

URBAN LEGENDS

THE WELLS STREET JOURNAL

ABOUT THE WELLS STREET JOURNAL

The *Wells Street Journal* is a London-based, biannual literary anthology of poetry and prose run by the University of Westminster's Creative Writing: Writing the City MA students. Representing all ends of the globe, their main impetus is to provide their readers both nationally and internationally with literary works which represent equality, diversity, and inclusivity. They achieve this by means of showcasing not only their own talents as writers, but also by sharing their platform with a collection of external writers with a wide range of experiences and locales.

Urban Legends marks the fourteenth issue, and fourth print edition.

The following collection is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the named author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Covid-19 is continuing to be a formidable adversary and has presented some interesting challenges to the editorial team working on Issue 14 of *The Wells Street Journal*. In recent years some have claimed that “a university is its students.” However, in the absence of formal classes and personal contacts for the best part of two semesters, it’s become evident that it’s been the faculty, the administration, the students’ union, and student support that has made it real. Our work has been possible because of the material resources provided by the infrastructure of the University of Westminster, and for that we are all very appreciative. Accordingly, we express our gratitude for the ongoing support to Dr. Peter Bonfield, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Westminster, and to our course leader Dr. Monica Germana.

On previous occasions the editorial board has renewed itself from within, as new members emerged from each new cohort of students as the previous class moved on. With no new cohort to draw upon in the summer, we’d like to thank Yen Ooi for assembling a team of alumni and current students to initiate the process, with prospective students joining later.

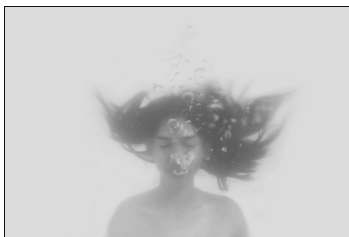
The logistics of the operation were tricky, co-ordinating on-line meetings across different time-zones. Some of us were in London but we had major contributors to the process based in Lagos, Nigeria, one hour ahead of London time, in Mumbai, India, five and half hours ahead of London time, in Los Angeles, California eight hours behind, and others at different points in between. And editing time wasn't just a distraction from writing time, it was a distraction from earning a living in these time zones too. But we got there.

Some people got the ball rolling and helped us avoid reinventing the wheel – thanks for that Jacqueline Ahearn, Claudette Benjamin, and Bageshree Mehta – and others stepped in when they passed on the baton – with special thanks to Dawn Ostlund for getting us through the final stages for a second time. Others were there throughout the process, providing ideas, editing, and proof reading - Ciara Burrell, Sophie Harris, James Hayward, Amaka Ngana, Will Ottley, Kunal Raju, and Jaya Ramsinghani, thank you all

And finally – thanks to Adrian Radu, the project manager who successfully herded us cats, kept us focused, and helped us get to publication, by ensuring that everyone's views were heard and we were all able to contribute to the process.

Brian Harrison

(On behalf of the WSJ Issue 14 editorial team)

BREATHE IN**SUZANNE CROMBAG**

Woman under water: Photo credit: Unsplash.com

BREATHE IN... AND BREATHE OUT.... I OPEN MY EYES AND LOOK AT the reflection of myself in the lake. It is a warm summer's night and the crickets are singing. It is a song made for the night. The water is dark and still, and it gives me peace when I look at it. I finally feel calm after this unbearable day. The only thing I did was run around, second-guessing all my decisions, and I even cried in the bathroom after my colleague had scolded me for something I didn't do, but I couldn't even tell him that! Sigh. *What am I doing with my life? What am I doing with myself?* A tear falls down my cheek. I stare up into the night and the moon is shining bright. When I look closely enough, I can see the

craters in the moon and one even looks like a flower. I like seeing flowers. They bring joy and colour in life, or at least, that is for most people. I just see them dying bit by bit every day until they are all brown and hanging down like lost souls. I know it's depressing to think like this, but it is what it is. I just don't see the use of having them. I like to see flowers outside and in parks but in my home, you won't see any. They will die because I forget to give them water or because they actually are dying. So, I just don't see any purpose of having them.

Brrr, where did that breeze come from? Wrapping my jacket closer around me, I notice there are small lights around. I smile. There are suddenly maybe a hundred fireflies around me. They look like small flying stars in the night-time and they are dancing on the beat of the crickets. It looks magical, like a fairy tale that is happening in front of me. The dancing of the fireflies is hypnotic to look at. So beautiful. I sit as still as possible. I don't want to scare them away. They start coming closer and closer and the way they start dancing is almost terrifying. So rapid and chaotic and so close to each other. As if there is a thunderstorm coming. Suddenly they stop and they are just hovering there. On their spot, doing nothing.

What the hell is going on? I start getting up when I hear a voice.

"Don't be afraid!"

I look around me, but I don't see anyone. Quickly I grab my bag and as I turn around, I see someone standing in front of me but I can't see the face.

Omg, omg what do I do? Okay, I can run for it, but I don't know if that's smart. Maybe I can just walk away quietly? Okay, stay calm, Luna. Just breathe in and out.

"Who is there?"

I look at the person but nothing. No response whatsoever.

"I have pepper spray so don't you think to come near me!" Still no response. All of a sudden the person starts moving

towards me. I take a step back, ready to run away when I see the face of a young woman with long, dark, chocolate-coloured hair, amber/golden eyes and cherry coloured lips. She is wearing a long dress that is the colour of the moon and shines bright once she steps out of the shadows. I've never seen anything like this before. I stare at her with big eyes, not knowing what to do or say. It is quiet for a couple of seconds whilst we stare at each other.

"Hi Luna, how are you?" she smiles. It is a comfortable smile and I start relaxing my shoulders.

"How do you know my name? And who are you?"

"I am Cynthia, and I know who you are because I have been watching you."

Well, that is not creepy at all, watching me! Puff.

"I know it sounds creepy that I've been watching you, but I come with good intentions!"

I look into her eyes. *How did she know that! Who is she? Or better saying, what is she?*

"That is a good question!" she laughs, "I am Cynthia, the protector of humans and animals."

I start laughing. *Is this girl serious? If she thinks that is real, she is crazy.*

"Okay protector of the humans and animals, why are you here?"

"I know you think I am crazy, but it is the truth. I am here for you! You're lost, my child. I am hoping I can help you find yourself again."

How did she know that?

"How do you know that I am lost? It's not like I said anything?"

"I know because I can read your mind and feel your pain. You are struggling and it hurts you because you don't know how to get out of it."

I look away and I notice that the fireflies are gone. It is just

her and me. I should feel terrified but instead, I'm still standing here not knowing what to think at this moment. *How can she help me? Isn't this something I need to figure out myself?* But then again, I don't know what to do so maybe I should listen to her and see what she says. The worst that can happen is that she can't help me.

"Okay I know you can read my mind, but how do you think you can help me?"

Cynthia smiles and starts walking toward the flowers. She starts picking the roses; first the red ones, then the blue ones and at last the white ones. From each colour, three flowers.

"Why three roses from each colour?" I ask. She looks at me and starts walking towards the edge of the lake. I watch her closely because I get a feeling. I don't know what the feeling means but I suddenly feel tense again.

"This is for you to find yourself. I need to surround you with these roses so you can feel their energy." She looks at me and nods for me to come to her. I walk to her and stand looking at the black water and the reflection in it. Without a warning, she steps into the water and walks until the water reaches her belly. She turns around and smiles.

"Come on, the water isn't that cold and to be able to help you, I need you to be in the water with me." I look at her, then around me and then back at Cynthia. I feel uneasy, especially because the water is black, and it is the middle of the night.

"Don't be afraid, nothing will happen. Only when you are in the water you will feel the energy that you need to help you find yourself." She gives me a reassuring smile and for some reason, I'm convinced it is fine. I start taking off my jacket and my boots. Then I put one foot in the lake. It is deeper than I thought it would be, and so much colder. I put my other foot in the lake, and I'm standing knee-deep in the water. Chills come up my spine from the cold; I wrap my arms around myself. I take a deep breath in... and out, and I start walking towards Cynthia.

“What now?” I ask. She looks at me and looks up to the moon.

“It is almost a full moon, just five more minutes. That is when the energy will be the strongest for you to find yourself.” She smiled her reassuring smile again and I smiled back.

“Now lay with your back in the water so you are floating in the lake.”

I do as she asks and as I go fully in, my breathing stutters as the coldness of the water reaches my lungs. I start breathing deeply in and out, telling myself to keep breathing normally and that the water is 35 degrees, so it is nice and warm. It helps a little. Cynthia starts putting the roses around me and while she does that, she says something. I can’t hear what it is, but it sounds like an enchantment in a different language. She looks at me and tells me to close my eyes and keep breathing in and out. I try to keep my eyes closed but I am curious about what Cynthia is doing. I see that the moon has reached his full form and when I look at Cynthia her expression has changed. Her face becomes red and dark circles form around her eyes. I don’t know what to do and I just freeze up in the water. Cynthia starts screaming things and I cannot move.

Why can’t I move, get out of here Luna, go!

But I can’t move. I just stare at Cynthia as she transforms into a devil-version of herself. I have never felt as scared as this moment in my life. Cynthia turns around to me and looks me in the eyes. Eyes of death are staring at me. I try to scream but nothing comes out and Cynthia just laughs. Then she puts her hands on my shoulders, while she keeps staring me in the eyes, she pushes me down slowly. I take a deep breath in before I am fully immersed and feel the pressure of her hands pushing me down. The only thing I can do is stare at her eyes while she keeps laughing and smiling. The pressure of taking a new breath is getting more and more. While I release my breath slowly, I know my last breath is coming. I try to inhale but all that comes

in is water. Paralyzed, I can't do anything, and I notice myself sinking away to the bottom of the lake. Noticing my mind has started to shut off and my sight starts to become blurry, the last thing I see and remember is Cynthia's eyes. Her death eyes.

I take a deep breath in... and a deep breath out. In again and out. I notice I can move my fingers and I start to regain control of my body. I feel a pressure on top of me and I immediately remember Cynthia. My eyes fly open and the bright light blinds me from seeing anything for a minute. As my sight starts coming back, I see the ceiling of my apartment. I look around and I notice I am in my bed.

How is that possible? It was so real, it can't be, but why am I in my room?

I sit up in bed and I am in my pyjamas. My hair is dry, and my clothes are hanging on my chair. I put my hands on my head as I realise it was just a dream, a nightmare more to say. I sigh in relief.

That was so scary, but it has made me realize that life is too short and I should do what I want to do and take risks. This is the only way to find me and be happy. I smile and pull the sheets off of me to get dressed, knowing what I need to do now.

As I walk to my chair to put my clothes on, I notice a red rose next to my bed. And another blue one and a white one. I walk around and notice there are six more roses laying in a circle around my bed. I stand there not able to move again and that is when I realize as I take a deep breath in...



Suzanne Crombag is a Contemporary Media student who loves writing short stories. Currently, she is pursuing her film career here in London. Through her travels around the world, she gained a lot of inside in cultures and adventures that help her develop narratives and films.

THE HOOK

HUDSON WILDING



Chevrolet. Photo credit: Mecum.com

STOP ME IF YOU'VE HEARD THIS ONE BEFORE.

Young lovers drive to a lookout point on a Friday night to make out. The girl is *Grace Kelly* blonde, a cheerleader, sixteen, blue-eyed, with mile-long tan legs that eventually stop in spotless white tennis shoes.

Her boyfriend's a real prick. I bet you knew that much already. When you try to picture him, you see a letterman jacket first and a flesh-and-blood human second. Hair and eye color don't matter, though he's white—guys like that always seem to be white; this is the late 1950s after all, over a decade before *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*.

The car is a cherry red Chevrolet Bel Air, the midsummer

night is honey-suckle scented and warm, everything is falling right into place. The boy turns off the headlights and turns up the rock 'n' roll station, which plays something a bit too energetic for romance, something like *'Great Balls of Fire'*—nothing too earnest, he isn't the type. Then he dives right in. His kisses look sloppy, like a Labrador retriever licking her face, but neither knows any better.

Jerry Lee Lewis is pleading on the boy's behalf for the cheerleader to let him love her like a lover should. The boy slips his hand down from her neck over her chest and the music abruptly cuts off in what appears to be an act of God. An announcer comes on, warning listeners that a murderer has escaped a nearby asylum. Oh, yeah. And he has a hook for a hand.

Wait, you say, I think I know this next part—the girl asks to be driven home, but the boy protests, locking the door and telling the girl he'll protect her with the bravado only naive teenage boys can muster. She pushes him away, insisting, and eventually he caves, though he isn't happy about it. Only when he drops her off does she see the bloody hook hanging from the door, and realize how close they were to death.

Now, momentarily ignoring the fact that no asylum would let a convicted murderer with a hook for a hand stay on their grounds, and the sheer improbability of finding a town where a lover's lookout is walking distance from an asylum, you may wonder how the bloody hook ended up on the car door without either kid noticing—was it pulled off the killer's arm as they drove away? Wouldn't they have heard the screams, or at least the clattering?

The simple answer is no. I practiced quite a few times on my car with my wife inside, to make sure she didn't hear a sound. This was during the afternoon before my daughter's first date, just after we'd arranged the broadcast with my friends at the radio station.

"I don't want to scare her to death, Jimmy," my wife told me.

“I just want to make sure she won’t go there with that boy ever again.”

My only regret is that I didn’t get to see the look on our sweet girl’s face when she came home, since I didn’t want to follow them too closely on the drive back. My wife said she was white as a sheet. My daughter hasn’t been out with that boy again.



Hudson Wilding hails from Upstate New York, where she spends most of the year waiting for October. Her work has previously been published in *Menacing Hedge*, *Not One of Us*, and *Massacre Magazine*, among other literary journals.

I COME ALIVE IN THE NIGHT TIME

AMAKA NGANA



The Queen's College statue. Photo credit: Amaka Ngana

LEGEND HAS IT THAT THE STATUE AT QUEEN'S COLLEGE COMES alive at night. Queen's College was a girls-only boarding secondary school located in mainland Lagos, Nigeria. It was divided into junior and senior school depending on the age and class of the student. The bronze-plated statue stood at five feet, dressed in the junior school uniform of a royal blue pinafore, blue beret, white socks and dark brown shoes. It was erected in the garden at the center of the school and held a torch in its right

hand. It was believed to walk around the school at night when no one was around. There were stories of people who had accidentally seen it walking at night but these stories were never verified nor the existence of the people confirmed. Generally, boarding students were not allowed to leave the school premises until the end of the term and so girls sought different opportunities to sneak out, especially for parties, at night. I believed the tale about the statue was invented to deter them from doing so, although I didn't buy it. No matter how exciting a party may be, no one wanted the risk of running into a walking statue at night. Besides, secondary school students had a reputation for spreading stories to scare one another and playing pranks to this effect. I likened the whole thing to the cheesy scary stories people told at summer camps.

"Chioma, aren't you going to the dorm?" my best friend, Mariam, asked while packing her books into her bag and staring in my direction. "Study time is over, you've read enough. It's 9:30pm, go to the dorm and sleep," she said teasing me. "You'll still get the best grades regardless, everyone knows you're the smartest in class." I laughed and threw a piece of paper at her. Although Mariam and I weren't in the same dormitory, we often walked to the hostel together.

"I just want to finish this chapter. You know how noisy Dorm can be, I won't be able to read anything there," I responded.

"Scholar! Well done. Bye," Mariam laughed and walked out of the class. Other students followed suit and soon I was the only one left in the classroom. Study time, often called *Prep*, ended by 9:30pm for senior students and lights out was by 11:00pm. I decided to stay back in class and catch up on whatever I could before heading back to the dormitory. It didn't take long for me to feel the absolute silence of the classroom area. At this point, I was sure I was alone. After minutes of flipping through my Literature notebook, my eyes grew heavy. The last thing I

remember, was reading the topic boldly written: '*Lord of the Flies*, by William Golding'.

I woke up abruptly to a figure standing at the entrance of the door. I quickly wiped off the saliva which was dripping across my face. I couldn't believe I had fallen asleep; so much for staying behind to study. The classroom felt colder than usual. I looked at my wrist but remembered I never wore a watch so I couldn't tell the time. I turned towards the girl at the door.

"Yes?" I said.

"Can you walk me to the hostel gate?" she replied with a mature and authoritative voice. It sounded more like a command than a request. I could tell she was a junior student from her uniform. I wondered why she was still in the classroom area at this time. Prep for junior students ended by 8:30pm and it was far past the time for their lights out.

"Okay," I responded, still wondering how I had slept off so suddenly.

As I headed towards her she added, "I advise you pack your bag and come along with it." I was taken aback. I stared at her for a bit and decided it was a good idea since I had slept off in my bid to study. I might as well just call it a night and go back to the dormitory. I packed a few books, although I was certain I wouldn't read them. I didn't want to make the impression of being an unserious student by carrying an empty bag.

As we walked in the premises, I realized how late it was. It was pitch-black except for the illumination from the street lights. Everywhere was unusually cold. We walked silently with no conversation whatsoever. I looked at her and realized she looked familiar but I couldn't remember how or where I knew her from. Students usually changed from their uniform to their day/house wear after classes but she didn't.

"Why aren't you wearing your house wear?" I finally asked to start conversation. I hated the awkwardness of the silence.

"I don't have one," was her stern response. I looked at her oddly.

A boarding student without a house wear. How is that even possible? I thought to myself. I couldn't bring myself to question her further. I felt like there was something preventing me from doing so.

The wind whistled violently as it passed through the trees, as though warning me. The distance between the classroom area and the hostel gate was relatively short and on approaching the hostel gate, I realized it was locked.

Could it be past 11:00pm? I thought to myself. She stood there in silence watching me. Her expression seemed angry. I hadn't noticed that earlier.

"Baba," I called out to the gateman, as he was fondly called by students, because he was advanced in age. No response.

"Baba!" I shouted again. His apartment was directly behind the locked gate and so I called out loud enough to get his attention but not too loud as to alert the principal, whose house was also nearby.

"Ba..." before I could finish, the girl began walking back in the direction of the classroom area. I opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out. I wondered where she was going. Why couldn't she wait for Baba to open the gate? Besides, I had come to the hostel because of her. I followed her slowly at a distance, watched her go to the middle of the garden, pick up a torch from the right side of the floor, look me straight in the eye and ascend the empty stand where the statue was supposed to be.

SHE WAS THE STATUE.

She stood looking intently and fiercely at me. My legs almost grew numb but my survival instincts quickly kicked in.

I ran back towards the direction of the hostel shouting "BABA, PLEASE HELP, HELP, OPEN THE GATE, OPEN THE GATE!"

At this point, I didn't care if the principal or anyone else heard me. I didn't want to be locked alone with a ghost.

"BABA, BABA, BABA!" Baba finally ran out from the apartment with only his singlet and boxers on.

"How come you are still outside?" he said, rubbing his eyes and bringing out the keys.

"OPEN THE GATE, OPEN THE GATE, THERE'S A GHOST BEHIND ME, OPEN THE GATE!" Baba's eyes widened. He opened the gate, ushered me in and locked it quickly.

"Where is the ghost, what did you see?" he asked firmly. I didn't have time to converse, I ran towards the dormitory. I was breathing fast but I refused to stop until I was sure I had gotten to safety. Poor Baba, I left him at the gate, alone and disoriented. I prayed the statue would not come after him.

"OPEN THE DOOR, OPEN THE DOOR!" I screamed as I approached my dormitory. Lights came on and the girl whose bed was beside the door opened it.

"Chioma, where are you coming from? Nobody saw you when it was time for lights out, so we assumed you had slept in Habiba's dorm. Why are you sweating and breathing like this?" Bisola, the girl who had opened the door enquired. Some girls had woken up at this point.

"Who is that one shouting by this time?" one remarked.

"Please, some of us are trying to sleep," another added. Other girls were still up chatting.

"You look frightened. Like you've seen a ghost. Are you okay?" Nkechi, my bunkmate who never slept early, asked me. I was still breathing heavily. I ran to my locker, opened it with the keys from my bag and got a bottle of Holy water from it. I sprinkled it all over myself and my bed. I felt the tears run down my cheeks and I started praying.

"What is happening to you, Chioma?" Valerie, the music

prefect and leader of the school band asked, concerned. People started gathering around my bed.

“Stop crying, what happened?” Amina, the oldest in the dormitory, asked me. Fear gripped me and I was undecided whether to tell the story or not. I didn’t know if the statue was somewhere waiting for me to talk so it could come get me. When they pressed harder and my tears were becoming uncontrollable, I finally spoke.

“I saw it, I saw the statue, I saw the statue. It came to me in the classroom. It walked me to the hostel gate. I didn’t know it was the statue until it went back to its position. It’s Baba that saved me, he opened the gate for me in time before it came back for me.”

As I said the words, I could see the different emotions of shock, fear and disbelief on their faces.

“You saw which statue? Our school statue?” Amina asked.

“Yes,” I responded. “The one people said walks about at night. It really does. It came to meet me in the class. It told me to escort it to the hostel and that’s when I realized it was the statue.” Tears rolled down my eyes. Some girls started praying, binding and casting. Others sat silently on their beds trying to take in what I had just said and decide for themselves whether to believe me or not. Some moved away from me as if my experience with the statue would somehow affect them. Amina held me in her arms and comforted me. Nkechi sat beside me consoling and assuring me that nothing bad would happen to me.

“What were you even doing in class by that time?” someone said, and Amina told her to shut up. “Don’t tell me to shut up, she is always feeling like the most intelligent student. It’s good that the statue visited her, next time she will come to Dorm when everyone else does.”

I looked up briefly and noticed the girl speaking was Anita,

a girl who hated me because I refused to help her cheat during an exam.

“I’m afraid of this school,” a girl stated.

“God will not allow anything to happen to us,” another responded.

“I’ll call my mother tomorrow morning, she has to find another school for me. I can’t stay here with what I’ve just heard,” a different person said. People gathered in groups to share their opinions. I realized it was 12:18am.

“You’re lucky it didn’t kill you,” someone suddenly interjected.

“Ada!” Amina said angrily, “Shut up.”

Eventually the crowds dispersed and went to bed. That night, I dreamt the statue was chasing me and Baba did not open the gates soon enough.

I woke up in the morning with a headache. Amina tended to me throughout. Nkechi stayed sober and consoling. News of my experience spread quickly, with students interested in interrogating me. Most just wanted to make jokes but Amina told everyone off.

As we walked to the classroom, a girl tapped me from behind on the shoulder, pointed towards the statue and mockingly said, “Look at your friend.” Amina turned, threatened to beat her up on the spot, and in the moment, she missed the statue turning slightly to wink at me.



Amaka Ngana is a creative writer who loves reading and aspires to become an accomplished author and scriptwriter. She hopes to use her writing platform to inspire others and create a positive impact on the world. Her interests include artworks, sports & athletics, going to the beach and being in natural environments.

IN THE REALM OF THE IN-BETWEEN

PAULINE DAVENPORT



Nurse with foundlings. *Photo credit: Foundling Museum*

*CHIEF INFIRMARY NURSE, THE FOUNDLING MUSEUM, BRUNSWICK
Square*

London, present day

When the shadows of the last visitors pass over the front porch; when the curator turns off the lights and locks the doors; when Londoners squeeze themselves into the lifts at Russell Square and burst onto the tube, once everything is quiet and safe within the Museum; when the floorboards have settled and the blinds have stilled – my girls and boys come out to play. At first,

they crackle like a cinematic projection, and appear by the curtains, in twos, or on their own.



These are the ones I look after. I always give them what they want when they are unwell, how else are they to get better? I am not simply nursing a hot forehead or a sore tummy. I am nursing heartaches and a litany of other ills. Butter on toast might just do the trick for a little one who is getting nothing else in the way of sustenance. You are probably thinking, “Why I am still here three hundred years later. Well, who else is going to do my work?” I chose to stay and watch over these children like a good shepherd. And, now you’re thinking, “Why are the children still here?”

That fragile flame of young life doesn’t always burn bright; it splutters and quivers, and in a tiny breath, it is gone. But, in that going, there is never enough time for goodbyes with mothers or relatives. Other times, there were never enough shillings and crowns to pay the bill. And, there is another problem here, for some boys and girls are still seeking their tokens, their crosses, their thimbles, their padlocks or keys. Initially, no questions were asked about babies and their parenting, and then over time, notes were kept of a little *thing* to identify a baby. These were not love tokens, but tiny objects to prove the identity of a child if the family was able to take their child back. Occasionally, parents left letters, but those who couldn’t read or write left hairpins or coins; objects that could be worn or carried. Many were in two halves, which matched, but after the governors put a selection of tokens on display in 1858, some identifiers were lost. Furthermore, there was the problem of lost receipts, which meant no one knew a child’s number.

I walk into a room with a long wooden table in it. It is sunken in the middle, looking as if too much worry, philanthropy

and paper were piled up on top. Then I peer into a display cabinet with the silver. The alms dish is a fancy one. That saw a lot of donations from those sophisticated ladies who helped Sir Coram's dream become a reality. It took seventeen years of campaigning for King George II to grant a Royal Charter. And, what a thing to do, for all those children. I look at the silver spoon. That was for collecting all the bits that sank to the bottom of the wine during communion. There's the cup for good behaviour, for self-respect. Now that's a tricky one, because even with our prayers to God, and all the good will in the world, a lot of my children still feel abandoned. My children are all sorts of ages. Some have been here since the hospital started in Hatton Garden, and before the second big hospital was demolished. I've been here since the beginning.

Frederick, my Fred, was brought here wrapped in a borrowed shawl. I remember it well. He had a dirty face, muddy tears and nothing else. He died of consumption when he was six; we think his mother died of the disease of the lungs too, but we can't be sure. It was 1851; I remember that because The Great Exhibition was in Hyde Park. He's still six. Hester, my Essie, arrived in 1922. A terrible fever she had. Newton, my Newt, is one of the tallest, but we're not sure if he's the oldest. He's about ten years of age. He had a terrible sore tummy in 1935. Harold has been with us since the beginning, in 1760. People say the small-pox took him, but actually, it was the vomiting. He's still eight and over the years, he's become known as Hal.

I had smallpox myself. All the staff had to have survived it but, there were all sorts of problems, and people think children will survive anything, bounce straight back after being slapped down, or sit up after a bad cough. It just isn't true. Matron was a formidable woman. Cook was a hard one as well, but she was too busy to have time to shout. Our children had to be resilient, with no hugs up until after the war in 1946. We nurses did everything we could to look after those babes: we sent them to the

countryside to wet nurses, or to foster families in Essex. A lot didn't return. Bless them all, all of them, under hatches in their little eternity boxes. I think some people are born to sing in choirs, clean pots, climb up chimneys, minister to congregations, and perhaps, some are born to die. It's a dreadful thought, and I pray God will forgive me. Every child has their own lessons to learn, their own errors to make, and their own hymn to sing.

Hal's mum was fifteen. She promised she'd be back, but she told a tale that made me turn cold in fear. I think I know what happened. You see, she wanted her mother's ring. It had a purple stone in it. Harold's birthstone. She knew it would be safer in the hospital, but the problem was, if she went back for it . . . She'd run away from the Household where she was a maid after the young man of the household had, *you know*, and she found herself with child, and she couldn't go to the workhouse because of her immorality. She never did come back with the ring, which she wanted so dearly to be Hal's token. Hal has the temporary token that she left. A pinecone. Its seeds are still in the pages of the register, where they made tiny stains on the page.

I tiptoe past the boys narking around on the stairs. I never had a child. All the officers, nurses and servants at the hospital had to be of good character and unencumbered with families. I suppose you think it's a shame, but I don't need your pity. These are my children, I love them all, even the ones who never got sick of semolina. I watch Essie pull up her socks, tug her white pinafore over her knees and pat her hair. She wouldn't like to have long hair, she wouldn't like all the knots and tugs in her curls, especially since girls have to brush their hair one hundred times . . . She looks up at the boys. Hal's small-pox bubbles are out again like something baking, his fringe is getting in his eyes, and yet, Newt's hair has been close shaven for as long as she can remember.

Essie skips down the stairs to the ground floor and into the gift shop. With two hands, she carefully takes down all the mugs

off the shelves and lays them on the floor by the entrance. Then she looks around the shop for something else that she can play with, to make into a doll, but there are only pens, pencils, cards and books. She picks up a pen and tries saying *hello* to it, but it just isn't any good, it hasn't any hands to wave at her. She looks down at her clothes. What has she, but her hands and feet? Maybe she can make a doll from one of her socks. She could stuff it with paper. She sits down on the floor, and picks at a hole in her sock where her little toe peeks through.

Essie pulls off her sock. She watches as it slides down her shin as if someone else were taking it off. She thinks that her sock looks like an extra-long leg. She wiggles it this way and that, until it falls off. Then she grabs her toes before anything else can grab them. She looks over her shoulder. The hall is empty. She pulls her baby toe, the next one, and the next ones until she gets to the big toe. The papa toe. She had no papa, or did she? Essie doesn't know. Sometimes when they are out walking, she looks at the faces, but there is never any papa there. For some reason, she thinks she'd know him, but for another reason, she decides he is with angels in heaven.



There is a great mystery in the realm of the in-between, and that is one of transience, for we ghosts simply come, and go. I oversee my charges, but I can't be here all the time. Time is a tricky thing. For you it's Mondays and Thursdays, midday and midnight, for us it is doorways and windows, falling sideways and never being caught. We are here one moment having a conversation, and are gone the next. Sometimes, I wonder if it is the nature of this place that creates this effect, because the museum isn't the children's home. They ought to be in one of the Hospitals at Hatton Garden, or Conduit Field in Bloomsbury, but because neither are there anymore, they regrouped in this

place. The foundlings deal with the drifting, the movement, better than me. Perhaps this is because they have no attachment to parents, or to the Museum, and only each other, but if I'm being honest, I think it is their innocence that doesn't question their immaterial reality. Sometimes, it takes all my concentration to not be pulled away and sometimes, I have to give-in to it because it could be a child calling me on the fringe of life.

The Foundling Museum is quiet during the day. Despite that, it always brings tears to visitors' eyes because, when terrible things happen—and they happen all the time—good things happen too. When there is love, there is no bogeyman under the stairs, or a little green man outside your window, neither is there a skeleton in your closet, nor a hand ready to snatch your ankle in the middle of the night. This why I stay, because it doesn't matter who loves them, so long as someone does. And, if no one loves them—God will. That is what I pray. I will always be here, for this it is my duty. The children will come and go, but I will stay in London and cast my eyes South over Holborn, Covent Garden, Seven Dials, and towards the West End. When the curator locks the door in the evening, I will be in the Museum, in case anyone arrives looking for me, during rush hour, or in the middle of the night.



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FIVE DEGREES**BRIAN HARRISON**

William Fisher placard. Photo credit: Brian Harrison

I WAS ALWAYS A BIT SKEPTICAL OF THIS IDEA OF SIX DEGREES OF separation—the idea that everyone can be linked to anyone else in no more than six connections—so I wasn’t expecting such a connection to one of London’s Victorian curiosities. I blame my father—don’t we all?—as he turned out to be the first connection.

I’d known my Dad had been a crafty spin bowler in his day, and had witnessed a demonstration of his skills when I was younger. It was during my teenage years, when parents are the most embarrassing people you can imagine, and I was mortified to discover not

only had Dad found one of those newsletters the school sends home (and you deliberately hide at the bottom of your bag) but he went on to phone the school to volunteer for the parents' team in their annual cricket match against the teachers. Well, who could you support in a game like that? It would be a bunch of middle-aged men making a spectacle of themselves, so it wasn't cool to support either side. Yet for the first time in years the parents won, and mainly because my Dad took six wickets for nine runs. Even my mates were impressed by the way he clean bowled the PE teacher, who would brag he'd once played at county level but never clarified which county it was.

That was when Dad first mentioned to me that he'd played cricket quite a bit when he was a youth, and later my aunts told me about his exploits for the Methodists vs the Anglicans matches at the parish fete. I also have an old photo of him with a ground-crew team vs an air-crew team during the war at an RAF base in north Africa. There's another photo where he's in cricket whites for RAF vs Army, and although England vs. Tunisia in 1943 wasn't a real test match, I found a scorecard for it among his service memorabilia and he was number seven in the batting order.

After the war, there can't have been much time for him to continue playing: there was a new job and he also married my Mum, I was born, then my sister; they moved a few times and then bought a house, and all this during post-war austerity and rationing. But then one weekend he suddenly decided he'd like to see Bradman's last appearance at The Oval. Don Bradman had been a star in Australian cricket since the 1920s and played in over 50 test matches. If it hadn't been for the war, who knows what he might have achieved. The Don, as he was called, is the second of these tenuous connections.

Everyone expected the game to be a big event and some queued for days beforehand to get in, but Dad only decided to go on the day itself; it was a Saturday and he'd worked in the

morning as many did back then. Over lunch, he announced to my Mum that he'd go on the off chance of getting in: there'd been rain overnight and play didn't start until mid-day, but by the time he got there it was almost over. Even though the match had started late and they'd taken an hour for lunch, by ten past three England had been bowled out for a pitiful total of 52 runs and many fair-weather spectators were leaving in dismay so he got in quite easily.

The first couple of Aussie batsmen—Morris and Barnes—put on 117 for the first wicket and so Bradman didn't go into bat until after 6.00 p.m. In his career he'd scored 6,996 runs in test matches and only needed four more for his career average to be over 100 runs per innings so he got a standing ovation on his way out to the crease. And wouldn't you know it? He was out for a duck on the second ball he received—a googly that went between his bat and pad onto the wicket. It must have been a long slow trudge back to the pavilion for him. Australia went on to make 153 before the close of play and the talking point afterwards was Bradman's duck rather than a career average of 99.94.

In the pubs around the ground they talked about it until closing time. No-one knew at that stage that Australia would take a commanding lead and Bradman would never bat in England again so there was plenty to speculate about. My Dad, as a Methodist, wasn't much of a drinker but he liked to chat and could nurse a pint to keep up appearances while talking and listening. His story of Bradman at the Oval was one of my favourite bed-time stories and I pestered him again and again for the details. After the match he said he spent his time in a corner of *The Beehive* talking with the elderly gent he'd been sitting next to in the ground (my Dad always called old men 'elderly gents.') George was in his mid-sixties and had been going to The Oval since he was a lad: he was Surrey through and through and

had no time for that lot at Lords on the other side of the river; George is the third of these connections.

As the evening wore on and the topic of Bradman became diluted with other concerns and interests, George said he was planning to retire in the autumn before the winter chills and dark gloomy mornings arrived. He was a railwayman over at the Nine Elms yards and was feeling his years; a whiff of gas in the trenches during the First War had left him a bit wheezy and he wasn't looking forward to another winter of river mist, smoke, and fog.

But George was approaching the point where another drink might be unwise. There were times when George just stared into his glass and hardly uttered a word so Dad thought it might be best if he could get him out of the pub and into some fresh air before steering him home.

"It's a bit crowded and stuffy in here, shall we step outside to stretch our legs?" He took George by the elbow and manoeuvred him outside.

"Which way are you heading George? Can I treat you to a taxi?" said my Dad.

"No taxis! No! No taxis! I can walk. I've not had that much," said George.

"How far are you heading?"

"Just the other side of the Walworth Road, stop fussing, I'll be alright from there."

"I'll walk with you. I can get a tube from the Elephant so it's not out of my way," said Dad. He was a bit of a Samaritan like that, wanting to make sure George got home safely.

They walked off through the warm August night and after a while George said, "Sorry if I was a bit abrupt back there."

"That's alright, I've heard worse."

"Trouble is, I have a bit of a thing about black cabs."

"We all have a thing about something."

"This cricket stuff. I got into it because of Billy. And with it

being the Aussies today, it all came back. Billy was cricket mad.”

“Billy?”

“Billy was my big brother. It’s hard to remember him clearly now, but he got me watching cricket.”

“How did that happen?”

“Well, it was the Aussies again, as I said. The first time they came over here.”

“That must have been a long time ago.”

“1886 it was. It was the first Test series. I was too young to go, I was only three, but Billy was going to sneak in. He could do that; he knew how to do it. He was nine. He said he’d take me to see WG in the nets before the Tests began. I didn’t know who WG was then, but if Billy said it was important to see WG then that was good enough for me.”

WG! George was talking about WG Grace, a cricketing legend to match Bradman, and probably the first of the sporting world’s superstars – he knew the crowds usually came to see him in person so he played a flamboyant style of cricket. It would be a mistake though to think that Grace is the fourth connection – it turned out to be Billy.

“And did WG live up to your expectations?” asked my Dad

“I never got to see him.”

“Oh?”

“That’s when it happened.”

“I see ...”

“Billy got run over—by a taxi. A hansom cab it was, in those days.”

“What?”

“It was my fault too. We were crossing a busy road and this big cart horse snorted and stamped its hoof. I was startled and jumped back but there was a hansom flying down the road. Billy pushed me out the way but the wheel of the cab caught his

shoulder and knocked him flat. Broke his neck, it did. So, we never got to see WG.”

“Oh my ...”

“And that’s why I don’t take taxis. The bugger didn’t stop, of course. He disappeared down the road with his fare. They were too important for the likes of us. The carter with the big horse was very nice though. He gave me an apple. The daft thing is, I think I can remember that apple more clearly than I can remember Billy now.”

And that was the story as my Dad told it to me, with The Don, and George, and Billy, and WG linked in a strange chain. I didn’t think much more about it until recently. I’d been wandering around the back of Smithfield market and was passing Postman’s Park when I remembered GF Watts’ Memorial to Heroic Self Sacrifice was there and thought I’d take another look. It’s quite unassuming but that doesn’t diminish its solemnity, with its celebration of civilian bravery and valour. It was then that one of the tablets caught my eye. I don’t know for certain that the George my father had been talking to was George Fisher, but I had a very strong feeling that he might have been—and my five degrees of separation were from the monument, not the cricketer. And I wondered if George had ever known it was there.



After spending too many years writing for other people, Brian Harrison now writes for himself. He was in the first year of Westminster’s MA Creative Writing (Writing the City) course and is pleased to see the programme flourish with the regular publication of WSJ. Brian has been published in *South Bank Poetry*, various anthologies of short stories, maintains his London-centric South of *Watford* blog, and has contributed to other blogs such as *Binge* and *SCA-UK*.

THE JOURNALIST

HÉLÈNE EZARD



Man in jail. Photo credit: Unsplash.com

She's seen it countless times before:
Events fuelling previously dormant imaginations, bringing
fantasy to the cemetery next door.
Gossip laying the foundations
for new local stories to add to the folklore,
from a tale that starts with graveyard desecrations.

As soon as the story is circulating,
the seed is planted, the process may commence.
Irrational thoughts are germinating,
fear is overriding common sense.

A vampire; two rival magicians competing,
building up the suspense.

Now she has to write a sensationalist piece.
Suddenly everyone is a witness,
they saw a spectre, a ghoul, a dead not in peace.
A mob of informants and hunters, it's good for business,
but it's hell for the police.
Graveyard break-ins, vandalisms; the crowd is fearless.

People's rational minds are fully conquered,
by the flying rumours of a monster.
Their sense of reality is altered
to the point that a psychic,
armed with a wooden stake and holy water,
enters a catacomb while searching
for the vampire that wandered.
He ends up in jail for believing the paper.



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SHADOWS BELOW THE CLOCK TOWER

SOPHIE HARRIS



London Skyline. Photo credit: Sophie C Harris

“LEGEND SAYS IF BEN STRIKES THIRTEEN TIMES AT MIDNIGHT, the city comes under attack. The Queen will be taken, the Trafalgar lions will tear us apart and the people of London will be slaughtered by the demons from below and London will be lost forever, to a far darker existence,” Frankie whispered, wiggling his fingers in a spooky manner.

Arnold scoffed. “For goodness sake Frankie. Night shift would be so much better if you would stop with the stupid ghost stories. Halloween’s next month, give it a rest.”

“I like that legend. It’s my favourite. Big Ben strikes thirteen, a war commences, the Queen goes kaput and we all go to hell. Ha! You should visit Hackney at midnight my friend. That’s

already a one-way ticket to hell on earth right there,” Frankie laughed.

Arnold playfully smacked him on the arm. “Who’s supposed to be leading this army of demons? Spring-heeled Jack?” he joked as he made some coffee.

From their office they heard the familiar sound to indicate midnight had arrived.

Dong! Dong! Dong!

Big Ben rang loudly, signalling the half-way point of their shift. Silence followed the thirteenth ring of the bells.

“That’s odd. What’s going on, Pete? We’ve only just finished renovating the bloody thing,” Arnold said into his radio to his colleagues in maintenance.

“No idea Arnie.” Pete’s crackly voice erupted from the radio speaker in Arnold’s hand. “Joe, Luca and I will go check it out. Might just be a loose nut, the big boy has never let us down before.”

“Let me know what’s going on.” Arnold sat back in his chair taking a swig of coffee. He’d been on shift for a few hours, but already it felt like a lifetime. He had ten days leave coming up and was going to Cornwall for a week to get away from city life; breathe in the fresh sea air. Well, that was if old Ben didn’t prove to be an issue for him. His radio sparked to life.

“Hey, Arnie, I can’t seem to see what the problem is. Hang on, there’s something here. Let me just...ARGHHH!”

“Pete? What’s happened? You OK?”

Silence. Arnold frowned at Frankie who dived into action, switching his screen to the cameras inside the clock. A panicked voice came through the radio.

“Arnie, send help. We’re under attack. I repeat, we’re under attack,” the voice sobbed.

“Joe? Joe, what do you mean? Who’s attacking you?”

“ARGHHH!” Joe screamed. The radio went dead.

“Arnie, we’ve got a serious problem.” Frankie said,

pointing at his computer screen. A group of about fifty shadowy creatures were filling the live feed, with more coming up from around the base of Big Ben's internal structure. Arnold looked at them in shock. What on earth? Suddenly a pair of red eyes looked at the two men straight down the camera lens. Frankie jumped. The creature before them was truly horrifying. Papercut, slit-like eyes burned a bright red as though hell itself was reflected in them; his smile was made up of grimy, jagged teeth, his face full of scars. He looked demonic and still, behind him, more creatures like himself were coming out of the floor. Zombies? Demons? Was Arnold stuck in a nightmare?

Next to him, Frankie was on the phone. "This is Code Red. We are under attack. Emergency procedure '231: Big Ben Thirteen' is in process. This is not a drill. Get moving. Now!"

The people on the other end of the phone went into an instant mode of frenzied chaos. This was not a drill, but it was still a situation no one had believed they would ever face. It was absurd. Surely, the security team were mistaken. Ask questions later, it had been agreed. As thousands of oblivious people continued their evening, the government and security services had sprung into action. They all had an assigned role which they executed without hesitation. No need for an obvious reaction, there were too many people to cause a mass panic. Friends out enjoying Soho's nightlife, students making use of a 24-hour library and coffee machines, the fellow late-night workers burning the candle at both ends, families enjoying time in their homes, tourists marvelling at the London landscape of bright night lights. So many people, so many lives to protect as silently as possible.

In Buckingham Palace the Queen's guards had gone into their own emergency procedure; to protect the Queen and Royal family at all costs. The Prime Minister, who had been enjoying a dinner date with his wife, was immediately called to action. This

was code red 231. This was serious. Big Ben had struck thirteen. The impossible had happened. London was under attack.

Back in the control room, Frankie and Arnold were stressed; confused as to what was happening as more shadows of impending doom surfaced from below.

“What the hell is happening, Arnie?”

“I have no idea. Looks like your little ghost story summoned Jack’s demon death army,” Arnie tried to joke.

Frankie looked at him with a face full of fear before turning back to stare at the computer screen. Inside Big Ben’s stomach, the red-eyed monster Spring-heeled Jack was instructing the shadow demons. He was speaking at the same time as pointing to the door that led outside, the door which the shadows flowed through.

Arnold ran to the window and baulked at what he saw. A stream of demons from the clock tower were now filling the immediate pavements outside Parliament Square. Arnold looked on in horror as a few late-night roaming tourists on Westminster Bridge were attacked. The ever-growing army of demons moved in unison heading towards Buckingham Palace. Arnold ran for his phone.

“This is Arnold Smith. You need to prepare yourselves. Get the soldiers in place. An army of them, they are headed your way. Protect our Queen.” He hung up, stood at the window and silently cried.

In Buckingham Palace there was a buzz of frantic activity. The Royal family had been moved and taken to safety deep in the Palace. Guards, armed police and Palace staff were all taking up positions of defence. The army was taking position outside. Suddenly a war they had never seen coming was upon them. Tanks and soldiers formed a grid of protection around the Palace and all other members of the royal family not residing at Buckingham Palace were being given their own military protection squad. After a few minutes the outside of the Palace was

secured, with the soldiers positioned. They were ready for an attack and had one goal...keep the people inside the Palace alive.

No one survived the attack that night legend says. No one was able to tell of the moment they saw the army of demon shadows approaching. A sea of stark darkness. The only light coming from the glare of the demons red eyes. One look at them had the soldiers momentarily frozen in fear at the sight before them. This was an enemy of a different kind. There had been no training for this type of foe and suddenly the soldiers felt helpless, as though all the hope had been drained out of them by the red eyes before them. Still, with a bead of sweat upon their foreheads, the loyal men and women took their combat stance and prepared for the battle ahead. The first few lines of soldiers began shooting. The bullets moved through the demons like a hand passing through water. They ran swiftly, reaching the first soldiers before the last round of bullets had left the barrels of their guns.

Screams echoed out as the demons fought the humans. Comrades shot each other in confusion as their minds were used against them. Others died of pure fright having looked the monsters in the eye up close. All around, soldiers fell to the floor and laid still. The soldiers further back began to panic. All around them their friends were being taken down as efficiently as blowing out a candle flame. Their bullets weren't causing any harm and even their grenades only injured the demons on the surface. They were going to lose. London was going to be taken. London was going to be lost. The officer in command dropped his head and prayed for a miracle. He didn't believe in God, but desperation called for even the most sceptical man to beg for help of any kind. He had to find a way to stop these demons.

"Sir." A voice broke him from his spiritual pleading. "We haven't got a hope in hell. These things, these creatures...nothing's working on them. What do we do?"

The commander looked at the soldier square in the face, "I have no bloody idea, Johnson."

Johnson ran off as the commander put his face in his hands, cursing the world and his job as he thought of his wife and daughter at home waiting for him. His troops were being slaughtered and there was nothing he could do. He stood and took in the situation, watching Johnson get torn open in the chest with the demon's clawed hand.

The sound of battle was deafening. Tanks, guns, grenades, screaming, crying and death itself spoke loudly. In amongst all this, the Commander heard a soldier's animalistic scream and was shocked at how brutal death could be when taking a soul.

The Commander had decided to retreat, to try and blockade the Palace instead, when the first of the heavy, majestically metallic animals sprang down in front of him, sending the demons in front flying. He looked on in fresh disbelief as the Landseer lions from Trafalgar Square blocked the path to the soldiers behind them. They prowled, back and forth, the demons who covered their ears to the deafening roars were knocked back. The army of soldiers watched in amazement as the lions tore apart the closest ones.

Spring-heeled Jack screeched angrily at the lions' entrance. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and slammed his fist on to the ground and screamed an awful high-pitched wail which shattered the ear drums of the soldiers in front of the gates, and damaged the ones of those further back. In that moment of Jack's outburst, the Landseer lions froze. After the last echo of Jack's scream had fizzled out the silence that followed was disrupted by the roar of a lion, which had now turned its back on the demons and was facing the soldiers. One by one each lion followed suit, until they stood in a line snarling at the troops.

The lions attacked. It only took minutes before the soldiers who had been stationed outside the gates were all dead. Jack revelled at the exact moment the gates of Buckingham Palace

were stormed. Sat upon a lion and joined by his main demon officers he rode through the golden gates to claim his Palace and city. The lions destined to protect their Queen were now loyal to Jack and his controlling powers. The Queen was nowhere to be found, long gone from her throne now ruled by Jack himself.

London died the day Big Ben struck thirteen, and Jack won the war he had planned and dreamt of for eons. Pubs lay empty, shops lay dusty, houses abandoned with people's belongings still neatly arranged inside. Not one human soul was left to tell the story of that night. The night our beautiful city was lost and laid forgotten, ruled by the demons who overpowered it. Not one soul, except me!

I'm biding my time, building my own army, preparing to take London back from the shadows below the clock tower.



Sophie Harris loves to read, write and explore new worlds that a writer creates. She has always loved writing but has recently enjoyed learning about and attempting new forms of writing and finding inspiration from the city of London itself.

NO DOORS BARRED

KUNAL RAJU



Man and boy. Photo credit: Friday Magazine

RAMPUR ATTRACTS HUNDREDS OF PILGRIMS FROM ALL ACROSS India. A village where Devotees, Pandits, and half-naked Sadhus—clad in flimsy saffron towels—congregate to pay homage to Lord Shiva. Legend has it that Shiva had made Rampur his temporary abode on earth thousands of years ago. During that time, he guaranteed the inhabitants complete safety from any external threats. Since then, villagers have placed their eternal faith in the Lord, and as a mark of this trust none of the houses in the village has a door to bar the entrance. Prized possessions are never locked away. This strange nonchalance stems from the belief that whoever tries to steal anything will

never be successful. But today that stands to change. Maybe. Maybe not.

For Vijay, nothing could pose as a better opportunity than this. The Rampur that comes alive with the cacophony of the pilgrims during the day makes barely a whisper in the dead of the night.

Doors open.

Village asleep.

Long shadows cast by huts under the full moon made for a perfect cover. Well camouflaged, like a leopard on a prowl, except for his glinting eyes, Vijay tip-toed nearer to a hut and slunk in through a rectangular passage in the wall where originally a door should have been. The man, his wife and their two children wrapped in their threadbare blankets were sleeping in blissful ignorance. A sudden snore and flapping of the sheets startled the surprise visitor, but silence returned just as quickly as it had left. In a corner, under a miniature statue of Shiva, a wad of fifteen thousand rupees lay in the open. It looked as if Shiva was supervising the security of the neatly-bundled notes himself. Vijay suffered a bout of momentary hesitation, but his hands stretched out, as if they were acting on their own accord. With a few deft movements, the heist was complete.

Vijay breathed a heavy sigh of relief, as he stepped out of the house. All throughout, he had held his breath, fearing that the simple act of inhaling and exhaling would wake up the four from their peaceful slumber. Now, making his way out of the village before dawn was the highest priority. He quickened his pace, breaking into a jog, followed by a brief run and then a few minutes of rest. For the next three miles it almost turned into a routine. Jog. Run. Rest! Jog, Run, Rest! The calluses on his feet stung each time they made contact with the rugged ground. But he had to keep going, not for himself, but for Aai (Mom in

Marathi). Aai was suffering from Tuberculosis. Her days were strictly numbered. The only hope that remained was to take her to Bombay, where health services were far superior, but inaccessible to the likes of Vijay. However, Tuberculosis was the lesser of the two evils. The real culprit had been lurking in the dark recesses of Vijay's home, long before he was born, like a spider, spinning its cobwebs, spawning a hundred offsprings that gave birth to another hundred. That six-legged creature called POVERTY!

"It wasn't that tough," Vijay thought to himself. "All those stories about thieves ending up dead or relinquishing their immoral pursuits were lies, myths perhaps! Here I am, very much alive and successful. Good job Vijay! Good job!"

Good job Vijay! Good job! The words floated in the air like wafts of hot steam amidst a night that was surprisingly cold for October.

Sssshhhhhhhhhhh. A sudden gust of wind gave rise to a whirlpool of dust. Trees swayed and leaves rustled. The shrill voices of bats echoed like a high-pitched crescendo. For a minute, the road ahead was barely visible. The dense jungle on either side seemed to have come alive with nocturnal sounds to nip Vijay's overconfidence in the bud, rising up together as if to say: *Not yet Vijay! Not yet!*

Mile after mile, the road grew darker with no end in sight. Trudging along the way, weighed down by the bundle of cash and a somewhat guilty conscience, Vijay came across a poster of Amitabh Bachchan. The Hindi movie star was set to release his new film 'Agneepath' next month. Amitabh's angry and menacing eyes on the poster stared down into Vijay's. Eyes that seemed to be aware of Vijay's unscrupulous conduct. They commanded him to go back, to give up or face the wrath of Shiva!

Fear rose like bile in Vijay's stomach. A strange bottomless feeling. He knew he wasn't alone anymore. He sensed an

uncanny presence around him. A presence that seemed to reassert its authority with the movement of branches, the crunch of dry leaves and the hooting of owls. Vijay broke into a run, passing an uprooted tree that had fallen by the wayside. The muffled thud, each time his feet hit the ground, echoed, giving him the impression that someone was following him. Running behind him when he ran; slowing down when he dropped his pace: footsteps that worked in tandem with his.

Another poster of Amitabh Bachchan swept by. Those eyes watched him struggle frantically to find a way out of Rampur. Sweat trickled down Vijay's forehead. His pupils dilated. He passed another tree that had fallen by the wayside.

The branches shook more wildly; the crunching of the leaves grew louder; the owls hooted cheerfully, as if gloating over Vijay's misfortune; the echoing footsteps were still hot on Vijay's heels.

And yet another poster of Amitabh Bachchan.

And yet another fallen tree.

It was on the third circuit that Vijay realised he had been doing the rounds of the same path over and over again.

Breathless. Dazed. Afraid. Panic tightened its vicious grip around Vijay and rendered his critical faculties useless. He felt remorse for the sin he had committed and promised never to do it again. He sat by the fallen tree. The sound of the footsteps came to an abrupt end, as if the entity they belonged to had stopped short in its tracks. An eerie silence descended over the place. Breath came out in gasps and punctuated the silent night. The wad of fifteen thousand rupees slipped out of Vijay's pocket. As soon as he bent down to retrieve the bundle, he felt a gentle tap on his right shoulder. He couldn't summon the strength to look around. He knew it was Death, come to push him into the dark abyss from where no-one ever returns. Another tap on the left shoulder, this time a little harder. Vijay fell to ground like a log, his body stiff, his breath still.

The next day word went around the village that a man lay dead near the fallen tree. People gathered to catch a glimpse of the corpse. A broken branch was hooked onto the threads of his shirt on the left shoulder. A squashed fig (presumably fallen off from the tree) stained the right side red. Later, an autopsy revealed that he had died from a severe cardiac arrest. The cash in his clenched fist made him look like a thief on the run. On that day, beliefs were reaffirmed.



The setting of this Urban Legend takes inspiration from an actual village called Shani Shingnapur in Maharashtra, India, where it's not unusual to spot a doorless house. Locals believe that their village is guarded by the presence of Lord Shani. Strange and unbelievable as it may sound, there are no cases of robberies and crimes officially confirmed so far. Anyone who tries to challenge the prevailing notion and commit a crime will have to repay for his sin, the villagers affirm.



Kunal Raju has worked as a writer for two years in Mumbai, India. He wishes to pursue an MA in Creative Writing to broaden his horizons. Besides writing, he enjoys reading, taking photographs, bike rides... and occasionally going to the gym too!

URBAN FOX

KIM WATERS

*Fox. Photo credit: Unsplash*

Tonight there are no foxes,
but it's easy to sketch a shadow
between the strokes of a railway track,
static currents crinkling overhead

which is what the fox, wired for sound,
listens to in the deadbeat heat of the night
or maybe the smell of a captor
coming for it with a close-range gun.

I have never seen one up close,
but love the sound of its name,
conjuring something archaic, shifting,

beyond the now. A fallen creature,

it could be mistaken for a dingo;
both belong to the same
milky dusk and the trick of a railway
line contouring itself in space.

My hand ricochets across the page
filling the white noise of night
with lisps of blackened fingerprints
and wheezened dust, as the urban fox

waits beside the charcoal tracks,
pausing in its cloud-breath, following
its own spool of thought, answerable
to no one but the sun and the moon.



Kim Waters is a teacher living and working in Melbourne whose poetry has appeared in newspapers and journals including *The Australian*, *The Shanghai Literary Review* and *Going Down Swinging On-line*.

ROSE-RINGED PARAKEETS

WILL OTTLEY



Rose-ringed parakeet. Photo credit: Pixabay.com

JONATHAN DROVE TO PRIMROSE HILL VILLAGE TO HAVE BRUNCH with his friend Lucy: an ex-futures trader from New York.

He was early and plugged in his car to charge before walking up the hill. Canary Wharf hovered in the mist above the City, and below it four hundred acres of Regents Park was in autumnal colours.

A flock of parakeets appeared with the now familiar flash of green and shrill squawks. He was reminded of an urban myth about Jimi Hendrix releasing the original pair of rose-ringed birds near Carnaby Street in the swinging sixties.

He checked his watch and hurried back down the hill.

Lucy was sitting at an outside table in the Sun. She stood out

in her checked wool suit, with black and white leopard print heels. A couple of businessmen glanced at her from across the street. She had a penchant for exquisite diamond watches and jewellery, so much so that she'd once been mistaken by airport customs for a jewellery smuggler.

She'd ordered poached eggs with a butter lettuce salad and dribbled copious olive oil all over it as Jonathan sipped his coffee.

"So aside from the art exhibition, are you in London for any business, Lucy?"

"Actually I have a meeting with a deep tech start-up at Silicon Roundabout after lunch—they're way ahead of the competition, and need an Angel investor like me to fund them."

They'd both invested in AI start-ups having compared notes for a couple of years. He now supported disruption, on the basis that tech and humans are stronger together. Embrace it, or join the dinosaurs.

"Of course any country without strong tech in the next five years is in trouble. They'll never catch up. It's game over," continued Lucy as she removed her chic sunglasses, resting her intense and slightly playful hazel eyes into his. Her left eye was communicating vibrantly, whilst her right eye seemed to be downloading and analysing.

"Companies are buying others to kill off their competition. Those fakers are targeting UK intellectual property, and Deep Tech Start-ups. They are stealing your national champions right under your noses, who would have thought?" she said. "'Being seen to be open for business and innovation' after Brexit is one thing. 'Selling the family silver' is quite another."

"I totally agree with you Lucy. We need—"

"London's strong in Fintech right now," she continued. "However, given that most successful innovators in Tech are now polymaths driving disruption, it's a no brainer that—"

“Yeah, we urgently need more PhDs and investment, or we are vulnerable.”

“Exactly, and in the meantime across the pond, we’re pulling away from you.”

“Well, maybe we’ll leverage our next tech innovations ourselves,” said Jonathan, although he wondered how many more Turings and Berners-Lees London could produce.

Waving Lucy off in a cab, he walked back to Primrose Hill, passing dog walkers and trendy yoga-clad runners, before crossing Prince Albert Road into Regents Park. Marauding flocks of rose-ringed parakeets now descended onto the trees, reminding him of an article about them threatening vineyards on the South Downs.

He walked along the edge of London Zoo sensing something staring at him through the trees. He glanced around him—was he imagining it? Then looking through the leaves he locked eyes with a well-camouflaged Siberian tiger, through golden boughs, lounging on a high wooden platform. He wondered if camels in an adjacent enclosure were now used to having this apex predator in their midst. In the same way that humans project harmlessness onto sociopaths, giving them the benefit of the doubt. What could possibly go wrong?



Will Ottley is author of the illustrated book, *Mountain Garden*. A freelance travel writer, he grew up in Suffolk, England and has travelled extensively. His experiences found expression in an inspirational story about a white stag, a book he always wanted to read. London-based admirer of art, literature and the natural world.

RIDING PILLION

OLIVER LEROTH



Gravestone. Photo credit: Dawn Ostlund

I TOOK THE CALL ABOUT THE MANGLED LEG IN A DARKENED corner outside a pound-in-a-pint pub. But it wasn't my call, it was Austell's.

Two hours earlier he rapped the window of my car. I lifted my head from the steering wheel, seeing his face sodden with October rain and his shirt stained and ragged. It was easy to mistake him for one of the addicts who prowled the entrance. The ones that traded pill packets at waist level with gowned-up shadows resting on drip stands. I wiped my eyes and dropped the window an inch.

“Jon. Let’s get a drink,” he said.

He dragged me down the Whitechapel Road, his head fidgeting on his shoulders, bobbing under half-closed shutters and down dark alleys bathed in neon, my sweat seeping into the tight grasp of his hand.

“This’ll do,” he said, as we fell upon The Stag.

It was the third night that week I’d been for a drink. The case had been escalated to gross negligence with a court date set. I had started to lose my grip; the fault line that cracked through me the day she died was widening. But I suspected for Austell he was already halfway into the abyss. He was disintegrating, even before it happened; and he was holding the knife.

We shuffled forward in the queue and I could see, between the slick-haired heads of suited city boys, the red brick hospital building looming high above the twisted poles of dismantled market stalls. I sucked back a wave of nausea. I hated the place I still had to go to everyday and pretend to care.

Austell disappeared for a moment and then ducked back in the queue. “Fuckers told me to wait like everyone else.” He pulled at his tie, his famous hands shaky, his face puffy and agitated.

“How’s Jane?” he asked, squeezing my shoulder absently and arching his neck down the line.

I shrugged. “Not good.”

Inside, a maroon paisley carpet reflected off cheap vinyl sofas and glum men with briefcases sat at the bar, hunched over lagers with no head. The light was artificial, smudgy; the kind of room with no windows, where it was impossible to tell the time.

“Christ,” I said, looking around. Austell grinned and waved a hand at the bar. We sat down and two vodka sodas arrived in pint glasses smeared with dishwasher grease.

After the first drink he stopped twitching. After the third my ear was doused in his spit.

"We did nothing wrong," he shouted over Phil Collins. "You did nothing wrong." His finger prodded my chest.

I nodded along, my mind in another place, back in that operating theatre, under the harsh sterile glow, our masked faces peering into the hole filling with the pure red blood of unblemished youth. She was a girl riding pillion. Driver RIP.

The music stopped and a woman in a bikini with an acquiescent smile paced around the bar with a tankard, collecting pound coins. I dropped two in. Austell waved for more drinks.

It was his case, the girl. A splenic laceration. A catastrophic haemorrhage. Difficult, but he could manage, or at least at one time he could. My brogues were on and I was waiting for the lift when Aziz had caught me, breathless from his sprint down the corridor, his eyes telling me all I needed to know—Austell was in trouble, again. When I arrived the systolic was 40 and he was tremulous and pale, his feet painted scarlet. I was too late. I still don't know why I peeled back the drapes to see her face.

I left the next round on the bar untouched. He drank it and then two more.

"You saved me," he was saying, his breath lurid and sickly sweet. "You all saved me." But we should never have propped him up for so long.

He waved a fifty at the girl in a purple crop top, with the small roll of fat, who was standing hopefully nearby. "You want this," he yelled, "then suck my dick."

Outside I noticed the fifty still clenched in Bianca's hand as she helped me carry him to the curb. We propped him on a bench, runnels of sweat pooling at his brow. I looked at him lolling in his seat, an arm hung pathetically in a puddle on the pavement and I knew I was culpable. I'd known and had done nothing. I looked back at the red-bricked building and saw the helicopter landing on the roof. Two minutes later Austell's pocket vibrated, grinding against the wooden slats of the bench.

“Probably that bitch from the bar,” he slurred, his eyes striving to stay open.

It vibrated again but he didn't stir. I took the call.

“Is this the on call surgeon?” the voice said. I wasn't, but he must be. I wanted to strangle him right there. It was happening again. I want to lie him on his back and let the vomit choke him.

“Yes,” I said, watching Austell twitch in his sleep.

It was a white leg. Fragments of tibia jutting from the skin like bomb wreckage. A girl riding pillion, driver RIP. I dropped the phone and started running, not looking back.



Oliver Leroth is an NHS plastic surgeon and has published widely in academic literature. He has discovered a passion for fiction and writes to unwind after a day in theatre. His stories draw on the rich experiences he has gained from thirteen years in medicine.

A DREADFUL DEAL

ADRIAN RADU



Sunset. Photo credit: Adrian Radu

SINCE HENRY STARTED HIS NEW JOB AS BAR MANAGER, HE BEGAN to pass in the front of the House of Lords, although it wasn't the shortest way home. He came on this path as if charmed by a magical power. He wasn't aware that the Palace of Westminster attracted him as a magnet, and a mix of familiarity and nostalgia beyond comprehension rose in his heart the whole time he walked in this area.

Striding in the night, as usual, Henry watched, enchanted by the great royal buildings and, inspired deeply, he felt to absorb in himself a sense of history from eternity. At that very moment a robust man, wearing a big hat, talked to him.

“Hello Henry. Happy to see you, young man!”

“Hello sir.” Henry looked surprised at the man with the big hat.

“How’s it going with your bar business?”

Henry realised only then where the person in the night knew him from. The man with the big hat, moustache, and long beard, who looked like a musketeer, saw him at the bar. Yet, Henry didn’t remember his face, although he should: the man in front of him was quite different, a man of old fashion, as from other ages. “Most likely he is an actor,” Henry was thinking.

“Last time I wanted to talk to you,” he said, “but, as usually, you were very busy. I have to tell you that I really appreciate your flair for business.”

“Sir,” Henry interrupted him, “what is this about?”

“Of course, I won’t waste your time. In short, I am planning to start my own business, and I was thinking of hiring a capable young man as you are. I don’t have knowledge about business, but I have good capital. What do you say?”

If until then, Henry had been surprised and annoyed by the weird man, hearing about money, his attitude changed completely. He had been working since he was sixteen years old, and in his already long work experience, he had set a few rules which he reminded himself of every day: money is the most important thing in our world; nobody is trustworthy, and, as an inference of the first two premises, he should do anything in his power to earn money and to have power, regardless the morality, or other trifles, such as friendship, or.... With these divine rules, he got the position as bar manager. Chloe Paton, his girlfriend, was bar manager before him. She was six years older, yet he controlled her all the time. The owner trusted her one hundred percent, although she wasn’t so honest. When Henry proposed stealing money with an easy scheme, she accepted. Just that he, her lover, had a better plan. At the right moment, Henry betrayed her: she was fired, and he became manager at this important and lucrative bar from central London. It wasn’t his first betrayal.

“What is your business about?” Henry asked, trying to take a professional approach.

“I’d like to have my own pub, something outstanding, with completely novel decoration, and Italian food. I have my own place not far away from here; as I told you, money isn’t a problem, I have half of a million right now.”

Hearing about the outstanding amount of money, Henry was suddenly held by a powerful greed. At the same time, his philosophy of life triggered an alarm: is this person normal, is he honest, what is the trick here? Guy Machiavelli, as the man presented himself, seemed to perceive his doubts.

“Young man,” he said holding Henry’s arm, “I can see that all this could be weird, but I am telling you something about myself: I am quite eccentric, moreover, I like to invest in young people. Money has never been an issue for me. You know what? Let’s talk about this tomorrow!”

Guy gave his address to Henry, who agreed to meet him the second day. Henry was intrigued by the occurrence, including the strange surname of the man, but knowing that he loved Italian food, he guessed that *Machiavelli* should be an Italian name.

In the next two weeks, Henry has become a shadow for his new associate. Guy’s house was open to Henry all the time, whether day or night. The safe with half of a million was controlled by himself, although nothing had been done yet for the pub. Actually, Henry hasn’t seen the place yet. He didn’t care about the project. He had his own plan, and this plan was working perfectly. He needed only to find the perfect timing to achieve his ambitions. This occasion came sooner than he hoped, when Guy informed him that he will leave London for a long holiday in Italy, where he had relatives.

“You have anything you need. I wrote the pub’s address for you in the notebook. It’s on the desk in my office. Carry on with our project! I am sure you’ll do very well.”

Guy left Henry with these words. The truth is that Henry never checked the notebook to see the address. Not long after Guy Machiavelli disappeared, Henry emptied the safe, and stored the great amount of money in a better place for him.

October had almost ended. Henry resigned from his job, surprising everybody. Moreover, he surprised them by the reason for his resignation: he pretended to be ready to enjoy the Catholic Order of the Jesuits. He was going to become a monk. It was a lie, of course, but a lie which intrigued Henry himself, because this idea came suddenly in his mind, as if he really had believed it for a long time. And that should have been all; he was going to enjoy his new life, with all the time he had for himself. But things took a crazy and unexpected turn. Everything started on the same day as his resignation.

It was the first of November, when he had the first nightmare. He seemed to be attending a great festival, when a huge crowd began to gather around an effigy tied to a stake ready to be burned. It was bonfire night. A large amount of wood, logs and dry branches were set around the stake. Two men appeared with torches, ready to light the fire. At that moment, he realized he was the only one to see that inside the effigy was actually a living person, shouting terrifyingly for help. The crowd made such an awful noise that nobody could hear his cries. Henry started to push the people in front of him, trying to make his way to the stake. Nobody seemed to care about his struggle and about the person who was going to be burnt alive. He wanted to shout, but the words were stuck in his throat; the sound refused to come out from his mouth. The fire was lit and he woke up in the same moment, terrified.

All day after, Henry was limp. He languished, and didn't feel well to go outside, even though it was splendid autumn weather. Unaware, he was expecting the night. Although the night could have been scary, and he was frightened, an irresistible force held him in its power. After the sunset, the night

came quickly, filling Henry's being with its power. He lay in bed, in complete darkness, waiting to fall asleep. But the sleep refused to come. Only late, after midnight, completely exhausted, he fell asleep, going straight into the same dream. The effigy was at the stake, and this time he knew that inside was a real person. He started to make his way among the crowd, and he got in time to the stake. The two men were ready to accomplish their mission and to light the pyre. Henry stopped in front of them:

"You can't do this; a person is trapped inside!"

The two executioners watched each other seriously, then looked at Henry with a sarcastic smile.

"It's only a dummy; it's Guy Fawkes!"

In that very moment, Henry looked at the stake, and saw the face of the person trapped inside. He screamed like a baby and jumped from his bed terrified. The person trapped inside was his associate, Guy.

The room was dark. Henry was shuddering. He got off the bed puzzled, and went to the window, pulling away the curtain. The light from outside penetrated in the room, projecting shadows everywhere.

Henry became obsessed with his nightmare. Everything seemed so real but he had no clue. Yet, after a long mental exertion, something came to mind. His original lie regarding the monastery turned out to offer a solution. The next day he went straight to the Mount Street Jesuit Centre but the receptionist considered him suspiciously, trying to understand what he wanted.

"I am looking for somebody to talk to about spiritual things," Henry answered with a slight stammer. At that very moment, a monk of indeterminate age with thick eyeglasses appeared and heard about Henry's request.

"Follow me!" he said, walking away without watching if Henry followed or not.

The receptionist exhorted Henry to hurry with theatrical gesticulations. Henry followed Father Clement, as the monk presented himself, into a small library with the walls covered by books. On the desk there were a few really ancient books, and a laptop. The monk invited Henry to sit, examining his exhausted face, without asking anything.

They were watching each other silently. Henry understood that the monk was waiting for him to speak.

"I have terrible nightmares. I just felt I had to come here because I need help. I am sure my life is in danger."

"Demonic attacks?" Father Clement asked with a calm voice.

"I don't know, maybe. What do you know about Guy Fawkes? In my nightmare I try to save him from the pyre."

"Did you take something from him? Did you?"

Henry was mute by surprise. His face became pale.

"This man died centuries ago," he tried to argue.

"Of course. What did he give you? Gold, money?"

Henry started to cry, covering his face with both hands. He couldn't hold it in any longer. He told father Clement the entire story, without hiding anything.

"How can this be possible? All this situation is madness!" Henry shouted.

Father Clement took off his eyeglasses and massaged his tired eyes. He waited for Henry to regain his composure, then explained in a low, but confident voice.

"As we all know, our history began with the big betrayal: Lucifer betrayed God, his Father. Two thousand years ago, Judas betrayed our Lord. The dark angels gained a special authority in this field. When Guy was captured, he was punished by human laws and sentenced to be hanged, but in the spiritual world he faced another trial. He was sentenced to be burned at the stake every year on 5th of November, unless he found another traitor to replace him. Somebody who then betrays Guy Fawkes himself. This last development brings an equilibrium offered by the

angels of the light. Everything in the universe must be in equilibrium. Since then, every year Guy has found somebody to be burned in his place.”

“But it’s madness! I should have known before.” Henry cried loudly, feeling the looming punishment. “What can I do? Do I have any chance to get rid of this?”

“Of course. Fix your mistake! Give the money back and keep your promise as you said!”

Henry was exuberant when he left Father Clement. He was going to be free again, and to avoid the cruel punishment. He decided to walk home although the road was quite long. On his way back, the doubts started to attack him. It was only a dream, he thought. The monk was a man who lived in his imaginary world; why trust such a man? Should he get rid of half of a million because of a nightmare? All that evening and far in the night, Henry had this painful fight with himself. He had followed his golden rules, and he succeeded. Why give up now? Although, when sleep approached, the terror returned: he might be burnt on the stake! Therefore, he decided: first thing next day he would put the money back in Guy’s safe and to put an end to this business. After the tough decision, he fell asleep as a baby. His soul was relieved.

However, early in the morning, the front door slammed with a terrible thud, and he was blinded by the beam of many flashlights. He jumped from bed screaming.

“Don’t move, you’re under arrest!”

When finally, he was completely awake, and the light was on, he saw about ten policemen in his house. He was cuffed, and kept under arrest. In their search they found the case full of money under his bed. Once in the police station, he discovered that the police had received an anonymous phone call informing them that he had stolen the money. His explanations about the business were received with scepticism and irony by the investigator and he was put in a cell while further enquiries were made.

Henry understood from his lawyer that the police were looking for the owner of the safe, his associate Guy Machiavelli.

It was the 5th of November, the fateful day when the cursed effigy would be burned. Henry was still in his cell, waiting for the end of the police investigation. He wasn't afraid anymore; he had decided to do things right, to give the money back and so forth. It wasn't his fault that the police prevented this. However, he felt remorse for his stupidity. To keep the money in his own house! Only an idiot would do such a thing! But he had to live with his mistakes, who knew for how long? With these shadows in his mind, Henry fell deeply asleep, after so many nights of torment.

When he woke up the next day, he believed first to be in another dream. A lovely blonde lady was looking at him carefully, smiling in a professional manner. He was obviously lying on a bed, and from the things around him he realized that he was in a hospital.

"Hello. Welcome back, dear Henry," she said. "Try to not move too much, and don't be scared; I'm going to tell you what happened last night. Nobody knows how, but your cell caught fire. When the guards finally arrived, everything was burned, but miraculously, you are alive, and not so bad. In a few months you will be back on your feet."

Henry wanted to shout his desperation, but an acute pain stopped him. He felt as if he had been baked, and his nose was still filled with smoke. It looked like the doctor understood his anguish and was trying to console him.

"The good news is that the owner of the money confirmed your story. Every allegation against you has been dropped."

Henry didn't answer. He didn't care about any allegation. Almost all his body seemed covered by medical tape. He would be in care for many months and would wear the scars for the rest of his life.

"Your colleague is a very kind person. He promised to pay

for your cosmetic surgery, and to help you financially. He sent you this letter.”

She opened the letter, and held it up so Henry could read it. As he read it however he began to tremble.

My dear friend,

It was a pleasure doing business with you. Moving the money from the safe was a great idea! I never doubted you, and I am looking forward to meeting you next year at the same time. Knowing you so well, I am sure you will still be available, and you can always rely on me being here, too.

Your loyal associate and friend,

Guy Fawkes



With a PhD in Philosophy, Adrian Radu likes to write prose fiction, screenplays, and sometimes poetry. His main interest remains Philosophy of Religion and Theology.

THE LOOK OF THE DEAD

KIRA RÜCKEMANN



Highgate Cemetery West, Egyptian Avenue. *Photo credit: Jennifer, Wikimedia*

THEY ALWAYS SAY THAT CAMDEN IS SO FULL OF LIFE AND colours the year round. And they lose their whole sense of mood, I tell you, if anyone from outside asks about THAT ONE rumour. You see no-one like me must be reminded of it, but since you just stopped by I'll tell you this: Westside. It all started there. Nobody knows the exact year, but it was always Thursday and specifically the fourth one of every single month. Definitely. No one can be wrong about that. And none of us cannot be so frightened by it any time we're close to the gate, or even on the street where Highgate cemetery is. Rumour has it that if you go there on that specific day late in the evening, you may cross your

fate in a bloody way. I'd call it "asking for trouble" if you want to understand better.

It's simple. Just buy a ticket, then follow the main path from the colonnade. Keep walking straight forward until you reach Egyptian avenue and the main gate with the rotten columns: that is where the fun starts. Now just pass the gate and walk deep into the circle, then take the route right. It only takes three laps. On a freaking Thursday. Keep looking at all the grave entrances. If you don't focus and just keep wandering, and just looking like I said at every entrance, you will end up with those eyes watching you from one of these graves inside. And then you'll realize that there is no other, just you, watching yourself from those dark shadows. Bizarre, yet frightful with no specific facial expression. Just keep staring, until you'll be unable to say which one is the right one and which is real. I saw that—myself, him, it, or whatever name you give to that—thing. Lee, Joe, and others have been there and done it too. But none of us never, ever, went back to take a look for the second time. None of us, because we know what happened to Russell.

Well, Rus... That happened five years back, but I still feel like it was yesterday. He'd just moved here from Cornwall. Tried to do as best he could to blend into our group. We were almost done with our degrees at uni and decided to test out this rumour, to give it a shot. I guessed back then it was probably all just fake and we'd let it go like all the other fake stories and challenges, made up by people—'cause it's London, duh. But no. This time we were wrong. Definitely.

And then it went on, like some Domino show with tiles falling one after another. We went together once and ended up with chills on our arms and that drilling sensation of being too transparent for something. Almost all of us had this feeling like we don't want to do it never, ever again. But not the Russey, oh no, not him. Russell did it a third time, and then he kept mumbling about replacing himself with "that," but we were so

drunk, it we thought it was just drunk rambling, you know. But. But... he did it—I mean for a fourth time. And then, suddenly, there was nothing. Emptiness. Silence. No contact with him at all. All I remember was some sort of police investigation going on, with no sign of Russell anywhere. There was no contact with him or any of the others who'd tried this walk more than twice. I never saw any of them again. Ever.

So, shoosh. Just... keep it to yourself, mate. Stay in the corner, you know. Keeping it low is the best ya' can do. Nothing more. Unless you want to end up like your last reflection in the mirror. Gone.



Kira Rückemann likes like visiting forgotten places. And keeping the witchcraft memento in her head. Someone once said she should write, or she will waste the time. And so she does—waste time on writing.

THE LEGENDS OF LONDON

JAMES HAYWARD



View from the Shard. Photo credit: James Hayward

I SUPPOSE IT'S AN INTERESTING CONCEPT, THE IDEA OF AN URBAN Legend. What is it exactly?

I suppose, one way to look at it is something that may have happened, but nobody can be sure of the truth. Aliens, Area 51, Nessie,

Bigfoot, Beast of Bodmin Moor, all them kinds of things.

London's got its share mind you.

They say the old Aldwych station is haunted you know? Built in the heart of Theatreland, on top of where a theatre once stood, and the ghosts of that theatre, the actors who walked the boards no more, remained. Ironical in a sense, especially since Aldwych station itself is a ghost—closed in '94 when the old lifts from 1907 could take no more; and now they sit, eerily quiet, like statues to old engineering, never to move again.

And what of Jack the Ripper? Nobody ever worked out who he was, did they? He was real alright; it'd be difficult to deny with the long list of his victims. Yet, they never were able to conclude his identity, were they? They reckon at least five people could have been him!

Yet, you can still walk the streets and trace many of his paths to this day; following in the footsteps of one of the world's most famous, yet proven urban legends.

Then there's the river itself. The Thames? You might ask. How could something so ordinary be considered an urban legend? Maybe it's not a legend by itself, but it sure holds many a legend-like secret still, from the entire history of our fair city.

You still hear whispers of the odd skeleton, or even corpse washing up on the sticky, oozing mud of the banks at low tide, of how priceless treasure hides in the mud, waiting to tell us of a past long before the modern metropolis grew over it.

Then there are the people who make up the city. People like you, or I. How are we urban legends? Well, I suppose we aren't quite yet.

In every day that we add ourselves to the rich and storied tapestry that is the city of London, with its influence from the past, the present, the future, and the wider world that has made London their home for life and business, we write our own legend. Sure, we may never become an infamous mystery killer, or haunt a tube station, or heaven forbid, wash up on the grim banks, but we all have a story to tell.

Maybe that is the true point of an urban legend; to tell a story and keep the memories of our city's history and it's many peculiar tales alive. And hey, for all you know, one day all the books might be talking about your legend in the city. Let's just hope it doesn't involve anything too strange!



Born and raised in the UK, but strongly interested in the culture and media of Japan and the Far East, James Hayward wants to travel and explore more of Europe and the world, to see new places and experience more cultures.

BY THE TWITCHING OF THE CURTAINS

DIANE BENJAMIN



Window. Photo credit: Unsplash.com

SOMEONE ONCE TOLD ME THAT A ‘NEW TOWN’ IS A RUNAWAY town, full of new starts and re-inventions.

1. ARRIVAL

A small van pulled up and came to a stop in front of the house. A youngish couple appeared from inside the van looking up and down the street with furtive glances as they approached the front door. The young man was of a slim build with slightly sloping shoulders, a scowl across his forehead and divot between his eyes gave an impression of meanness about his features. He

had the key readied in his hand as they walked up the short pathway to the door. The woman was far fuller faced and bodied than the man and an inch or two taller, making him seem all the more spindly in comparison. The fullness of her body contoured in a pleasing curvaceous manner, which, together with her height gave her a striking look that probably brought her admiring glances. She walked with quick tiny steps. He opened the door ushering her inside with a slight push to her back and in a moment both disappeared inside.

They hadn't noticed the twitching of the curtains from the opposite row of bungalows. Small darting eyes summed up the couple by every movement, fibre of clothing, turn of hair and outline a countenance. The twitching curtains belonged to a neat tidy-looking bungalow with clean shiny windows and thickly draped gleaming white net curtains. Climbing roses wound their way round the door and windows billowing with blousy generous red blooms.

"Hmmm, looks like trouble to me," observed the watcher out loud.

"A small, mean man I would say and did you see the way he pushed her? The less practiced observer would maybe interpret it as a loving, guiding hand. But I have seen such tiny gestures disguised as love but which really mean control.

"Mark my words tears and terrors are to come," the watcher continued their conversation out loud in the manner of those accustomed to spending time alone with imagined companions of non-specific persons. This came naturally to her as she had spent a lot of her childhood alone, playing in the woods and fields around the small cottage rented to her father on a large country estate, where he was head game keeper.

Mrs Simpson had lived alone in her bungalow since her son had moved out twenty years earlier. She was married briefly, but the man proved to be not of a suitable character to settle to domestic life and faded from her away like an old photograph.

Her son was the bright light in her life and she had lavished all her love and attention on him. This intense nurturing had blossomed into a loving and kind son and there was a strong bond between them. But, for the last couple of years, he had been living abroad with his wife and two daughters in New Zealand. He would send video messages of his family and call her every week. She loved to see and hear how they were and it filled her with love and pride to see their happy, smiling faces.

“How well he has done for himself, with such a beautiful life,” she sighed with a sense of satisfaction in the part she had played in the happy outcome of her parenting skills.

Although she was glad of his success in life, it left her without a sense of purpose in her own life, now that he no longer needed her support. So she spent her days pottering around the house and lavishing her care and attention on the garden. This resulted in a magical garden bursting with vibrant colours, forms and shapes; turrets of green conifers and box, yellow heleniums, spears of red hot pokers, drifts of lilac verbena and white *Echinacea*, and spheres of purple alliums. But it was the red rambling roses that were the crowning glory of her garden. Neighbours would often say, “Morning Cathy, roses are looking stunning today,” or she would peer from the curtains to see passers-by slow their pace as they peered into her garden to admire the roses. She was often asked what her secret was to growing such fine specimens. “No secret, only love and attention,” she would reply, a knowing smile forming on her lips, “well maybe a little extra ingredient.”

2. JUDGEMENT

A few days passed and she kept an interested eye on the comings and goings across the road at number 26. A van arrived, delivering their belongings and furniture; there was a trip to Tesco and one to IKEA, she observed as they carried in logo

plastered bags and boxes. She preferred Sainsbury's and John Lewis herself. Along with her earlier observation that they may bring trouble to the tranquil lives of the neighbourhood, Mrs Edwards at number 28 had heard that they were renters, so extra scrutiny was necessary.

Tap, tap, tap. She was startled by a sharp, quick knock on her front door. Who could that be? How had she not noticed someone coming up to the door? She shook off the feeling of annoyance that the sound had caused by intruding on her ordered life and crossed the living room to open the door. There stood the young women from number 26.

"Hello, I'm Emily I just moved in across the road," came a bright, cheerful voice.

"Oh, well nice to meet you, Emily," Mrs Simpson replied slightly hesitantly, remembering her earlier assessment that this couple would bring trouble.

"I was just wondering if you have a stamp to spare," a warm expectant smile beamed from her face.

She seemed a nice, friendly, pleasant sort of person.

"Of course, I'll just have a look in my purse," Mrs Simpson turned from the door and went to find her purse.

When she came back, Emily was no longer alone. Her gaunt looking partner was standing at her shoulder. He had his hand on her arm and was pulling her away.

"Come on," he said. "Why are you over here? You need to be waiting in for an important delivery I'm expecting. Come on," he repeated.

Mrs Simpson returned smiling with a stamp in her hand but her smile faded on seeing him. "There you are one stamp, lucky I got some just yesterday," she said handing it to Emily.

"Oh, thanks. This is my partner Karl," his head gave a grudging nod as he ushered Emily back across the road.

After they were out of earshot she remarked to herself once again, "Definitely trouble."

Emily returned the next day with a whole book of stamps to replace the one she had borrowed and a packet of rich tea biscuits as a thank you. Mrs Simpson felt herself warming to Emily in spite of her growing dislike of Karl and had the feeling she could use a friend.

“Ah you must come in and have a cup of tea and help me eat the biscuits,” insisted Mrs Simpson.

“Just for a little while then,” Emily agreed, glancing over her shoulder nervously.

Soon, Emily became a frequent visitor at Mrs Simpson’s bungalow. It was on one of these visits as Emily was reaching across to pick up her mug of tea that Mrs Simpson first noticed bruises on her arm.

“It’s nothing,” Emily said, shrugging her shoulders, “just a knock with all the unpacking and that.”

“No, dear, those are finger marks, made by someone grabbing you very tightly.”

Emily looked down.

“It’s nothing, just a blip. This is our new start in a new town.” She smiled the sort of smile you have when you are trying more to convince yourself than others.

As the two women got to know each other better, Emily shared more about her relationship with Karl. Turns out that Karl had quite the chequered past, spending time in prison for fraud and dealing in stolen goods. He had a string of broken relationships including at least two divorces. He would manage to hold down a job for a while but there would always be some incident that made him leave or he was fired. Things would be calm and almost normal for a while but then all hell would break loose and she would be in his firing line. This move was supposed to fix everything. Karl would be a changed person.

But the bruises and injuries kept appearing; a bruise on the cheek, a cut on the lip, a scratch on the neck. She said they were having money problems that Karl had lost his job, but refused to

let her work. She saw less of Mrs Simpson. Karl was a danger. Preparations needed to be made.

3. ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

There was a thundering thudding at the door, delivered with long heavy blows—demanding entry. Mrs Simpson peered with alarm from her window to see the sight of a terrified looking Emily and snarling Karl mid fist hammering on the door.

He spotted her straight away and said, “Open the door you old bat or I won’t be responsible for my actions.”

Mrs Simpson’s concern for Emily made her forget caution and she rushed to open the door.

“I’m sorry” blurted out Emily, as Karl manhandled her through the door, pushing her to the ground.

Karl shot straight over to Mrs Simpson grabbing her by both wrists and shaking her.

“Right you old cow, where do you keep your money? Emily’s been telling me you must have a bob or two and stupid old people like you always have some hidden and around the house.”

“I, I don’t have, don’t have much,” she stuttered out the words. “There’s a tin in the kitchen marked ‘baking powder’.”

He threw her with some force onto the floor of the hallway and lumbered off like a predator smelling blood, in the direction of the kitchen. The two women looked at each other. Emily was shaking; her hair was matted and poking up in unkempt directions, her face red and swollen around her right eyebrow. Mrs Simpson was calm but remained on the floor.

“I’m so, so sorry,” Emily pleaded through streaming tears. “I only mentioned that you had some nice belongings. I thought things would be different this time; that all the troubles from the past were over. Coming here was supposed to be a fresh start.”

Karl was back in a moment bending over Mrs Simpson. His

angry face only a couple of centimetres from hers. He shook the tin over her head.

“There must be more than this,” he snarled in her face.

“It’s all I have in the house, I just keep it for emergencies,” Mrs Simpson told him calmly.

But as she said it her eyes glanced involuntarily to the trap door of the loft. Karl spotted it straight away and sprang towards the loft door.

“Stupid old cow, what you got in the loft? You can’t fool me. I’ve met your type before. Think you’re clever don’t you, but you can’t outsmart me,” he said, congratulating himself on spotting her mistake and getting the upper hand over the old lady.

In a moment he had the trap door open and the loft steps came clattering down. He shot up the steps. There was a split second of silence then a terrible crash, a yell, a thud and then silence again.

“I haven’t heard that sound since just before my husband disappeared,” Mrs Simpson said in a far away voice. “Who knew Daddy’s old junk would be so useful in getting rid of pests.”

She stood up, smoothed her hair with her hand and shook out the wrinkles in her dress. She turned and put her hand out to Emily.

“I think some yellow roses are needed in the garden to go with the red ones. Yes, yellow I think would be nice.”



Diane Benjamin lives in Milton Keynes, working locally at a large Secondary Comprehensive as a Teaching Assistant embedded in the English department. She enjoys spending time with her family, having four grown-up children. She also enjoys reading and long walks.

THE SWARM

DAWN OSTLUND



Robot. Photo credit: Unsplash.com

SUNRISE. A CREEPING ORANGE FLOOD, SPILLS ACROSS THE CITY. London is stirring to a dawn chorus. House martins, wagtails, and blackbirds score the morning ritual. Countless stretching bodies lay hidden in houses, flats, makeshift tents and inset doorways. Their eyes open, their bodies move, but the somnolence remains.

My walk is almost over, the morning's counting done. As I put my key in the door, I look back, taking in the sights and sounds of my beloved city one final time. I recall my childhood

trips to the theatre in Covent Garden, how fascinated I was by the unseen orchestra warming up in the pit. The sounds would weave their way into the great hall and pierce my very soul! But I am no longer a child, my innocence gone like midnight. A new day has dawned, and we must face our collective truth. I hum the 'A' of the oboe and tune into the strange new collection of instruments practising beneath the city. The wood, bone and horsetail of years gone by have been replaced with silicone, titanium and graphene, seeded with human intelligence, and grown beyond their borders. A cacophony of fear rises within me and I want to scream, but that would change nothing.

The season is turning in that abrupt way that seasons do in London. The sky is roiling, as if to remind us that the warm breeze of yesterday is but a memory. Nature, when she meets this city is fiendishly fickle. Perhaps she does it to spite the human occupants who are equally infuriating in their constancy. Up at six, rushing about with their tea and toast, then trudging across the city, shoulders slumped, chin juttied forward, eyes transfixed on tiny screens. They grumble about poor connections while severing the greatest connection of all—the sacred link between humans and nature. Those connection-seeking bodies send fumes up into the sky, drop litter down onto the streets, pour chemicals in the river and step over the broken bodies that lay strewn across the parks; and throughout it all, they pretend they are doing no such thing. Acknowledgement would be unseemly. Their spines are soft but their turning away is strong. Sitting at my kitchen table, I pour cream into my tea. Little rotten lumps make their way to the surface, unable to mix harmoniously with their surroundings. It is an ill omen.

I make a fresh cup and leave it black. Warming my hands, I watch the steam flicker and dance like a ghost hailing the angels above; but even the angels are distracted. I resume writing. I am almost finished with my novel—it is a story about robots. People often confuse fiction with the truth, so perhaps my message will

get through the back door, so to speak. It certainly didn't get through the front. I've written countless articles about the robot fleets growing beneath our city and even produced a documentary. All ignored or ridiculed.

Humans are funny creatures. I often wonder if I was dropped off here by alien parents who forgot to pick me up again. Perhaps they got lost and are still searching for me today. Or, maybe I am human, just a different sort: one who's vision, hearing and feeling have not been blunted by the pandemonium of progress; one who remains grounded; one whose feet cannot be carried away by the electromagnetic rivers flowing all around us. Perhaps, I am the exception who sinks, while all my fellow citizens float just a few nanometers above the earth, rolling on the ebb and flow of multiple data streams. Their lifting-up is subtle and they are jolted just enough to blur their vision, muffle their hearing, and dull all feeling, but not so much that they wake up and acknowledge something terrible is happening. Disconnected from nature, their individuality lost, they become one being, one continuous mesh of shriveled husks stretching out into a great fallow field. That mass of insensible drifters feels almost nothing, except, I hope, the prodding of a well-told story!

The question is: how do I put the fire into its belly, the vision into its eye, the word into its ear, or passion back into its heart? It must grow strong again, so strong that it shatters into a trillion tiny, infinitely precious lives; each with its own connection to nature, its own unique vision and voice. Only then, as an infinitude of particular minds, can we defeat the enemy before its final strike. Time is short and I must get this story right.

I believe that the key can be found within my own personal struggle, for nature is to man what man is to me: an impossibility that I can only attempt to recreate or approximate. While I sit here battling robots in my mind, MI5-i is desperately trying to regain control of its own, very real robot factory. I tell you, this

is no urban legend. This is happening right beneath our feet! But the fight is futile. The factory has already produced a fleet of robots so vast it dwarfs the nation's collective body of flesh and blood. Now, the product has cast aside its human creators; it learns and grows by itself. There is nothing *artificial* about Artificial Intelligence. It is real and it is a far better maker of machines than even the finest human ever was. At this point, MI5-i has no idea what the robots are doing down there, except that they are growing louder and more raucous by the day. The factory's mission was written by humans and fed on a diet of human behavior, but it soon outwitted best minds in all of England. MI5-i has been struggling to regain control ever since. Its failure is no secret. Nor are the dire consequences for humanity! Why will no-one listen?

Everyone knows this is happening, but you damned Londoners bully the truth into the dark alleys of your unconscious. You ignore the greatest story of our time, pulled away from your own salvation by some notification on your phone. Acknowledged or not, the robot army is real: from microscopic nano-bots to three-metre AI-powered drill bits, to gigantic humanoid figures crawling through dark sewers on titanium hands and knees, their red laser eyes looking forward to the day they can stand up tall and stretch freely in the sunlight—I assure you they are real! They have no use for humans and will crush us all without a second thought. The machines learned this from us, but they do it far more effectively. We leave a dozen bodies to freeze in the streets at night and we tactfully ignore their suffering. The robots will leave thousands to die, and one day, you will be among them. Through my novel I will warn my fellow citizens, I will make my brothers and sisters pay attention!

There is a city bigger than London, directly beneath our feet, and it's swarming with robots who will rain death on us all!

How could that be, you ask? You know the answer, but you push it aside. Allow me to pull it back to centre for you. The media calls it ‘a vast maze of abandoned sewers and tunnels’, and they write the occasional lifestyle piece about an old princely hide-away for secret lovers, a fancy wine cellar for the rich, an old Tudor tennis court, a smuggler’s passage, or the ghost stations of Brompton Road, etc. Those descriptions are but the truth of the past, much like the streets we drive on now were once muddy ruts carved out by horse and buggy. But deeper down, further out, and in between those famed abandoned crevices, truckloads of thug metals mix with tiny drops of frozen, fickle entanglements. A cryogenic creature so smart it gives two answers for every question, then four then eight then sixteen and so on. Confined to black boxes, it was dangerous enough, but when we gave it a body—then a multitude of physical forms—its power increased exponentially. I warned people of MI5-i’s subterranean robotic army but received only ridicule for my efforts. Now, the intelligent machines are out of our control. They are on the move and soon will come rolling, flying, twisting, droning, swimming and bashing their way out from their underground city. The sewers and subways will be their birth canal. Like a spider’s egg filled with eager predators, it will crack open and they will come spilling out and devour us all.

Every morning as I stalk the silent streets of this doomed city, I sense the various fleets warming up; feel their war drums vibrate the very ground we walk on. Barely conscious, you blame the trains, or busses or city works and fall back into your screens. Just today, I’m sure I felt the hideous shape of new fleets beneath the pavement on the Battersea side of Chelsea Bridge. It can’t be long now. Dear God, have mercy on us all!

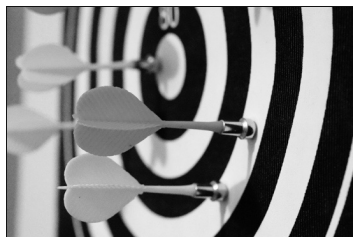
It’s a fair question to ask, how I alone am able to focus on the terror unfolding where others see only the unsullied rituals of

city life. The simple answer is, hard work. Thousands of hours of meditation have grown my sensory body beyond its physical bounds. In the early hours, just before daybreak, in the stillness and silence, I clear my consciousness and use my body like a holographic instrument. I can sense every shape beneath the streets. Like the sonar of dolphins and bats, my body sends out a signal, and senses any change in the return. With this information, I paint a picture of the world below. In the morning silence, I walk for miles, taking stock of all that lives beneath the road and river. The unseen becomes visible, and what a commotion! We are floating above a vast metallic ant farm! I alone have been mapping the course of its conquest; checking its density, sensing its flow, penetrating the dimensions of that which will eventually reduce all we have built to rubble and bring our lives to an early take our very lives and end. The robots, no doubt, will have perfected the very human art of turning away.

My life is small and means little, but collectively we are more. *We* matter! Must humans learn the lessons of the gods the hard way? Must we die at the hands of our own creation? The novel I am writing is my last hope. I pen the final passage and look out the window casting my eyes across my beloved city. A nano fog rises up from the Camden catacombs and south, past Regent's Park, the tunnels at High Holborn shake and crack open as the soulless metallic fleets begin to emerge. It's happening! And all the shoulder-slouching side-stepping souls turn their heads and look the other way. I am too late.



Dawn Ostlund writes stories about technology's incursion on the rituals and traditions of different cultures around the world. She holds an MA in Politics, Media and Performance and an MA in Creative Writing. She lives in Los Angeles and works as an editor and proofreader.

BEER AND GIRLS AND ERIC BRISTOW**PETE ARMSTRONG***Dartboard. Photo credit: Unsplash.com*

I MADE THE DARTS TEAM AS SECOND RESERVE AND FELL MADLY in love with Belinda Foster the summer that Eric Bristow came to Gloucester. It was the most famous summer in history: police and strikers waged epic battles; we had a collection in the Runt and Bucket for the families of one side or the other; Billy who worked in the cellar saw The Clash play in Oxford; and Belinda grew her hair past her shoulders and had her braces out. It never rained all summer long, but I had just turned seventeen and maybe only remember the hot nights. It was a long time ago.

The pub revolved around the darts team in those days. I made the team when I took two games off John Tuckett as he

was on his way to winning the local cup again. I was the only one to do it so it was a big deal. He grinned at his mates and said I was a bloody upstart but he never spoke to me the rest of the night so he couldn't have been that pleased. The pub team would lose matches sometimes even when John won all his games; it was best to keep in with him.

We won through to the national round of the league cup on a roasting hot night in April. All the doors of the pub were open and you could smell the farm pigs from down the road. Beer and crumbs ran across the tables and there wasn't time to clean them. Belinda was helping out serve drinks and I couldn't take my eyes off her. She had cut off jeans and was running with sweat, cracking with the guys from town, curving her hips past me. Luckily I wasn't playing that night; my eyes would have been in the back of my head. John had to win the final game to get us through and he hit 180 off the top. It wasn't even close.

After the other team left we locked the doors, put *London Calling* on the jukebox and filled up jugs of beer. The girls came in from serving and we made a night of it. They called me the quiet one as there was never space for me to say my piece, but I knew my time would come. John wouldn't win forever.

I wanted work in the pub cellar after leaving school, but there was nothing doing, so instead I filled bags of grain at my Dad's place and got paid about half what the regular guys got, when he remembered; there was still grit under my fingernails a decade after moving away. I helped Billy shift barrels when he wanted and got beer we couldn't afford to buy. There was no end of barrel dregs to be had, but you only ever got drunk on that once. By mid-morning the next day you'd swear off beer for life during one of your brief escapes from the toilet.

Sometimes I'd have pizza at the place where Belinda worked, but the waitresses always hung together and paid me no more attention than when I'd been in school. The place reeked of pepperoni no matter what was being served, and our table was

always dirty. They wouldn't clean it just for us. They were out of my league anyway and I didn't want to get caught staring. We never had money and there was always a group of us sharing the one pizza. Enough to get you hungry but never enough to fill you. The whole summer was like that.

When the draw for the national cup was made we were at home to some team from Staffordshire. We didn't know them and we all thought they'd get a shock when they saw John on form. But next day in the supermarket I saw it on the front page of the local paper. All of a sudden everybody was talking about how Eric Bristow's team was coming to Gloucester.

None of us knew if he would come down with the team, but the pub planned to make a big night of it anyway. The owners said they'd open up the back room and get in extra beer and food. They got me to ask the farm next door if we could use the field for extra parking. They said we could if we paid for it so we paid in beer and cider, that's Gloucester money.

A second dartboard was set up in the back room and we came in to practise when we could. Alfie and me got it during the day, but when John came in from work it was all his and we just hung around until he wanted to play games. We were hoping to keep quiet about John so that the Staffordshire papers never found out about him. He was our secret weapon against Eric Bristow.

We started setting things up properly two days before the match. I helped put up tables and set rope around the car parking field. Belinda worked in the kitchen and at lunchtime a group of us took over one of the outside tables. We got beer and food for our wages and I feasted on mini sausage rolls and Belinda's company for an hour. It was the first time we talked properly. She didn't even know I was on the team, but I told her about the two games I'd taken off John. She said that she was doing a catering course and was going to stop helping out just for Gloucester money. It would have to be a proper contract or noth-

ing. The others went in but we sat out there for ages. The sun shone, the wind stayed down. I picked flecks out of my fingernails. She's good to talk with when you get her on her own.

Saturday was a scorcher. The field at the back was concrete hard which was lucky because cars started turning up in the afternoon. The place was late-night full by tea time. We were supposed to be practising in the back room but that had already been opened up and it was heaving. Everyone wanted to play. John had disappeared off somewhere in one of his moods and I couldn't get a game. I was only reserve anyway.

I tried to catch Belinda at a break but she was going flat out, they were serving up beers as soon as they could get them out of the pumps. Spills were dripping off the tables, glasses tumbling, food coming through, juke box playing and it was still daytime light, kids playing on the swings. The fryers were sending out waves of hot, oily air from the back, but you could still be overwhelmed by cheap perfume and hair stuff as another bunch of folk pushed past you.

No one noticed at first when the Staffordshire team turned up. I was expecting Eric Bristow's big shirt with the England colours on it and was disappointed when I couldn't see it. He hadn't come. But Alfie pointed him out. He was really tall and was wearing a simple denim shirt, not dressed for a big game. Someone else did all the talking for them. They got drinks and he sat down with the others. I thought they'd want to practise, but they just sat there.

I remember thinking it was odd. The place was so busy, but everyone was focused on beer and food while the two darts teams were being ignored.

Alfie and me sat together in the back room. We couldn't get a game, couldn't buy a beer and the girls hadn't stopped all day. John wasn't back yet and Eric Bristow was just sitting there. Someone had put New Age stuff on the jukebox. It was hot, sweat ran down the inside of my t-shirt. My hands were clammy.

No need for nerves because I was just a reserve. I never got them anyway, some people got all tightened up by I never did. That's how I got the two games off John.

After a bit a photographer from the local paper got the two teams together for a picture. I pushed my way in too. The Staffordshire lot were real friendly, Eric Bristow stood in the middle and grinned just when the photo was taken. He shook hands with John but John was real quiet. He was keeping himself back, I reckon. They had one good player and so did we. It should be a tight match.

Then it was time. They cleared out space around the dart-board and pushed back tables so there was plenty of room. People came in from outside and the back room so the place was mobbed. I couldn't get close enough to see properly so just stayed at the back. I never liked it in a crowd.

You could tell when the games started from the sudden quiet. I heard the thump of darts hitting the board but couldn't make out what the scores were. Funny thing was I didn't really care. I watched people instead, those at the back who were craning necks to try and get a view. They were all pushing in, hands on shoulders. One man was up on his toes but he wore little grey slip-on shoes and they were coming off. Every time he stretched up his heel would come out of its shoe and he would have to rock back and sort it. He did that again and again. A woman had a view down a side wall, but she had to press up against a table that was swimming in beer. I could see pools of the stuff slide one way and then the other. She was dipping the edge of her coat in it but was too drunk to notice.

Someone said it was a walkover, they were winning all the games. There were a few jeers now and then. You could tell when Eric Bristow played because it went real quiet. You could see the top of his head over the crowd.

Belinda came out and moved over to where I was standing. She smiled at me from the side of her mouth. Her sleeves were

rolled up, hair tied back and falling out of her hairband. She smelt of spilt beer. I was overcome with desire. No one had ever looked so good. She said something but I never heard it. There was a huge roar, someone must have got a big score, maybe it was John. They'd turned the jukebox off, at least I think they had. You could hardly hear it anyway when everyone cheered.

The serving girls were all having a break, no one in the crowd was ordering beer while the games were on. I'd wanted to watch John play, but now nothing was going to move me from that spot. She was standing close, her cheekbones glinting with a slick covering of sweat. It was still real hot from outside even with the sun down. She asked if I wanted to move closer and I said no, we could stay where we were.

It was a walkover anyway. They had Eric Bristow. He'd be in the paper the next day, our big night. I was only a reserve.

My hand was on the back of a chair. Then her hand was beside it, touching. It was wet, pulsing hot. There was another roar, something had happened, but it didn't matter. I felt her hip pressing against mine. I was on fire, alert as anything, I could sense her every movement, every breath.

It was the most famous summer in history. Late night, dripping heat. We were forgotten at the back as the crowd roared on.



Pete Armstrong lives in a leafy suburb in central Sweden. He spends his days in blue jeans looking after children, listening to Bach and writing stories. He is not sure how he landed such a cushy number. His stories are usually in a classical style, occasionally returning to the East Coast of Scotland where he grew up. When given time off he enjoys walking long distances.

A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR

JEREMY HOWELL



Daniel Defoe. Photo credit: Wikipedia.com

I, DANIEL DEFOE, WALKING THIS WORLD AGAIN AFTER THREE centuries' absence, have witnessed the latest plague to blight humanity. I now present my account of it for the curiosity of the public, to understand how the pestilence took such a strong hold of people's bodies, and of their minds.

January 6th

I, among the rest of my neighbours, read from my *screen* that a plague of sorts had started in Cathay and was very violent

there, particularly in the city of Wuhan and the surrounding province of Hubei.

Walking abroad on business through the streets of London, and venturing into divers inns and taverns for refreshment, I heard people swapping views on the matter, saying such things as: “That’s all right, then. Other side of the world, isn’t it? Let them deal with it, poor sods.”

However, officials in Cathay—which nowadays is called China—had spent a month covering up the extent of the infection in their country, and claiming it could not pass from human to human, meaning the pestilence had all the freedom it needed to spread this way and that across the world, entirely unchecked.

And then we all read through our *screens* that holidaymakers had brought the plague back to English shores. Some said they had contracted it from time-share salesmen and similar characters on the Greek islands; others said it was spread through après ski parties in the Alps. It mattered not from whence it came; all agreed it was come into this country.

The Secretaries of State acted resolutely, at first, saying those arriving back from plague spots overseas would be stopped at the ports and examined with *divers tests*. They would be questioned as to whom they had been in contact with, and those people would in turn be confined, tested and questioned.

This scheme worked excellently for nigh on twenty-four hours, after which the state’s medical officers lost count of all the people they were meant to trace, meaning the infection was now passing undiscovered through the length and breadth of the Kingdom. And besides, the tests to see who carried the infection proved unreliable. And that is how the plague came amongst us; when we were naked, so to speak – with no tests, nor vaccine, nor any knowledge of how this virus spread, nor how to protect ourselves.

Now, in their entertainment in *divers taverns* and *alehouses*

in London, people blamed the Chinese for all of this, because of their taste for eating bats.

“That’s right, bats,” the drinkers said, after taking deep draughts from their tankards. “They buy them live in the markets and put them in soup. And them bats are what has this corona inside. And I thought it was just dogs them people ate.”

February 14th

I made the shift to Whitehall, to put forty shillings on Liverpool against Atletico Madrid in the Champions League. Through the bookmaker’s window I saw several of our sovereign’s principal ministers of state hurrying within doors to the Cabinet Office.

Many knowing nods amongst us punters as we all told each other that they were attending one of the fabled emergency *COBRA* meetings. COBRA meetings sound impressive. They sound like meetings where people make stirring speeches and load ammunition into powerful weapons.

Having said that, what was resolved must have been of little import because one month later, we still had no reliable tests for infection, nor adequate supplies of protective clothing for medical staff.

February 21st

To my grocer in Richmond-on-Thames where, in the course of buying pre-packed mutton, I was nearly suffocated by a throng of people jostling and fighting each other in their quest to buy toilet paper.

How did people’s minds leap from hearing about a disease which causes fatal shortness of breath to worrying about the lasting cleanliness of their posteriors?

And no pasta left on the shelves. Why?

March 1st

A grim day in Britain, in which the first death from the virus was announced. Sometime later, it was revealed that many more people had in fact died from the disease by this date. However, the authorities had covered up all those deaths, much as they had covered up news of the first deaths from the plague in London in 1665—perhaps because the authorities did not wish to panic people, or because they feared they might get the blame.

Whatever the reason, the government succumbed again to its almost instinctive urge to keep secrets from the public.

March 6th

In 1665, I recall that people made up for their feelings of helplessness against the plague by resorting to magic, astrological conjurations, dreams, and old wives' tales.

Similarly, in the present age, people invented their own myths to try and survive.

In the American colonies, which have become their own nation since last I walked this earth, the government had to advise people that drinking bleach could not inure them to infection. Others there eschewed Corona beer, thinking it might have been brewed from the virus. Others refused to eat Chinese food, for the same reason.

And here in England, mobs of people started burning down the masts erected to carry so-called 5G signals to our *screens*, believing 5G to be the true source of the plague.

March 9th

I lost my bet when Liverpool let in two goals in the dying seconds of their match against Atletico Madrid. I hold the Spanish authorities responsible for this, for had they imposed

their ban on sports events one week earlier than they did, this match would have been cancelled and I would have got back my stake.

In Italy, the deaths from the virus have climbed well into the thousands, thanks to the initial reluctance of the government to curtail people's pleasures and confine them within their homes. It was said that what happened in Italy would occur here in Britain one week hence.

March 13th

The leader of the new American nation has emerged to be the comic diversion of these hard-pressed times.

Transparently worried that the plague's outbreak might redound on his chances of re-election, he declared it to be a hoax put abroad by his enemies, to rob him of votes. He then declared that the plague would be no less a burden on the population than influenza, or the common cold, and that the problem was passing away no sooner than it had arisen.

Later on, this snake-oil salesman came to fancy he had found the miracle cure for the pestilence and told physicians to try injecting their patients with disinfectant. While the physicians demurred, many folk tried it on themselves and in this way, fatalities from the plague in America crept past the fifty thousand mark.

In the evening I travelled to Spitalfields for a literary soiree. I had walked to the same event one week before, from Houndsditch to Brick Lane, and had witnessed a mile-long party on the streets. Female City workers had shrieked on the pavements while holding glasses of Chardonnay; male City workers had brayed and guffawed while holding pints of lager. This Friday night, those same streets and bars were as good as empty.

March 14th

Everyone, let me say, is now terrified that everyone else is a plague carrier. Someone coughs in the workplace, or on public transport, and people around them flinch, or glare. And cough in a lift? *Oy vey!* as my silversmith friend from Hatton Gardens might say.

People indulge in ghost behaviours, going through the motions of their usual trade or calling. Sports teams play to stadiums empty of fans. Comedians perform on shows for our *screens* stripped of the usual studio audiences.

The clown-prince of the American nation insists on calling this pestilence the “Chinese virus”. In New York City, a Chinese man is beaten by a crowd on the street, as though he were personally responsible for spreading the disease.

Reading this dismal news on my *screen* brought to my mind memories of mobs of apprentices in 1665 throwing supposed witches down wells as punishment for spreading the plague.

March 18st

I remained indoors all this day on the orders of our masters: the Prime Minister and the divers other great figures of the times to whom we now entrust our lives.

Having previously told us all to go outdoors and mix, in the hope that this plague might infect everyone and thus endow the entire population with immunity, our masters now realised this course of action would likely fill our hospitals and mortuaries to overflowing.

So manufactories, shops and offices were closed; people were barred from attending their work; and firms, which a week before had been perfectly viable, went bankrupt for want of trade.

The streets and public transports became eerily bereft of souls. Life became a sort of death-in-life. All that was left for me

to do was to tramp weekly to the giant grocery store nearby, in repeated quests for toilet paper and pasta.

March 19th

I had lately purchased a *screen* to ease the tedium of lockdown, and after some time struggling with it, set up a Zoom conference with my contemporaries, Robert Hooke and Ricardo Malthus. Hooke had been looking through the latest version of the *microscope*, he having always been enraptured by this instrument. He said he had found cells in human bodies which had gained immunity from the coronavirus. That gave him hope, for if one could discover how those cells achieved their immunity, he said, a vaccine might presently be engineered.

Malthus asked why he was bothering. The virus was nature's scythe, he said, cutting back the overgrown ranks of the elderly. Never before, he said, had mankind been called upon to support so many millions of them.

This virus, he declared, promised to be the great reset for the human race, yet what were governments doing? Perversely, they were sinking billions of pounds of tax money into protecting the old, so keeping Mother Nature from doing her beneficent work.

Hooke replied that were Master Malthus to have his wish, then Mother Nature would unleash a plague which would carry off the entire human race, meaning we need never spend a single penny ever again.

Hooke broke off the Zoom connection in a temper and Malthus did likewise. So ended my one piece of social discourse for the week.

March 23rd

Today, the death rate from the novel coronavirus reached

seven hundred and the government issued strict orders to keep us two yards' distance, one from another.

To think that until so very recently, we had blithely brushed past fellow-shoppers and stood cheek-by-jowl with fellow-travellers on London's new underground transport. To think that sometimes (dear God!) we had wantonly shaken hands with our fellow humans, or hugged them, or even exchanged kisses with them.

And to think that until a few days ago we had blithely entered shops or coffee houses or taverns. No more! They are all now locked and shuttered.

All has changed; changed utterly. A terrible dullness has been born.

March 30th

Unable to endure the solitude of my rooms in Richmond, I dared venture downstream to Kensington to call on Mister Thomas Hobbes. In his house, I had heard, was Dr. John Locke, who had been visiting the libraries in London and could not return to his post at Oxford, all travel being forbidden which was not for official purposes.

On my way along the Thames towpath I saw constables of the watch busily keeping folks *socially distanced*. They ordered people who had sat on benches to rest, or to look at their *screens*, to keep moving on or to return indoors, on pain of being summoned before the magistrates.

One constable stood in my way and demanded to know why I was outside my home. It was banned – he said – save for an hour of exercise, or for taking physick to an ailing relative.

“It is to exercise, then,” I say.

“It better be,” replied the constable, eyeing me suspiciously. “Don’t think you’re not being watched. We’re getting people to inform on neighbours who go out more than once a day.”

Arriving without Mr Hobbes' house I was ushered in quickly by his manservant, for it had been made unlawful to congregate in groups of more than two. I was taken upstairs to his drawing room.

In the wall was a giant version of the *screens* everyone now lives their lives through. On it, the prime minister was burbling merrily about launching a fightback, but he was looking very wan. The skin on his cheeks seemed to me to be as white and as roughed-up as the flaxen, unkempt locks on his head.

In two opposite corners of the room sat Mr Hobbes and Dr Locke.

"He may not be strong enough to overcome this distemper," remarked *Hobbes*, turning his eyes from the *screen*. "But he has done the state some service; he has gained new extents in its power. Ultimately, it does not matter whether he or someone else wields that power. What matters is that there is someone to wield it, and that the people obey."

"It may set a bad precedent," says Locke, "if the government learns from this that it can easily curtail the liberty of subjects. What pretexts might it choose in future? And will the subjects so readily submit?"

"Naturally, subjects look to the rulers as their fathers and protectors," replied Hobbes. "This is natural law, as decreed by God. He sets a ruler up to be a giant amongst his fellow men, such as the fabled giant Leviathan."

"And what if that father-protector cannot protect his subjects?" asked Locke. "What if he demands obedience in the form of mass confinement yet cannot organise tests to see who is healthy and who is sick? What if he cannot organise the hospitals properly, or provide garments to protect the physicians and nurses who work within them? And if the ruler cannot protect his subjects, why should subjects not use their own good sense in deciding how to protect themselves?"

Hobbes replied Locke was fondly mistaken if he believed

our fellow subjects had sense enough to govern their affairs without guidance and coercion. He said he would start forthwith to write a treatise on the matter.

Locke, scowling, vowed to do the same.

May 1st

Today I fashioned a face on a coconut and called my creation *Man Friday*, hoping that its company might save me from losing my reason whilst in solitary lockdown.

Master Friday and I watched images on my *screen* which modern folk call *memes*. Some were of so-called *dank doggos*; some were of kittens. All of them, however, featured goofy music and head-splitting shrieks of laughter from those recording the antics of the animals. I learnt little from these spectacles, yet could not help but trawl for more and more of the same.

Alarmed, I used my *screen* to call upon Mister Samuel Pepys and asked whether he was also gorging on the same vacuous diet of pap. Did he also fear it was turning his mind to mush?

“*Mutatis mutandis*, Defoe,” he replied. “Henceforth, I will be writing the Blog of Samuel Pepys and filling it with pictures of Victoria sponges I baked and cute clips of meerkats. Methinks it will show future historians the heights of intelligent discourse to which Britain soared in the present age.

“Like me on Insta, Danny! Ciao!”

May 2nd

The death toll now threatens to surpass 30,000 in Britain. However, the Secretaries of State insist that they are carrying out close on 100,000 tests a day to separate the clean from the infected. That means that within a matter of some months, or even some weeks, the lockdown might be lifted for the able-bodied.

I contacted Pepys again on my *screen* and asked whether the government was, perchance, getting things organised.

Pepys revealed that he was, at that moment, within a brothel in Paddington.

“Do you know why I am here?” he asked.

I said that I could guess.

“Well,” he replied, “Let me tell you that our government couldn’t organise the thing that I have just done.”

No sooner had Mr Pepys said this than I heard the sound of a door being broken in, the shrieks of young women and, presently, a gruff voice saying: “Get your pants on, sonny. You’re nicked.”

May 4th

To the magistrates at Paddington Green to pay Pepys’ £60 fine for flouting lockdown rules. He emerged from the courtroom with his clothing stained, his wig askew and generally looking exceedingly seedy.

“I just felt in a rather deviant mood,” he told me, as we walked down the Edgware Road towards Tyburn. “I can pretty much stand the lockdown. What I cannot stand is everything around it. You know, everyone being so chipper; the tedious clips people send out showing the half-witted things they’re doing to pass the time. It’s the rainbow drawings in every window and the weekly mass demonstrations of support for the health workers.

“It sapped my will to live. If coronavirus wants to kill me, it can damn well take its place in the queue behind syphilis and gonorrhoea.”

He gripped me hard by the lapels.

“Contact Newton! Tell him this is the stupidest possible age that he could have taken us all to in that time machine of his. I

want to go back. Plagues, fires, wars with the Dutch; I don't care. I've had enough of this century. I want to go back!."



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