

From Glasgow to Saturn

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Scare

by Ewan Alasdair Houston

This is the third or fourth scare. A scare being counted in the sense of being tangy, tangible, brittle-boned, shrill; lulling back to the fringe of things, just to lurch into view, a rank focus in its eye, wailing with the silent shriek heard only by me.

Cancer. There have been legion other mini-scaries; pico-shrieks, which pierce and parch the mind. For example, my post-operative chances of recurrence were pegged at 60:40. In my favour of course, joy of joys. Every other day the futile appraisal of where or when the little cell would could latch on to a lymph, a lung, a juicy kidney. And after two years the graph drops off, the chances are much better in your favour. Good. A sigh of relief. On with life and down with death! Go to see the doctor less frequently: every three months, four months, watersheds passed with gusto. Then one day, what's that lump? It's in my neck: a danger zone. A scare.

What makes this one most scary is now I feel I have so much to lose. I am months from graduating. I have plans. Travel, adventure, having hair. The possibilities rasp and twinge through my head like sad headlines in a women's trash-mag. 'He had so much to give and lost it all: his fertility, his university career, his remaining testicle'. These macabre flights appeal to my sense of tragedian narrative and soar into the narrative structure of my life like *Diabolus ex machinae*: sickly poets of fortune picking the ripest time to defile the dream. I think about my family. How lucky I am to have them and my girlfriend. I make deals with the great unknown about the coming weeks, months. I'll be better. I'll try.

Cometh the hour and I am in an exam room, in hospital, lying on a table with ultrasound gel on my neck. A napkin tucked around my t-shirts neck line saves the material. The doctor, who has a beautifully soft highland lilt, examines my neck. I think, 'She has the perfect voice with which to give bad news... Is that why they chose her, because they know from the CT scan that it's probably serious?' She is examining my whole neck, and then she'll get to the lump, she tells me.

'Have you had thyroid surgery?'

'No', I say. 'Why do you ask?'

'It's just that your thyroid has no left lobe...'

'Well it was my right testicle they took, so I'm in perfect balance now'

'Yes, total symmetry. You won't be falling over everywhere you go'

'Or walking around in circles'

Through all this I'm thinking 'Is she having a laugh with me to soften me up for the big horrible bit of news?!' The silent shriek is back. My heart pounds. She completes the exam. She delivers the news.

'There's nothing there to worry about.'

All the bad butterflies are gone and I look forward. Future. I'm high up in the happies. Fucking come on!

My Old Dancing Girl (Black 'n' Blue)

by Andy Grozier

Her skirt flows 'round the corner of the bar, and the smooth , soft touch falls across my arm. Swivelling around lethargically on the bar stool I manage to catch a glimpse of the black hair and sun-licked skin that could only be hers. She strolls to the dance-floor with her natural "cool" and beautifully soft rhythm that echoes everything all the men dream of in her. Everything I used to feel of her when we went out at night...those few occasions we'd make it out of the bedroom.

She's dressed in black. She never used to dress in black.

On her face she has more make-up than she ever used to wear , and there's a dark circle around her eye and some swelling above, and under her lip...makes her look like someone completely new and so different to my eyes...makes her look weak and cruel all at once. She doesn't pay any attention to her cuts 'n' bruises as she dances 'round all the guys...who don't notice the scars anyway...most likely they'd all do the same thing to her if they had a chance; they don't...or at least they wouldn't have if it was still the same gal I used to have. Saturday night dancing, drunken, scumbags never would have touched her, she'd never let them...I'd never let them.

She grabs one of the guys around her and slides down him. My stomach decides to do flip, bringing about that horrible feeling you get before you throw up...toss your cookies per say. A cold chill slides down my spine, making me pull in a heavy breath. As she grabs the mans collar and pulls his neck to her lips, he grins like a madman and his eyes go into that horrible glaze of sheer pleasure...making me sick to my already sickened stomach. Her eyes still remain like stone...no change, just a dead stare straight ahead of herself. They aren't the eyes I used to look into; when we were younger, every night before we fell asleep...not the eyes I'd look into when we were falling for each other, under the stars in the spring night.

Not the same girl.

I swirl my whiskey around in the glass and order a shot to take away the thoughts that are grabbing onto my mind...something to erase the ideas and images resting themselves on the front of my brain. The barman looks at me like he wants to gimme it for free...and follow it with another three or four...he must know the feeling. Guess I'm being a bit too blatant about it...hadn't even noticed that I had been staring at her since she first brushed past my shoulder. She didn't even notice it was me.

I'm just about to head out the door; downing my shot, my whiskey and my beer quickly enough to grab a few stares from the other lonely suckers along the bar, when I glance back for one last look she finally sees me.

Her eyes suddenly strike up to look something of what they used to do, a little flicker of emotion...just as they caught mine. But she still pulls the guy by the tie and takes him through the door...knowin' fine well I'm there. Knowing fine well I can see. Knowing exactly what she's doing to me.

She's not the same girl I knew.

I slip through the door, just as she - I imagine - is pulling him through her room door. Sparking my light just as they're suckin' in each others lips. Lighting up my cig' jus as she is going down on him. And finally takin' my last drag as she, no doubt, is

collapsing on top of him...

I take in another cig', kinda hoping that all those warnings on the pack of "early death" come true for me tonight, and head back into the bar - only 'cause there's no other bars nearby...or at least too far away for me to stagger to. I give a quick scan of the place before I take my regular seat, the one closest to the barman, but don't see her around. Sitting down I order another beer 'n' a whiskey to follow, the bartender pretty much had it set out for me as soon as I sat down...we didn't know each other by name but we recognised the faces from all the other nights.

Then she swayed in. Black and blue flowing. There was no man following behind her though, and no-one walked ahead of her. Her hair was wet, and her eyes remained as cold as ever. This time though, she looked for me, found me, and stared across, with her big eyes. I went back to my beer. I smiled at the girl across the other side of the room...hoping she'd grin back, and hoping she would see it all...hoping she would feel everything I just went through. Fuck her.

She's not the girl I used to know. I wish I could have fixed everythin' for her, kicked the ass of whoever made her face so black 'n' blue, and jus' held her, kept her safe. But, she chose her own path, that long road without me...now she's back to her dancing.

UK Gold

by Stephen McEwan

Mohamed walked past the lift and then stopped and turned around. He peered through the smeared window and pulled the handle; the door wouldn't budge though and so he turned back for the stairs. After three floors he swapped bags and headed along the walkway and at the last door stopped, let the letterbox snap and turned the handle. He always knocked before going in; it was polite. And it was madness as well, he knew, leaving a door open round here, even at ten in morning. But his friend had had none of it; an open door saved him getting up.

He moved towards the kitchen and the stench of fried bacon, then dumped down the bags and turned for the living room. 'That's everything, Joe,' he said to his friend behind the armchair. 'Got your bets. And your paper.'

'Alright.'

'Hope you have better luck than yesterday.'

He turned from the TV, pulled himself up with his frame and examined the slips. 'Each way?'

'Of course.'

Joe leaned forward and placed the slips on the cabinet by the bust of Elvis, Mohamed noticing as he did so how his jeans, where an old comb still faithfully sat, hung looser than ever from his hips. And he lowered himself again, dropping the tube over his chair then asking 'How are things up in Birmingham?'

'Oh, you know-'

'Uh-huh?'

'Well, could be better, I suppose.'

'And how's that?'

'Maraam's just finding those boys- well, they're not really boys now, I suppose- she's finding them a bit much on her own.'

'I'll bet. I read there was trouble there last week.'

'Trouble? If there was I missed it.'

'There was.' he said grimly. 'And it's not fair on your sister.'

Mohamed laughed. 'No, she'll be alright. Hey,' he asked turning to the window 'do you think it'll brighten up soon?'

'Don't know and don't care, I'm okay right here, there's a couple of Westerns on later. Hey!' he scoffed, flicking a nod. 'This is on UK Gold now. But why would I bother with that? Eh? Why would I, Mo, when I've got every episode in front of me?' As if to prove a point, he leaned forwards and stretched out for a DVD.

'You're right,' Mohamed agreed. 'Look, do you want me to make you some tea? Only I have to get going soon, I start at eleven.'

Joe shook his head, turned back to the screen.

'Fine. I'll see you tomorrow then.'

'Okay....Oh,' he said, turning back casually round. 'There's something I'd like you to do tomorrow.'

'No problem. I'll be up at the usual time.'

As the door closed Joe put in a DVD. He stared through one episode, and when it

finished stared through another; and then another after that, every now and then placing the oxygen mask to his mouth. Soon he drifted off to sleep and on waking again, sighed sadly at a once hilarious disaster unfolding tiresomely. Then he finally decided on what could be put it off no longer. He switched off the TV, found a pen and some paper, and started to write.

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‘Brylcream,’ he shouted the next morning, shuffling across the room. ‘Can you get me some? And more betting slips?’ He handed over some notes and glanced at two envelopes on a table. He picked them up. ‘And these need stamps.’

Mohamed checked the addresses; for newspapers in Liverpool. Before he could speak though, Joe gripped his stand and began shuffling back to his chair. ‘That daughter of mine,’ he grunted ‘if she doesn’t get in touch with her old man soon she’ll be too late; my only relative and all that. I don’t have long. Things to be sorted out.’

‘Yeah, of course. Hey,’ Mohamed said brightly ‘I was thinking, it’s a pity we don’t go down the dogs anymore, isn’t it? You and me and the others, like old times.’

Joe gasped as he fell into his seat. ‘Ah, this is the last of the dogs right here and he’s about to get shot. And you? Don’t know why you’d you want to go again. Don’t know why you went in the first place, the only man I’ve ever met who could get excited without putting a bloody bet on.’

Mohamed giggled. ‘It was the atmosphere, that was enough.’

‘Yeah,’ Joe sneered ‘you can’t do this and can’t do that. Surprised your lot haven’t become extinct.’

‘Well, anyway, Joe, I best be off now.’

‘I know. You watch you’re not late.’

Mohamed stepped out the door and Joe grabbed the remote control.

*

‘I’m not expecting her to answer or anything, Mo,’ Joe explained one morning ‘just doing my duty as a father, no more and no less. I don’t suppose Mina’s got any relatives in Liverpool, does she?’

‘No one, no.’

‘Didn’t think so.’

‘Just here and Birmingham.’

‘Yeah. Those boys.’

‘I might have to go back there in fact, for a couple of days probably. Sort things out.’

He tutted. ‘There are things to sort out?’

‘Not really, well, just little things. Do you mind?’

‘Mind?’ Joe sniffed, snapping open the paper. ‘Why should I mind? You do what you like.’

‘And,’ he said standing up ‘I’ve got a station to clean as well, unlike some. But I’ll be back tonight for the football. Fancy it?’

‘You come if you want,’ Joe answered ‘I’ll be watching anyway.’

As Mohamed swept the subway station he thought of all the times Joe had mentioned his children. Although he didn’t know for sure, Mohamed assumed he had as many as four, and from all over the world from his years as a seaman. He’d mention them casually over the years, laughingly even, Mohamed feeling it to be just his own way of dealing with things. But the girl in Liverpool was different; he’d talked about her for the first time only two years before, and with a genuine regret he hadn’t before shown. But although Mohamed had tried, it wasn’t till Joe’s diagnosis six months previously that he’d started to mention her again; he’d lived with her for a time and hadn’t seen her since she was twelve; he wondered if she was married; if she now had kids of her own.

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‘I’m not blaming them for *wanting* to come!’ Joe exclaimed with a splutter as he removed his mask. ‘Who wouldn’t want to get out of there? Out of those bloody holes to come for a free house, free phone and free doctors?? But do they thank us for it? No! They’re out there mugging us or bringing in guns! Or worse! Blowing us up!! So what’s their problem, Mo?? I mean I don’t trust those Jews either but I put up with them. Why can’t they?? Eh?? Why can’t your lot, Mo??’

‘I-I don’t think it’s because they’re Jewish, Joe.’

‘Course it is. Your lot are worse than the Irish, at least they didn’t...at least they.....well, you’re just worse.’ He took the remote, zapped on the TV and stared. For a moment Mohamed took refuge under its blare, and when he glanced across Joe was trembling in fury.

‘I bumped into Terry yesterday after work,’ Mohamed said finally.

‘Did you?’

‘He was asking for you.’

‘That’s nice. He’s forgotten where I live like the rest of them.’

Joe accusing others of screwing the country was ridiculous to Mohamed; for years it was he who’d cheated the social, and his mates too when they’d had their club. This was why they no longer visited, no matter what Joe claimed.

‘How’s the wife?’ Joe asked after some time; the closest, Mohamed knew, he’d get to an apology.

‘Yeah, fine, looking forward to getting away to Birmingham for a week.’

Joe looked about to say something then but instead sat back and after a pause, sighed ‘No word from Jacqueline. That’s nearly a month now.’

‘Well, you’ve got to give it more time, I’m sure she’ll be in touch. Maybe you just have to change the wording a bit, you know? Give more clues about yourself so she’ll know who you are.’

He lifted himself back on the chair. ‘Maybe. But she can do what she likes. An adult now. And anyway I’m alright, got my DVDs here and my UK Gold. Why should I worry?’

‘Of course. Oh, I forgot to tell you, I have to go back to Birmingham tomorrow.’

‘Yeah? Well,’ he muttered ‘you need to watch those boys, I suppose.’

‘Yeah, I do.’

‘Why are you telling me anyway? You do what you want.’

‘I know. I’ll see you on Friday though, definitely.’

Joe stretched to the carpet. ‘Is this the problem?’ he asked suddenly, brandishing an opened tabloid. A dark-skinned man stared out above an accusing headline.

‘What?’

‘Come on! Asian boys? No dad around? What are they up to?’

‘Our problems are our business, Joe. Just like everyone else. Leave us. We can sort them out.’

‘You think?’

‘Yes. Leave it. Please.’

‘Okay,’ he agreed.

Mohamed left and Joe took out another DVD. He checked the back and then he watched.

And watched.

*

‘Did you see that? Did you see it? Did you? Ha!! It gets me every time!!’ Mohamed had seen it; so many times he could scarcely believe he’d once found it funny. When the episode ended a thick and heavy silence engulfed them both.

‘No reply yet, you know.’

‘It’ll take time for word to get around the place.’

‘Time? One thing I don’t have.’

‘Come on.’

‘It’s true. They want to get me into hospital.’

‘Joe, you’re a long way from hospital yet.’

‘I’m not. And I know what it means once I’m in there. It means there’ll be no going back.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘It is. I’m coming to the last stop, Mo. All I want to do is see my daughter before I go.’ He sighed and blinked away a tear, but as his friend took a cautious step forward he shook his head and lifted himself back again. ‘But anyway, whether she gets in touch or not is up to her. Whatever.’

Mohamed got up to leave before telling him that, as little as he wanted to, he had to return to Birmingham.

‘Yeah. You must be worried, eh?’

‘Well,’ he admitted ‘a bit.’

‘And what’s the work saying? All these days you’re missing?’

‘They’re not happy about it. But I don’t care.’

‘Be careful.’

*

The weeks passed. The nurse increased her visits while Mohamed made less, and whenever he did come saw his friend’s health deteriorate; the mask on more and more and his voice struggling under the hiss. And every week Joe would phone the newspapers to extend the adverts, and Mohamed would go out and post the cheques.

*

'I wonder if I'm being punished, you know, I never cared for her or her mother. And I never thought about anything, never thought about the future. Didn't think I'd end up sitting here without even a breath for company. You can't beat your past, Mo. You think you can, then you get to the end and find it lying and waiting.'

Mohamed's phone rang as he was about to speak. 'I see. I see. This is too bad.'

He hung up. Joe raised his eyebrows. 'It was Mina, I'm going to have to go back to Birmingham. I really should go now, Joe.'

'Well,' Joe declared 'go, although you might be too late.'

'There are plenty of trains.'

He smirked. 'Come on.'

'What?'

'You know. I've been reading the papers, I know what's going in Birmingham. They're old enough now, those boys. What are they? Seventeen?'

'So-?'

'So, old enough, old enough to get- what do they say- radicalised.'

'Rad-? Just what do you mean by that?'

'I mean you're watching them, Mo. You're not letting them out your sight and I don't blame you.'

'No.'

'I'm right.'

'Just leave us to sort it out, will you? They're just boys. They're good boys trying to get by and it's not easy. It's not easy for them in England these days.'

'Yeah, but they're not are they?'

'Not what?'

'They're not English, that's the problem. They're not *really*, Mo. They're not and never will be.'

'But they're as English as I am! As *you* are!'

'You think-?'

'I've been in this country fifty years.'

'Yeah, but it's not just about living here.'

Mohamed stood up. 'Look, I think I should go.'

'Yeah,' Joe grunted, wheezing and grabbing his mask. 'Maybe you should.'

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When Mohamed got back his wife told him about the phone call; Joe had taken a turn and would have to go to hospital. He waited till the next morning and then told his work he'd be late. His boss warned him he maybe shouldn't come at all. He put the phone down and shrugged. 'I better go now,' he said to her.

He snapped the letterbox and went in, heard the nurse's voice from the bedroom. Stopping at the doorway, he saw her sitting him forward and arranging his pillows. His face was ashen and his cheeks were sunken, but when he looked up and saw his friend he signalled at the nurse with a mischievous wink.

‘Joe gave us a bit of a fright,’ the nurse explained straightening the sheets ‘the home-help found him on the floor. Maybe you’ll now come into hospital, eh?’

‘You...’ he wheezed ‘...sort the TV out first.’

She grabbed her jacket. ‘I’ll be back in a couple of hours. Give you both some time.’

Mohamed sat next to the bed, put the newspaper at his reach. ‘You’re in a fine mood this morning, Joe.’

He smiled and nodded.

‘Something you want to tell me?’

He caught his breath. ‘Yeah.’

‘What?’

‘She called.’

‘Called? Who? Jacqueline?’

‘Last night.’

‘That’s-!’

‘It’s why I ended up on...on the floor. She’s coming...next weekend. Can you believe it? Her...and her kids? Coming to see me.’

‘She is? And kids? Wow! That’s great news, Joe! Really!’

‘I thought I’d never see her, Mo.’

‘I knew you would, I knew you’d find her.’

‘Me?’ he smirked.

‘What?’

‘Come on. She didn’t...find out...from the adverts.’

‘No?’

‘It wasn’t...the papers. She told me all about it, the poster, Mo; the poster her mum saw...at a bloody bus stop. Said they’re all over the place in Liverpool. Hundreds. Of me. My life story...Photo...And a phone number. And not my number, Mo.’

‘Oh.’

‘Oh? That all you can say? Oh? Someone’s been busy...really busy, making trips to Liverpool, and it wasn’t me...I can’t even get myself to the bloody toilet.’

‘Well-’

‘So?’

‘You’d have done the same for me, Joe. I’m just happy she found you.’

‘You said you had...a family problem.’

He laughed. ‘I did. How long have I known you, Joe? Twenty years?’

‘And your wife? She knew about it as well? God knows what your work is saying.’

‘Who cares?’

He cackled. ‘Not you.’

‘No, not really. Do you want me to put a line on today?’

‘No, not today.’

‘Good. It’s raining now.’

‘You can get the tea on, though.’

Sunrise Beach

by Andrew McGovern

The bus to the airport would arrive in a few hours. Her boyfriend and the rest of our friends would be here in even less time. We fumbled frantically in the dark of my room. Rushed, passionate, interrupted- the sound of an approaching taxi outside my house startled us. Scrambling for clothes and managing to pull on only one sock, it was over before it had started.

On the bus to the airport nothing much had changed. Yet she was sitting directly behind me. I was aware of that all the way down. There was eight of us in total travelling, a group of friends on our way to Spain.

The holiday had started well, a continuous sunshine-cycle of cocktails, clubs, laughing, dancing, with breaks to the beach and dead-sleeps beside the pool. Yet this quickly collapsed, and perhaps it was always going to. The arguments didn't involve me, didn't really trouble me. My growing feelings for her were lost in an uproar of verbal conflicts that swept through us all. All events (or alleged events) from before or during the holiday were shrouded in mystery: arguments started for no reason; stories were born simultaneously with perspectives on stories, all founded on nothing, or something. I didn't know, didn't want to know.

Time alone with her became increasingly precious: a moment alone in a room, the lending of a book for a couple of minutes, a hurried exchange of words in a club. The beach was our only way to escape all the commotion, all the watching.

We left the apartment under cover of darkness. Everyone else was asleep, or too tired to hit the beach at 3.00am. I had my arm around her as we passed through the deserted streets. The bars were closed, all the peering eyes of hotels asleep with curtains drawn. The cold wind was felt keenly as the buildings ended suddenly and the horizon and noise of the sea became clear to us. Other than disparate groups of people huddled in groups round CD players or small fires, the wide expanse of the beach was deserted. Finding a spot close to the sea we held hands under the blanket and talked, sipping away at make-shift drinks from plastic containers. We dug our feet under the sand for warmth.

The horizon of the sea was flanked on either side by a wide stretch of hills that thrust out into the water, ending in a symmetrical arrangement of sharp, black rocks. The sea was a canvas of sparkles, courtesy of the moon that was slowly shying behind the western hills away up on our right. Upon these hills the silhouette of a statue could be seen, its form indistinguishable from down here. On the hills to the left a castle was visible, like a dark ink painting, its features faintly threatening in the moonlight. As time passed (we still talked, on any subject) the moon was gone and the sea became dark, the rushing white froth of the tide just in front of us clearly visible. The eastern sky above the castle began to change, from black to a dark blue, gradually green. The shapes of the rocks on these hills became clear and the waves in the distance behind these rocks began to shimmer, signalling the approach of the sun. This shimmering spread to the right, rapidly populating the blackness of the sea as if chasing it. A rose-pink sky began to smoulder faintly behind the castle, highlighting the windows and the green foliage of the now visible trees that hid parts of the castles beauty. We were both silent as the tips of the eastern hills blazed red.

Then it happened: the sun peeked over the landscape and flashed across the sky and sea, immediately illuminating the statue on the western hills, a woman with hand outstretched. The sea was suddenly alive with sparkles that stung our eyes, and the sky was awash with a clear blue. "Did you see that?" We talked about that moment for a long time.

Immediately warmer, we shook off the blankets and laid them out on the sand, occupying a huge space. Taking off our jumpers we stripped down to our beach-ware and stretched and lounged on the sand. As the temperature rose we became drowsy. The sea sighs seemed to sooth our substance filled bodies into a peaceful stupor. I would wake at random intervals, realise I was too hot and saunter down and into the sea, cooling myself immediately. Each time I woke and performed this necessary act the beach became more populated around us, yet the idea of concealing anything never occurred to me.

I watched her as she lay sleeping, my head resting on my hand as I lay on my side next to her. The temperature grew and my feelings grew also. Looking at her, I knew I was falling in love with her, and that I wanted her to be mine. The thought that I had never felt this way for this girl seemed strange to me. Her black bikini highlighted the bronze beauty of her limbs, whilst the sun seemed to inflame her short blonde messy hair that spiralled round her head and face, as if it was meant to. She wasn't shrouded in anything here, no arguments, no history. It was the sunlight that illuminated my feelings for this person. The sun melted any fears I had, apprehensions, and shone through everything, leaving just her, on this beach with me. She rolled over gracefully and caught me watching her. We kissed, and the softness of her lips and the softness of the sun on my skin seemed to be one and the same thing. We were oblivious to anything and everything.

As the sun was a scorching ball now directly in front of and above us, we decided to head back. We gathered the blankets and shook the sand off. She placed our excess clothes into the bag while I waded through people to put our rubbish into a nearby bin. Placing a blanket under each arm we began to trudge back towards the strip, back to the apartment, back to everyone else. I was sad to leave, reluctant to enter that restricted environment again. We had only walked a few yards into the vast crowd that now heaved on the beach when the heat hit us. We no longer had the sea breeze to cool our sweating bodies. We stifled on, the pressure and the heat growing unbearable. This pressure took visible form with the approach of our friends in the distance, her boyfriend also. The beach was left behind, that day when the sun came up and we were happy alone.

Generic Love Story

by Kevin B. MacNeil

Remember this. It is darkling in my mind. The moon is a full and dazzling yolk-yellow in the cloudless sky and all of the little attendant stars seem to twinkle brighter in reply. *Like pieces of glass sparkling on a black road - in the startling beam from a single unbroken headlight - in the stunned moments of silence after a terrible accident.* No. Forget that part.

It is a warm night with a cool breeze, and my body responds gratefully to the almost Mediterranean perfection of the temperature and humidity. And all of this little world is very quiet – *hush* – save for the gentle hiss of the sea – *hush* – washing up gently on the shore – *hush* - in the darkness just beyond us - *hush*. We can imagine the blanket of foam sending delicate silvery tendrils of dwindling strength up the dark sand of the shore, yearning for our bodies. Then a long intake of breath as it retreats back into the sea. Then another quiet sigh.

Laura, you and I are in the hollow cup of a shallow dune, sheltered from the rawer breeze rolling in off the sea. Perhaps I have just made a trivial remark – say, that it feels as though we have landed in a crater on some wonderful, warm moon – but now I am watching you talk. You are telling the story that I love, the one about your sister and the yellow wellington boots. You are lying on one side, your head propped up by your right arm (your left hand lies delicately upon my chest), speaking quietly and looking down into my eyes. Your long dark hair falls down around your supporting hand, through your fingers, showing in relief against the pale skin of your arm like a haphazard art nouveau pattern. The very slight breeze moves your hair softly against your wrist and forearm. It must be tickling you a little.

In the eerie light of the moon and under the play of shadows in the dune – and because I am lying flat on my back – your dark hair is a profound black and your face is especially pale. Your lips move as you make the words of your story and your lips are dark too, accentuating the occasional white flash of your smiling teeth. I relax my head on my interlaced hands and gaze over and up towards you. I am enjoying the way that your left hand presses daintily on my chest and I want to kiss you but I don't want to stop you telling the story. You love telling this story so much.

La belle dame sans merci hath me in thrall. Well, anyway...

None of this is real - not in the usual sense of the word. Our first genuinely successful night of being with each other – of beginning to feel like absolutely comfortable lovers – was something like this, I suppose. There *was* a beach and it *was* a warm and pretty evening. But I have this terrible habit of idealising the whole evening beyond recognition. Particularly Laura, who is invariably transformed into some kind of bizarre Dante Gabriel Rossetti-meets-Edgar Allan Poe wet dream whenever I imagine her. Remember her. Think of her. Well, that's love, I guess. My idea of love, anyway.

Laura would probably tell a different night into being. It's strange, the way our stories evolve and change the more we tell them, the further from the present moment of absolute truth we travel. I could have sworn Laura's sister's wellington boots were red the first time she told that story. Anyway. I only tell these things because I want everything to be out in the open and transparent.

First of all, I want to make it clear that the night when everything happened is a complete blank to me. I blacked out on vodka and I can't remember a single thing. That's the first thing. So my first memory of the whole episode was very early the following day.

The police told me that they had to bang on my door six or seven times before I responded. They had known I must be home because the music was still playing. Remember that. Because of the music. So anyway I'm slowly crawling out of this coma I've thrown myself into – my head has a heartbeat and I swear it tastes like a street dog took a shit in my mouth. I stumble down the hallway and nearly fall into the door, tripping on my shoes at the bottom of the stairs. I fumble hopelessly with the keys and the handle until the door pops open a few inches. Peering around the door at the two policemen – and I must have been a *beautiful* sight to behold – I choke out an approximate hello.

To be honest I don't remember a great deal of the subsequent conversation. I was still effectively drunk. Anyway, the police they came in and they stood, impassive and imposing in my tiny kitchen, as I struggled manfully to make some tea (which they politely, and sensibly, declined), and fired random questions at my sozzled noggin.

It may have gone like this.

Where were you at around 5 pm last evening?

I... er ... I was home. Here. I think. Yeah.

What time did you arrive home?

Um... um... was... yesterday... Sunday?

Yes. (They exchange a glance.)

I dunno really. Not exactly. But it was pretty early afternoon I think. Half one about?

Was anybody with you?

No. Alone. Came straight home after... well, after I got a carry out.

Ah. (They exchange another glance.) Sir, did you see or hear anything suspicious – anything at all – yesterday or yesterday evening?

No. (And I'm suddenly a bit more awake and alert because of this very serious tone these coppers have and the grave expressions on their clean shaven faces. My eyes feel itchy.) Why, has something happened? What is this about?

Ok, Mr... (Looks at his notebook doubtfully.) Mallory? We just need you to answer our questions. Were you at home all day, from half one onwards?

Yes

And did you hear or see anything you felt was unusual or... frightening?

Frightening?? (My voice rises a little.)

Yes. Frightening.

Jesus. No. Well, but...

But what, Mr Mallory?

The truth is I was drinking very... heavily... yesterday. I can't really remember... anything at all.

When did you start drinking? (Pointedly focussing upon his notepad.)

When I got home. Around half one I think.

(They exchange another glance, as if to say 'o-ho'.) Is that... an ordinary Sunday afternoon for yourself, Mr Mallory? (With his eyebrows raised expressively.)

Now just a bloody minute here, I..

(He interrupts me with a finger raised calmly and speaks forcefully.) MR MALLORY. Do you know the family next door, your neighbours, the Gibsons?

Yes. Of course. (In a small voice now, scared.)

Their daughter Vanessa was beaten and raped last night no more than fifteen feet from where we are standing, in her own house. Brutally. And you are telling me – we know that she screamed, Mr Mallory – that you heard nothing? That you saw nothing?

(I am devastated for several moments. Little Vanessa, I'm thinking, isn't even fourteen yet. They watch in silence as I am unceremoniously sick in the kitchen sink.) I... no, I just don't remember anything. Nothing. I was too drunk. I fell unconscious I suppose. What time did it... when...

What were you doing at about five pm, Mr Mallory?

You don't think that I..?

We have the main culprit and plenty of... evidence. But there were several others, Mr Mallory. We only have Vanessa's... there appears to have been... we need to know if there are any other witnesses who saw or heard these boys... encouraging...

(I am sick again.) God. Oh God. I had the music on pretty loud and on repeat all night. I... I'm surprised nobody complained...

So anyway they exchanged their little judgmental glances and raised their eyebrows and pointed out (rather vindictively, it seemed to me) that the only person in a position to complain about the music was Vanessa. And she had lain unconscious on her bedroom floor until her parents had returned, about an hour ago, from an emergency trip to visit Mr Gibson's ailing father in Newcastle. Vanessa had music lessons on a Sunday and had stayed behind. And what was the real shame of it all? Who had they asked to keep half an eye on their quiet, reliable daughter? Mr Mallory, of course. Moi.

By the time I had sobered up the true horror of the whole thing had landed upon me and I sank into a terrible depression. Then all hell broke loose because the papers somehow got a hold of the whole thing. Instead of an extremely informal promise to look out for Vanessa as she came and went, I became her 'emergency guardian' who had been too 'insensible with alcohol and intent on partying to loud music' to fulfil my promise to her heartbroken parents. Then Laura phoned, her voice hard with anger:

I can't believe you let this happen.

That's because it's not true.

How could you?

You know exactly why I...

Don't you DARE try to blame me...

I swear to God I didn't hear or see anything if I could help her case I would...

And Laura hung up. That was the hardest time for me. That Laura didn't support me then, when I needed her most... that hurt.

Listen. Let me explain. Most people understood that Vanessa generally took care of herself. When the Gibsons said 'And you'll keep an eye on that tearaway daughter of ours?' it was really only a gentle, affectionate mockery of her ability to take care of herself. They would say it to all of the neighbours, not just me. It just so happened, this time, that I was the only person at home. Vanessa was often left alone for a day or so, because Mr Gibson's father had been ill for over a year. We had become accustomed to her self-sufficiency, all of us. So this was not the thing which prompted people to spit on the ground as I walked past or fix me with evil stares. No. The reason was that nobody – including Laura – believed that I could possibly have been in my room next door, just a few feet away, without having heard anything.

Vanessa had damaged her vocal chords with the ferocity of her screams and cries for help and had been unable to speak even a whisper for many days after her ordeal. Her struggle had been fierce and brave. They had to chase her through the house and the place had been badly smashed up. She had landed a few blows and scratches upon them too. Before they pinned her down. *All of that, they seemed to say, and you heard nothing? You were too drunk? Uh-huh. Whatever. Probably too scared to help. Too heartless to care. Monster. As guilty as the ones who did it.* Was this the perceived sentiment of the people around me, or my own guilty heart speaking? Well, anyway.

So I had to go to court and sit through the thing. Had to. I was a witness – that’s a laugh – and I needed to find out how the trial unfolded. My brief testimony was met with barely restrained muttering animosity from the others in the court room.

The real turning point was when one of the young men accused with abetting and encouraging the crime finally broke down and confessed. He responded to questions in broken fragments, through tears of pathetic self-pity. *Was just having a laugh... didn't mean... but things got carried away... got violent... she kept fighting back... making us angry... making things worse. I remember that stupid music blasting from next door. All we got was like the bass and drums through the wall. It was like we got caught up in a mad dance... in the big booming rhythm...*

Well, that’s where I broke down. That’s where I fucking lost it and had to be led from the court room, in tears. And the newspapers said it was relief – because I had been vindicated or absolved – whatever. But that wasn’t it. That wasn’t it, at all. And Laura was under the same mistaken impression when she came back to me, a month or so after the trial ended.

She told me, standing in the rain at my door and looking indecently beautiful, that she wanted to try again. I suppose I just gave her a dark look for a minute. But my heart was doing little somersaults. So then I said you had better come in then. She started off about Vanessa. She said she was sorry that she hadn’t believed me. That she had seen how much it had tormented me, in the strength of my relief when the young man confessed and corroborated my story. I stopped her. *That’s not what I was reacting to. That isn’t it at all, I said. Don’t you see? Those bastards were... doing that... to that poor girl... (and I’m nearly crying again) in time to the music I was playing. And I was just rolling drunk, or unconscious, or whatever, and they were just a few feet away... I feel like I was a part of it... dirty... involved, because of that. I helped them along. That’s why I fucking cracked up! Not because ‘Yay! It’s not my problem, I’m innocent woo-hoo!’... for fuck sake.*

Well anyway I cried and she cried and we talked for a long time that night she came back to me. And she begs me to take her back, because she’s so sorry. *So are we going to talk about it, then?* I said. *The one thing the police didn’t ask about – why I was drinking alone at half one on a Sunday?* So Laura looks at the floor and says she’s sorry again in this tiny voice that breaks my heart. I wonder if she really means it and decide it is impossible to know for certain. I haven’t got the heart for being cruel to people, punishing them for the harm they have done to you by inflicting more harm back on them. And I love her. So I say to myself that I will try to learn to trust her again. In spite of the memory again and again of walking in to her flat that Sunday morning with a cooked breakfast from the cafe around the corner, to surprise her after her night out with the girls. Only to discover some disgusting drunken random man fucking her – actually in the act of fucking her, my Laura. The position, the horrible lack of dignity in the position and the repulsive expressions on their faces will haunt me forever.

But perhaps that’s the moral of the story, you know – if the story has any moral at all. Don’t put the people you love up on ridiculous, impossible pedestals because the ugly reality can only disappoint you once your eyes are opened. Once all of life’s wonderful, nasty little blemishes are in plain view. But I think the really crucial thing is to be strong.

Don't give up, even if it seems like the easiest way – *especially* if it seems like the easiest way. Keep wading through the shit, even when the current is strong and the stench is overpowering and you want to puke and you want to give in. Because love and life *are* ugly and difficult and nothing turns out like a story in a magazine or a romantic comedy – but you have to forgive, forget, and try to persevere. Try to stay in the game. I will do that. And I will try to forget, particularly, that the music I was playing so loud on that terrible night, in my drunken stupor, was an album with eight second gaps of silence between all of the tracks. Focus on the future and salvaging love from the wreckage and try to forget those eight seconds of pure, hysterical screaming that I must have heard. However drunk I may have been. However unconscious I really was.

A Clinical Waste

by John Jennett

I held our knitting, corded still
to her contracting belly.

Stitched with my genetic echoes
of an Irish esquire slain
in 1690 with all sons
but one, at bloody Boyne.

Not before his girl and baby
breathless, slipped through Munster's fields,
glancing back through trampled corn
for body-hungry Jacobites.

Snugly tucked in good-maid's basket
was ancestral moses – James - the fragile
link who barely stretched our name beyond
sheer tips of papist's grimy swords.

Give thanks for their sprint I can extend,
the spiders' web which now suspends
this tepid, slimy handful, still
that hangs in both our pauses.

Shocking perfect tiny toes.
Mistake a twitch; mad glimpse; yet worse
to witness feeble death from fleeting
life and standby helpless.

Fifteen weeks. Too young, to see
if he or she, to take a breath,
as birds, regardless, chorused;
anticipating dawn, not death.

Would like to meet Oxford Companion
or a Cambridge Guide. Rifle for some guideline
when it's panicked mother can't resist the urge
to squeeze our child out months ahead of time.

Find refuge in the drama cliché;
“clean towels”, the only prop I take

with scissors – there to shape my nails -
cut free this child I've helped to make.

Curl it in a warm-lined box,
no womb, yet if we turn it in, I learn
its slung inside a yellow sack
and sent to some remote inferno.

We dig deep. Let liberated roots of new-bought tree,
entwine the tiny carcass of our dreams.

John Jennett is a full-time student in the Creative Writing MLitt programme.

In a church in Verona

by Allan McDougall

The old, black tramp sits on a pew in the church
laughing at a joke we can't see or hear.
Filthy in his rags and tatters he roars at the respectful tourists
as they saunter by, enjoying the cool air.
We see him later, pissing against a tree in the parkland beside the river,
still laughing, now muttering and snarling at the passer-bys.

The cool interior grants us respite from the crushing brightness,
the glare of the harsh sunlight off the chalky marble.
So we flit from church to church, plotting our route around the squares,
each half hour of sun balanced by the same time in shade,
learning the story of the city, told by the dead and the righteous
who became their statues, inscribed their plaques.

The day before,
the Ora and Perèr blew us up and down Lake Garda,
tearing down trees along the shorefront,
throwing racing yachts across the water,
from sunlight to mountain-shade,
without a crazy prophet in view.

Taking Control

by Sarah Rodgers

Lisa caged herself in the cubicle and approached her throne with confidence and clarity. The toilets were clean as a hospital and as sickly-smelling. She gazed into the bowl like a psychic would her orb, as though she alone were privy to its revelations. It was a place for human waste to be disposed of. All the dirty, hidden disgraces of the body flushed away - out of sight, out of mind. Piss and shit and cum and blood and snot and phlegm and vomit. Everything repulsive about the human body, gone with just one trigger.

Lisa heard footsteps from beyond the locked door and soon she had a neighbour. Lisa did not know who she was, but the light fall of her deposit and the subsequent rustling suggested to Lisa that she was menstruating. Or eating crisps, Lisa considered - not out of any true belief in the latter but merely to occupy her mind momentarily, as many people do, by speculating wildly about her neighbours private matters to no great conclusion. The door slammed shut and soon the hand dryer began its coughing and spluttering. Then silence returned.

Taking two fingers Lisa broke into her mouth, pushing back until she felt the soft, taut flesh of her throat give way. Her chest heaved in baffled response but its confused cries were caught and repressed. Again, she pushed. This time her stomach also threw up its complaint and her whole self ached with the effort of protesting her action. Seconds passed. An involuntary heave: Lisa spat, and suddenly the sick came. The heaves were relentless. Like a woman in labour Lisa pushed and pushed, revelling in tyrannising her own body.

To her intense satisfaction, Lisa recognised her lunch from the murky mess in the bowl. It was not nearly enough yet, however. Once again she penetrated her mouth, this time with three digits, tactically using one to tickle and tease her tonsil. This fingering continued until the heaves resumed. A fat tear dropped onto the seat. She felt that self-righteous kind of exhaustion experienced with exercise. She felt better. She felt, not lighter, but emptier.

Was she finished? One last try. Lisa strained every muscle in her stomach. In her heart, she wanted rid of more. Her fingers thrust onward: unforgiving, alien invaders of her unsuspecting throat. She felt the weight rising, but - then - more noise from outside.

Sweating, Lisa sat on her throne, her mouth full of poison she dared not deposit for fear of being exposed by the sound. The bile sat, livid, in her mouth. She felt its slimy stroke on her tongue. Mush clung to her teeth as though it did not want to leave her. Lisa stayed strong and listened with damp eyes slanted. From a cubicle Lisa could not locate, a girl wept. It was a painful cry, or at least Lisa believed so. She could almost imagine the sting of the girl's tears burning her face like oil spit from a pan. Still retaining her own regurgitation in her mouth, Lisa eagerly awaited the girl's departure. Another sob, another heave - so much like Lisa's own it almost made her sick again - and she was finally leaving. From her position Lisa lowered to gaze at the crying girl's feet. Lisa was

interested in this girl and she wondered if her footwear would offer some insight into her trouble. She really felt for her; this crying door with feet.

Once relieved of her burden, the physical ecstasy wearing off and her own sweat chilling her, Lisa was left in the harsh spotlight of the toilet to reflect on her decisions. She had decided to have cake for lunch - that was a bad decision. She had entered into negotiations coolly, trying to conjure up the feelings of guilt and shame and disappointment she'd inevitably feel afterwards to convince her terrible lusting of its sin. But she couldn't. Instead Lisa justified it by means of a new contract with herself: one treat a week. And this was her treat. She had eaten it slowly, felt its sticky sweetness in her mouth and, not five minutes later, had coolly walked upstairs to vomit, telling her friends she'd be back soon.

I WAS HERE. Lisa traced the carved letters with her tickling finger. Who was here? There were no further clues. The walls were pink woodchip; like a young girl's flaky nail polish, or pocked flesh. Getting up, she paused to look at the cake float in the bowl for a second and then watched it disappear with the flush. The slate was wiped clean again.

Lisa's face in the mirror was clammy and white, her hair wild with moisture and stuck to her forehead. Her eyes stayed still, dark, as infinite as the black hole within the sterile plastic and full of secrets. She smiled a yellow smile.

Walking back downstairs, Lisa licked her lips. Her stomach felt empty and her head full of I WAS HERE I WAS HERE I WAS HERE.

Old Friends

by Gary McCluskey

Yesterday we met for the first time,
in a long, long while.
I had grown smaller and more gray
and you'd become fragile.
We exchanged a brief embrace and sat
inside a shop for tea.
We talked of forgotten memories and
didn't dwell on the present.
You sat next to the fireplace yet
kept your overcoat on.
I cupped my mug in both hands
and spoke, very, clearly.

While we waited it began to rain. We
sighed in unison and lamented the fact
that neither of us had brought umbrellas.

It was odd for me, and possibly for
you too, to think that two distinct sets
of thirty years had passed between
us and yet we spoke only of the
sixties.

Periodically, you searched the skyline and
checked your wristwatch.
And when the rain had calmed
you said you'd better go
I helped you to stand and we
walked outside together.
A car came close by the pavement and
splashed our feet.
We both laughed.

And in that moment, I felt like a kid,
I felt the rain
and the arm of a friend I'd lost
but could still regain.

Fairground

by David Gordon

Swirling lights danced with the night sky overhead, discordant laughs and cries could be heard beneath the demented din of the music. Adam had been to the fun fair before, but this time was different. There was unease and anxiety all around; the air charged with trepidation and self doubt.

“Mum, I feel sick,” he whimpered, “Can we go home?”

His mother replied sternly, “I told you to take it easy on those sweets, now you’ll never get to sleep.”

“No, Mum said we can go on the Helter Skelter first.” retorted Adam’s sister in a firm yet dainty manner. The mother continued with calm authority:

“Okay then, one shot then we’re going. Adam, go with Molly and meet me back here.” Her Son dutifully complied, albeit with a subtle roll of the eyes. “Come on Molly”.

The pair proceeded to negotiate a course through the turbulent tide of people; their hands grasped tightly. Adam escorted his sister straight to their destination, with a swirling sick feeling in his stomach. The Helter-Skelter stood still amongst the carnage around it like a lighthouse in the mist. Molly was seemingly unaware of her Brother’s unease as she stared enchantingly at the shooting stars, lollipop in hand, skipping on the ground that rocked beneath them to the crashing beats in the undercurrent.

“Okay we’re here, don’t be long,” said Adam eagerly. Molly gave a look of disgust:

“You have to come with me! I don’t want to go myself.”

“Fine then! Let’s go”.

Adam led Molly up the steps of the slide. There were lots of them, and helping his little sister up the stairs turned into an ordeal by the time they approached the summit. Once they were there however, a beautifully peaceful moment transpired amidst the chaos. From this height they were not disturbed by the noise below them. It was calm and everything was coming into focus. The cool breeze whispered reassuringly in their ears; a calm voice of hope and perspective. Adam looked down on the Pirate Ship ride. It wasn’t nearly as scary from where he was. The perceived danger was still visible, but from a distance it was less intrusive or intense; they were simply observing the menace of the night. But it was still there.

The entire fairground was a volcano ready to erupt and engulf everyone. The pressure was increasing with every passing second; and as though Vulcan’s hand was trembling, the line between creation and destruction was narrowing towards a cardinal point.

At this point Adam lost his footing on the slide and hit the shoot with a big bang. Now he was sliding downwards in an uncontrollable spiral; descending back towards what he had been escaping from. He rolled out onto the flattened grass without grace, bruised from the fall. He got to his feet despite the lingering dizziness. Molly followed behind, but with far greater poise and dignity. As Adam got up, he was confronted by a group of older children from his school. They stared sneeringly at him as he tried in vain to brush off the mud from his jeans.

“Y’know, you really shouldn’t be on that without your Mum!” mocked one of

them. The three others sniggered with contempt, their faces frowning with ridicule. The original inciter marched towards Adam and pushed him back onto the ground. “This place is ours Adam. You don’t belong here. So why don’t you get out of here when you’re still in one piece?”

The threat was not hollow and Adam knew this. His sister was cowering behind him, only daring speak after the group had gone. “Who were they?” she asked worryingly. Adam replied defensively: “It doesn’t matter. We should head back now”.

As they retreated back to where they had parted with their mother, Adam stared at the ground. The empty cups and food packets that were overlying the ground made for a strangely comfortable focal point, as he could not bring himself to face the passers by. He was ashamed of his feebleness and felt less visible with his head hung. Suddenly, in a moment of sugar-rushed spontaneity, Molly screeched: “Oh let’s do that first!” She pointed at a nearby stall. It was a vacant tin-can alley, run by an old man. His glum face lifted as he noticed the two potential customers. “One pound for three shots,” he chirped, “look at all these prizes you could win.”

Adam scanned the toys in front of him with intrigue. The cheap stuffed animals looked more appealing than they once did. He struggled for focus, then lightly tittered. “Alright Molly, let’s go for it.” Molly was surprised to see such a turn in Adam’s mood. With a cross-eyed grin, Adam tossed a coin at the man running the stall. “Three shot please mister”. He handed the gun to Molly, who took it off him slightly languidly. Taking almost no time to aim, she fired and missed. With a shrug of the shoulders she passed the gun to Adam. He proceeded to take aim, concentrating so intently that he almost lost his balance. After much deliberation he pulled the trigger. The ball-shaped pellet didn’t even reach the stack of cans and fell onto the ground, alongside several other disused pellets. Firing again, the same thing happened. The old man painted a sympathetic smile onto his face as he took back his gun.

“Unlucky son, it was a good effort.” Adam wasn’t willing to walk away:

“That’s not fair, the bullet doesn’t go far enough.” The old man leaned forward and spoke with authority and astuteness:

“Look kid this is a fun fair, not a courtroom. Now I’ve been here for a long time and there’s some things that go on in here that might not make sense when you go outside. I saw you getting shoved around by those kids over there. You shouldn’t take that son. You worry too much about people’s feelings and being a good kid, but let me tell you something: you’ll never enjoy yourself in this life unless you break the rules now and again. It’s screw or be screwed, that’s the way the world works.”

Adam was intrigued by the man’s philosophy. He thought to himself that the man may have spent his entire adult life here. He seemed to be relaxed in his surroundings. As they were leaving the stall, an overwhelming compulsion struck Adam like a bolt of lightning. He blindly grabbed a stuffed animal from the old man’s stall. His legs immediately began running, seemingly faster than they’d ever ran before. Molly called out “Adam, no! Put that back!”. Her shouts were futile, and she had no choice but to follow her brother. The lights were flashing past Adam as he ran. He didn’t even know where he was going but that didn’t matter. He was in an electrolyte and was out of control; in a false liberation. He was running like never before, but being led like a greyhound to the rabbit.

Within his peripheral vision, a blurred figure suddenly appeared. Unable, or

unwilling, to slow down, Adam crashed straight into it. Face down in the dirt, he didn't know whether to attack or thank the person he just collided with. As he mentally resurfaced, a muffled voice he was hearing came to the fore, it's clarity was startling. His eyes opened and his awareness returned, like a dazed athlete presented with smelling salts. Eyes staring down, he could hear the voice:

“Adam! I was shouting at you, how didn't you hear me?”. Adam responded with surprise.

“Dillon! I didn't know you were comin' here tonight.”

“Well, yeah. This place is only here for a few days, can't miss out on the fun.” At this moment Molly arrived on the scene, visibly distressed.

“You're supposed to be looking after me!” she yelled at Adam. He scowled at her in return.

“I **have** been looking after you! Quit buggin' me!”

“We have to go back and meet Mum now. She'll be mad”

“I don't care about Mum. I'm stayin' here with Dillon. You wanna go, feel free” Molly was shocked at his behaviour and immediately turned and scampered away into the distance.

“Won't your Mum be mad?” asked Dillon. Adam shrugged his shoulders imperviously. “Maybe. I can do what I want though.”

Adam looked down at the toy he'd just stolen. This was the first time he'd examined it. It was a fluffy red horse. Cheaply manufactured, it's pupils rattled around inside plastic eyeballs. It's huge teeth made for a complexion that amused Adam, who laughed loudly as he gleefully inspected it. Dillon, slightly confused by Adam's demeanour, made an assertive suggestion. “Hey, wanna go on the dodgems?” Adam enthusiastically agreed and proceeded to run towards the ride. “Come on Dillon!”

Adam jumped into the driver's seat, giggling with anticipation. Dillon caught up with him and slowly climbed into the passenger's seat, and put on his seatbelt. Noticing Adam had forgotten about his, he fastened his as well. As Adam scanned the other drivers, he recognised three of the drivers. The bullies, who had threatened him earlier, had returned. Laughing to each other, they continually looked over at Adam and Dillon with menace. “Get ready to die!” one of them shouted, to the roaring approval of his friends.

“This'll be interesting,” remarked Adam, in a focussed and confident manner.

“They're in three cars, Adam. They're gonna gang up on us.” warned Dillon.

“Relax, we'll be fine.” A red light turned on in the corner, attracting everyone's attention. The pressure began to increase all around them; the air like toxic gas. Engines were revving, the drivers were raring to go. The light switched to green, igniting the scene like a detonator. The cars launched forward at pace. Adam unreservedly sped the car straight towards his enemies, who were simultaneously charging towards him. As the sparks were flying overhead, Adam and Dillon collided violently with all three cars. The impact sent their car spinning into the bumpers surrounding the track. The three bullies reacted vigorously with howls of derisive laughter. Adam, determined not to be beaten, charged towards their cars again. Just before the point of collision, the cars split and avoided contact, resulting in Adam and Dillon's vehicle crashing into the barriers once more. The car slowly turned round again, like a tormented animal gingerly getting back to its feet. The humiliating process was repeated several times until the time-out buzzer

sounded; it had the relief of a final sword thrust. Adam's sense of adventure had been well and truly killed. As they dejectedly got out of their car, they were approached by their tormentors. Without second thought, Adam charged at one of them. Before long he was kicked to the ground and set upon. Nearby adults stepped in and intervened. One of them led Adam aside and advised him. "Don't take on three guys bigger than you, not a good idea." Adam nodded abashedly and walked away.

Adam proceeded to wander aimlessly round the fairground. Dillon had seemingly disappeared into the night. Adam felt more detached from his surroundings than at any other point during the night. Just minutes ago he had been running to the exhilarating rhythm of the fairground music. Now the sounds were coming from everywhere; crashing together in his head like stormy waves on a cliff face. He could feel himself eroding and drifting away and he knew for the first time, no matter how hard he tried, he was never going to be able to reject the inevitable. He was never truly going to go back home. He was like a fresh corpse in an open grave, parasites gnawing at his skin.

He came to a house of mirrors. Not knowing why, he stepped inside. It seemed a long time since he'd seen his reflection, and he was intrigued to see how his image could change on the concave walls. Walking down the hall, he was coming from three directions, heading to one point at the end of the corridor. He began to run, eager to see his images converge. As he got faster, the mirror at the end of the hall became a tantalising destination. Just as he was reaching the end of the hall, his reflections vanished and he hit his head off a glass pane. It was an optical illusion, and from the ground he could see himself sprawled out in pieces on the multiple reflections on the ceiling. He struggled and got to his feet. He had reached the end of the corridor, so he turned the corner. The images were contradicting and confusing. His reflections varied in shape and size; his distorted figures moving with him through the maze. He looked to the faces of every impression, as if expecting them to speak. At this point, he just wanted to leave. Unable to see where he was going, he leaned on the walls and felt for the route. This blindness was unnerving, and to his relief Adam eventually saw the exit. Before he stepped back out, he had one last look at the mirror preceding the exit. The image was flattering, he looked bigger and more imposing. In the reflection, he could also see out the exit door, a small figure he recognised. It was Dillon, looking around with concern. Adam turned round, went out the exit and ran over to him.

"I've been looking for you, where've you been?" asked Dillon?

"Oh ... nowhere, just got a bit lost." Dillon reached into a plastic bag he was carrying.

"Um ... I lost your toy, but I won you another one back. It's a different colour, but ..." Adam took it out his hand with a smile.

"Black looks better anyway," he said reassuringly, "but you can keep it." They both began to walk together, sensing that they needed to talk. Dillon broke the silence: "Why did you try to fight those guys?"

"I'm sick of being pushed around, Dillon. You can't let people walk all over you."

"But there were three of them, you didn't stand a chance. If you're gonna fight someone, make sure you can win." Adam looked at him and rolled his eyes in querulous agreement.

They kept walking until they came to a Ferris wheel. There was no queue forming and on Adam's suggestion they boarded the carriage. As they rose slowly into the night

sky, Adam stared out vacantly. Dillon was rummaging around his bag and brought out a box of cookies. “My Mum made them, want one?” Adam obliged and took one, the taste was ambrosial to him. He'd never eaten anything so good. Looking out at the fairground, he could see the children laughing. Carrying the toys that they'd won, running around with sugary glee. Now the clouds were the candy floss, and the rain was sticky and sickening. It was beginning to lash down on the fun fair. Addictive but impure, the children were growing on superficial and immediate indulgence.

They were nearing the top of the wheel when Adam compulsively grabbed Dillon's shirt and forcefully threw him out of the carriage. With a squeal and a merciful thump, he lay twitching on the ground in his own blood. The wheel stopped rotating and the lights went out. The music stopped playing and the laughter turned to screaming. Adam picked up the now discarded cookies and began eating them. At the top of the wheel looking down, all that was left was darkness. The circuit was blown; the socket overloaded. Adam closed his eyes, brushed the crumbs off his shirt, and drifted into the blissful sleep.