relation to their subject, their students, and their own writing output. This is an important text in an under-theorised field and became the genesis for a series of essays and anthologies on Creative Writing teaching called *New Writing Viewpoints*<sup>158</sup>. The essays by Katherine Haake and Audrey Petty were of particular interest to my study.

**Katherine Haake, 'Dismantling Authority: Teaching What We Do Not Know' in: Anna Leahy, *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom***

Haake theorises about creative authority within the context of a writing workshop and identifies some of the necessary dynamics for successful workshop teaching. Haake's philosophy prioritises successful artistic production while fostering a sense of achievement and development within the student-writer but does not identify short fiction as the most suitable vehicle to provide these elements. Haake's position is to allow a writer sufficient autonomy, but also to provide directed tutorial support and facilitation of peer-review workshops that prioritise the reader-critic; she notes the challenging nature of what I refer to as the creative-critical balance.

**Audrey Petty, 'Who's the Teacher?: From Student to Mentor' in: Anna Leahy, *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom***

Audrey Petty also theorises about the hierarchy in the Creative Writing workshop, identifying some of the ethical parameters within a writing workshop as well as considering the impact that conducting workshops might have upon a teacher's own writing practice. Petty also notes the need

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<sup>158</sup> Graham Harper: series editor, *New Writing Viewpoints*, (Multilingual Matters: Bristol)

for teachers to find their own teaching style but does not delve into specifics or suggest any criteria to demarcate any such styles. Instead, she relates her own journey of discovery, transitioning from student to writer to teacher.

Petty presents a persuasive argument with relevant anecdotal evidence, concluding with a short investigation into the effect of a tutor's physicality – their gender, ethnicity, age, even their accent – and how these factors might influence a class dynamic. This portion of the overall study is equally interesting but is less thorough and perhaps deserved to be developed into a separate essay instead.

**Diane Donnelly, *Establishing Creative Writing Studies as an Academic Discipline***

Donnelly conducts a thorough investigation into the critical academic status of Creative Writing, and how best to develop the subject and field of scholarship. She discusses the need for a more unified body of professional knowledge and pedagogical practise. Donnelly investigates a taxonomy of creative writing pedagogies and divides teaching practise into four schema – Mimemtic, Expressive, New Criticism and Reader-Response. My own study further develops Donnelly's taxonomy and directly applies it to the teaching of short fiction.

Currently, there is not a widely accepted sense of there being defined spheres of teaching, or recognisable schools of pedagogy, but as my study aims to demonstrate, such spheres do exist and might be individually developed to further extend the reach and diversity of formal Creative Writing teaching. Donnelly identifies a spectrum of teaching styles but does not expand upon the topic or direct her argument towards a need to foster and promote more specified approaches.

**Diane Donnelly, ed., *Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?***

As the title suggests, the essays collected here critique the practical application of peer-review workshops. The overall conclusion to this polyphonic critique seems to be: yes, the writing workshop does still work; nevertheless, Donnelly et al list a number of objections and provide some suggestions for improvements to the system in order to avoid stagnation within the subject, and proved useful to my study when considering the taxonomy of teaching styles.

**Leslie Kreiner-Wilson, 'Wrestling Bartleby: Another Workshop Model for The Creative Writing Classroom' in: Diane Donnelly, ed., *Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?***

Kreiner-Wilson offers a detailed account of her first years in teaching, identifying teaching methods which she found more effective and highlighting some pitfalls to avoid. As well as entitling her essay in reference to the Herman Melville short story 'Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street' (1853), Kreiner-Wilson specifies how focusing her course content on the production of a number of short stories, rather than on 'long-project prose', proved immediately profitable to her students and to her own writing.

**Micheline Wandor, *The Author is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else***

Wandor offers a more direct polemic towards current Creative Writing practice. She identifies some of the weaknesses of formal writing workshops and questions their overall usefulness. Wandor's study reveals a range of poor practices across a range of institutions, and as such presents a valuable critique; a how-not-to-do-it guide.

Although the study does not offer a sufficiently balanced argument to be entirely persuasive, it nevertheless remains a vital text in the contemporary debate on the future and development of Creative Writing in academia. Wandor does not consider form or medium in any specificity, but she does acknowledge that the short story is the most effective developmental focus for under-graduate

writers: 'an undergraduate degree generally "teaches" the short story ... or it should. It is the only logical approach.'<sup>159</sup>

### **Dana Gioia and G.S. Gwynn, *The Art of the Short Story***

There are a plethora of non-fiction works which present the thoughts and insights of established writers discussing their craft and their personal writing process, many of which are written by notable short fiction authors; Margaret Atwood<sup>160</sup>, A L Kennedy<sup>161</sup>, Ernest Hemingway<sup>162</sup> and Edgar Allen Poe<sup>163</sup> to name but a handful. Gioia and Gwynn present an anthology of 52 stories by 52 writers, each accompanied by an interview with, or an essay by, the author of the story. Some of the interviews have been conducted specifically for the collection, while others are archival (with many of the contributing authors being long dead at the time of publication). The essays/interviews offer perspectives which illuminate both the reader and the writers themselves, as they investigate their own art and process.

Taken from the critical perspective of an apprentice writer, there may seem to be valuable lessons to be learned from such investigations, but I caution my students to avoid direct emulation of any one particular writer, but instead to find their own method; in order to do so, they might investigate the memoirs and philosophies of a variety of writers, and use elements which suit their own writing needs. I have yet to find a writer's memoir which directly credits *another* memoir as being the

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<sup>159</sup> Michelene Wandor, *The Author is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else*, (London: Palgrave, 2008) p197.

<sup>160</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>161</sup> A.L. Kennedy, *On Writing*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013).

<sup>162</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*, edited by Larry W. Phillips, (New York: Touchstone, 1984).

<sup>163</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition' in: *The Poetical Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, (Memphis, TE: General Books, 2012).

author's sole creative blueprint, and yet I find students may sometimes cling to a single text, (and thus one individual writer,) as their exclusive guide.

This anthology affords a varied range of different philosophies and strategies for students of writing to draw from, and to experiment with, discovering which techniques best suit their individual needs. By linking the interviews and investigations directly to each story, a reader/writer is able to analyse the stories more as a construction and to identify elements of the author's 'writing strategy'.

**Lorin Stein and Sadie Stein, eds., *Object Lessons: The Paris Review Presents the Art of the Short Story***

*Object Lessons* is a more recent anthology than Gioia and Gwynn and shares a comparable objective: to pair short stories with essays written by short story writers. In this anthology, however, each of the twenty stories are accompanied by critical essays penned by *other* writers, not by the authors themselves. This produces a more objective and distanced critique, although still from the frame of a writer (and fan) using the writing process as a principal criterion. The two books form an archival resource valuable to writers and critics alike, but one which does not consider teaching or instruction, nor gauge the effectiveness of the selected techniques when attempted by groups.

**Mike Sharples, *How We Write: Writing as Creative Design***

Sharples considers the writing process from a more holistic point of view and draws statistical data from cognitive psychology as well interrogating some of the more direct and practical aspect of the creative process through the study of writers and the teaching of Creative Writing. The study takes a broad view of writing, without focussing on any particular medium, but does undertake to explain and demystify the act of fiction writing with a view to both teaching and learning.

Sharples breaks down the writing process into phases and explores them individually as part of an overall theory of writing as design. His arguments regarding revision and rewriting are particularly pertinent and present some interesting discoveries which have informed upon my own study of the editorial process, and of the 'review cycle'.

**Michael Dean Clark et al., eds., *Creative Writing Innovations: Breaking Boundaries in the Classroom***

Clarke et al offer one of the best collections of contemporary essays and studies of Creative Writing pedagogy. The collection focusses largely upon collaborative writing techniques and upon expanding genre, but also touches upon the workshop model and questions of identity within Creative Writing education. There is no specific study of short fiction in teaching, although the majority of essays do make reference to the form, some more extensively than others.

**Ching-In Chen, 'Genre-Queering the Creative Writing Classroom' in: *Creative Writing Innovations: Breaking Boundaries in the Classroom*, eds., Michael Dean Clark et al.**

Ching-In Chen's essay addresses the important issue of LGBT representation within Creative Writing education. The essay 'articulates an approach to Creative Writing pedagogy that values and affirms the work of genderqueer and nonbinary writers'.<sup>164</sup> Chen interrogates the somewhat elemental issue of pronouns within fiction writing, but more specifically, Chen considers how to effectively incorporate queer theory and creative investigations of sexual identity into the Creative Writing classroom and developing a foundation for gender nonbinary literature. Chen identifies short fiction

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Alth<sup>164</sup> *Choice Magazine*, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/choice/> [accessed: 3 October 2019].

as being a particularly fertile space for innovative fiction, suitable for contemporary narratives of sexual identity and sexual politics.

**Hergenrader, Trent, 'Steampunk Rochester: An Interdisciplinary, Location-based, Collaborative World Building Project' in: *Creative Writing Innovations: Breaking Boundaries in the Classroom*, eds., Michael Dean Clark et al.**

Trent Hergenrader's study is based around utilising a commercial roleplaying game in order to develop a fictive space for his students to write within. The class collaborated to play the game, and then transposed the characters, events, and interactions into original stories, all set within a 'shared universe'. This technique was also used with great success by fantasy authors Margaret Weiss and Tracey Hickman who adapted *TSR's* popular roleplaying game *Dungeons and Dragons* to produce their best-selling *Dragonlance* series of novels and short stories.<sup>165</sup>

Hergenrader's study introduces some interesting elements to the classroom, placing a higher priority on collaboration and contiguity than most Creative Writing courses demand. His classes limit the overall scope of writing projects, but at the same time offer a fertile area to grow within. The course also added the dimension of dice and of specific, (if potentially random,) results outside of the writers' ability to affect. I have found that this prescriptive approach, with its strict and yet oddly changeable parameters, does require a certain degree of dedication and focus from the class, making it somewhat incongruous if included within a more varied course, but the unique blend of collaboration and of narrative momentum which the format provides, offers valuable learning opportunities as well as fostering a cooperative class dynamic.

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<sup>165</sup> The *Dragonlance* shared universe now includes over 190 published novels and short story collections, penned by dozens of different authors between 1984 and 2011.

Hergenrader later developed the study into his book *Collaborative World Building for Writers and Gamers* (2018), but this work steers away from the classroom model and from teaching technique.

**Adsit, Janelle, 'Place-Based Pedagogy and Creative Writing as a Fieldwork Course' in: *Creative Writing Innovations: Breaking Boundaries in the Classroom*, eds., Michael Dean Clark et al.**

Adsit considers where – not just how – writing is taught, and the impact that place and environment have upon teaching; something I have expanded upon with my own investigation of in-situ writing. Adsit points out how this process might inadvertently alienate students unfamiliar with the area, region or even nation, and that the cultural significance and/or heritage of a place can become domineering to the creative process. She does not specifically consider short fiction or how it acts as an appropriate medium for such investigations, being contained and immediate, nor how portfolio writing supports the multifarious investigations provoked by a series of fieldtrips. She notes that a fieldwork-based course encourages student-writers to vary their work and how it 'invites new frontiers' (p152) but does not apply these findings to recommend short fiction, or suggest any critical/theoretical content which might supplement such a course.

**Robert McKee, *Story***

McKee principally focuses his study of creative storytelling on the medium of cinema. Consequently, this book has become something of a canonical work amongst screenwriters and screenwriting courses. However, *Story* can also offer prose writers, particularly short story writers, useful instruction for writing. Given its subject of study, it is relevant to student-writers hoping to adapt their work to screen, but also to writers who may be interested in developing cross-media fiction writing skills, whilst, at the same time, regularly producing work (in the form of short fiction) for publication or for assessment and feedback, gauging their progress. *Story* offers a range of accessible



and popular case study examples. As such, it functions as a useful introduction to critical practise. It can be less intimidating for students to grasp critical practise when applied to something like Jan De Bont's action film *Speed* (1994) rather than to the work of someone such as Salman Rushdie, who might come later in the course.

McKee presents many of his theories and observations in diagram form, which can be useful and immediate teaching resources applicable to short story writing. McKee also explores the expectations of an audience for, what I would define as 'the single-sitting story'. Although he applies his concepts to cinema, they are directly relevant to the production of short prose, as well as writing for theatre.

#### **ehow.com, 'How to Teach Creative Writing'**

ehow.com offers a more general approach to Creative Writing teaching technique and classroom exercises. However, each provided example relates to a short story writing challenge, so while the study may not explicitly focus on short fiction in teaching, the short story form dominates much of the practical applications of the book. The study does not explore any of the features, qualities and possibilities afforded by the form, nor does it equate any of the provided exercises and examples with existing published works. It offers a suitable teaching framework that presents writing challenges and assignments of increasing complexity, as well as exploring some of the pedagogical reasons behind them.

#### ***Baldwin, Carol, Teaching the Story: Creative Writing in Grades 4-8***

Baldwin explores effective Creative Writing methods aimed at children aged 9-14. The practical exercises included throughout all focus on short fiction production as being beneficial for

development, and manageable for single-term courses. The study highlights some of the motivational qualities of short fiction production and how the process of finishing a complete work can inspire the author and increase overall productivity. Baldwin does not suggest or recommend any particular short fiction to be read and discussed or used as support for the outlined pedagogy, but instead she concentrates on presenting a range of practical teaching methods aimed solely at production.

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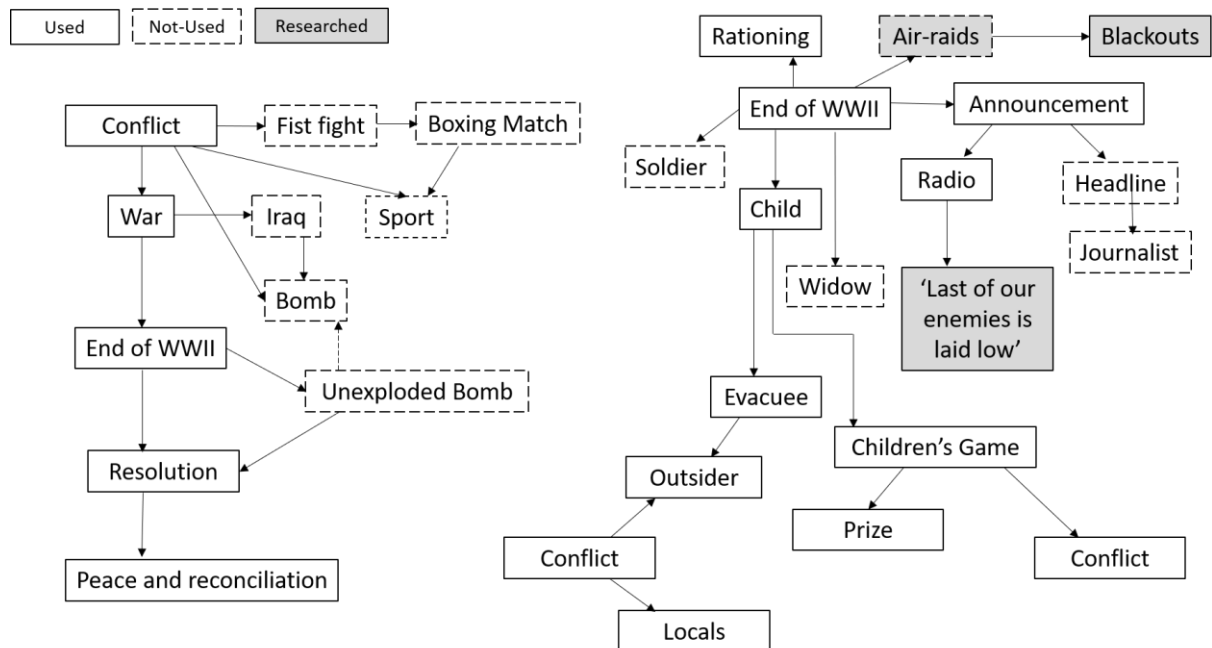
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## Appendices

### Appendix I. Process notes for short story 'Laid Low'.

Taking 'conflict' as an arbitrarily selected theme to begin with.



Official announcement by Prime Minister Clement Attlee: 'The Last of our enemies is laid low.'

- First Person (gives intimacy to protagonist)
- Past tense (suits historical)
- Evening – Darkness – blackout
- [Air raids in UK stopped after 1944] – although recent memory
- Broadcast – [Midnight, 15 August 1945] – Late for children to play - Night time adventure? Picnic?
- Secrets and lies
- Picnic – rationing
- Conflict – Children playing games, locals vs evacuees (?), winner is contested – fight
- Prize – finds a 'treasure' – fight for the treasure (?)
- Treasure – a children's treasure, something banal but mysterious and attractive
- Fight stops at announcement – How? Radio – children run indoors – adults too happy/shocked at news to really care
- Reconciliation

- Conclude in bathos – fight doesn't happen – all shouting and no punching – peace prevails



## The Platform

Jon Mycroft

They all just stand there, waiting, ~~in transit, in limbo, in stasis.~~ They all wear **in the fading sunlight. Everyone wears** a uniform of one sort or another. The station staff wear ~~fluorescent orange, apparently this year's yellow~~ **high-vis waistcoats**. The business sorts, ~~with briefcases~~ **have their drab suits** and **plain** ties, ~~stand next to the~~ **while** elderly **couples huddle** in sensible ~~drab knitwear while the~~ **wiry. Wiry** students with rucksacks and ~~lapels mingle with the~~ **inevitable groups** **headphones pace up and down, past the group** of **hunched** youths; all ~~underdressed~~ **dressed** in ~~cotton~~ **various** hoodies and ~~nylon~~ sportswear, half of them are too fat to jog let alone slam dunk. They shout their inanities to. **There are a few hushed phone calls in dark corners of the platform, but no-one is talking in person; they barely look at one another and laugh loud enough to wake. When the drunks teenagers first arrived they were more animate, they were laughing and pushing one another. Now that they've been waiting for a while, they have drifted into the same malaise.** They all just stand there, ~~a human pause,~~ **like everyone else, waiting;** staring across the rusted **rusting** rails in **hopeless** anticipation.

¶ **Litter wanders up and down the platforms, wind-surfing the diesel blackened tarmac, seeking some quiet shady corner to die. There are glimpses of the incoming cattle truck and the end of their patient labours** **wasteland beyond the tracks, between the raw concrete**

walls. The rest is poured smooth, like a jelly mould building. Everything here is cold to the touch all year long.

The wind howls. It has something to do with the horizontal acoustics and the westward tunnel. The wind actually howls, as it ruffles executive trouser suits and disrupts cheaply bleached faux-hawks **newspapers and umbrellas. Nobody responds. They simply keep on waiting.**

Coffee **Now that smoking has been banned, coffee** is their only respite ~~the only prescribed medicine provided for the forlorn mannequins as they.~~ **They** cradle their paper cups like candles at a vigil, using the rapidly descending temperatures to warm ~~frosted fingers.~~ **their chilled fingers.** The majority are grasping cheap disposable fiction with their gaudy embossed covers, designed, not for the reader already beguiled by its siren's call, but for the eyes sitting opposite the reader on the bus or the tube. Boredom will force the bookless commuter to examine the splayed cover of the novel read by the opposing veal calf. **Some of them are standing and reading** ~~M~~ mass-market paperbacks with the author's catchy nom de plume in its gold relief lettering, twice the size of the picture postcard painted cover, following the words with his ~~their~~ Wimbledon eyes – **left, then right, and back again,** left then right and back again. He is practically asleep, counting typographic sheep with only the hissing of a thousand nearby iPods to prevent his peaceful slumber; and so he reads about presidential assassination, bank robbery and conspiracy theory until he reaches his stop, **until** when the book goes back in the bag for tomorrow **the journey home.** He won't, for the next 23 hours, think once about the story, the characters or the plot. He won't wonder or ponder, he won't theorise or postulate on any aspect of the novel, because **In between train rides, the book will not be considered;** it is simply chewing gum, it is; musak; it is only there to fill a blank space in the void.

~~The women tend towards more worthy fare full of emotional turmoil and contemptible coincidence. Either that or the true life accounts of alcoholism, child abuse and neglect. Books called 'Sammy, A Boy's Story' or 'A Friend of Bill: Adventures in Addiction'. Books as nauseating as the station food, which is predominantly triple-priced chocolate bars or flaccid panini.~~

~~Litter wanders up and down the platforms, wind surfing the diesel blackened tarmac. Plastic tumbleweeds marked *Salt and Vinegar* drift around; tired like wounded animals they seek some quiet shady corner to die.~~

~~...~~

**They have no energy, no power, none of them. They are all simply there, frozen in transit. They don't live, they exist.**

~~...~~

~~I wonder which of them I should kill.~~

~~...~~

~~Transformed into a murderer, I will no longer be constrained by moral and social conventions; I will be truly free.~~

~~...~~

~~I look to the chavs with focused contempt...~~

~~—...~~

**I look across at the hoodies and I see their contempt. They hate the students with their potential, they hate the suits with their income and their routines, they hate the elderly with all their nostalgia. And so they act up; wild and threatening, but at the same time, slovenly and bored. They are already doomed, so I look elsewhere.**

~~...~~

I watch an ~~Elderly~~ **old woman**. It is hard to see clearly but she may well be wearing two hats. She stoops as she shuffles, ~~a~~; **the** result of a retirement full of conversing with ground-level cats and picking up litter. **Hers would be a mercy, not a conquest.**

...

I ~~look at~~ see the business executive, puffed up with self-importance ~~in his imported Egyptian cotton socks each costing four hours minimum wage~~. **For a moment**, I visualise smashing in his dandruff-controlled scalp, perhaps with a lobster hammer. I fantasise about plunging a ~~bread~~ **steak**-knife in between his pinstripes and **then** watching as the dark-brown heart-blood seeps across his ~~Ted Baker and coagulates between his stiff starched collar and eologne-soaked stubble~~ **Hugo Boss**. **Everything about him is familiar and uniform; clichéd. To kill him would be to kill nothing.**

...

~~My fists are clenched white and my teeth are grinning,~~

...

~~The~~ **A** low rumble deep in the tunnel to my right precedes the dull peering headlights of my train. I get to my feet and stroll toward the yellow line. ~~Some guy~~ **A man in his early-twenties saunters** in front of me **and dumps a black backpack at his feet. He is wearing expensive-looking spectacles and coloured socks: an arty type. He** is tapping his foot to ~~his~~ **pair of** over-cranked headphones; ~~he is~~ **while standing** on the impatient side of the yellow line, the rebellious side, the wrong side. ~~I position myself behind him, not directly but diagonally so that our shoulders overlap.~~

**I could position myself behind him, not directly but diagonally, so that our shoulders overlap.** I start planning it in my mind, **I imagine** the **coming** moment, when the train

~~awesome presence of the~~ approaching ~~can not~~**train cannot** be ignored, ~~its awesome presence dominating the stagnant surroundings.~~

Coffees down, papers folded, bags gathered. ~~These~~**Passengers** getting on will be focused, **wakened**; those ~~on~~**waiting for** the next one will barely stir.

**¶**The noise increases as the train crawls closer. From this distance it seems to be hardly moving, but I know that will change as it gets nearer. It will be faster, heavier; relentless. **The arty type sighs and puts one hand in his pocket.** Just as ~~they all start to gather, he will~~ **the crowd begins to coalesce around him, he'll** reach down for that black canvas backpack; ~~leaning, bending. Hip to.~~ **He'll lean, he'll bend. With us hip to hip, I could** ~~can~~ ease his weight off balance, and with my knee behind his knee, the whole house of cards ~~comes~~**will come** tumbling down. ~~Tragic. Horrific. Questions in Parliament, MTV blamed, iPods banned in public.~~

~~I'll get counselling of course, some compensation too probably. As a first-hand witness I'll need it.~~ I may get blood on me, brain even. ~~There will~~**There'll** be the nightmares, the shakes and all that post-traumatic stuff, ~~I'll get the works.~~ **As a first-hand witness, I'll be offered counselling. I might even get compensation.**

But I won't actually be a murderer, ~~will I?~~ **not really.** Just a push, that's not ~~really enough.~~ ~~It's,~~ **it's** too detached, too hands-free, ~~the.~~ **The** train will be the real killer and I want that, ~~.~~

**¶**I want to be the train.

...

~~He bends down.~~

...

~~His~~

The words painted along the length of the platform are repeated over and over: **KEEP BEHIND THE YELLOW LINE. KEEP BEHIND THE YELLOW LINE.** But his feet and backpack obscure some of the ~~bold painted yellow~~ letters:

~~¶KEEP BEHIND THE YELLOW LINE.~~

¶It now **and, for just a moment, it** reads: \_\_\_\_\_ BE \_\_\_\_\_ THE \_\_\_\_\_ LINE—He'll never know just how close he came. ¶**He bends down, leaning. I step forward and position myself behind him, not directly but diagonally, just enough that our shoulders overlap.**

~~(916 words)~~

**(899 words)**

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