

RAP LYRICS ARE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE REALITIES OF REAL PEOPLE:
AN ABSTRACT VIEW OF THE COMMONALITIES IN LIFE BETWEEN HIGH-BROW
LITERATURE AND EXPLICIT RAP.

by

Dominique Sheyreyne Duberry

A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of
DOCTOR OF CREATIVE WRITING

Graduate School
College of Arts and Law
University of Birmingham
June 2024

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

University of Birmingham Research Archive

e-theses repository

This unpublished thesis/dissertation is copyright of the author and/or third parties. The intellectual property rights of the author or third parties in respect of this work are as defined by The Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988 or as modified by any successor legislation.


Any use made of information contained in this thesis/dissertation must be in accordance with that legislation and must be properly acknowledged. Further distribution or reproduction in any format is prohibited without the permission of the copyright holder.



Abstract

This thesis comprises a creative portfolio of original short stories that combine social realism and magic realism, set largely in the West Midlands and taking influence, directly or indirectly, from contemporary rap lyrics. This is accompanied by a critical component which curates and analyses a selection of short stories by contemporary (largely 21st century) authors. Examples have been selected for their literary acclaim and achievements in combination with their thematic relevance to the creative portfolio.

‘Friday Black’ and ‘Zimmerland’ by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah (from *Friday Black*, 2018), focus predominantly on materialism and the disregard of institutional racism and violence, while ‘Zimmerland’ explores the reality of race, and the value of some lives over others. ‘The Husband Stitch’ by Carmen Maria Machado (from *Her Body & Other Parties* 2017) delves into female consent, sexuality and gender inequality. ‘Waxy’ by Camila Grudova (from *The Dolls Alphabet*, 2017) is a bizarre account of child labour, rigorous rules for all females and constant praise and worship of all males. ‘Red Sultan’s Big Boy’ by Chuck Palahniuk (from *Make Something Up, Stories You Can’t Unread*, 2015) is a dark insight into sexual deviance, internet safety and how individuals place materials and money over life and moral exactitude. Finally, ‘Death is Not the End’ by David Foster-Wallace (from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, 1999) is an intimate reflection on the literary life and the hope for life beyond death.



These close readings are placed in the context of the candidate's own creative practice alongside lyrics from the following rap artists: Tupac Shakur, Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Eminem, Nicki Minaj, Nas, Jay-z, Grand Master Flash, Lil Kim, 50 Cent, Scarface and Ice Cube. All of these are used to accentuate the correlation between two types of narrative, the short story and the lyric, and to further solidify the argument that rap lyrics should be treated with the same consideration as high-brow literature.



Acknowledgements

I want to express my profound appreciation to my supervisors, Professor Luke Kennard and Dr Elsa. Braekkan-Payne, both of whom have been the BEST supervisors in the entire universe. Thank you for believing in me and my voice. Your guidance has helped me stay motivated and focused throughout my arduous and unique journey.

I would also like to extend my immeasurable gratitude and love to my parents, siblings, nieces and nephews, who have spent endless hours delivering positive words of affirmation, constant love, support and lectures (ha-ha) on finishing my PhD. They have helped me through some of the most challenging periods during this pathway. I love you all so much!

Finally, to my best friend, thank you for being there for me and sending motivational texts, voice notes, e-mails, images, and videos. Thank you for all the moments I've cried over my PhD, and you have consoled me. I appreciate your presence in my life, and I'm happy you gave me the best hugs. Thank you, my friend.



Contents

	Page
Title Page	1
Abstract	2-3
Acknowledgements	4

Creative Portfolio

Joyride	7 - 9
Blue	10 - 17
Feathered Tales	18 - 26
Trauma	27 - 35
Belle	36 - 44
Equality Policy	45 - 54
RUN	55 - 63
SWOT Analysis	64 - 74
The Talented Ms Riddle	75 - 84
Complaints Policy	85 - 96
Brief Interviews with Common People	97 - 108
Confidently Lost	109-118
Content and Context	119-125
New Gent	126-136
The Cut Off	137-148
Crows Shot	149-157
All She Saw was Red	158-167
How Great Thou Art	168-177
The Art of Meat	178-187



Critical Analysis

I've Got War and Peace Inside My DNA	188-200
Friday Black by Adjei-Brenyah	201-213
The Husband Stitch by Carmen Maria Machado	214-224
Waxy by Camila Grudova	225-235
Red Sultan's Big Boy by Chuck Palahniuk	236-243
Zimmerland by Adjei-Brenyah	244-258
Death is Not the End by David Foster-Wallace	259-267
Conclusion	268-272
Bibliography	273-287



Creative Portfolio

Joyride

1 Speed

Alana clasps her left foot into her hands and turns on the *My Spa* battery-powered nail file that her sister bought her for Christmas Eve. They have a family tradition where they will exchange three gifts at 23:00, with the theme randomly selected a mere seven days beforehand. Her younger sister, Nickita, had advised, in a high-pitched voice, squealing, 'Alana, babe! You must make sure you look fabulous all the time. Not just for Christmas.'

Alana frowned as she recalled her sister's immaculately shaped, frosted-pink hyper-gel painted nails that were holding onto her dry hands and dried-out cuticles. She then pinched her big toe between her thumb and forefinger and continued to sweep the file left to right, right to left and back again. Pressing the file down onto her thick, brittle nails, wondering how long it would take to make them fabulous. Alana pauses to blow off the build-up of nail dust that covers her almond-coloured skin. Some of the dust drifts onto her Union Jack printed bedding, and the rest glides into the air, losing any trace of its existence as it lands. She continues with the rest of her toes, all of which share the common features of thickness, brittleness, and an edge of crust around the cuticle. Toes that pay homage to the feet they hang on the end of. Feet that leave a trail of flakes along the house as they venture from one room to the next. And cracks that scrape over the mattress cover, grasping bits of cotton in their wake. *At least they smell floral*, she thought.


'Loving you is like a taste of heaven. Wanna gaze into your eyes for ever. Float away and spend our lives together. We've found love.' Alana sings along to

Joyride as she admires the differences between her 'almost fabulous' left foot and her soon-to-be fabulous right foot. *'And our love goes around and round, way up high, a joy ride. We can touch the stars above. We've found love...'*

Breaking news: *'This is ITV news at ten, and we have just received reports from (____) That the eight-year-old girl (____) from ____ in India has been found dead! ____ was raped, murdered and dumped just two miles from where she was snatched. We are now connecting to our correspondent Amelia, who is with some of the locals, who are claiming that the authorities were warned about the concerns raised regarding a certain individual...'*

She tilts her head toward the screen for a moment and sighs as the image of the young Indian girl stretches across her 40-inch screen, with the title 'Snatched, raped and murdered' below in bold black text that is affixed to a white base. Feeling sorry that a child with such beautiful bright blue eyes and nutmeg skin tone could be dead. *What a waste*, she thinks. 'Your parents should have protected you better!' she remarks at the picture and proceeds with the up-keep of her feet.

Now satisfied that her nails aren't as thick as they were 30 minutes ago, Alana selects the largest nail clipper and starts to press it down. Clip, clip and snap off comes the longest claw that was resting upon her biggest toe. *'We've got something they can't touch. We've found looooooooooove.'* Her husky voice strained to hit the high-melodic notes of Mariah Carey. She presses the home button on her smartphone just to see if she has any new notifications or messages from Nickita, her mother, her boyfriend Ed, or just anyone else. She rolls her eyes in dismay and



leans forward to examine the small area of toenail clippings. One by one, Alana gathers them into the palm of her hand.



Blue

'You alright, I'm alright, I'm quite alright.' – Lil Uzi Vert


1

I love days like this, sunshine beaming down my soft white skin. Seagulls flying above me, watching if I have anything tasty to offer or for them to pinch. They create a big circle, all twenty-something of them flying around me with each step I take—warm grains of sand race around my toes like a miniature version of *Wacky Races*. *Dick Dastardly* and *Muttley* are trying to cheat their way to the front, overlapping everyone in their pathway, subtle hints of blue roses sweet-smelling in between the sea breeze. Understated hints stroking through my frizzy-red hair, leaving traces of? Did I tell you how much I love days like this? The roses all stand tall and proud from their sandy foundations. Each of the many thousands is forest-green in the stem, slim and smooth at the slightest touch, not a thorn to prick idle fingers. Their heads held high like Queens amongst kin, shades ranging from royal blue to sky blue. This sky is so clear, well clear from clouding. Still, the gulls sing harshly, and their eyes continue to stalk me.

I reach out my hands and stroke a few as I approach the sea's edge. *I understand you*. The beauty of a beautiful rose beautifies the girl who cuts it and places it above her right ear. They all recognise me without a rose; we share desires, and our hearts beat as one.


Just Do It

Email received: Admin has released my results.



College was tiresome this afternoon. What's the point of having a lesson start at 13:00 and end at 15:00? Mr Tulloch is giving us his usual spiel on how he has friends working for Edexcel who have slipped some questions from our upcoming exam for him. Genuine questions that have a 50% chance of cropping up on the day. *We're not even allowed to have our phones out.* Jesus Christ, I woke up at 11:00 for a lesson on Visual Basics. My name is Trevor Tulloch, and I have a friend from Edexcel boasting. He says this whilst smiling at the class, that stupid smile that Mr Bean does, you know, the one after he successfully pushes the 3-wheeled blue car out of his way. He vocalises this whilst stroking his hairless chin. It is almost as if each stroke causes us to zone out from reality and buy into his promises and endless talk of the all-knowing friend. 'Stick with me, and you'll pass, but you've got to work hard,' he declares. I look upon him, my face expressionless. Yet my hand partially mimics his, and I prefer to stroke my left arm. The outline of a whale resting below my polka-dot cotton sleeves. I read their response, 'You're the best; you're bigger than this universe.' *I replied, to clarify, was what they had assigned to me for day 50 correct?* My little whale has a smile and a spout, and *they congratulate me on the detailing.* I explained how I used toe-nail scissors, as they have a nice small curve at the tip, and I managed to scrape out the perfect outline. I then used a razorblade to add the spout, the teeth and her name, *Blue*, on her tail. *Xanny numb the pain, yeah! – Lil Uzi Vert*, I hug myself for a moment.


As with most days, I return to an empty house; Mum must be up the road with Mary; quite contrary, *how does your fucking garden grow? With white gold bling, a handsome king, and pretty friends all in a row. I mean old bags in a row.* Dad mentioned working in Aberystwyth, Wales, this week. First, I watch *Power Puff Girls* for a while, then I grab a carton of blackcurrant flavoured Ribena and head upstairs



refreshed to conduct my weekly snoop in my parent's bedroom. *Most people wonder what goes on behind closed doors. I open them up and explore when no one is around.* Simple.

Part foil-lilac floral paper on all four walls was the outcome of mum's vision and final say. I believe the black silk bedding was what most would consider a compromise. Mum obviously chose the texture, and Dad chose the colour. But I wonder what was agreed on childrearing and the aftercare of my teenage years? My green eyes are bright in the reflection of a silver square-shaped vase that glimmers on the window sill. *Mum must have bought that recently, and I hadn't noticed it last week.* I gaze into the vase, and my eyes look like freshly cut grass-green, bright and welcoming and irritating, as you know it's going to bring hay fever with it. *Often, I wonder what life would be like if people cared.* I start from the beginning; I go through their clothes drawers first and then sidestep quietly *so that no one anywhere can hear anything*, across to their built-in wardrobe. I sniff my dad's jumpers. His scent fills me with warmth, and I miss him. A few years ago, when I was twelve, he took me and my mum to the Sea Life Centre in town. We all had so much fun. Dad touched a stingray, and Mum warned him that Steve Irwin was savagely killed by one, we laugh. It was such an incredible day. We ate chips, and he bought me a keyring shaped like a dolphin. It was transparent and filled with water and miniature seashells in various pale shades.


I try on my Mum's leather aviator jacket and do the Naomi Campbell walk at five strides toward the long silver floor mirror. I look nothing like my Mum or my Dad. I look like me, Harriet Hunter, only the group administrator calls me Misti, he posted in the chat saying green eyes mean mysterious, therefore, my new name is Misti. Before tackling the mattress, I put everything back and ticked a few more boxes off



my mental checklist. King in size and weight, first I slip two fingers beneath, followed by two more and a thumb. I slowly stroke the base, trying to cover as much area as possible until the weight becomes boring. Usually, it's just a few odd bumps here and there, but only now do I feel paper. I pull it out, and my eyes widen at seeing a £50 note.

My heart races, like the moment before a crazy rollercoaster starts. I slip the note into the side of my sock on my left foot. I stand up and scan the room, correcting anything that looks wrong, as I back up out of there. I go into my bedroom, my heart beating too fast. I sit on my bed and blow out. £50 I've stolen. My brain quickly rationalises the wording to 'borrowed.' I have borrowed £50 from my parents, and I shall pay them back for weekly household chores by charging them £10 to take the bins out. *We usually have 2 per week, so that's £20 paid back already.* I make a mental note about that. After about five minutes, maybe seven at most, I managed to control my breathing. I admire my calming decor, black and white, with no one colour dominating the other. With one lone canvas of a blue rose hanging on the wall above my headboard. *Day 25: I never thought it would be so easy.*

I meet with Milly, Marissa and Marissa's rat-faced, ever-growing brothers and sisters. They always look needy, especially when I see them. *Day 4 was to eat every hour for a total of 24 hours. Marissa and Co came over, and we all stuffed our faces that Saturday. Since then, they seem to be stuck together with Sticks like super glue.* I show off my £50 note and swear them all to secrecy as I explain my sexy, super-rich, secret boyfriend gave me some of his spare change. *People love speaking to money, and money has a lot to say.* They all praise me, and smile masked with fake glimmers of glee beam from cheek to cheek. I bought myself a £20 EE credit voucher for my mobile and treated Milly, Marissa and Marissa's snot-nosed beasts




for siblings to a feast of chicken and chips with chilli and mayo—no sharing for us tonight. We were merry and ecstatic, drinking wild amounts of *Coke* and finishing off with bags of sweets from *Mr Singh's Sweet Sweetie* shop. Mum had questioned me the very next day. Of course, I told her the truth, *my truth*. I told her I returned home shortly after she did and not a second before. As I told her, I shouted and stomped heavily upstairs, angry at such wild accusatory tones within her questioning, and she said, 'Harriet, have you seen any money laying around? I seemed to have misplaced it.' yes, *I knew my dad was not home*. I slam my door, turn on my iPod shuffle, and instantly, *XO Tour Life* comforts me.

'Done' was all I had typed back, replying to them. They had said, 'Do it, steal money from someone you know, just do it!' So, I did. Another successfully completed challenge, time had matured to Day twenty-five. *I'm committed, not addicted, but it keeps on controlling me*. I replayed that part of the song in my head.

3

Afternoons like this are wonderful, and a few pink dolphins appear in the distance. The breeze is mild, and the heat from the sun is like opening an oven door on Christmas Day to check if the turkey is ready. Waves of heat caressing my legs, my arms and the back of my neck. Parts they advise to protect and to hide away. The blue roses smell even sweeter in this temperature, almost edible. I twirl around, and my eyes land upon a whale, its voice bellowing across the seafront. I wave to it. I have taken this pathway for 49 days and have never seen a whale. Everything was perfect until my right foot crushed a pearl white shell; fragments sparkled from the heel of my foot and felt like a piece of Lego. Pain shot through me, and I swore, I




swore. 'Fuck, fuck, fuckity, Fuck!' *Today is day 50. This is my final challenge; they named it Blue Whale.*

A heartbeat on, and the wide array of blue roses glows white, hummingbirds flying between their stems. Tears roll down my face, and then they dive into the water's edge. The hummingbirds fly away from the sea, and the whale's song fades into the depths. The illuminated roses blacken, and their once silky petals dry out and fritter away. I swim out into the sea, smart-camera safe in protection. I dive down just a little, and there it is. I take a shot, and the view is breathtaking. I turn around and take a selfie, Harriet Hunter and Blue.

Attenborough

There she is in the family living room, disconnected from reality, connected to the Wi-Fi by many methods: smart phone, smart camera and laptop. She spends hours online reading stories and hardly ever makes eye contact with her family. When they speak to her, she sighs heavily, mumbling, and they worry they're not being cool enough, so they serve her meals in the kitchen, keeping it warm in the oven and hoping she joins them when she can. We believe it's called Snapchatting, something Harriet does more now than ever, constantly typing, Tweeting, Facebooking, Instagramming and taking selfies.

During menstruation, she rambles on about pain to her mother, completely forgetting the constant burn from the little whale on her arm. But she cries out to her online followers. Harriet details how her parents don't understand; her dad works away from home often, and her mum spends her time at Mary's. College peers never invite her out, so being a teenager must be hard. Depression is usually stated, but



the common thought is that teenagers are always moody. But are they? Some parents mistake their offspring for being antisocial. They misunderstand the signs when, in reality, Harriet daydreams about people she would love to get to know her better.

Tonight, she says that she's catching up on EastEnders, only she misses the moment Phil Mitchell holds Ian Beale's head in the toilet and flushes, making a declaration that he's a piece of turd. Her phone is alight with notifications, and her green eyes darken with intrigue. Who could be demanding her attention, a boyfriend perhaps? But why does she hug herself? And why did she avoid Sandra's wedding last month? Indeed, she should have invited him along. Yet her main interest is charging her gadgets and not losing her robust fibre optic-fueled internet connection.

4

They know me!


It was a new season, and blue roses blossomed all around. For likes, we are all connected, albeit by a few hashtags and photos alike. The roses are intense in the aroma; one whiff, and it's like I'm in *Mr Singh's Sweet Shop*, with pineapple rock, lemon sherbet and strawberry bonbons. The vivid blues compliment my leaf-green eyes; for once, I am the Queen they stand for. Day 50 is my final challenge, and they whisper *Misti, you've come this far already. Don't stop now! Just do it.* I pick a marine-blue-coloured rose and glide its head over the little whale on my arm. The smoothness of the petals provides little comfort to the raised scaring from the outline of my whale. I kiss the rose and begin to peel away each petal. 'Life loves me, and life loves me not.' Tossing it up, a seagull swoops by and snatches it. It might have been the sugary fragrance.



Blue

I have always loved the faint whispers of the sea. With seagulls eating up stolen morsels and shitting overhead, all done in flight. Britain truly has talent. I once tried to talk to Dad, but he only heard me say how quite the house is; he handed me £10 and told me to treat myself. I then told my mum that I was bored, so she bought me a new eyeshadow palette, encouraged me to try something new, and then visited Mary up the road. I guess they were taught that all teens need money and makeup. I just wanted to talk.

'Blue, I am not afraid to die' – Harriet Hunter, 2018



Feathered Tales

Never outshine the master: ‘Always make those above you feel comfortably superior. In your desire to please them, do not go too far in displaying your talents, or you might accomplish the opposite – inspire fear and insecurity. Make your masters appear more brilliant than they are, and you’ll attain the heights of power.’ – Robert Greene.

Eden

Cercis siliquastrum was the name I had originally given to this tree. I created it to flower in the period I named spring. During my time away, well, it wasn’t a vacation or anything; I was sprucing up Nebula. A man hung himself from one of them, and The *Sun* newspaper reported this. By the time I had returned, Wikipedia and its petulant readers had renamed it the Judas tree. Rumour has it that the poor bastard was christened Judas Iscariot.


Judas and the rest of the Iscariot’s stand tall, close to the lake, their branches spread wide, like they’ve played a game of Peek-A-Boo and wish to frighten everything away with their pretty pink flowers. A lone Sparrow sings beautifully from the tip of a lower branch. *Well, they do look anaemic in the winter.* My precious pink, naturally growing sculptures are one of billions of bits of proof of my natural talents. Not that I feel the need to prove anything to anyone. I’m just saying.

I do believe that Judas should have hanged himself from Cedrus Libani, which is a tree native to the Middle East. Why? Well, oil distilled from Cedrus was used in

Ancient Egypt to embalm the dead. *Try it if it feels right. Just try it.* - Jorja Smith, *My hybrid singer*, once said.

In 1873, I was commissioned to create, *well, redesign using mortals*, this wonderful park. I answered prayers, he-he. I simply nodded, and the minions did all the grafting. I'll allow them a little credit. It has obvious elements like freshly cut grass and a large canoe pool, *which they call the lake* and trees. You know, sometimes I remember the first garden I handcrafted *myself*. I placed a tree of knowledge and the posthumous talking snake. *Sly little bugger*. Divine is how I remember it. My earth is not quite ready for another talking thing. They just about got their heads around Siri. I named this place Cannonhill Park and blessed it with many trees: Betula Pendula, Pyrus Salicifolia, Catalpa Bignonioides, and my secret favourite, Acer Japonicum!

Two swans paddle easily down the lake's centre; Royalty is here. The pigeons looking out in awe, overlook the trail of shit that follows them. 'Look, everyone, the swans are in town,' shouts an obese Grey Pigeon as she chows down on a piece of bacon buttie that was tossed aside by a fatty on the Atkins diet. 'I hear they have nests dotted all over Britain.' Sings, a lone magpie, as he decides which nutritious part of the celebration he will take. The pathway beside the wooden picnic becomes crowded in a matter of seconds. Most of the birds sing out compliments to the royal couple as they paddle home. However, others focus on the entrees. 'Much too good for Magpie,' coos the fattest pigeon as she picks up the last piece of smoked bacon from the floor and rolls her chubby neck at all the others. *And theists must question why I can't be asked anymore, isn't it obvious?* The rustle of a crisp packet being pulled apart by a small flock of pigeons is short-lived when a magpie dives down and pushes everyone out of the way. 'It's mine. I declare it; therefore, it is.' He shouts.




The pigeons back off, creating a puddle of space. 'Get back to gawking at what you dream of being but will never achieve.' The magpie is a black and white bird with tints of green at the ends of its feathers. *I remember this specimen. I was eating mint humbugs to give you an accurate recollection. I also produced Zebras, skunks, badgers and penguins. All from a mere humbug.* The flock now turned, feathers ruffled, and beaks paused their gossip to admire the most beautiful one of all, Cannonhill. The Gorgeous Green One! *The little sparrow glides down to a corner table and nibbles on a piece of rotting apple.*

Peacock

Slowly, he strides by the afternoon commotion, his head facing forward, his eyes flittering between glances to the right and back to the centre. He knows that he is the kind of bird that everyone wishes they were. Royal blue and marine green hues clash for the spotlight, and critical features highlight his body, which is smooth and wholesome. Curves, yes, Peacock keeps to a strict diet. He will eat only exceptional boxed food from clean human hands, never from the floor. He's a bird, not a beast. 'Peacock, Peacock, pretty Peacock,' chirps Magpie. He *secretly admires him*. 'Fucking overrated cunt,' he whispers.

'I was told only last week that I look like Peacock look, I have a bit of green down my back,' said the fat grey bacon-munching pigeon. Her eyes narrowed as no one seemed to be paying attention. *Someone is always paying attention these days.* Peacock struts across the buffet, right over to a nice shaded area beneath Judas. He knew that the lovely carpet of soft baby-pink fallen petals made his bold, distinctive complexion even more glorious than ever. So, every Sunday, *the official day of rest*, he would walk across the park and perch upon the sweet bed of petals.



Over three-quarters of the flock had abandoned brunch to gander at The Green One. With the wisps of green down her back, the grey pigeon snarled as they left her side. 'I hate him, that green-feathered, non-flying piece of shit.' *Sparrow hops down beside her and helps himself to sugared doughnuts that seem to have escaped the crowd's view.*

Grey Pigeon

'That's my spot, my shade, my love and my...' She began to vent when she noticed a little brown bird devouring his way through a packet of sugared doughnuts. Flapping her way across *feet, never leaving the ground*, she slaps Sparrow. 'Get away from my food, you can't creep around stealing, you're not royalty, you're not even a magpie.' She kicks out her mangled foot and frightens the little sparrow back to his rotten apple.

Pigeon gobbles up three of the five ring-doughnuts just before Magpie joins her. 'Why aren't you at the front showing love to The Green One?' He teases as he helps himself to a doughnut. *Pigeons are disgusting, he thinks, and I agree.*

'Er, maybe because he's not worth my time!'


'You're jealous,' he laughs hard, trying not to drop any crumbs.

'I'm not jealous, don't you think he's... you know?'

'What, sexy, a bit boring, but I would fuck him if he begged me to.'

'You know?' Pigeon nods her head up and down.

'I know you're jealous. Wouldn't you like to have a bit of that attention, even if it's just for a day?' Magpie stretches out his wings, and the green tint of his feathers twinkles in Pigeon's eyes like he is a descendant of The Green One. *The injured*



sparrow perches beside the apple and leans forward, peering through the gap in the table, watching on with intrigue. Magpie strokes Pigeon's bulging cheeks.

'You know, Pigeon, I was once on the beach in Western Supermare, yes! I know I've been to places. Anyway, I got talking to a couple of birds, and during a stroll along the pier, we spotted a seagull pulling an octopus out of the sea!' Magpie lowers his head and scrapes his thin black beak along the leg of the wooden table.

'What's a fucking seagull eating got to do with me? Peacock gets an easy life, food hand-delivered, for Christ's sake! And what do I have to do, fucking hang around picnic tables fighting for scraps?' *You're not exactly short of food, he smirks.*

'Ah! Pigeon, do you not see? The seagull saw something he wanted and didn't wait around for anyone, anything or God himself to take it. He just took it.'

'Well, I can't exactly go over there and rip his tail off now, can I?'

'Who said Pigeons can't do anything better than Royalty? A swan would, that's if they really wanted to.'

He takes off in the direction of the silver bird bath by Goose Corner, shaking sugar from the tips of his wing that had touched Pigeon's face.

Peacock

It is now high noon. Sunshine glistens off Peacock's long neck as he stands tall, stretching out his legs. Without even checking, he knows hundreds of eyes are scanning his body, making illegal copies of it into their minds and replaying them in her physical absence. She prances forward, her feathered train shimmering behind his. He heads over for a sip of water from the lake and then returns to his nest, just past his fans. Behind the tide of grey dust, he notices a little sparrow sitting next to a piece of fruit. *Aww, he looks adorable.* He goes up onto the tips of his toes and says,

‘I see you, little one.’ Winking at him, he lowers his gaze, opening his feathers in full. The little brown bird fluffs his feathers in appreciation.

Grey Pigeon

‘Worms are by the bandstand. Look, see quickly!’ she coos and, as expected, just like sheep in the flock, flaps across to the bandstand, leaving one or two late arrivals scrounging the earth for scraps.


The pigeon ruffles her feathers and hops right in front of Peacock. *Although, some may argue she rolled.*

‘Why is it you think you can strut around this gaff thinking you’re a fucking swan or something?’

Peacock rolls his eyes and continues to stroll by the remnants of brunch.

‘I’m talking to you, you damn green feathered ponce!’ Pigeon hopped closer toward Peacock. ‘You had better get out of this area if you know what’s good for you.’ Pigeon raises her wings, about to slap Peacock, but the little sparrow floats between them, tweeting his cries for peace and harmony. ‘Get the fuck out of my way,’ Pigeon whacks him. Sparrow goes hurling into pieces of a broken glass bottle. Pigeon cackles at the little bird, and as she turns around, Peacock kicks dust and debris into her eyes, then retreats for safety. *Pretty, pretty Peacock can’t be getting into fights now, can he?*

The flock of birds see the ruckus and gathers around the scene. Exhibit A: One meaty Pigeon shaking dust out of her eyes and screaming, ‘Peacock attacked me, Peacock attacked me. Will someone help me?’ and Exhibit B: A battered and bruised meagre brown bird was bleeding and dying. Exhibit C: Many onlookers saw the drama had ended and went back to search for worms. Others gathered water to



take care of Pigeon, completely ignoring Sparrow. *He wasn't one of them, so why bother?*

Do not commit to anyone. 'It is the fool who always rushes to take sides. Do not commit to any side or cause but yourself. By maintaining your independence, you become the master of others – playing people against one another, making them pursue you. – Robert Greene

Lineage


A loud shrill comes from the scant bloody sparrow, and the flock gathers around, nearby but behind Pigeon. Looking on with her now clean eyes, she coughs, 'The little bastard is dead! That noise is probably Magpie playing tricks or something.' *But Magpie had left a while ago with a raven.* Thought one of the crowd, yet they dared not correct her.

'There's a horn coming out the sparrow's head,' said a Wood-pigeon that watched on from a safe distance.

'It's not a horn, you dickhead. It's a piece of glass.' Pigeon laughed and continued, 'Peacock had attacked me like I was saying earlier, and this little fucker joined in to help him. The thing is, if you start worshipping those that aren't of your kind, they take advantage and try to blow us out.' She nods her head and looks around for approval.

'Then why is it black?' said Wood-pigeon, a tinge of fear shaking his words as they left him. Again, Pigeon ignored it and turned away to finish the last doughnut.

At first, it seemed like a horn, but then they silently agreed it must be a piece of glass. But the glass seemed to be moving up, exiting the skull of the dying bird.



Minutes later, a bloody black beak is glistening in the sunlight. A shrill is heard once again, like a lone screamer running away from a high-school shooter.

The beaks of birds of feathers gape open as they bear witness to a live reincarnation. A large, plump, muscular Crow squeezes out of a dead sparrow. He bops his head up and down, left to right and then up and down again, shaking off a few entrails, a tiny brain and an even tinier heart that still beats faintly.

With one big flap and short jump, he lands with a thud behind Pigeon and before the chubby one can drop the doughnut and turn around, Crow begins to pluck away her tail feathers. Pigeon wails out, tears filling her eyes, her pain flowing out, washing the sugar away from the sweet treasure. Crow pecked and pulled with every cry until a hefty, bald bird sat before them. Once he had pulled the last feather, he hopped onto the fleshy belly of Pigeon.

'I'm sorry, please forgive me. I'm so sorry,' Pigeon begged for mercy. Crow roared back, 'In the beginning was scream. Who begat blood? Who begat eye? Who begat Fear?' Crow leans closer, his body carrying the stench of raw meat. He whispers to Pigeon, 'Who begat God?' and then plunges his mighty black beak into Pigeon's eyes. Hopping back by two, Crow continues to strike out at her, tossing bits of her flesh out to the crowd. Only when he rips out her backbone does he stop, hopping out of the cavity of her warm skin, his eyes drowning in blood, he asks the congregation, 'Who begat crow?'



Eden

In the beginning, I created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the Crow. In 1873, I created Cannonhill Park, which has served as a home for many birds of a feather. *I wonder why they didn't use Judas today? This game becomes so tedious at the best of times.*

The birds still stand around the Crow, afraid to move, so they stand still, trying to blend in. I place Jorja Smith on the bandstand, and her soft voice spreads far and wide, even bringing the swans to peer out of the gap between the twigs on their wall.

I place the lid over the game, pop it on cloud nine and exit. I think about what a clever man named Robert Greene once told me, 'Law 26, Keep your hands clean: You must seem the paragon of civility and efficiency.'

'If who I am offends you, don't feel sorry, don't feel sorry. My loss is worth more than your wins. I'm satisfied if it starts over again.' – Jorja Smith, 2018

Trauma


Bright lights fill and overspill in my line of sight. I'm slapped in the face seconds after being held back for my safety.

Blackness consumes me; I blink over and over, and yet I can't see anything or anyone. I try to scream for help, but smoke coats my throat with black as it forces through me. My whole face hurts, my nose throbs and I'm lost in a plume of impenetrable darkness that burns my eyes as if an omen were preventing me from seeing what's happening. I can't breathe. I cough and inhale, but there's no air here. I swallow, and I taste blood with a hint of salty tears. Images of my family invade the cloud, and instantaneously, I thank God they're not here with me.

Flames protrude beneath my feet, imploring to keep me warm throughout this traumatic ordeal. I'm able to raise my right hand, although I think about pushing the door. My hand glides over my face with a tremble of shaky denial to all the bits of glass now embedded in my flesh and causing mass devastation to my nervous system.


I scream again, only this time I sound like *Clarence Boddicker* as he dies in *Robocop*. The gory sounds of his final words before he falls into the remnants of the acid spill. I feel my blood battling its way up, wanting to be free. Devouring its deadly accomplice smoke as it reaches its goal.

Bold blue and red flashes of light pop in and out of this enormous plumage. Only it does nothing to stop a heavy metal shard from slicing its way down through my lower abdomen. I stop blinking and close my eyes. My family are my world, and I take peace in knowing they're safe.



I wake up coughing, quickly followed by a huge gasp for air. I'm wet, well damp, and my burgundy and white printed Harry Potter Gryffindor nightshirt is soaked with cold sweat. My marine blue walls now look a shade of sapphire with the lights off. I flip my duvet to the side and grab random areas of my body. Checking my neck and my waist, I continue down to my feet. I blink rapidly in sheer disbelief that what's happening now is real. I'm here; my breathing becomes more manageable, and salty tears roll over my lips, diving onto my sweaty Gryffindor nightshirt.

I roll my nightshirt off over my head, tossing it towards my bedroom door. I get up; my clammy feet slide a little before I'm able to walk across to the windows and open one wide. Cold air glides in, caressing my neck and my breasts, spiralling downwards and disappearing at my feet. I wiggle my toes, then turn around and place a towel over the area I was originally sleeping on. Then I hop back into bed, ignoring the creaks, still gazing out the window. More tears flow down my face, but eventually, I fall back to sleep.



Whisky's calm but noticeable purring wakens me. My cat is curled up tightly in a ball right above my head. I lie still for a moment or two, just listening to how loud my breathing sounds, wondering if the pigeons nest in our roof also notice this, too. Sunlight resting upon me, shining through the darkness of my eyes closed without a care in the world. With my eyes still closed, I stroked my face with my right hand. Tracing over my smooth skin, spending extra time on the spots I've gained from consuming milk. If everything were nonsense, the world would believe I'm a cat, and Whisky is a weird twenty-three-year-old woman. One who always goes to bed fully clothed but infrequently wakes up in her mismatched underwear.

My mother made me a plate of saltfish, ackee and fried dumplings for breakfast, with a heavy sprinkle of cracked black pepper and lashings of scotch bonnet sauce.

'So, have you decided what you want to do today?'


'No, I'm not fussed.' I look up slowly at her; she's wiping down the kitchen counter. Humming *One Love* by *Bob Marley*

'Well, we can go out to Pizza Hut if you want?' She asks as she starts to wash the dishes.

'I didn't want to make a big deal out of it, and I'm only twenty-three today.'

'Don't you want to spend time out with your friends? You've been staying in a lot lately.' She adds a bit of hot water to the sink and continues to hum.

'They're all busy working,' I lie. And my left eyebrow twitches a little. 'Besides, I'm happy spending it at home with my family.' She dries her hands, pours water in Whiskey's water bowl and apologises that she must run out for a few hours. She handed me some money and urged me to go out and enjoy my special day with my




friends. I wave goodbye and place a now sauce-stained roll of twenties beside my plate. *I wonder if Pizza Hut does home deliveries?*

Custard creams are one of my favourite biscuits; *I don't think I've ever told you that before.* I remove the tea-bag from my pink and purple floral-printed mug and add a questionable amount of semi-skimmed milk. My tea's colour lightens drastically from nutmeg brown to dark cream. I dunk my first biscuit in and contemplate how many spots I will gain because of my inability to refrain from milk. I get through a half-pack of custard creams before I realise that most of my milky tea has gone.

I remember you woke up one night; technically speaking, you were still sleeping. You managed to walk downstairs into the kitchen, open a packet of biscuits and, to my surprise, stuff five custard-creams into your mouth. I laughed so much I had to run tip-toeing up to the toilet. Out of all the noises we created that night, your mother woke up at the sound of me closing the bathroom door gently.

I pick up the pack of custard creams and count that I have five biscuits left. My heart beats faster, and my nostrils flare a little. I close my eyes and count down from ten, trying to recall what happened after your mother looked into your room and then the room of your other sisters, where I was pretending to sleep. I often become nervous when I think so far back. I worry that what I remember is accurate or if my mind is substituting memories to add value.

Your mother is a wonderful cook; she made your favourite meal earlier that evening: callaloo, saltfish and white rice. That was the first time I had tasted callaloo; it was strange at first, as it was new. The greens mixed in with the rice, spices pulsating inside my mouth, spices dancing on my tongue, teasing me to cough. Only that



would be rude of me to do during dinner. I scoop up an even bigger heap of food onto my spoon and swallow another mouthful in utter spicy delight. *I think that we both have a strong appreciation for the way our mothers prepare our favourite dishes, which happen to be two of one of the same.*


Happy Birthday, Nicki! I'm now twenty-eight, and this year, my mother walks into the dining room with a large pizza, singing happy birthday along with my siblings. I smile, noting that they also put candles on the pizza, and all appear delighted to celebrate indoors *within the safety of our home.*

After the hip-hip-hoorays and a traditional round of birthday beatings, Mother opens a bottle of *Sholer*, fills three glasses for a few of us, and the others pour *Pepsi*.

I find DNA to be a fascinating experience, and I've identified more and more similarities over the last few years. All of which makes me smile. Even though we don't know each other now, we share many aspects of our lives. From our greed for custard creams to our demand for our peers to wear Adidas as opposed to Nike and the joy we feel when watching our favourite movie, *Scarface*.

I grab a large slice of pizza with many different types of meat covering such a European delicacy. I wonder what you would've preferred, and I guess it would be spinach with a mixture of red onions, peppers and mushrooms. I know you classed yourself as a vegetarian, although you ate fish from time to time. Back then, we never knew you would be known as a pescatarian.

I look around, absorbing the happiness my family have created. I glance over at the gifts that rest on the coffee table that I have yet to open. I feel the desire to cry through natural happiness. The flames from the candles dance before my eyes.



Their seductive glow of yellow and orange swaying at me, imploring me to join in with the celebrations, whispering that some are good for me and not all burn. I look across the eyes of my family and see the warm glow of fire staring back.

A deluge of emotion overwhelms me as I blow the candles out. Today is a milestone birthday for me; it is a special day indeed. I feel selfish for thinking this but ecstatic that I'm alive. Trust me, this feeling only lasts minutes, seconds, in fact.


In August 2008, there were so many people here that the traffic slowed down and curved into the other lane so that people could navigate safely around the crowds. I look around, and everyone is wearing a multitude of colours. You are known for embracing all colours, even pink. I overheard an elderly Jamaican lady dressed in candy pink saying, 'him was a good man, him look after him children and him family.' She wipes her eyes, and another lady wearing a jade green dress added, 'We ah go miss him. A child should never go before him parents. No sah!' They both followed the Pastor inside, collected a programme and selected seats near the front.

I'm right at the back of the church with my mother and two of my brothers. Your mother is giving a speech at the altar, and she explains how you love travelling. That night, you had just taken your children back to their mother's house(s.)

'My son,' she pauses momentarily, takes a deep breath and wipes her eyes.


'My son Tobias is my first-born child. My one and only son...'

A sweet fragrance fills the room, warmed up by the love we all have for you. One by one, we all walk up to you. Accompanied by the familiar sounds of *Boys to Men* and their song *End of The Road*. Your other sisters cry out loudly, their screams




reverberate off the stain glass windows, filling everyone's ears with sounds that I know will haunt us forever.

The head of a chilli red coloured rose is what catches my eye at first, laying peacefully under your hands. You're wearing an Adidas tracksuit, which makes me smile subtly. I love Adidas, too. Slow steps towards you, I see your face and skin, which is darker than I had remembered, darker than the photos of you that surround you. It's the little scars on your face, all over your face. There you lay, unperplexed by your current surroundings. I stare at your chest, hoping to see it rise and fall. *Sometimes, they get things wrong, and you hear about those stories where people are buried alive.* I stare harder, look at the golden crucifix around your neck, and whisper to Jesus, 'please allow him to wake up. I only just want a few minutes.' I look back at your chest and see no change. My heart races faster, and tears blur my view. I cry because, due to our father's ineptitude with staying within the lawful lane of life, we lost connection during our childhood. My tears seem unstoppable, and my head can't comprehend how I had only just discovered where you were living a few weeks ago. Anger heats my face, and I'm ushered out by the gentle pushes of those behind me. The *Boyz* sing on, 'Although we've come to the end of the road. Still, I can't let go, it's unnatural...' I want to scream; I want you to know I'm sorry. I need you to forgive me; I should've looked for you sooner. All your friends and family keep asking, 'who are you?' and I'm forced to explain that I'm your youngest sister on your dad's side. And from how they responded, I can tell we shared a common opinion of our useless father.



August 2018, I waited for the lights to change to red and for the oncoming vehicles to slow down to a halt. Then, I push my sky-blue *Pendleton* bicycle across the road. The heavy rain streams down my face, adding irritation to my milk spots. My vision is blurry. However, the determination I have to do this keeps me pushing my bike all the way to the park. My new trainer, Domenik Spitzer-Wong, is waiting for me. For the first fifteen minutes, I tell him I can't do this, I've forgotten how to ride a bike, and I'm afraid I will crash and fall off. I continue to add to my complaint that the rain is heavy, my feet are slipping off of the plastic peddles, and maybe cycling isn't for a woman like me. Thirty minutes after that, I apologised for crying. I think about you and remind myself that I made it past twenty-eight. I imagine how much more you would have done by now. If you still had the choice to make.

Later on in the evening, I place my cadet blue *Trip* suitcase into the boot of a white *Uber* taxi. I sit at the back on the passenger's side strap my seatbelt on, with deep hopes that I'll make it home in one piece. The driver asked me if I'd used this service before. I explained that I had not, which he had taken as an invitation to talk me through the history of *Uber* and how it originated in his home country of India. My left eyebrow twitches every time; I feel he could slow down. However, a police car drove by, and the officers inside showed no care for the speed of my *Uber* driver. I instruct myself to calm down. Every car that is near, I imagine smashing into us, headlights at their brightest and glowering over me. I picture every angle of the car colliding with another, and then I'm inside, being broken from all angles. I confess I wonder what pain you felt from the first to the very last second before you passed away.



I envisage all the other drivers around me had drunk heavily and sniffed a few lines of crack before they decided to hop into a car and drive around the streets of Birmingham.

Belle

'I'm sleeping, I'm tired, I'm awake, I'm awake, I'm awake, yes I'm awake. I'm not lying, and I'm awake.'

'Fam, man up and stop your noise.'


'Can't you both speak with some decorum?'

'I said I'm awake. Why is everyone moaning at me?'

It's around 11:00 am this morning, and the temperature outside is eleven degrees Celsius, which is mild for this time of year. Officially, the month of February is still classed as winter. Rightfully so, it should probably be colder. Shall we discuss the weather? It's a cold day today.

Right outside the living-room window stands a bus stop, and about two feet away sits a post-box. However, the main colour of red has long since faded. I suppose maintenance is not a priority on an over-used street. Across the road, you will see a Halal meat shop, which I find interesting as most of the residents claim to be Christian of some kind. When I say most, I mean to say approximately 72.69%. However, I must be fair, kind, and honest. And let you know that 93.12% of the inhabitants of Westmere Street believe in my word in some way, shape or form.

I say, inhabitants, as I must include man, woman, child, dog, cat, and you are understanding now? Down to the ants that they see with their eyes (if they're not blind) right the way through to the micro-organisms. I acknowledge all of my creations. Even if some *like those putrid pigeons* are more disgusting than others – *Mrs Patel, at number 64, was a looker back in her heyday.* Anyway, the weather was



mild, with a mild glow of sunshine that mildly warmed up the batons of dog-shit, which rested beside the faded post-box.

‘But I’m so tired, and I only need five more minutes of sleep.’

‘Man, you’re such a dick! Why don’t you just go with the flow and get ready like the rest of us?’

‘I think the both of you are pathetic. Why are you even worried about what your name is?’

Downstairs in the kitchen is a white, square plate that’s smothered with deep-fried pork spare-ribs, chicken fried rice and a half-eaten chicken ball. Going off next to half a can of lager or beer? I can’t be too sure right now.

Sharing the same worksurface is a black kettle, which is home to limescale-infused water. I think it’s been about two weeks since it was last used. The water is rancid, and the spout shows signs of rust. But that developed months ago, and I’m merely filling out an image of accuracy here.

When first occupied, the kitchen was painted white because white is right. White is pure, and white is clean. However, upon reflection, white highlights the splatters of grease around the stove, the spider’s nest in the corner of the side window and the food-type finger-prints on the inside of all cupboards. The watermarks from a kettle are placed beneath the cupboard, and the mould across the ceiling grows as the occupier rarely opens his windows.



'I'm tired.'

'Fam, how can you be tired? What a time to be alive.'

'I wish you two were with the others. You make this whole journey feel like a chore. When reality is, this is a great moment for us.'


Beneath his bedroom is a livingroom that has genuinely been lived in. Two large pizza boxes on a teak wood coffee table tilt before one falls on the floor. A loud groan is heard in the distance, and a fat, scatty, long-tailed rat scurries out while woofing down a chunk of pineapple from the three-day-old pizza. *Reminds me of Gus from Cinderella, gathering kernels of corn. Knowing that the house cat, Lucifer, could strike at any minute* – That part has over 125,000 views on *YouTube*. *Straight facts.*

This once proudly painted blue room now shows the mood of its covering, which is blue. The decade-old carpeting breeds an infinity amount of dust mites and maybe the odd Tardigrade. Indestructible, you know, some may even say Godlike? I must leave something to prove I'm around, and not everyone asks for Jesus these days. The black leather sofa is a bit dry due to a lack of primary care. Netflix connected, and there was no one to chill with. Friends Season 3 paused on his 42-inch, LED/DVD/Smart TV combi.

'I only need to rest for a short while.'

'Fam! Wake the fuck up, it's almost time for us to bounce.'

'Will you both be quiet, please? I've been waiting for this moment my whole life, the day I share information with the universe!'




The bathroom is plain, beige and dull, with a fixed mirror and a conventional bathmat. Complete with damp patches, a lone stained sock and the smell of filthy shit-marked boxer shorts unnoticed behind the radiator.

I should tell you that this isn't the only bathroom on Westmere Street that has no toilet brush. However, a positive must be equal, and I can unequivocally confirm that there have been no rats in this area of his home.

In his memory bank, you'll find a date that he had in 2016. It was with a smart lady, smart and had a self-diagnosed bout of obsessive-compulsive disorder – for clean spaces. After a sublime date, he took her out for a bistro-style lunch, then to a museum she had never frequented before, and onboarded an 1850s-style double-decker horse bus. Fifteen minutes after sitting on his smooth bachelor (accessory) sofa, she asked to use his bathroom. He smiled, kissed her on her cheek and pointed her toward the second door on the left upstairs. She thanks him and hints that she won't take too long.

Her sanitary towel was full and had started to overflow 20 minutes ago. She locks the door behind her and inspects the room. A pin-pricked size of dark yellow draws her attention to the toilet seat. She shudders and pulls out her half-filled pack of antibacterial wipes, and winces as she proceeds to disinfect the area. After wiping down the toilet seat and lid twice, she spins around, hoping to locate the bathroom bin. After two turns, she decides it best to flush them. As she tosses the now infected wipes into the bowl of the toilet, she sees even darker stains at the base, you know, the bit before the s-bend. She felt the wet space between her thighs, screaming for a change. She felt repulsed by the whole situation and had to make a snap decision. Take a seat on the clean toilet seat and risk something grabbing her front and making her overfilled pad seem like a dream, or leave and search for a local place.



She popped her head into the kitchen where she found him and said her Grandmother had been taken sick with cancer and that she must leave immediately. She went so quickly that he never had the chance to say anything. Welcome to the bathroom.

‘Why are we waiting? Why are we waiting?’

‘Shut-up bruv, all you do is ask big man stupid questions.’

‘I think, as the three of us are going to be together for the race, then maybe we should at least know each other’s names? I’ll start, my name is Hickman.’

‘Safe Hickman, I’m Izayah, and that dickhead is Sam.’


‘Pleasure to meet you both. I’ve never met men like either of you before.’

‘Well, mans’ from the ends innit. Not sure about Sam, but he gets by.’

‘I’m Sam. I’m really tired, yes.’

The three acquaintances fall silent just for a moment, and two wonder how they ended up next to one another. Thinking well, very individual thoughts. Izayah ponders over ways in which he can make money. While Hickman dreams of the day he’s born into wealth, he just knows for sure that he belongs in money, not chasing cheques. They both sway with a minimal appreciation of the certitude that they are pressed from the same fruit.

Ah! My profuse apologies. I forgot to tell you about his bedroom. Who is he? Why his name is, erm? Sorry about the lapse. I had to glance over his passport, and I now have his full name! Gerald Owen Smith-Hand. Anyway, his bedroom is enormous because he’s single. I’m sure a woman would’ve found a way to make it smaller and then whine about, ‘Oh babe, I think we should look at getting a new place together.’



Gerald kept his walls the colour they were when he moved in, seaweed green with pinewood furniture. A pinewood double bed, covered with a 15-tog, king-sized duvet, which he's enclosed in a cookie-coloured duvet cover.


His over-sized room is fragranced with dirty clothing that, upon the first glimpse, looks like they've been scattered around. Only the truth is, he's left them exactly where he took them off. As you know, I know everything; *Febreze* can't get this out. I personally think one would need to burn the house down. In 1727, poor Janet Horne's house was burnt down because those nice people up north in Scotland believed she was a witch. The truth is, I didn't create her daughter in the most beautiful form. I was busy, and it was a Friday night. Thus, her daughter was born with deformities, which caused the locals to assume that she must be on the side of my fellow angel Lucifer. I knew about the trial, and I was going to intervene, but you know when you just need a break and to get away from it all? It's alright for you, business minions. You work 9-5 and then party hard on the weekend. I, on the other hand, must be tethered to everyone 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Imagine, I considered having an 8-day week, Jesus Christ!

The family trip to Chamonix, France, is captured in a single shot and embraced by a pinewood frame. Now, face down, like it had one too many Baileys hot chocolates by a real log fire.

'Sam, are you cool fam?'

'I don't think his company is entertaining anyway. Leave him be.'

'Hick shut up. Don't tell a big man what to do.'



‘Why you would think you’re bigger in size is beyond me. We are identical in every way, shape and form. Although, I know that my intelligence is worth more than both of you put together.’

‘Ayo Sam!’

‘Hmm, I think he’s departed us right before our departure.’

‘RIP Sam, you were cool for a hot minute.’

Music is heard from Gerald’s iPad Pro, *Cake by the Ocean* by *DNCE*. Gerald is on his bed, eyes closed and smiling. His head is well supported by his memory foam pillow. He imagines the voice to be more feminine, with hints of husky undertones.

‘Talk to me, baby, I’m going blind from this sweet-sweet craving. Whoa-oh! Let’s lose our minds and go fucking crazy.’

A sweet, joyful character with hazel eyes and a smile that penetrates its way through the screen. She appears to be happy to be shown and eager to please others.

Gerald’s eyes open, and instantly, he feels weak, like he’s a melting iceberg in the Amazon forest. ‘You make me feel...’ his words wavier off, transitioning into another groan, louder than the last. He swipes left, and the same character is now looking deep into his eyes, lips parted wide, and her famous yellow dress torn and, well, not in the way that we all know it to be.


‘Izayah, it’s time. Are you ready?’

‘I was made ready bruv.’

‘It’s uncanny how it’s only us three, well, us two now. I heard that these events are usually packed to the rafters with our family.’

‘I’m ready to start cashing them cheques now.’

‘I have something even more exciting, world-changing, in fact.’



Gerald swipes left again, and there she is, her hazel eyes sparkle and her lips red in this image. She's wearing a man's shirt, it has one button fastened. Her humongous breasts were about to break free from their cotton jail wrap. She has one hand on her red lips, and the other is between her pink lips.

'Belle, you're a naughty girl.' He grips hold of his balls while his main hand, *you know, the one he writes with*, works hard, pumping his nicely proportioned cock. Seconds later, in unimaginable but ridiculously obvious delight, he peaks. His cleanish bodily fluids spit out and slide down Belles' face. Fluids that contain four semen: Sam, Izayah, Hickman and unknown.

'Fam, where's the chick?'

'You mean our egg to fight, to fertilise?'


'What are all these bright lights?'

'This, my friend, is the result of a fop-doodle with too much time on his hands. I'm sorry to say this to you, Izayah, but we're going down the same pathway as Sam.'

'I'm fully shook. Why would he do us like this, fam?'


'The worst part is, I have the cure for...'

You didn't think I would allow young Hickman to give you details of how to cure, you know. Ha-ha, if I did that, then it would eradicate millions of prayers I received every Nano-second and call me naïve, but I can already tell you, *well, according to The Independent*, an astounding 53% of the UK population claim to have no religion or believe I exist. And although my fellow Zeus was around in 1860, he was the one who got many mentions in that damn book *Mythos*. That stupid number-one bestselling audiobook. What about my mentions? I made Jesus, for Christ's sake. Ha-ha, no way are you taking away any more of my popularity. In fact, times up!



I'm tired of all you needy good-for-nothing. What do you ever give to me? What have you ever given to me? Apart from your sharp and blubbering Brummie voice. Why do you think good old Lizzie and Co. reside in London?

Before Hickman gets to finish, Gerald wipes him, Izayah, Sam and the unknown up with the corner of his cookie-coloured duvet. Some of his spunk is still glued to his hand, so he wipes it onto his pizza-stained denim jeans, lays his head back, closes his eyes and falls asleep, mumbling 'Belle of my balls.'



Birmingham


Equality and Diversity Policy

1. Purpose and Scope

- 1.1 The purpose of this policy is to outline the city of Birmingham's dedication to equality and diversity, its legal requirements under UK law and the roles and responsibilities of all who are a part of our diverse community based here in the United Kingdom.
- 1.2 The fairness aspect is to demonstrate via text that we are committed to letting anyone who reads this policy know that our intention is to remain fair and treat everyone equally.

2. Policy Statement

- 2.1 Birmingham City's commitment to equality for all has been embedded into our minds since then. God knows when! Possibly the 1900's? Nonetheless, we worked tirelessly on this document to show that we welcome everyone. (*For non-UK residents, please see Birmingham City Equality & Diversity NON-UK available online.*)
- 2.2 In line with our people charter and the legality of aspects these days, Birmingham is committed to developing and maintaining equal and diverse areas. Where all residents, visitors and randoms will be treated fairly and shall receive no discrimination on the grounds of race, age, gender, religion, marital status, disability or pregnancy. Our bountiful city of Birmingham will do



its best, with resources and funding permitted – to ensure that everyone is given the same equal opportunities and is treated fairly.

3. Legal Responsibilities

3.1 We will never discriminate against you based on any aspect of the following:

- Sex
- Age
- Sexual Orientation
- Disability
- Marriage and Civil Partnership
- Gender Identity
- Pregnancy or Maternity
- Religion or Belief


4. Responsibilities

4.1 As stated above.

5. Complaints

5.1 Please see our *Complaints Policy* located online.

Birmingham 2020 ©



We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. – Thomas Jefferson 1776.

Hear No Evil

‘Did you see the one with the chipped blue nail varnish?’

‘Yeah, matched her chipped tooth.’

‘Definitely not a fit! Right? Everyone?’

Candidate one inhibited and expressed both the required and desired experience and capabilities. She exuded confidence and demonstrated that she is naturally a respected leader. But who gives a fuck about the fact she meets and surpasses everything they could ever imagine when her mouth displays a chipped tooth? And her hand, her ring finger, resembles the remnants of a childhood scrapbook. Why paint your nails a deep shade of blue, a royal hue of deep blue and not rectify the visible chip?

Along one side of a dull grey rectangular table sits a panel that holds the following occupations:

Senior Operations Manager - Amelia Kirk

Office Manager - Leanna Baldwin

Senior Administrator - Mandeep Kaur

Senior Administrator - Fallon Parchment




They're currently going through the mandatory scoresheets for every candidate.

Please note these are meant to be completed after each interview to enable fairness and transparency when it comes to hiring new members of staff. Only, one sweet-lipped Leanna voiced, 'I think it's a better idea if we fill these sheets out at the end of the day. I mean, it's quicker, and we already know who it's not going to be.'

Fallon glances at Mandeep, sharing a look of confusion and slight anxiety. Amelia notices this and confirms, 'yes, Leanna, that's a great idea. As we've got lunch arriving at noon, and I, for one, don't want to be faffing around with papers before and after lunch.'

Leanna smiles, stretches across the table, and scoops up the HR papers closest to her, motioning to both senior administrators to pass the rest to her. This is the thing with hierarchy at work: if you're at the top or one step below, you can say anything, and the herd will follow silently. But, if you're at the bottom and you don't agree, you won't last in any company. People like to have titles! With titles that build these worlds inside the confines of a workplace, they feel? They feel they can do anything because they matter.



‘I’m not sure why we have to spend so much time interviewing everyone when it was obvious from the resumes we reviewed that Nicky Dixon is the best candidate we could hire today.’


‘I’m not too sure because she struggled with a few questions. Whereas Letisha gave top answers.’

‘Fallon, come on! So, she stuttered through a few questions, and she took too long to answer Mandeep’s question on using initiative when faced with an emergency. I liked that she grew up on a farm, has a Birchbox subscription and how every strand of her platinum blonde hair remained in place – like she could’ve had an amazing night out, grabbed a coffee and stepped out of an Uber, right outside Tiffany’s and her hair and makeup remains stunning.’

Leanna rolls her eyes, tucks into a smoked salmon quarter from one of three sandwich platters and continues, ‘I know you think Letisha is good, but Letisha Burke droned on about how she grew up here in Birmingham right in that vile place called Handsworth.’

After devouring two salmon quarters and one cheese ploughman's, Leanna tucks her chestnut brown hair behind her ears, snarls and mumbles, ‘While she spoke about her struggles growing up in Birmingham, I couldn’t help but stare at her left hand, ring-finger. Her nails were painted in a deep shade of blue, but her ring finger was chipped. How could she come to an interview with chipped nail varnish?’

Leanna was hired a year or so before Amelia, and she never had much experience as a manager. However, she was close friends with the Director’s wife. There isn’t




anything more to consider when you look at how she grew in this company – her growth was artificially inseminated.

See No Evil

After the last interview, Amelia shared the candidate score sheets with the rest of the panel members. She pauses between Mandeep and Fallon, stretches her fat back and remarks, ‘Well ladies, I think we can all agree on who the clear winner is today.’

The small beige-coloured, fabric-cushioned chair creaks as she sits down in between Leanna and Fallon. She completed the score sheet for the first candidate, Letisha Burke, scoring her a 3 on average and a 1 (unsatisfactory) for her appearance, which was based on her chipped tooth and chipped nail varnish. Unashamedly, peering across to both Fallon and Mandeep’s scoresheets, she passes Fallon a new sheet explaining, ‘The outstanding 5’s your listing does not match up with the rest of our sheets. Things like that will make HR twitch. Besides, we’re looking for professionals here, not pioneers of the local gang-filled youth clubs.’ Leanna’s bright blue eyes shoot up from her score sheet for Letisha. Shaking her head from side to side, she smiles and recalls, ‘I also found her hair quite messy; it was big and wild like Scary Spice with frizzy bits bursting through her matching navy blue headband. I guess having her hair that way would’ve been fine if she was working in a 70s-themed nightclub, but it was revolting to see such an unkempt individual coming for an interview.’ She stands up and leans forward, placing her completed score sheet for Letisha Burke on top of Amelia’s copy.




Amelia joined the company a mere nine months ago as an Office Manager for the team that covers the evenings and weekends. Staff from other divisions gossip about her doing special favours for the Operations Director, Matthew Tomlinson. If you were to receive a phone call from her, you'd hear heavy breathing during the conversation, like a crazed stalker who just dialled your number for the first time.

If you had to attend a staff briefing that she is heading, you'd be stunned at the sight of her over-fed body. Her ass waddles from left, left, down to right. And her boar-sized stomach presses out from the cotton-rich black tent, someone labelled as a dress. Quiet often mistaken as Oswald Cobblepot, when the autumn weather greets the season of Halloween. Although she's more known as The Penguin, plodding her privileged feet around this over-priced central setting in Birmingham.

Life is always fascinating when Amelia bumps into you in an outside setting. She's always puffin away on a cigarette, but her weight only seems to increase – back in the 60s, it was widely said that smoking helps to keep you nice and slim. Oh, it must be noted that as the Senior Operations Manager, she's expected to attend many meetings, and the company has a policy on walking where possible. This is to reduce their carbon footprint and increase the drive to become more eco-friendly. However, Amelia prefers to send one of the Senior Administrators.

Many staff from across the business wonder how someone so large manages to fulfil her role. I guess being an outsider, we may never know. Once again, we digress! However, note that many of the other candidates in the cohort that were interviewed alongside Amelia were grouped as BAME – Black Asian and Minority Ethnic. Two other candidates were white but lacked an understanding of the role.



Three of the BAME interviewees had more experience than Amelia, but what did that mean to an all-white panel?


Speak No Evil

Inside Fallon's mind, there are roars of the dark thoughts of a woman embroiled in fear and the need to step in and mitigate obvious factors. There's a mug on the table, half-filled with tea, but the old dark rings of coffee flake away due to the heat, which changes the flavour while continuously fuelling the depths of family ties for E-coli and other common communities of the bacterium.

Partial visions of raising the soiled mug with the faded message, 'You're the best, Leanna!' and smashing that notion into her pink-blush painted lips. She pushed the broken pieces of ceramic into her mouth and ordered her to swallow her gift as quickly as she dismissed Letisha as a potential colleague.

Asking Leanna, 'who are you without your title?' would Amelia still say, 'yes' and compliment all your outrageous suggestions. The callous nature of how comfortably you announce your idiocy when justifying that the panel (placed here to ensure fairness and equality when selecting the best candidate) opt for Nicky Dixon because you both share a superficial commonality. I'm sure you share a few with Letisha Burke: the need to breathe, the desire to earn more money and most importantly, to be valued in life.

Fallon's mind delves even deeper and asks her to remember the fact that she was hired on a day that Leanna was off sick. Fallon was recruited without a doubt in any minds of the panel members. She was hired into a role, later discovering that she was the first and only black member of staff.




The conversations Fallon hears and has heard are categorised as offensive. Only when such words surround her workspace and float around her mind, daring her to say something, stand up for her race and the universal proclamation – everyone who works here is fair. Correction, what it says and what you're taught is that the company has an Equality and Fairness policy. The company adheres to every word of the policy, and anyone who disputes this is frowned upon.

When they silently channel those subtle looks and smarmy comments, when they know that words from their mouths hold weight. Even if it is illogical and unfair, like awarding a contract to a candidate because her hair looked nice, or at staff parties, associating the platter of fried chicken with one particular race and the fragrant aroma of samosas with another, Julie Smith from Finance bought in a potato-salad to die for!

Fallon's head surges through with an idea of accountability. Is it her duty to step in and confront the panel? E-mail HR and ask for advice. Retract her outstanding scores and feedback on Nicky Dixon, which was provided under duress. Is this a battle for Fallon? Should she not be satisfied enough, being a woman of colour alongside the upper echelon of the company's hierarchy? If work politics were as simple as when Cat Woman cut away a glass circle from the window of a department store. She would carve out the ignorant, blissful minds that are protected by laws made by white men for white people.

Only her subconscious reminds her where she is. Recounting the unlimited number of news reports that dab lightly around the topic of inequality and diversity in workplaces across the UK, how one study showed that people who are categorised



as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic applicants are rarely hired for senior positions of employment.

Fallon, like the few before her, fears being ridiculed and blasted out of the main achievement she's been provided. What if they react badly, set her up to fail and sacrifice her position in the company – recording her tenor as lost? Leanna would state in person, 'most people like her can be quite aggressive, and we don't need that in our department.' Then, she quickly replaced her with a Nicky Dixon, with Amelia affirming, 'Yeah, I believe Nicky is more than capable. And, of course, we will help her consistently along the way.'

However, on paper, ex-employee Fallon Parchments' file would highlight she was let go for her poor attitude, aggressive behaviour towards management, not following the company's policies and procedures, and often going against the advice her manager has kindly given her.

The people she trusted tried their utmost to dismiss the fact that they all clammed together like a Klan from 22 states in America. Getting a job there, in those places where your mind should be protected, not dissected, desecrated and stepped over.

If magic was a thing, she would crucio all of them. She would peel their skin away with a small blade, removing what they value most! Their privileges were stripped. How would they manage with their common shades of crimson?

'Know what it means to be born black, whether man or girl. Still struggling in this white man's world.' – Tupac Shakur.



Run

'Run rabbit - run rabbit - Run! Run! Run!

Run rabbit - run rabbit - Run! Run! Run!

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Goes the farmer's gun.

Run, rabbit, run, rabbit, run.' – Noel Gay, 1939.

The night felt mild; a nice welcoming breeze flowed by when Dwayne and his friend left *Boojees* Nightclub. It was overpacked in there, but I guess the owner doesn't give a fuck about health and safety. And to be honest, it was lit as fuck! I can't even lie.

Light rain had been forecast for tonight, and from the looks of the wet pavement, it was missed by all those inside the clubs. *And those chilling within the kebab-smoked walls of Ali's Chippy.*

Dwayne glances down at his black leather shoes, thinking, Prada-type looks, you get me, and he smiles. Pulls out his phone, opens the *Uber* app and scans prices and time estimates to pick him up from *Broad St Birmingham*. He hadn't had too much to drink, but he notes the £68.20 he spent tonight on drinks for women paid off.

To his delight, his *Uber* search is interrupted by a WhatsApp message. The notification pops up, saying there is *one new message from Ms Sweets*.

'Whoa! She's got some big tits!' His friend Marcus leans over his shoulder.

'I met her in the RnB room in *Boojees*'


‘What is she saying fam?’

‘Well, all I see is breasts, no words, I told her, man isn’t looking for a pen pal. So, she comes off with; I don’t write, I just pose.’

‘Has she got a friend?’ Marcus asks as he presses the call button on Christopher’s number. And looks around where they’re standing, scanning the image of Ms Sweets’ big breasts.

‘Yeah, but one of them is an ugly as fuck. She tried approaching a man first, with I like chocolate men. I told her I like women that don’t overeat.’ Dwayne raises his head and pushes his chest out. His well-built body is strong and firm, his black skin glowing beneath the subtle lighting of a grey-coloured lamppost.


‘No way, so you got big breasts and big-belly women coming after you. Rah! A pig wants a man.’ Marcus gives directions over the phone and then ends the call. He puts his Samsung S9 into his back pocket and pulls £20 out of his jacket. ‘I’m kind of hungry now, fam,’ he tells Dwayne as he ducks behind a bin and shouts, ‘I better be quiet before your fat groupie comes out and tries to eat, man. Especially how I’m dark chocolate and better looking than any man in these ends.’ Dwayne laughs, puts his iPhone inside his jacket and jumps up shouting, ‘Where the fuck have you been, blood?’ as their friend Christopher strolls up to them smiling. He tucks in his shirt and taps a finger onto his nose. Marcus grabs him and puts him into a headlock shouting ‘Did Chrissy get some pussy?’ He marches them towards *Ali’s Chippy*. Christopher laughs harder and tries to push Dwayne off him. Only Dwayne’s 6ft 4-inch-thick frame is too powerful for Chris to beat. So, he stops walking and coughs, ‘Ok, Ok, that Nigerian ting who I was chatting to at the bar, I just fucked her behind Nandos.’ Dwayne releases him and turns to Marcus, who is laughing just as hard as he is now. Marcus grabs onto the side of the number 22 bus stop. Then



teases Chris in a strong African accent, 'So Christopher, you fucked her, yes! Yes! You know, if you were back in Africa, Jehovah would burn you to ashes.' Dwayne slaps the back of Chris's shoulder and congratulates him. 'Hmm, I have to admit you seem to have a special vibe with these women.' Chris playfully punches Dwayne on his arm and says, 'All women love light-skin breddas.' He strokes his faint goatee, licks his pink lips and smooths back his short, black, curly hair from his face. 'There is always pussy for a man like me. I've had Chinese, Indian, everything. The menu is always available for a man like me.' They continue to laugh as they walk into *Ali's Chippy*.

Alis's Chippy was busy, considering it was fast approaching 3:00 am. Two Asian men were taking the orders at the till while three others cooked, and three more got the orders ready. About a dozen burgers sizzle alongside a couple of halal lamb skewers and a veggie burger. All the tables were occupied by either people, rubbish or both. Marcus tells the others that he will pay for the food, as he has cash and wants to hop into an *Uber* with whoever is booking one. He *doesn't want to spend any more money*. He joins the queue and begins to check out the deals as they scroll across the TV screens above the counter. Dwayne's phone beeps in a few quick successions, and his smile beams, showing the chippy occupants his straight white teeth, some of which were covered with gold grills. He takes a moment and then joins Marcus in the queue and boasts, 'Big tits claims she misses me and is asking when I'm free.'

Unnoticed by all, three men are seated near the window in *Ali's Chippy*. They, too, had visited *Boujees* and left a short while ago. The three men seem quite



interested in Dwayne's announcements. Even more so than the special Masala chips they had ordered from a recommendation by one of the staff.

Christopher bellows out;


'Nah, that's bare lies. She's asking you if she can get my number. She wants to meet a brown skin, sexy man like me.'

'Shut up fam. You can have her fat friend, look.' He clicks on the screen, and a picture fills it. An image of Ms Sweets, an unknown sexy friend and the fat chocolate lover.

'Ask her to ask her friend if she would like me instead.'

'No, man, I don't care about you.'

'Well, her friend looks good, if not better.' He grabs the iPhone, takes a selfie and sends it to Ms Sweets. Dwayne laughs, 'Wasn't the Nigerian ting good enough for you?' He snatches his phone back and types an apology to Ms Sweets, explaining that his friend is messing around and that he thinks her friend looks great. He emphasizes the slim, mixed-race friend who's wearing a red dress. He wouldn't want there to be any confusion. Marcus orders three portions of kebab and chips, with chill sauce and mayonnaise, no salad, and three cans of Rubican Mango. Pays and then carries two trays across to a plastic table located in the far corner of the takeaway. He places the trays down and calls loudly across the room for his friends to join him.



Conversation is often very fascinating; sometimes, we communicate in a fashion that would suggest to others that we have something to hide. Other times we present conversations in a way that depicts we simply don't give a fuck, about who hears. It's almost as if we subconsciously forget the fact that people are conscious and pay attention, both intentionally and unintentionally.

Even during the consumption of greasy food, licking your fingers and occasionally, *even more so than needed*, brushing salt off one's clothes. People are always listening.

One of the men seated near the window is slightly inebriated and becoming increasingly annoyed by how loud *Ali's Chippy* is tonight. I mean, he doesn't mind the groups of women dressed in bits of tight cloth. But it's the men, particularly the small group of black boys, that have just seated themselves on the other side of the takeaway.


'Why don't they just shut the fuck up!'

'You know why.'

'Well, last time I checked, they can train apes to do all sorts these days. Even wipe their arses.' He grabs a handful of the special masala chips and stuffs them into his mouth, and snarls out, 'fucking animals.'

The guy with a blue snake tattooed on his forearm leans in closer and whispers, 'I don't know what birds would be interested in them. I mean, look at him there, King Kong himself, has arrived in Brum.'

He then leans back and begins to laugh; the others join in complaining and shovelling more masala chips into their mouths. The stocky, most intoxicated one out



of the three clenches his jaw and narrows his eyes. Darting between the *extremely attractive* women ordering food, some of which were black. And what he describes as King Kong and his chimps. He grabs a few pieces of chicken kebab and dunks it into a small pot of masala sauce. Asking, 'I mean, who let them out of the zoo? Who gave them the right to be taking our houses and our women?' He takes another piece of chicken and dips it into the pot of masala sauce first and then the tub of mayonnaise. The quietest one of the three interjects with a soft, husky whisper, 'Just ignore them, mate. It looks like they'll be going soon enough.' Beneath the salt-covered plastic table, his hands shake, his stubby fingers tap his knees, and he looks down towards his feet and thinks, *without them, foreigners, I wouldn't have such nice trainers.*

Dwayne's iPhone rings. Ms Sweets asked Chris to be given the phone so that her friend Ella could speak with him. He laughs and hands his phone to Chris. Who in turn takes his phone and saves a new number in his address book. After a few quick screening questions:

- How old are ya?
- Where are you from?
- Do you give head?

He ends the call, and while handing Dwayne back the phone, he tells his friends, 'I told you, a man like me is wanted by every gyal. She said she's nineteen, from Leicester, and when I asked if she gives her head, did you know what she said?' He rubs his left eyebrow and wipes his mouth with a napkin, pauses for a moment to look at his friends. Then announces by shouting and jumping up out of his chair, 'She put on some sexy M&S voice and was like, I don't give just any head, I always

swallow.' With this news, Dwayne stands up and, for the second time, congratulates Christopher. Then adds, 'You know I'm meeting Ms Sweets tomorrow. She's invited me to her yard. These white girls, man! Fucking freaks!' He gathers their boxes, squashes them between his big, strong hands and tosses them back onto one of the stained brown plastic trays.


'Ella said to meet her; she's on Hagley Road. So I'm heading there still.'

'Are you going back to hers?'

'Nah, she's staying at a bed and breakfast. She said she's alone so.' The three of them leave *Ali's Chippy* and walk towards the subway that gets people safely from Broad Street to Hagley Road and other areas.

Marcus manages to book an *Uber* taxi from Ladywood Middle Way; the app states his taxi will arrive in ten minutes. At this point, he's annoyed with himself, as he should've waited for Dwayne to check again.

'Well, it seems like I'm the only one not getting any pussy tonight. And I'm proper tired now; I think the drinks are kicking in now.' He walks directly through the flowerbeds, leans against a wall and vomits. Christopher shakes his head and shouts, 'Another reason why you don't get any gyal. You're nasty, fam! Man can't drink and throw up afterwards. What if you were with a gyal now blood?' He pulls a strip of chewing gum out and tosses it to Dwayne, ordering him to give it to Marcus. His phone rings and Ella asks how long he is going to be. He holds his phone by his waist and says to his friends, 'I'll catch up with both in a day or two. This nigga is getting laid tonight. Marcus, thanks for the food, blud!' He places the phone back to his ears and starts telling Ella to make sure her panties are off because he's coming. As he starts running, he turns his head and sees three white men walking through from the area; they had entered minutes ago. He looks at his friends and sees



Dwayne walking next to Marcus. They look as though they're laughing at Marcus being a lightweight. He grins and runs in the direction of what he predicts will be a good night ahead.

Personal space can be in the form of requesting that your lover doesn't speak to you for a period. Or that other passengers sit elsewhere on the train and refrain from asking you to move your bag in favour of their space-consuming arses. It is forgotten that we implement and infrequently abide by rules that we can't see.

'Oi' shouts the tallest of the trio of white males. He smooths back his thinning blond hair and repeats, 'Oi.'

Dwayne turns to look over his shoulder. He spots three white men walking through the subway. He nudges Marcus and says, 'Did you hear one of them say something?' Marcus shakes his head side to side, checks his *Uber* app and says, 'It's four minutes away, fam, with just gotta walk up here.' They turn right and walk up the curved slope. Lights flicker alongside the ceiling, and the smell of urine increases near the sections of the path that remain unlit.


'Oi, you fucking beast. Can't you hear anything from your black ears?' The white male who ate the most masala chips runs up to Dwayne and swings his fists at him. He misses.

Dwayne stumbles a little. Finds his feet, turns around and punches his attacker in his chest.

'Are you on crack? Why are you attacking a man you don't fucking know?'

'You fucking ape! You come to my country, take our women!'

'Fuck off.' Dwayne balls his fist up again, ready to take a punch at his attacker. But instead, he feels someone kick him in his lower back. He spins around



and is face to face with the white man with the blue snake tattoo. He punches him in the face; blood spits out from his now broken nose. The one with the sweaty, stumpy fingers says in a fearful tone, 'Er, guys, let's get out of here. You don't want to catch anything from them. Let's just go.'

Dwayne grabs the one with the busted nose and headbutts him. 'You racist fucking cunt.' But before he can fulfil his rage and punch his new enemy. He suddenly feels confused, faint even. Falling with a giant thud near a black fence.

The morning felt damp but fresh. New weeds are sprouting out between the cracks in the pavement. Light raindrops sprinkle across Birmingham and poorly cleanse urine and sexual bodily fluids from both Broad Street and Hagley Road. A trio of crows fights over remnants of special marsala chips from *Ali's Chippy*.

An assigned ringtone, *Changes* by *Tupac Shakur*, keeps sounding from an iPhone that lays, screen down, in a leafy patch of green space. Its owner stares down at it; the song rings on with lyrics that seem to resonate with last night's event. The owner still looks down at his iPhone, not blinking, not once. His mouth ajar slightly, his grills glinting at the sign of dawn.

'Oh, run nigger run well, the pattyroller will get you.

Run nigger run. Well, you better get away.

Run nigger run well. The pattyroller will get you.

Run nigger run well. You better get away.' – Unknown 1851.

SWOT Analysis

'I know that every time I cry, a gift is being created by our universe for me to enjoy later.' – Dominique Duberry.


Strengths

I earn a decent wage, I guess around £45,000 per annum if I do additional hours during peak season. I'm able to afford the latest gadgets through upgrades and special offers, as my credit score is a healthy 633 points. I understand that this is better than the average person in my city, Birmingham, which is the best city in the world.

I live in an area where the local dogs are Huskies, Pugs or Chihuahuas. You'll never see a German Shepard or a Pitbull roaming these streets. Unless you're visiting from somewhere else and you happen to be taking a selfie near a famous piece of art sprayed on the walls of Jewellery Quarter train station by only the best, Banksy! But no one clicks Like for you or your beastly mutt, and they like your *Instagram* photo because of Banksy.

I eat only organic and shop locally to support small businesses. After all, climate change is real, and both my footprint and mind are green. Yes, I do enjoy Battucuri chocolate biscuits imported from Italy, courtesy of online shopping. But if the plane is already flying over to the United Kingdom, what harm is a small pack of handmade Italian chocolate biscuits going to cause? My point precisely.

My front door knocks twice, and I stand up from my bed, smiling because I know that once again, *Amazon* has delivered my *Prime* parcel on time. Many wise men walked



our earth years ago, and they left us the advice that planning and preparation are key to success.

I walk down my pewter and mustard-decorated hallway and shout out, 'Who is it?' even though I know it's *Amazon*, as I've been tracking my order from the moment the app alerted me, stating that my delivery is five stops away! I hear a faint reply, 'Amazon Delivery!' I open my wooden front door with a smile, only to see that he's already at least 3 feet away. His mask is sitting snugly on his unshaven chin. I pick up my parcel, wave goodbye, and close my door. Once I've re-locked the door, I place the box on the floor and step into the bathroom to wash my hands. I don't think there is anyone that has listened to Bojo more than I.


While washing, I sing, 'Times being wasted, scream, and I'll listen; I promise you'll hear me better.' A few lines from 'Still' by *Sabrina Claudio*. It seems to comfort me, especially in these unprecedented times, echoing the sentiments expressed in the latest batch of TV advertisements.

I stroll back into my bedroom without checking the contents are correct, power up my MacBook Air, select the forum from my favourites tab and sign in with my pre-saved credentials, taking a moment to consider a most fitting title.

Preparation is Key – Essential Items Received

I type up around 500 words before scanning briefly for basic errors and clicking send. I log out because I know I'll be flooded with requests to send pics and links and, most importantly, to keep everyone updated on my progress.

That's the thing with working and earning a decent wage: you learn to adapt to your online audience, you learn to select a normal name like Rosie Middleton and upload a profile picture of a pair of new-born pumps, with the caption *Good things*



comes to she who contemplates. From time to time, you post something that is arbitrary to your standard day. You remain present while blending in; the only merger you make between the two worlds is the exchange of key information. Everything else is non-essential, like Dominic Cummings and his self-service eye test. Like a scene from *Harry Potter* where *Professor Lupin teaches a spell and his students shout, 'ridiculous!'*


Weaknesses

It's true what my siblings say: I have no patience. I feel a splurge of agitation through my subconscious when I can't have what I want and when I want it. For clarity, when I place an order on *Amazon*, being a *Prime* member, I know that my selected items will arrive the next day, by 2100. I appreciate that COVID-19 may cause delays, but I'm a *Prime* member, and I expect what I expect.

However, there are elements in this life that slow down your dreams and give you snippets of your wants just to keep you around like an abandoned ginger cat on the cusp of starvation, being served a small spoon of tinned tuna from an old lady that passes by every-day, never picks him up and never calls *Cats Protection*.

For every ten tries, I mess up twice! I pierce a hole that is noticeable to the naked eye. Even an eye that is often protected with thin glass lenses from *Specsavers*. It pays to experience good advice, even if it originated from a digital screen.

At the start of lockdown, when I was told to work from home, I messed up the first three weeks when I started learning this skill. And after posting results on the forum, obviously with identifiable features not included. My online peers rallied around with advice, and some even posted short, step-by-step videos. Rosie, you



know my alias adores these amazing women. Today, I'm not quite the pro, but I'm good enough to begin stage one of my plan. The nice thing is that my learning does not interfere with my work.

Opportunities

I place a red lace ensemble carefully back into the white tissue paper it arrived in before resting it on my bed. I sprayed my Amazon Prime delivery with Dettol and then left it to dry under the rays of the sun on my bedroom floor. *Not even Rona herself will prevent me this week. Rona is not choking me.*

I open the box, examine the contents and hug the pink and white 75ml tube of new opportunities before sliding that and its companions into a concealed section of my weekend bag.

For about a week, I've been burning incense sticks that hold the insatiable scent of blueberries. My boyfriend loves blueberries – I notice he eats them for breakfast most days and always opts for the blueberry cheesecake over a New York cheesecake. What normal person does that?

My bag and all the clothes I'll be wearing are now fragranced with his favourite edible. I need everything to go to plan, or all this planning would be for embarrassment and failure. Doing what I do, living where I live, and living how I live contain no metal benches with the paint peeling off for failure to invade my life.

The key to executing such a powerful idea is to encompass patience. Once you're able to do that, then you can accomplish anything in life – even things that some may deem to be unethical.



Threats

We happened to attend Dean's brother's birthday party before the lockdown was imposed by Bojo. It was a good party. I say good because everything was good apart from Dean's sister-in-law acting like a stupid bitch. I say acting because I've been to bars with that bitch, and she drinks me under the table and manages to wake up and attend the Park Run for 0930 the next morning.


But at the party, she had two glasses of cheap wine before strolling over in 6-inch heels to loudly enquire, 'Hey Helen, when are you and Dean having some babies?' I hadn't even had a second to reply when she raised her perfectly painted red, manicured natural nails to her red lips. Her hands look well-moisturised, so you know she's not been washing her hands much.

I later saw her in the kitchen placing some mini bites into the oven, clearing away all the empty bottles – she took them outside to the end of the driveway and carefully placed them into the recycling bin.

I wouldn't be noting this if it wasn't needed – But the very moment she uttered that toxic question, I saw Dean wince, roll his beautiful blue eyes and mumble, 'in a few years ...' So, while I'm not best pleased that Rona is on a rampage through the entire world. She has helped me to keep everyone at bay! This means that absolutely no one will be around to snoop about my flat, borrow things, or make my dreams redundant.

Strengths

According to *Peak*, the brain training app that I have installed on my iPad and iPhone, I have 704/1000 points in the area of problem-solving and a brilliant 778 for



focus. Which, in my opinion, strongly indicates that I will achieve maximum success with my plan.

It's taken me around six months to lose three stone and to build on my running performance. Dean loves when I continue to suck him gently after he peaks if you know what I mean. I have it now so that if plan A fails during the night, then surely plan B will succeed abundantly.

After my shower, I update the forum and ask that they channel their positive thoughts into our universe. As an Atheist, independent at that, I never rely on God for anything. Why would God allow Rona to run a ruckus across the globe?

As I massage coconut oil into my silky skin, I think about all those times my friends have said, 'Oh Helen, you'll become pregnant when you least expect it. Don't rush; all good things come to she who waits.' I push a fake smile out, forcing my dimples to gleam and compliments to follow – 'I wish I had dimples! When God blesses you and Dean, your kids will have dimples. Trust me.'

I close my eyes, and tears of emptiness flow out. *What would they know about waiting? Kayla had a protected one-night stand with her ex and two children later, and she's now incubating their third mistake.* I guess it wouldn't hurt so much if Dean and I were still in the early stages of our relationship. But this November will mark seven years!

I slowly massage coconut oil into my stomach; I heard that if you use this every day before becoming pregnant, you won't get any stretch marks. And at this fine age of 29, with all the care I've invested in my health and wellbeing, I don't want to remember my body with marks.



Weaknesses

Infrequently, I feel strange about having these thoughts that fuel my plan. I feel odd because the face of society would frown upon me if I whispered to her that I've looked at my life from a strategic perspective, and I feel that what I'm about to do can only benefit the entire human race.


Whenever I'm with Dean, well, in the days leading up to this, I've thought about walking away from our relationship. I mean, what 41-year-old man isn't ready to start a family with a woman he's been seeing for seven years? Sometimes, I feel sick with hatred when he pulls me in closer by wrapping his arm around my stomach as he sleeps. I once read online that this is a clear sign that a man wants to have children with you.

I understood at the start that it may have been too early to start a family, and I was only 22 at the time. A few years later, I asked him, 'Do you reckon we should start a family soon?' he looked up at me and then continued to focus on the stir-fry he was making, answering, 'it's natural for a woman of your age to feel that way.'

I'm not just any woman! I'm fucking amazing, I'm Helen Pierce! And there is no chance that Dean, who's borderline 42, can do better than me. There is no replacing a woman of my stature, and there is no upgraded version – I'm the only one in this universe. I'm doing this because I love him. I love us. And our little future family is all that matters.

Opportunities

Keys are wonderful pieces of equipment, aren't they? They come in all shapes, sizes and versions, like the big, clunky metal one that was used to lock Cinderella way



from her Prince. These days, you can get a digital key to unlock doors to everything, even the darker depths of the internet. My alter ego thrives there, and I can say what I want without tongues transforming into glass daggers to cut through my words.


Saturday, the 20th of June 2020, is the day I will achieve my goal. I smile as I sip on a 250ml cup of peppermint tea. 48 hours to brew over the finer details:

- Lingerie selected and packed.
- Amazon essentials were placed into a black pouch and slotted into the side of my weekend bag.
- White patent 4-inch heels to go with my white lace ensemble. The innocent look suits me.
- Sexting from 0815 on the 19th of June: Send him a tasteful picture of my breasts with a drizzle of honey over my nipples. With a simple message, *I'll bring dessert!*

Threats

I'm in heaven right now, but I can't scream out how happy I am. He used the condom from the side drawer. All of which have been blessed with my delicate touch. Needle in hand, bending the wrist into the middle and out with a twist.

The room temperature was hot, and after Dean climaxed, he bent down and kissed my forehead. I smiled, and as I stood up, he said, 'I just need to wash this honey off.' He asks if I'm okay. *I can't speak, or I'll have to swallow first or spit.* I continue to smile until he enters the en-suite, and I hear the rush of water from the tap.



I jump up, open my weekend bag, grab the small leather pouch from the side compartment, walk quickly out of the bedroom and head across to the main bathroom. I turn the lights on while closing the door behind me and tip out the contents of the pouch. *Thank you, Amazon.*


I remove the lid from a tiny tub where I usually carry a small spoonful of marmalade to work. Then, I carefully raise the container to my lips, and I make sure my lower lip sits nicely on the edge of the tub. Then, slowly, I fill it up with life. I pick up the mini-medicine tube and use it to suck up all these little swimmers. In the distance, I hear Dean call out, 'Babe! Where are you?' I shout back, 'I'm just using the loo. I'll be back in a minute.'

I make sure the tube is full, then I lay on his navy-blue fluffy bathmat, part my legs and push the tube as deep into my pussy as I can. And with a whisper of a wish sent out to our universe and the positive thoughts from the other forum users, I push my thumb down onto the tube and set all his seeds free inside of my well-cared-for body.

I don't even care that my head is right beside the toilet bowl or that my handsome boyfriend is unaware of our new pathway together. I'm enjoying my moment of bliss.

Surprising so, I think about my *Amazon Prime* order and how everything arrived on time:

- X3 Packs of featherlight condoms by Durex.
- X1 tube of conception gel.
- X3 tiny containers.
- X2 Medicine tubes for infants and toddlers.




Without our online connections, none of this would be possible.

Weeks later, after Bojo announced the ease of lockdown and within days Dean and I attended his sister-in-law's *Lockdown Lifted Lounge Party*. Where she specifically requested that the small group of 20 attendees wear loungewear only. I remember her *WhatsApp* message highlighting *that no one cares what you look like, and we can all chill out together looking like rubbish*.

I'm wearing a skin-tight pair of white leggings, a white low-cut vest top, white patent heels, and red lipstick. I've painted my natural nails phoenix red to match my lips. I walk in with Dean's hand around my waist and see his sister-in-law scowling in the distance. I ask Dean to get me a glass of water and make my way across to his sister. She's dressed in a pair of black jogging bottoms, a creased t-shirt and a pair of Converse. I lean across and kiss the air beside her and whisper, 'Don't tell me you're finally expecting!' She steps back and mumbles, 'No, I've gained a few pounds during the lockdown.' I stroke her dry arms with my coconut-kissed hands and loudly laugh, 'I'm so sorry. I thought you were like six months gone.' Dean returns with an ice-cold glass of lemon water, and I kiss him softly on his lips. 'I love you, Dean.' He sips his beer, smiles and says quietly, 'Let's not stay here too long.'

I mean, I know the pubs have re-opened, but I'm not sure cosy parties are what Bojo was promoting when he told the nation to get outside.



Of course, my online circle had nothing but praise for me. After all, sperm-fishing isn't an easy task to execute. And many women before me have tried and failed. I bask in my moment for a few minutes, elated over how all five pregnancy tests came back positive. I hold and rub my stomach and give thanks to our wonderful universe.

Shout out to Bojo – The times we reside in these days reflect the new normal, and I'm not opposed to it.

The Talented Ms. Ripley

‘Conceal Your Intentions, keep people off balance and in the dark by never revealing the purpose behind your actions.’ – Robert Greene

Work


What the fuck does she mean by cross-referencing the tables with VLookup? I

opened the Excel attachment she sent in an e-mail detailing all the tasks I must complete during my shift:

1. Check the stationery order and update the inventory.
2. Laminate the new posters from the Westbrook account.
3. Update noticeboards in block D.
4. E-mail Mr. Blackstock with a new appointment time.
5. Complete new General Data Protection Regulation training.
6. Cross-reference last year's complaints against this year's (please see attached.)
7. General tidy of office

Stupid woman, I'm not here to cross-reference anything. I'm here to look after our visitors, and I'm a Receptionist, not a business analyst.

I sip water from the eco-friendly bottle I purchased from Amazon last weekend. Still has that plastic smell to it. But trust me, it's environmentally safe. Straighten up the useless Q-Connect highlighters that were ordered for me, but every Tom, Dickie, and Harpreet keep using and failing to leave as they found them. The smell of the small litterbin near my desk is disgusting, and I'm not a Maid either.



I type VLookup into Google, and loads of blogs, YouTube videos and images appear among the search results. It seems there is no quick fix or simple solution to my lack of knowledge. I sent an e-mail, and I feel annoyed. Yet, there she is, marching through the foyer, floating from one meeting to the next and stinging me with the sound of her heels whenever she visits the reception to grab something from her desk. *I swear she's checking up on me?* I could easily meet people, make coffee, drink coffee, and chat over coffee. Why does it have to be her? I love *Nescafe*.

'Close the windows, please!'

I roll my chair back, wailing my arms around.


'It's boiling in here. Are you serious?' she laughs at me. I leap out of my chair and race out of the office, screaming, 'Wasps, they're going to get me.' I find a reasonably comfortable armchair just in the foyer, sit down and lean my face forward into my hands. Actions speak louder than words. I hear her laugh continue, and then Al joins in. The chair creaks a little as if to applaud in agreement.

'Oh my God, wasps! Help me!' Al croaks in between chesty coughs and what I imagine his airborne saliva.'

'I can't see anything. There are no wasps, not sure what she thought she saw.' Interjects my manager. Her tone sounds unbothered with a hint of confusion.

'What a Princess. Look over here; look at an aphid. No wasps in here.' He coughs more, louder this time. Maybe he has a chest infection? *Maybe its Madcow disease or terminal lung cancer? Options are plentiful.*

'I best go out and check on her, see that she's alright.'



‘She’s attention seeking if you and I can’t see anything. Then she’s playing up.’ I imagine he’s wagging his fat sausage fingers around his equator. *She should have been out here ages ago.* I listen until it fades.

The laminate-covered flooring shines, although Mary from Cleaning Services has used far too much lemon floor-gel. I keep telling her, just one cap full, Mary. However, she measures by her gut feeling. This could be quite distracting, with sharp undertones of lemon cutting into my imminent conversation. I want her to remember this, not by lemons but by me.

‘Hey Natasha, are you alright?’ her sly grin tries to make a guest appearance in our conversation. I bet they like her lips.

‘I’m sorry, I’m so afraid of wasps.’


‘We were all shocked when you ran out of the office. We thought you were messing around. I mean, you’ve never said you feared wasps.’ She kneels beside me in this plain, black fabric, creaky chair.

‘Well, I didn’t think that was a good idea, as people never believe me.’ I rub my right ear, bypassing the 9ct gold stud that my boyfriend bought me. Her Sublime Wine glossed lips turn down, and her eyes soften, *welcoming Ms. Pitiful.*

‘I believe you, Natasha. I’ll ask one of the guys to get a fan from the storeroom. There have never been any wasps fly into the office, though.’

‘I know it’s hot outside, and I’m just so scared they will get me.’

‘Well, we could use the fan today; however, I have to think of everyone who uses the office and the fact that it is summer now. Some prefer having the window open, you understand, right? Especially with the bins not being emptied often enough.’ She looks at the two communal bins located just outside the entrance. One



is for mixed recycling, and the other is for general waste. Both big and bold, they are hard to miss when you have to walk by them to get to our reception. *I know right now, during that glance, her mind refers back to when I entered work a mere 45 minutes ago. Strolling in 10 minutes late with a half-eaten meatball Mariana sub from Subway. I took two more bites out of it and tossed it into the metal-grey bin near my desk. I had asked them to add anchovies with barbeque sauce, as my pansexual ex-friend/partner had told me that anchovies increase libido as well.*

‘Sorry, I really didn’t mean to cause such a fuss.’


‘No worries, my main concern is that you’re alright?’

It’s wonderful, isn’t it? This is a moving picture right here. *I want to say lights, camera action!* The men from our little team scramble around, forward off to the dark, damp storeroom. All for me. Why stop at one fan? Bring two. Say’s the one I’ve named Pig-man. I heard him laughing with her as if my trauma was funny. He’s one fatty, christened Alvin. He has brown hair that curls like pigtails, a broad body he will say, is down to his heritage, big-boned’ yeah! Bone-dead from all the fat his frame has been lumbered with. His badge says Head of Maintenance. Only he spends 73% of his shift on tea breaks, Head of Tea breaks! *Fat fucker.*

‘Right, Natasha, you take your time, and I’ll make sure there are no flies, wasps or anything flying around the office. Although, I must get ready for my next meeting. When Al’s back, I’ll get him to bring you a coffee.’ *That grin is returning.*

‘Thank you, Lorna. You’re such an understanding manager, and I really appreciate this.’ I smile back.

‘No worries, let me know if you need anything else.’



She taps my right shoulder twice and swans off back to the office. *I bet that's how she pats Chip, her Jack Russell.* Her legs shimmer in the sunlight. Her firm ass jiggles as she walks. For a moment, I'm caught in a trans, her wide hips swaying. Her dress hugs her close as if it were a sheet of amour.

'Bitch', I whisper, then I look back down and remind myself, 'They will love me one day more than they love her.' More than they drool over her moisturised lips, her long ebony hair, and, let's not forget her bootyful ass. *Fake bitch. Kardashian Wannabe botched-bitch.*

Clunkety clunk, clunk, clash. Alvin came stomping through the foyer with two fans, one desktop and the other an upright.

'Hey Natasha, I bought these up for you to use.'

'For me? Aww, you shouldn't have.'

I rub my left arm and push loose strands of my chestnut-coloured, wavy hair back behind my right ear. He smiles at me and says, 'keep your chin up, Chuck.'

'Thanks, Al, you're a star! So, understanding, I really do appreciate it. You know, when I was seven, my brother put six dead wasps in my bed and...'

I pause and look down at my feet. Tapping my fingers on my knees, I inhale deeply.

'I remember waking up.'

'I'll get that cuppa for you.' He interjected before racing toward the office; both fans wedged between his fat stomach and bingo-winged arms. Everything, wobbling like jelly, has been given life.

'Perfect,' I whisper.

Love

On my way home, I stop off at McDonald's by New Street station. I ordered a super-sized Mc Chicken sandwich meal, *although I won't eat all of it, just like the looks I get. Skinny girl ordering a large meal. Hehe – The kind of meal AI needs to get by.* I select a strawberry milkshake and ask for a pot of tomato sauce. *Life is wonderful, isn't it?* I found a space to sit on a bench opposite the *Apple* store. I had overheard Lorna telling AI she had an appointment at 18:15 to get her iPhone X fixed. Apparently, the face-recognition does not work for her. *Maybe her lips are too covered? Maybe her iPhone hates her fake smiles.* I Open the brown-paper-bag and tuck in into the salty fries. *Just the way I like them.* A pigeon walks by, staring at me, watching my hand slip into the bag, listening to the rustle, and anxiously hoping I toss over a few fries. *Aww, I don't know why he wants my fries. Perhaps he'll die!* A honey bee flies past my side and rests on a daisy a short distance from me. *Nature is beautiful, isn't it? Without bees, we would not survive; there would be no one to sell Sublime-wine lipstick from Avon to her. Nor will there be any Chinese people making iPhones for her to selfie her lips with.*

'Babe, are you alright?'


'I'm fine. I, I'm OK.'

'I don't think you are. I can hear the tears in your voice. What's happened?'

Can I come in?'

'No! Don't come in. I'm just a bit upset, and I don't want you to see me like this.'

I add a few seconds of coughs at the end. Push the water forward, and the wave builds and dives over the edge of the bath. Sponges of bubbles try to follow suit but



end up sliding back down the water's edge. I notice a few fingerprints on the mirrored bathroom cabinet. From this angle, I see the side of the sink that seems to have patches of dried toothpaste on the outskirts.

What does a girl have to do to get you in here? I whimper a little, whispering loudly, 'It's not fair, life's not fair.'


'Natasha, I'm coming in.' He storms into our bathroom, sight landing upon me. My hands shake, and mini ripples form in the water. 'What's wrong, baby?' My loving boyfriend kneels beside the bath, his face twitching with confusion and alight with concern. 'Natasha, please tell me what on earth is going on?'

He places his left hand on my right shoulder and starts to massage that area of my body gently.

I pull my knees in and hug them, resting my head on them. Then, slowly, I voiced what I had rehearsed in my mind to my loving boyfriend, Daniel.

Work

I can't quite put my finger on it, but the air seems fresher today. Maybe it's due to Lorna having a day off. Maybe it's due to her forgetting to send me a precious handover. The weather is bright and out in full force, warm with a nice breeze. A breeze that flows through the Reception window. I see grey squirrels fighting over a keyring of some kind. I sit at my desk. It's clean, all the highlighters are aligned, and they even have the lids on them. That is just how I left them on Friday afternoon. My desk is clean, and although it is Nordic-ash wood, I'm positive there are no grubby fingerprints on it.



Al is currently outside doing some work for a change. That could be because the big cheese, Tess O'Brien, General Manager, is visiting this afternoon. He's so thankful that I gave him the heads up that he's promised to finish updating block D. *I wasn't asked for a handover on Friday, you know, after the wasp scene.*

Right on time, she arrives and smiles at me before going into the back office with Leon Rhoades. He's a manager from another site. *This shows about to become interesting.*

About 30 minutes after their arrival, I'm called into the other office. The printer stirs to life in the background, 40 copies of how much we recycle each year, now on print.

I pop into the ladies first, and whilst urinating, I recite parts of the e-mail I sent to Tess on Friday. I blow off a mixture of excitement and nervous energy. After I flush, I spit into the toilet, wash my hands and fluff out my hair a little.

'Natasha, thank you for joining us on such short notice. I was quite keen on meeting with you as soon as possible.'

'Thank you for meeting me. I wasn't sure if you would.'

'Before we start, this is Leon Rhoades, Manager of Edmundson. He will be sitting in on this meeting to ensure that we cover everything and you have another form of contact. Someone to support you during this very difficult time.'

'Thank you both, I really appreciate this.' I rub my left arm and lean my head forward, ensuring that my hair falls and shields part of my face.

'I must reassure you that I've read your e-mail and I thought discussing this face to face would be a lot better. Due to the sensitive nature and content of it. Now, when you're ready, could you please tell us in your own words?'

‘I, I’ve been so afraid and stressed out over this. I thought at first that maybe...’

I pause and look down at my feet, tapping my fingers on my left wrist. *I once read that the wrist is classed as a vulnerable part of the body. It’s exposed during love-making and before death. Although, that was an article by the Sun newspaper.*

I move my lips with no sound, just lip movements. *It heightens the suspense before the climax of these types of conversations.*

‘Natasha, we are sorry to learn about your experience with your manager, and we can assure you we take all complaints seriously and will begin an investigation right away.’ I rub my left wrist slower and bite my lower lip to prevent a smile from forming. *Their facial expressions are that of shock and anguish, and this is perfect. This means they’re invested in me emotionally. They believe in me.* After a few small coughs and apologising for taking up so much of their time, I thank them again and exit the office.

The sun shines upon this lemon-scented foyer. Lemon whiffs, thanks to Mary. I smile. Finally, there’s truth to what my pansexual ex-friend/partner once said to me *well in the form of a meme that was posted on their Instagram page*: ‘If you really want something, then go for it. Life is too short.’ I whisper it to myself as I head back to the Reception. Allowing for my smile to beam from ear to ear. *There’s nothing sweeter than success in the form of a conversation.*

‘Conceal Your Intentions, keep people off balance and in the dark by never revealing the purpose behind your actions.’ – Robert Greene.



Truth

Approximately three weeks ago, I got to work around 6:30. My shift wasn't due to start until 7:00. I had been feeling a bit down, as I hadn't seen my boyfriend in 2 nights due to him being asked to work overtime. *The increase in the UK threat levels has supported this.* I was in the ladies' room, and I was startled when I heard the door swing open. I dropped the needle, and after a 3-second delay, I picked it up and quietly disposed of it in the plastic grey bin, specially made for sanitary towels tampons and convenient for needles with traces of heroin left inside.

Later on in the day, after my lunch break, I return to my desk, and I notice a small card resting under the yellow highlighter. *Frank.* The only other person on-site at the time was Lorna.

I, Ms. Natasha Ripley, am an intravenous inconsistent drug user. I enjoy using heroin to get me through things from time to time. I take it in small doses, and it induces a feeling of warmth and joy in abundance! I want to be transparent and highlight that I'm not a drug abuser. I only use it as and when required.



Complaints Policy

Birmingham

1 Introduction

1.1 The City of Birmingham is committed to providing high-quality work and a great all-round experience, fully supported by a range of well-educated people, religious services and buildings. However, as it may be in any other city, things go wrong, and the City of Birmingham recognises the need for people to be permitted to express their dissatisfaction when this happens.

1.2 It is through the Code of Practice that the City of Birmingham ensures residents and visitors alike can access this system to raise complaints and concerns and guarantees that these are managed discretely equally. People who highlight concerns or complaints through this Code of Practice may do so without fear of reprimand.

1.3 The Code of Practice can be used for both collective and individual complaints or concerns.

2 Stages of the Code of Practice

2.1 The Code of Practice on residents/visitors' complaints and concerns is split into three main stages, which **must be followed sequentially**: the ritualistic stage, the review stage and the absolute stage.



Stage 1) Ritualistic Stage

- If, after you have deeply considered raising a concern or complaint, you still feel the urge to do so, then please take a moment to pray.

Stage 2) Review Stage

- If, through prayer, you still have no resolution to the matter, then you may proceed to this stage.
- Review Stage is to look at the full picture and have a rant on social media. Allow others to bestow their wise words and educated advice upon your issue.

Stage 3) Absolute Stage

After you've demonstrated that you have at least tried the first two stages, then you may try the absolute stage – which is simply to accept the situation as it is.

3 Next Steps of Complaints

3.1 Don't complain.

1.1


Birmingham is known as the second city. Second, in offerings, looks, and, of course, residents. There's the delightful couple, Danielle and Marcus, living in an overpriced loft apartment by Warstone Lane. Their wages combined to cover the rent, utilities, and food with a little something left over for a small treat. But they're together, in love, residing in a key location, and that's all that matters. They have drinks with friends during payday weekends and attend Sunday roasts with their families on a bi-weekly basis.

Speaking of which, one of our most exciting parts is the Jewellery Quarter, situated in the heart of Birmingham. Diamonds, gold, and wealth all blended between the unsightly freckles of riff-raff and wafts of man piss. Welcome to the Jewellery Quarter; visit Birmingham!

Across the minds of the residents, there is always that common thought, 'What better place than here?'

The rain is predicted to fall around 17:00 this afternoon, but the morning has begun so brightly and warm. *I'll be fine!* Think 51% of Birmingham residents. I'm out, let's go! The majority have voted. The health-conscious ones get up around 05:00 and go running. They politely nod as they pass one another, which is accepted as a 'well done, mate!' Well done for getting up, well done for getting out, and well done for making positive steps to be a better human.

One runner turns left onto Lion Court and almost trips over the remnants of a burnt-out recycle-only wheelie bin. He's appalled it's a few feet away from Hockley Medical Practice! As he hot steps over the waste, he thinks about the issues that could have



arisen: Fire, wildfire, smoke inhalation, loss of belongings, injuries and death.

However, he takes peace in knowing that he lives ten minutes away, and his apartment complex keeps wheelie bins in a bin shelter that is cleaned daily, covered by a camera. This health-conscious man is named Kendrick Hadleigh. At least four times a week, you'll spot him in his bright blue high-vis running gear, running through the Jewellery Quarter. Green safety lights flashed on his left wrist and right ankle, and I believe he bought them from John Lewis for £28.99. He later found out that Amazon sold them for £12.99 but convinced himself that he had the better option.


Speaking of seconds, another thing I deem to be an infrequent passer-by, but for the purposes of this tale, we shall label them a resident. This resident was born on Soho Road in Handsworth, and his parents blessed him with the name Balraj. However, he's currently here today and telling people his name is Barry. So, for the simplicity of this unstructured but truth-based narrative, let's highlight and confirm that Balraj is Indian, and yes, he's adopted an English name, Barry.

Each weekday, Barry will be noticed by at least one hundred individuals, including pets and pigeons alike. Barry is seen for several reasons: his distinctive look, his ability to rotate between three of four corners by Warstone lane clock, and his unnatural act of vanishing completely before 23:00.

1.2

'I went to the Button Factory last night. It was brilliant; can't fault the service or anything.'

Kendrick removes the cast-iron frying pan from his forest-green stove and places it upon the glasswork surface protector. He snarls at the king-prawns he added to his stir-fry 15 minutes earlier as they have shrunk down to little curves of pink.



‘Well, I had a nice bit of steak with chips and some of that peppered sauce, and Mica had a salad. Cheap date, I know! It was going well until we left the place. We went to cross over the road, you know, near Barclays Bank? Yeah, she said she had to get her train from Jewellery Quarter station to meet a friend near Worcester. No, you see these fucking modern-day Dothraki dickheads. Joyriding right past us, Mica was in so much shock she held her handbag tightly and then asked about the crime rate.’


Kendrick adjusts the ear-pod in his left ear, opens a packet of teriyaki sauce by Blue Dragon, and drizzles it over his over-cooked King-prawn stir-fry. There is now a sweet aroma in the air, sweet with a hint of partial rice burn.

‘So, we get to Pittsford Street, and there's this rotten-toothed fucker Barry, asking for spare change to buy food. She looks at me, leans in, and asks in a hushed whisper if I should give my doggy bag to the beggar. At first, I was thinking, why? But she squeezes my arm, and she has such a sweet scent.’

Kendrick grabs a pasta bowl, turns the stove off, picks up the cast iron pan and flips the contents into the bowl. Not caring for the over-spill of sauce or the fact that the kitchen ventilator is still running.

‘I mean, I hadn't even answered, and she slips the bag out of my hands, joyfully skips over to this lazy fucking benefit scrounger and hands him my leftover steak! I could've sworn I'd seen him in M&S?’

Kendrick rolls his eyes, adds rice to his spoon and scoffs, ‘I paid £35 for my steak, and I paid for her damm salad. And her mousse, which she insisted on saving for a treat after work. But she clearly was feeling charitable when she gave my steak away.’ Grimace covers his face. He inhales deeply, exhales loudly, and eats another spoonful of his substandard dinner. ‘Richard, the thing is, had it been two hours later,



you wouldn't see him there at all. He's like a fucking ghost! I'm sorry. I'm just annoyed. She hasn't even bothered to reply to my texts.' Kendrick places his bowl onto his black high-gloss coffee table and heads into his kitchen to grab a can of Stella from the fridge, 'I've sent two messages now. One was thanking her for a lovely evening two nights ago, the other was during lunchtime today, asking how the mousse went for lunch?' Kendrick sits back down on his grey suede armchair and takes another sip from Stella. Picks up his bowl, and before continuing to eat, he groans, 'Well, according to WhatsApp, she read that message at 13:27. It's now after 20:00, and well, it's been two nights since I sent the first message. I'm not pissed off about it at all. I'm a catch! I think that fucking beggar scared her away, as she knows I live here.'

1.3

'So Kendrick, have you heard from that bird you met off the internet?'


'No!'

'What, you mean she hasn't called you?'

'No!'

Kendrick raises his pint glass to the Barman, who returns his request with a nod and a two-minute signal. Shouts for orders are heard from the far right, and the kitchen has been inundated with requests for fish, chips, and mushy peas. Or a good ole steak and ale pie. The aroma of chips and ale is infused within every piece of furniture inside The Red Lion pub.

'Haha! She gave away your steak and didn't bother to call you after?'



‘No! Shut the fuck up man, at least I had a date. How’s your girl? Is she still suffering from headaches every time you want to get laid? Or how’s that everlasting period going?’


His barstool is squeaky, although only Kendrick can hear it. The cushion is non-existent, reminding him of the long bike rides he does every Sunday between home and Wednesbury. His beer is refilled, and he pays using his Apple wallet, gulps a considerable amount and turns his back to Richard. I mean, turning your back on someone may cancel out the sight, but it can’t block out the sound of their voice. A voice that is mocking you with the truth, forcing you to clench your jaw tighter. Besides, Richard happens to be more precious than Kendrick, so I thought you may need to know another fact about them.

Richard smooths back his blonde hair, ensuring that his mun (you know, man-bun) is still looking the part. He bites his lips in slight hesitation before crushing a beer mat and loudly saying, ‘You’re just bitter because you spent so much time talking and talking. Then you finally meet, and she gets her free meal, then BOOM! Just like that, she’s gone.’

‘Fuck off! I told you I don’t care. I just want to drink in peace. Why don’t you pop to Tesco on your way home and pick up some tampons, paracetamol and chocolate for your Mrs. No doubt you’ll be in for another dry night.’

‘Mate, chill the fuck out. I was winding you up! No need to get personal. I’ll finish my pint and be on my merry way.’

Kendrick rolls his eyes and continues to devour pints of Cobra beer until past 22:10. When tiredness sets in, and his battery is dying, meaning Apple Pay is about to timeout. He nods to the Bartender, who enters the costs of another pint, plus 20% tips and motions him to tap his phone to the card reader. Payment clears, and



Kendrick thinks he saw the wrong amount, but the reader beeps in approval, and his iPhone shuts down.

2


2.1 Stage 1) Ritualistic Stage

Kendrick slips his phone into his pocket and challenges himself to down his last pint in one go. Fails miserably and begins to choke before an older woman pushes her partner to help him outside, for the fresh air, of course, and not just to be rid of his miserable energy. Reluctantly, her partner bites into his double beef burger, licks the mustard from his lips and rolls his eyes as he gets up to provide the help that his partner urged him to give.

Kendrick mumbles something inaudible to the old man and decides to himself that it is time to head home. As he walks back to his apartment complex, he spots the homeless man known as Barry, who got his steak two nights ago.

‘You! You are a fucking tramp, you ruined my fucking night. Was my steak good, aye?’ He swings his fists and feels the cold air against his knuckles. It takes him a little over two minutes before he realises that Barry is further up the street and appears to be placing his sleeping bag into a backpack. He blinks his eyes a few times and accepts that he may be too drunk to be arguing, as his eyes seem to think they saw Barry hop into an Uber taxi.

At home, he slams his front door and manages to get to the toilet before the excessive amount of urine is rejected from his system. He stumbles into his living room and throws himself onto the corner of his sofa. Looking up, he sees the proud image of his Grandfather smiling back at him, and he remembers how his grandad



never took any shit from anyone and decides to plug his phone into the nearby charger. He kicks off his shoes and wonders if his grandad was alive today and if he would be moping over a woman he spent months online getting to know. Or if he will accept it and move on to the next? After a few moments, his phone comes to life and notifies him of a message from Richard. *Sorry, mate, I didn't know you were that into her. Maybe give her a call tomorrow.*

He frowns and wonders if God would like to place him in these situations, as they seem to be frequent and draining.

2.1 Stage 2) Review Stage

22:33 @86Kdot – I hate B'ham sometimes. It's littered with litter and fucking illiterate ungrateful tramps.

22:33 @86Kdot - @CityofBham, look at this shit. *Inserts a video from YouTube of a homeless person being offered a sandwich, and the homeless person throws it back and shouts, 'I asked for spare change. I can buy my own food.' #BenefitsBritain

22:35 @86Kdot – Backstreet Barry takes Uber! I witnessed it with my own eyes. But my battery was dead. #FakeHomeless

22:37 @86Kdot - @CityofBham and all the trains were down last night too. Took me over an hour to get home, almost missed the footy! Sort it out. I pay my taxes!!!!
#TaxPayer

22:38 @86Kdot – I work hard, I raise money for Shelter every day, and all I ask for @CityofBham to do is to get these undesirables off our streets. Make the trains run on time. In fact, stop charging me out of the arse to get from Birmingham to Coventry! It's Coventry. You shouldn't charge anyone who has to end

23:10 @86Kdot – Endure stepping into a real hell, having to walk through what they refer to as a fucking town centre. What are you doing with my money?

23:32 @86Kdot – Did anyone watch Dublin Murders last night on @BBCOne chilling stuff? I felt like? Is this based on a true story??

23:33 @86Kdot – I've been working hard at work today, but do you think it's bloody appreciated? I won't vent on @Twitter because it's #unprofessional

23:47 @86Kdot – I saw Barry getting into an Uber tonight. #FakeHomeless

23:51 @86Kdot – And I swear to god I was charged double in the pub! I want a damn refund. #TheRedLIARS @TheRedLion

2.1 Stage 3) Absolute Stage

Today is now Saturday, and Kendrick is stretching in Cannon Hill Park. He checks his Garmin watch and smiles when he sees Richard heading towards him. They're both pleased with the clima-heat running gear they purchased from Adidas. No issues with frostbites today.


'Hey mate, I couldn't find anywhere to park, so I've parked near Aldi. A bit of a walk when we're finished.'

'Sorry about the other night. I was feeling a bit annoyed.'

'I know I was there. Don't worry about it. We all have shit days from time to time. Don't whine when I beat you shortly.'

'You know, Mica eventually messaged back and said she's not interested and she's going to block my number. I only sent two messages.'

'I read an article about women just online to get free meals. They will speak to anyone just for a free meal. Some may even say they do what Barry does.'



'Barry, that man is a mystery. I swear I saw him get into an Uber the other night.'

'I know, I saw your tweets.'

'What tweets?'

'Are you kidding me? Mate, you had a rant online. Haven't you seen all the responses? I cringe whenever I log in now.'

'Are you serious?'


'Yeah. Look.'

Richard pulls out his Samsung Galaxy, selects his Twitter app, swipes onto Kendrick's profile and shows him the responses. Kendrick's eyes glance right over a tweet from @CityOfBham: 'We are looking into your complaint. We are committed to providing a great experience to all the residents/visitors to our wonderful city, Birmingham.' He smiles, and suddenly, he announces, 'Well, it's Mica's loss. I matched with someone who lives 1 mile away; she's a runner too, and she's offered to take me out.'

They both laugh and get ready for the countdown to the start of parkrun.

3

3.1 I know you're wondering what happened to Balraj, known in the Jewellery Quarter as Barry. Well, if you take a moment to appreciate that the weather is chilly as fuck, it is 09:30 on a Saturday morning, and on average, the number of attendees falls between 500 and 850. Which makes for a warm run if you're able to keep up. Yes, I must say it takes both Richard and Kendrick around 20 minutes to complete the 5km race. Whereas it takes a small percentage of other runners (we are all runners here), maybe an hour?



You see, the thing is when you spend your days sitting on your arse, with a tatty pair of jeans on (that happen to have spots of paint on them), wearing an old pair of trainers. You begin to familiarise yourself with the delights of Birmingham and the riches it willingly gives you, albeit in small amounts. They come frequently and earnestly! The People of Birmingham is a giving sort, and Barry is highly appreciative.

Oh! Yes, sorry.

He's right there, towards the tail end of the runner's trail. He's wearing the new Puma collection by Usain Bolt. He's happy. His brother joined him for the first time today, as he promised he would treat him to a real man's lunch back in the Jewellery Quarter at The Red Lion.

Brief Interviews with Common People

S.B #20.02.2018

Handsworth Community Centre

'I mean, I saw the wee lass during the summer holidays. She often came to the centre for a few days out of the week. Mind you, it could've been more, but I was only working three days out of seven. I mean, I would do more, but you know, when my knees play up, it's hard to focus on the kids. They can look after themselves, can't they? I like to sit with the other ladies and have a wee break, you know, just three minutes. A sweet cuppa tea, two sugars and one biscuit. Bess likes to bring in the biccys.

Over S. B's shoulder, the large window to the right, I see a car park littered with takeaway boxes from *Charles Chicken Coop*. A group of teens are playing football as a Staffordshire Pitbull watches on in excitement. At the same time, a grainy screen records the younger children playing in the main hall. S.B. adds four heaped spoons of white granulated sugar to her interestingly named mug, *Tea Queen*. Then she walks over with her mug and a saucer full of custard creams and sits on a robust red plastic chair opposite me.

Q.

'Yes, we get all kinds here, African, English, Indian and them immigrants. I haven't a clue where they come from these days. Wendy calls them the boat kids, and our Pat calls them imis. You know, short for immigrants when we can't be bothered to say the full word.'

Q.

'No, sorry, pet. I love working here. What did you wanna ask me again?'

Q.

‘Ah! Yes, as I was saying before, we got carried off about the tea ladies. I used to see her a couple of days a week. Quite a little mouse she was, never liked anyone else. I mean, she couldn't tell the difference between Tag and Hide & Seek! She used to vanish whenever the kids were playing tag. Then, she returned from god knows where she used to hide. But we would never see her until ten minutes before home time.’

Q.

‘You’re having a laugh, aren’t you? We don’t have the time to be chasing around after big kids who don’t understand how to play simple games. I mean, we’ve got a room full of kids to look after. And there’s only five of us.’

S.B. sips the tea and coughs lightly. The smell of chips flows around the office, and the mellow sounds of *One Direction* increase quite rapidly. Before, another member of staff shouts and turns it off. The teens who were playing a friendly game of football a few minutes ago are now squaring up to one another. One who is average in height and red in the face pushes another boy who is shorter than he is, and then a fight commences. The setting is like the universal version of *Fight Club* only. The participants and the onlookers aren’t aware that there are no rules. Some hide behind others, and others record the pre-fight ramblings of prepubescent males and masculine females.

Q.

‘How old do you think I am? I’m not going out there. No way, no chance.’



Q.

'The little shits will be fine. Boys will be boys. And I thought you wanted to know about Celia?'

Q.

'Right, so she was only here a few days a week, and like I said before, you distracted yourself. She was a bizarre child. I can't seem to remember anything else, my dear, and it's lunchtime now.'

Another lady enters the office, turns the kettle on and fills a small bowl with custard creams. Add one spoonful of coffee and five sweeteners. Looking around, I see they seem to have a nice setup here. Three desks on one side of the room, with basic CCTV, set up on half of a desk and a kitchen area, complete with a mini dishwasher, toastie maker and a cupboard full of tea, coffee, sweeteners, sugar and biscuits.

S.S #14.05.2018

Handsworth, Birmingham

‘Every Sunday, they used to come in to wash their clothes, and Celia had to have her own machine. Her mother would always be mumbling under her breath, and yes, I did listen in. What else is there to do?’


Q.

‘Well, it was the smell that got to me. I know, it’s wrong of me to say this as I own the laundrette. But Celia’s items always smelt like piss. The stains were something that even *Daz* struggled to fight. I’m glad that they never requested service washes. What teen do you know who still wets the bed? I used to say to my cousin, that girl must be a bit retarded. I know it’s wrong of me to say, but you can’t miss it. So, whenever her mum was cussing her, I thought, good on you! It’s embarrassing, innit?’

Whirs of washing machines and tumble dryers spin on. A blend of lavender and bleach strokes our nostrils. I hate the smell of lavender. An old Chinese man sits quietly in the far corner, reading a book of some kind. This cold, hard metal bench spurs me to push through and get out within the next twenty minutes. A young mum cuddles her baby while humming *Twinkle Little Star*. She apparently has no sense of how to wash clothes successfully, as she’s mixing whites with colours. Steam spreads across the windows, and on the other side, large drops of rain race down, water logging the drains right outside the entrance.

Q.

‘She was a quiet girl. Once she paid me the £3.60 for the large machine, and I turned it on. She would sit on the bench and fold her arms, staring at the floor. I



figured she was counting the tiles, as I do that myself when there aren't many people in. There are 94 black tiles and 102 white.'

Q.

'One time, when her mum went across the road, the corner shop was just there. I asked her if she was all right. Her mouth parted, but then she continued staring at the floor. I mean, I don't think she was a bad child. Just a bit odd, bed-wetting and acting deaf. Come to think of it, she never really smelt bad, just a bit unwashed from time to time. But I think maybe she was marched here every Sunday to wash the sheets first. I can imagine they must be a large family. I've seen all sorts coming in with her mum, but Celia was always with her, without fail.'

M.T #07.07.2018

Handsworth, Birmingham

‘I brought her some clothes to wear, you know, shorts and T-shirts. But I don’t know why she always wearing dem short shorts. Back home, my people call dem batty-rider shorts. And the stupid girl always woke up and came straight downstairs to mi front-room. I tell yuh, mi always, and I mean always! Run her backside back upstairs and tell her fi go wash before she comes and sits inna my face ah look food.’

The room that we’re seated in is full of family photos. It feels homely and warm, hot even; it must be what it feels like on a Caribbean island somewhere. M.T. is eating plantain chips while her eyes flitter between my lips and my hands, and she goes to the door to enter the room. The lilac and pastel green floral printed sofa set is completely covered in a plastic sheet, which sucks in the matching cushions. The deep mahogany rocking chair creaks loudly every time M.T. stretches forward to grab another plantain chip.

Q.

‘No, sah! Mi not saying that. What mi ah seh, is that she doesn’t dress right when male company is over.’

Q.

‘Mi nar she that it’s her fault. But too many times, mi seh to that girl, stop wear yuh clothes dem hitch up so. When I was born, I wore a long dress when people came around my mother’s yard. Some people are just stupid, and it must be this English weather, ah mess up she head.’

T.T #07.19.2018

Winson Green, Birmingham

‘Yeah, we stopped going to the community centre as there were bare people just acting up. Kids were throwing up everywhere or trying to invade our space. The supervisors didn’t give a fuck. They used to get us to watch the kids. Promise us money and then give us biscuits. Do I look like a dog to people? I mean, yeah, people know me as a bad bitch, but I’m no dog.’

Q.

‘I heard they got paid £15 an hour and that the gov pays for our food. But every day was the same thing: chips with beans and eggs. And sometimes, I used to see them in the office, plates ready, and then *Deliveroo* would come through with bags of *Nandos*. Fucking fat pigs!’

Q.


‘Yeah, I know. Sorry. Just makes me angry. Celia and I would sometimes sneak out during tag, and we would go to *Charlie's Chicken Coop* and order two meal deals each. Celia always had money. She said our uncle Lenny gave it to her whenever she stayed at Nans.’

Q.

‘When I asked Uncle Lenny for money, he said no. True, I say I don’t stay there as much as Celia, and I wasn’t too fussed. As she always gave me some anyway.’

Q.

‘Well, before that happened, she told me one time that someone raped her. But when she said it was someone I knew, I just figured she was chatting shit. I told



her, I don't know any rapist! And from that night, she stopped talking to me. And as I hardly visited Nan, I couldn't be asked to make an effort.'

Q.

'Well, not really, no. I see her Facebook check-ins, and she's only ever checking into school or Nans. So, who is going to be raping her? I just thought maybe she started drugs or something. And her mum told my mum that she's a big ass woman and pissed the bed. So, I thought maybe she's a bit slow, you know.'

S. J #01.02.2019

Kings Heath, Birmingham

'It's strange because we always spoke about what our first time would be like. Which fit boy in year twelve would it be with, and of course, where would it be? Celia always shared these thoughts and smiled that we were the same. Virgins.'

She stares longing out of the window and hugs a grey teddy bear that has a heart stitched onto its stomach that reads, Best Friends Forever. Her bedroom isn't that of a typical teenager. She has a single canvas of a white rose hanging above her bed. Her sheets are silked champagne, and she has only one teddy. There are no images of celebrities and no game consoles. In fact, she has no TV. One glance at this room will show you a person who is happy within themselves. Content and full of potential, she has no distractions. Not at face value, that is.

Q.

'Celia told me a few months ago when she stayed over at mine one night. And I went straight downstairs and told my mum everything.'

Q.

'It was shocking to hear about it, to be fair. And creepy. Her pervy uncle had attended the school fair and even picked her up early from the end-of-term party. I always felt strange vibes from him but would never have guessed this.'

Q.


'My mum is like my best friend, and we often talk about all things strange and fun. I explained to Celia that my mum would help and not judge, and that was exactly what she tried to do. Celia was in a bit of hysterics at first, screaming at my mum and me and begging us not to tell anyone anything. She even tried saying to my mum that she was drunk and that we had been drinking upstairs and tossed our empty bottles of gin out of my bedroom window. My mum simply walked over to her and held her, and she looked up at me because she knew that I enjoyed a glass of white wine after school on a Friday. And my mum and I will share two bottles between us, not gin. What kind of women drink gin? Mum and I are ladies, not ladettes!'

Q.

'Not as well as we hoped. While we headed over to Celia's house, my mum reassured her, saying that once Celia's mum knew, it would be fine and that it would never happen again. In fact, my mum assured her that mothers do anything to protect their children, you know, like how *David Attenborough* discusses lionesses on the *BBC series Dynasties*.'

Q.

'Her mum listened, and then she slapped Celia and told my mum that Celia kept on telling lies. She said her uncle, Lenny, would never do such a thing and that he has kids of his own, five daughters, and, in fact, now lives in Liverpool. Celia went to her bedroom and slammed her door, and the three of us could hear her goofy



sobs through the ceiling. Her mum then told us that Celia said the same thing about the Postman and, apparently, one of the boys at the community centre.'

Q.

'During the drive home, my mum advised me it's best we don't get involved and warned me to stay away from Celia. I trust my mum, so I did as she asked and never spoke to Celia again.'

Q.

'I felt bad until I went back to school the next day. I spoke with her cousin, Tisha, and she confirmed that Celia is a liar. I accepted it for the facts presented before me, all hearsay.'

A. T #01.26.2019

Handsworth, Birmingham


'I always do right by my kids, each one of them. Celia just needs some more guidance from time to time. She's too away with the fairies on a good day.'

Q.

'I mean, she's always been a strange child. She's too quiet, and I'm always wary of the quiet ones. She was very chatty as a young child, but you know, how teenagers are.'

We both, in synchronicity, inhale profoundly, and for a few seconds, I close my eyes. The sweet aroma of freshly baked doughnuts hits me, and although I have one luring me from a plate beneath my nose, I want to buy more. When I open my eyes, A.T. has finished her strawberry jam-filled treat and sloppily licks her lips.

Q.



'The kid's father went out to *Asda* one evening to get bread and milk for the next day. Then, a friend of mine sent me a video of him with another woman in the club. So yes, they have had a father figure. He's just not ready to come back home. But trust me, he will. He always does.'

Q.

'I'm not. I'm just letting you know that she didn't lack a male role model in her life. She's got brothers, cousins and uncles. And my kid's father will be back soon.'


Q.

'Only a few years, but my friend sends me updates on his Facebook account, and well, put it this way, it seems like his world is falling apart. Apparently, he changed his relationship status to complicated. So, it's only a matter of time now before he comes home. And when he does, he will deal with Celia and her batshit lies.'

Q.

'I mean, once they start speaking, you can't trust a word that comes out of them. I asked my mother what she thought about this situation, and she said that her son, Lenny, would never harm any child. Let alone his own family, his niece, for God's sake. My mother told me that she is always in the house and can name all the visitors she has, how much of her food they eat and if anyone leaves shit marks in her downstairs toilet. She told me Lenny checks in on her, buys food for her and the grandchildren and always gives Celia money to treat herself. Mum said, not once has Lenny been bad to Celia. And once she told me that, I knew for sure Celia was making up stories again.'

Q.



‘Well, no, she’s never accused anyone else of this disgusting thing. When I say again, I mean I’m sick and tired of hearing about it. I sat with Lenny and asked him if what she was saying was true, and he said no, my mum was there to witness this. God was there to see and hear everything! Lenny said no, and he said Celia was telling lies because one day she asked him for £100 cash, and he said that just because you’re the eldest does not mean you can be greedy. He helps Mum out, and he helps me out, too, when I need money for gas and electricity. Lenny would give it to me, so it’s no problem. Most of the time, he never asks for it. Lenny is a good man.’

Q.

‘Well, I told her plain as day, when she turns sixteen, she can fuck off out of my house. I’m tired of her bringing the world to my door and causing drama in the family. Mum doesn’t want her either, and Lenny said not to kick her out, but no! She can go, but as soon as the clock hits midnight, she had better be out of my house.’

Q.

‘Well, if Lenny is fool enough to be bothered about her after she tells lies about him, then he can take her in. I do not give a fuck. I’ve washed my hands. Now, where’s the money you promised for this meeting? I’ve got kids to feed.’



Confidently Lost


From this view, the thickness of green is rich, with glimmers of rainbow balls flashing frequently.

Shadows are flickering around the ground, with a plethora of footprints disappearing into the undergrowth. Leaves elongated in a variety of shapes and sizes, food for few, shelter for many. Seaweed wrapped around olive, jade resting beneath moss and basil playing shake with pine.

It's not always the wind that causes the leaves to rustle. Often, you'll find thousands of ants marching up and back down the trees, carefully cutting away pieces of leaf, taking them back to the nest and repeating this action until a day's work is complete. Birds call to one another often in song, a salute to the biodiversity that continuously shows up each day.

Five years ago, they told me that they were unsure of what it may be and needed a second opinion. I remained still, trying to imagine what it could be. I mean, it's not unusual for blood to rise from the bed of the forest and inflame the walls with clutter.

Once a month, I would experience pain in the depths of my uterus, expending clots, which I would feel each time they passed through me. Pain darted through my abdomen like bolts of lightning fired by Zeus himself. Zipping and zapping every few minutes, maybe two apart from one another, I don't know. They seem to last forever. I mean, eight days straight, and I try. I willingly take ibuprofen from small capsules that are scarlet red in colour. Red reminded me of the deep red pieces of congealed blood that my body is embarrassed about creating. Often, I cry because even the




strongest painkillers appear to do nothing to help. I cry because crying makes me know I cannot imagine things; something is not right. I cry myself to sleep and hope that in a short space of time, I will feel better once again.

Sunlight pierces through my white wooden blinds, heating my skin like a stewed lamb for eight hours in a slow cooker. I know it's not great for me, but my stomach loves it, and the hot water bottle that is pressed just below my navel appreciates the temporary support. I could lie here forever; this is the right place to be, and I'm sure Zeus must be sleeping right now as Helios is making me feel human once again. Thank you, I'm thankful.

My eyes are closed, but I'm awake. I suppose this act is the definition of resting. My Airwick automatic spray sends a shot of cranberry and mango mist into the room every nine minutes. I inhale deeply through my nose, exhale slowly through my mouth and repeat. By focusing on my breathing, it keeps my mind busy for the moment.

The birds sound even prettier than yesterday, not that I'm fussy about sounds. Only right now do birds from Malaysia sound warmer than birds from Australia. Who would've thought an app, a free app specifically for sounds of nature, would be so needed? I wonder how the females of the forest cope with pain. Do they confide in one another, or do they opt to grin and bear it, all of it? Showing the world that they're fine and nothing will stop them from doing what they need to do. This is peaceful, and I'm sure I caught the low hum of a hummingbird over the lakeside. I imagine the water to be warm but clear, abundant with water plants and aquatic animals.




I hate when he returns home, showers and hops into bed naked. No matter what I'm wearing, he always seems to be hungry and expectant. I feel him inching closer and closer until I feel his excitement pressing the back of my double-layered panties.

Disgusting. I inch away, and he wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me in closer. I'm already hot. It's a warm night. I wish he wouldn't do that as if he can't feel how hot I am. Like a tigress after hunting for seven hours straight with no luck, knowing there are four cubs to feed back at the den. But before that, a tigress that knows where a small waterhole is and opts to sit in and cool down.

I'm hot. I remove his hand an inch nearer to the edge of the bed, voicing in a hushed tone, 'Ethan, please! I'm too hot.' He groans something and presses his body closer than close. My senses are heightened right now, and I swear I feel every strand of his stomach hair scratching into my back. Bears like to rub their backs against tree bark to satisfy themselves with a rewarding back scratch. If Ethan is the bear, I must be the bark, rough and brittle, spikey in some cases. I'm satisfied with using it when needed, but what about my needs? I've told him I'm hot, and it's clear I don't want him so close to me. But now I feel his hot breath on my ears, whispering, 'Zara, come on, the night is still young!' I feel his cock pressing against my ass, and for around a micro-second, I can see scarlet seeping through the *Always Infinity* pad that I have nicely fitted in my black cotton underwear. Greeting his cock with an onslaught of unwarranted chemistry and blessings from womanhood.

I flip the duvet, swing my legs out, inhale deeply, and exhale while standing up. 'I told you I'm hot. I'm going to get water.' I exit our bedroom, slamming the door behind me and head downstairs. But I don't enter our kitchen. I race to the toilet near our utility room and lock the door behind me. Grab the tissue, unravelling some while wrapping it around my hand. I remove it from my hand, place it into the toilet, and




then sit down. No sooner do I sit than I feel Aunt Flo and her clotted companions passing. They dive onto the *Andrex* double quilted tissue and exude their raw liquids into *Andrex*.

Like those deer grazing on foliage, minding their own business, when a troop of monkeys sound the alarm with cries of distress. But it's too late; a young deer trips in shock and can't recover quickly enough to run with the others. The tigress finally got a kill, and after her well-needed rest, she dragged her catch back to her cubs. You see how the blood stains the forest floor? Drying up with every heated second that passes, the fresh blood from the animal corpse keeps the forest thriving in pain and pleasure.

No sooner does the last clot fall. Zeus shoots more bolts around my body. My head hurts, but my stomach hurts even more. I feel my uterus going wild with movement, contracting and expanding beyond anything I thought possible. Tears race down my face and then jump willingly with a splat on the cold, hard tiles. I imagine those trapped in a building where the fire is coming up from beneath their feet, and I kind of get the adrenaline rush to jump out of the nearest window. Hoping you fall onto a mountain of double quilted tissue and not cold hard tiles.

Unexpected sprays of excrement shoot down into the once sparkly white, now heavily soiled toilet bowl. Quick bursts of brown in between breaks of air, like there are pockets of air making a break for freedom. The sound is precisely that of the current President of America, a load of shit spraying over the visibly clean faces of the world. Digression is what I have mastered during times like this. I don't want to think about the smell; that rotten smell of last week is overdue. Or the Trump over Trump sounds that reverberate within this windowless space. How my stomach feels empty, but the shit is stacking up and fast.




A cheetah can reach speeds of 100km – 120km in a short burst. I bet they dart far away from the den to release the misfortunes of the effects of what my GP stated was...

I grab the wipes and use about ten, one right after the other. I change my sanitary towel, wrapping it up into the wrap from the fresh one, placing it into a nappy bag, tying the bag and then putting that beside my feet. As I stand up slowly, it feels as though my legs have lost all senses. They feel numb. I pull up my panties, and I know I shouldn't, but I do. I look. It's horrifying; each month, it seems a little different, a layer of baby wipes upon a layer of shit, upon a layer of clots and Flo's upon a layer of tissue, miraculously floating upon a small pool of water.

I flush, close the lid and turn to wash my hands with the shea butter and coconut handwash. I clean them as if I were a Doctor preparing for surgery. I must look, so I lift the lid, and the water from my hands connects with the side and slides down. And there it is, huge blood clots, bundles of tissue and fragmented shit swirling around clockwise in purple lavender-scented water.

Water is now just below the rim and in no hurry to go down. I knew what to do, I gave the bleach and squeezed almost a litre into the mini homemade swamp.

My mother once told me that back in her day, during a funeral, some of the horses would shit on the road. Once the funeral procession departs, she and the residents of George St would race outside and scrap up manure. Apparently, it was great for growing crops at the allotment or blending with soil and selling your own fertiliser. At least that went away. My waste won't flush. The toilet releases water, but the waste parade still swims on. I pick up the nappy bag and pop it into the small white bin. I



reach for the can of Thailand-fragranced Febreze and press and hold the trigger, eliminating the smell that my petite frame created.

‘How are you feeling baby?’

‘Horrible.’

‘Have you eaten?’

‘I don’t want to move.’

‘Maybe some toast will help?’

‘I’m fine if I stay here. Please move out of the sunlight!’

‘You’ve been down here since last night, and you can’t stay here forever!’

‘Ethan, I’m sorry for being in pain. I’m sorry for finding comfort in this spot. In our lounge, where people lounge. Please, leave me alone! You really don’t understand!’


‘I will leave you alone, but only as I have to go to work. Make sure you call your GP and see another Doctor. How can you trust what she told you? She printed text from the NHS website. Come on, Zara, you could’ve done that yourself.’

‘But she’s right.’

‘How? What evidence did she show you to substantiate the shit she’s filled your head with?’

He grabs his keys and says bye, and then he’s gone. This is a monthly once discussion, now strengthening the argument that occurs during each extended cycle.

I know he could be right, but I also know how my body feels, and something is wrong. The forest thrives when blessed with rain. The inhabitants procreate and build. They defecate and appreciate all at once, united against the harsh misfortunes



that mankind places ahead of them. They try, and they try, but sometimes you can't help! Your donations are lost in the sea, as their homes are floating overhead, to be transformed into furniture for man to adore fleetingly. Well, at least until the January sales.

Five years ago, they told me that they were unsure of what it may be and needed a second opinion. I lay still, not wanting to make a sound or be seen. Like a common brown Looper moth, there but not there, not to the naked eye.

Another doctor returns, and she tells me this will make me feel uncomfortable. She's sorry. But I already know this because the first Doctor has just examined me. I squeeze my eyes shut even tighter than the first time, but this time, I wish I were Dorothy, and if I imagined standing in a pair of shiny red shoes, I could click my way back home.

'I'm afraid it looks like there is a growth on the lining of your womb. This is the reason why you have been experiencing a painful period and why your flow is heavier than usual. Blood is getting trapped behind the growth and causing clots to form. It also means that once your cycle has finished, you'll continue to menstruate as old blood will then make its way down. The female body has a way of cleaning itself naturally.'

'What does this mean?'

'It means we'll be referring you to the hospital to have a procedure that will remove the growth.'

'A procedure?'

'Yes, a minor operation where a specialist will freeze away the growth and then check your ovaries with an intravenous ultra-sound scan.'



‘What?’

‘Don’t worry, you’ll receive a letter in the post in the next few weeks. Please, take a moment to redress yourself, and I will send a letter to the hospital.’

Around five years ago, a Doctor at the hospital froze off the growth that had sprouted from the wall of my womb. Gone were the extenuating circumstances I made up to be excused from work. My boyfriend at the time was simply grateful we could resume sexcapades four nights out of seven. The focus was back to the tops of these tall trees, some of which have stood here from the age of the dinosaur. Here, you see more than various shades from two prominent colours. I like what I see from this position in life.

It all started back a few months ago, the crazy clotting pain before, during and after. And the flow was overstaying from five days to nine. Only this time, it felt enhanced. At times, my whole body would feel too sensitive to touch, so I avoided eating as I did not want to spend my days in the toilet. Adding to the sludge, which grows by the hour. But still, it came! It was like my insides were abandoning my entire being, like I was no longer fit for purpose. As if I fell forward onto a porcupine and its quills perforate my delicate skin, I deflate into nothingness as my organs are devoured by mycotic fungus.

I monitored things for a few months before visiting my GP how alone I felt following such an encounter.

‘Well, I had similar symptoms a few years ago. I think they said it was a growth in my womb. But they treated it by freezing it, and everything was fine after that.’

‘Did they say what it was?’

‘I can’t remember, but you should be able to see my notes from my previous GP.’

‘Your heavy flow will stop with an IUD fitted.’

‘Pardon?’

‘The Marina coil is a form of contraception for females. Basically, a piece of plastic that is inserted into the womb and can help ease your period pains.’

‘But I don’t want contraception, and I don’t mind if I become pregnant now. I’m here to find out what’s happening with my body. Why have the heavy periods returned? My previous Doctor examined me last time.’

‘I don’t need to examine you. I know exactly what it is: you have endometriosis!’

‘Pardon?’


‘One minute, I’m printing off information for you.’

‘You’re not going to examine me?’

‘Here you go, information on the Marina coil and endometriosis. Having a coil fitted will help with the pain, although some women find it uncomfortable, and it does sometimes move. But all you would need to do is book an appointment to see a GP, and they can refit it for you.’

‘I don’t want an IUD or Marina coil! I came here to find out what’s causing these symptoms again?’

‘And I’ve told you, it’s endometriosis! You can take painkillers for now, but I’ll get you booked in to have the coil fitted, and you should be okay. Women with this illness sometimes conceive but aren’t always able to carry it to full term. I don’t think you’ll be able to conceive, but at least you have all the information now.’



‘What?’

‘Sorry, appointments are only ten minutes each. Just read this info. You can find extra online, and it’s directly from nhs.co.uk. I recommend the coil over the pill for you, though. I’ll make a note to say we’ve discussed everything.’

‘But we haven’t discussed anything.’

‘Thank you for coming, look out for your appointment letter.’

My womb is the symbol of the essence of being a woman. We’re raised with the belief that we are to become wives and mothers. Motherhood is the ultimate achievement in the world of being blessed as a female. We’re taught to empower one another and be supportive of those going through less fortunate times. Did I mention that my GP is female?

To make this more poignant, we are the same shade in the labels of skin tone. I remember she had a photo on her desk of her and a young girl, who I believe is her daughter. They’re both smiling, with a full, small basket of cranberries sharing weight between them.

Yet, there she was, promoting the use of plastic inside my body. In other words, I should lay upon the bed the forest has grown, express my slowly fuelled scarlet espresso until the roots that feed the trees above take hold of me and return me to my natural state. In the forest, nothing goes to waste. We live from it, and we sacrifice our heartbeats for that of a loved one.

Context and Content

Context


As a child, I used to love reading *The Broons* by Ken Harrison. My wee ma used to treat me to a comic every month. It's about a large Scottish family that gets up to all sorts. They're so much fun. I still have a copy.

Content

In Birmingham, Edgbaston, King Edward Wharf, to be precise. Lives a single man in his early forties. He's educated, wealthy, wise and quite affectionate. He once cooked for me on our second date. This was back in 2013, he made an Indian curry, but I can't quite remember which one. I vaguely recall the actual name -Tikka, Rogan Josh, mild? I don't know. He did say, 'Sauvignon Blanc? Help yourself.' Which was what I did.

Two bottles later, I'm led up his spot-lighted staircase. He shows me three Ensuite bedrooms, the Master bedroom being the last one and his. He pulls me closer to his chest, his heart beating at a steady pace, and I giggle. Slowly stepping to the loo, I sit down and pee. Thinking about how beautiful his apartment is, wishing I could stay forever. Wishing I could make him love me forever. Extreme goals for a second date, I know. But, well, men like Damien are rare.

I never slept, and my head was banging; that wasn't the reason I couldn't settle. It wasn't quite my bedroom back home in Aston. It didn't quite smell like Vanilla incense, and his mattress was so soft and white and didn't have springs that occasionally scratched me if I dared to turn over. His fitted wardrobe was the length of my main wall, the wall I pin my university work on. Art by Banksy hung above my



head in a glass frame. I miss Tupac, who is held up in poster form, with Blu-tac on my other wall where the fire door rests. The Bostik brand is not cheap stuff. I checked my phone, and it was around 5:20 am. He stirred and then got up and stated he was going to shower first. He seemed slightly annoyed and less engaging than he was only six hours ago. He laughed loudly and admired my erratic dancing skills, as well as the sweet, repetitive melodies of Britney Spears and her deceptively innocent lyrics. He ironed a navy suit that was hung up at the far end of his wardrobe. I stared at him, gliding the iron over a lapel from his blazer. He dressed slowly and went downstairs.

Eventually, I slid out of bed and tip-toed into the En-suite as I didn't want to make any noises to cause him to return. Removing my t-shirt, I turned on the shower, ensuring that the temperature was the hottest. I sat on the white, square-shaped toilet and buried my head in my hands. Something was wrong. Nothing felt right.

Later, I asked if he could drop me off at work, and although he seemed annoyed, he agreed. He pulls up near the Bullring, and I hint for a kiss. It happened so quickly that I didn't even feel it. I open my eyes, and there it is again, that disappointed Damien look.

That was the last I saw of Mr Hennessy in November 2013, 2013, to add accuracy to my recollection. The last text I received stated that I shouldn't worry. He's fine; he's just busy with work.

In May 2016, there I was drinking Sauvignon Blanc in my bed. My mattress is now shielded with a basic range-topper from Asda. I scrolled to the left on my iPhone 6, the search function that I rarely use, and typed in His-Story. There was an e-mail I had sent to myself shortly before erasing his number from my contacts.



Title: HiStory

+4479001 265 2333 – *Don't contact him ever again. You can do this.*

I clicked on it and then proceeded to compose a message: 'Hey, how are you, Mr Hennessy?'


'Great, thanks, you?' I wondered if this meant he still had my number saved. After a slight lapse in thought, I assumed he did and proceeded with:

'I'm lovely. I'm just drinking Sauvignon Blanc and thinking of you.'

'Ah! Nice.'

A short reply: I need to know if he was seeing someone if he had children, and if he was married! I had to know.

'So, how are you? Any mini Hennessy's yet? I bet they're adorable' Too much? I didn't care, and I just needed to know. I gulp a large portion of Sauvignon Blanc and place my phone on flight mode. Did I just ask that question? Yes. I did. My heart starts racing, and my palms begin to feel hot. I stand up and walk over to the other end of my bedroom, stepping up into an area I refer to as the stage due to it being slightly raised like a platform to perform. I open the window, inhale the night air and admire the secrets that the night sky holds. Spotting a lone star, twinkling in the distance, 'I wish Damien would love me, I wish we could be together, and I wish when I turn off flight mode that he wants the same.' The star appeared to be changing between shades of white and baby pink, or that could be the effects of alcohol? I top up my glass and settle down between my phone and an old grey cardigan that has been on my bed since last week's wash. Wiping my clammy hands over my pillow, I swipe up and deactivate flight mode and stare at the screen. Two seconds pass, and I feel like an idiot. Two messages came through from my sister-in-law, Shantel. She wants to know if I'm free for lunch tomorrow. Then there it is,




one new message from Damien Hennessy: 'No kids yet, unfortunately...and I'm still single.' elated from within, a smile stretches across my face. He said he's 'still single.'

Our messages became more frequent over the next few days, and we discussed work, university and running, Bluetooth speakers, Snow-bombing, Zurich, and relocating to Australia. Eventually, we upgraded to WhatsApp, exchanging images of our daily meals, recent selfies, and his new Bluetooth speakers for Zurich. Links to Strava, an app that monitors cycling, running, and snowboarding, as well as distance, speed, and timescale.

Then, the content became more sexually charged. He was aroused, and I was melting. April 1st, 2016, and finally, that message arrived. Come over; I need to see you. I call Louise and ask her opinion as it's now 21:40, and I have loads of prep work to complete before my meeting tomorrow. She advises, 'Go for it! You only live once, and everyone deserves a bit of fun from time to time.' I finally respond to Damien, 'Are you sure? It's quite late.' He reads the message at 22:13 and responds at 22:13, 'I need to see you, these messages have made me so horny, and I want you to come over...

Here we are again, two and a half years later. Only this time, he embraces me. I wake up, and he holds my waist. I kiss his forehead. Again, I dream about us moving in together and cooking some Caribbean delights to tantalise his Scottish palate. 'I thought the concierge would knock on my door to ask about all the screaming.' He laughs and strokes my face. I trace the figure of eight over his chest and respond, 'You're amazing. I've never had multiple orgasms before, and I thought that I would pass out.' He kisses me lightly and laughs, 'I really enjoyed myself.' I slide out of his arms and out of his bed, smiling as I walk into the ensuite. No time to




shower, I brush my teeth and put on last night's clothes: a black and white mini dress, leggings, black patent heels and a black boyfriend jacket. Heading back over to his bed, I asked him to call me a taxi, and he asked if I was still going to get my train to London. 'Yes, I don't want to, but I must.' I thank him for an amazing night, kiss him once more, grab my bag and tip-toe out of the bedroom. Downstairs, I put on my shoes, and as I raise my head, I see him standing there. At 6ft 4 inches tall, naked, his pale white skin illuminated by the warm lights in the hallway. His manhood is erect and calling me. I ache. I stand up, and he pulls me close, his erection trying to poke through my dress. My pussy just wants to stay, and well, we kiss quite intensely.

I admit the journey home in that taxi was nerve-wracking. Women always say don't text him, wait for him to contact you first. He texted to ask if I had made it into my taxi safely. I wonder if that counts. Back to Aston, I go through the rain. His spunk was barely moist between my breasts, and his scent blended with mine; it was bliss. I reply to him, reiterating how exhausted I am. He urges me to get my train. My stomach rumbles, and it begins to sink in. That will be the last I see of Mr Damien Hennessey.

Context

I use Deliveroo sometimes when I fancy treating myself. Shannon keeps asking about how I'm feeling. We had sex, and she wanted to know how I was feeling. I like her. I do. I'm just not sure if I can see us together long term, I'm not sure if I'm ready to share my bathroom. I love her skin tone she's this beautiful shade of nutmeg with mild hints of coffee. But she hates salmon. What kind of person doesn't like salmon?



Her curves are just, I mean, she's more than a woman. She's just beautiful. I don't think she realises that.

Text Received: Shannon

'Hey Olive Juice, just want to let you know that you're amazing. Hope you're feeling it?'


I know I should at least try and see where it goes. I'm 42 now, I've travelled and experienced life. I suppose it would be great to travel with a woman, but I think I've gotten used to living alone. She's so full of life, energetic, and quite random. However, I just don't know what to do anymore. When she asks how I'm feeling, I ignore her.

Content

I thought that after so many years apart, things would be better between us. We failed before we even started before. Now, he just reads my messages and hardly ever replies. He reads them within 2-5 minutes of me sending them via WhatsApp. Who does that? Surely, he knows that I can see the two blue ticks to clarify that they have been received and read by the recipient.

I was invited over again shortly after he arrived back from Zurich. We lay in bed together, and he read me a few chapters from Freakonomics. He's such a great kisser. Kissing him makes me feel so close to him. The type of kisses that beam you into outer space to that pink and white sparkling star and back a thousand times. He wanted me that night, but I said no. All I needed was a cuddle and to fall asleep on his luxurious mattress.

In the morning, he arrives and makes me granola. We discuss *Wall and Peace* by Banksy, salmon, the Queen's birthday, and casual dress at work, and then



we leave. In the lift going down, we discussed sports work, and he advised me of an old injury he had received a few years ago. I just wanted to hold him close. He pulls up outside my workplace, and we kiss. I felt it. It was great. I grab my bag, smile, close the door, and thank him. As I walk away, the driver behind beeps his horn and shouts, 'Get moving, you fucking wanker.'

New Gent

1000hrs, 12.06.2012 From: Jeremy Nugent

Hey Baybaaay,

Yesterday was awesome. Speak later xxxx Love Jeremy.

1300hrs TGI Fridays, 11.06.2012

‘Aww, thank you so much! You’re such a sweet friend, and I love TGI’s.’


‘I know, and you’ve been working so hard, and you’ve not been out much lately.’

‘Well, I’ll never say no to a free lunch.’

I’m so happy. I’ve been struggling with all the drama that life delivers to everyone. Each night, you listen to me vent, and you never complain about being used as a soundboard. I appreciate this about you, and you’re not like my other friends. They care about the gossip; you care about the conversation.

I’m wearing a purple sleeveless tulip dress with a white lace short-sleeve jacket, black leggings, and pastel pink ballerina pumps. My HTC Google One phone lays at the base of my pastel pink and black, thin-strapped shoulder bag, alongside an almost empty tin of *Vaseline*, a small tube of hand cream by *Nivia*, a pack of *Wrigley’s* spearmint chewing gum, a travel-size bottle of *Carex* hand-gel, a brown-tan leather *Topshop* purse and my house keys.

The atmosphere this afternoon feels chilled, and I feel relaxed. We joke about how hot it is outside and how the world is missing out on the small pleasures of good air-conditioning. You say, ‘order whatever you like, it’s my treat.’ I pick up the menu, and you laugh and say, ‘Why do you even read the menu? You always order the



same thing.' I giggle and reply, 'You're right, Jeremy. You know me so well.' He motions for the waitress to visit our table.


A few other people are eagerly waiting for their food to arrive. Laughter is heard from a group of women who appear to be out for someone's Birthday. I inhale the aroma of delicious meats and spices. I love this place, despite the sounds of a mother failing to settle her young child.

I order Jack Daniels, chicken with mashed potatoes, and broccoli. Jeremey orders spicy chicken bites, ribs, and a large portion of onion rings. I add a lemonade, no ice, and Jeremy adds a Coke. We both laugh about our mothers complaining about the amount of time we spend talking on the phone. Once again, I thank Jeremy for such a lovely treat. Our food arrives, 'grubs up!' He says we clink our glasses of fizzy pop.

Unknown, Unknown, 11.06.2012?

I hear a noise, and it sounds like the TV is on. Why is it so loud? I struggle to open my eyes, and when I do, my vision isn't clear. I see a dark outline; I try to raise my hand to reach for it, but I can't move. I can't move. I try to scream, but my voice sounds raspy. I try to turn my head, but I can't. I inhale deeply and try shouting to no avail. That's when my eyes close on the light and the darkness.

It feels like I'm being squashed. I can't breathe. I feel hot, why can't I move? My eyes work once more, and I open them. I want to ask, 'What are you doing?' but I struggle to vocalise my pain and discomfort. I see the low ceilings and feel a spring from the mattress below digging into my back. I think these walls that hide this moment were once white with purity and goodness. I think I hear the soft vibration of




my HTC Google One phone, but it can't hear me. I'm not sure how long my eyes would not open, but for a second, the dark outline is clear.

Time passes, and I can feel movement in my fingers. I try to keep my eyes open, but the room is now pitch-black. I lay in silence, trying every few minutes to move my other body parts.

Time proceeds without my knowledge. I wake up yet again to sunlight breaking through a hole in the curtains. I lift my left arm, and this time, it obeys. Although sluggish, it listens and acts. I swivel my legs to the righthand side of this squeaky bed, stumbling to my feet seconds before falling to the floor. Both my knees scrape the threadbare carpet as I land, causing instant minor burns. That's when I realised I didn't have my leggings on! I don't have my tulip dress on. Where are my clothes? Where is my bra, my underwear? I clasp both hands over my mouth and try to remember something, anything. I feel the wetness between my legs. I look down and can't see anything. I turn around and spot a floral print bedside lamp; I turn it on. It lightens this space with a warm glow, and that's when I see my purple tulip dress crumpled beside the corner of the bed. Part of my left shoe peering out from beneath the bed as if it were trying to escape from this unfamiliar setting.

Eventually, I melt from my cold spot and crawl into the bathroom. I reach up and pull on the drawstring, where I'm welcomed in by the slow whirring of an extractor fan coming to life. I pull myself up using the side of the bath, then the sink. I look up and into the cabinet mirror; it has fingerprints on it, and I catch a faint mist of male body wash and mildew. I'm staring into the mirror, and someone else is staring back. She looks defeated. Her soft brown eyes hold the look of a petrified young woman. Her once supple lips were swollen, cracked and stinging from dried blood.



Her left cheek was larger than the right and a darker shade of purple than her tulip dress. Her neck is smeared in bite marks that lead down to her breasts, past her navel, to her inner thighs. An area that is currently besieged by a slow flow of warm blood.

I hold the side of the sink tightly as pain fires through my body, screaming for help and hoping to be comforted. I reach up and pull on the cord for the lights. Blackness shadows me, and I slide down to the cold, dirty, damp, *I believe*, once-white tiles. Coldness penetrates through me, but I don't care. I'm not here. I'm not here, and I can't be.

A day or two later, I woke up, and I was alone. It's quiet, but I know I'm safe. I'm in my bedroom. I look down, and I still have on the clothes that I fell asleep in a Micky Mouse t-shirt, grey hoodie, two pairs of panties, old tatty leggings, grey jogging bottoms and two pairs of socks.

I reach down for a bottle of water, which is now room temperature. I pop two ibuprofen into my mouth, followed by a gulp of warm water. I sweat in these layers, but at last, I notice a green light flashing on my HTC Google One smartphone. I pick it up and swipe my pattern to unlock it. I now have twenty-four unread messages, six of which are e-mails from Jeremy.


1800hrs, 11.06.2012 From: Jeremy Nugent

Subject: Thaaaaaank YOU

Hey Baby, I just wanted to say lunch was fantastic earlier. We must do it again soon, that waitress Shantel was brilliant. Hope you're not gonna be too hungover tomorrow.

Jeremy.

1003hrs, 12.06.2012 From: Jeremy Nugent

Subject: Great Day Today

Hey Baby, wishing you a great day today. Hope there's no drama, and make sure you hit me up when you get this message. Are you still tipsy? LOL x

Jeremy

1800hrs, 12.06.2012 From: Jeremy Nugent

Subject: Date

Hey Baby, guess who's got a date tonight? ME! Thanks for your advice during lunch; you were spot on. Hope you're not still hungover. You were wild yesterday. You kept knocking em' back, good job I was there to save you. LOL. Where you at?

Jeremy

0214hrs, 13.06.2012 From: Jeremy Nugent

Subject:

Morning Baby, the date was alright. She's not as lovely as you are, though. I miss you, why aren't you replying? You drunk? LOL.

J

0216hrs, 13.06.2012 From: Jeremy Nugent

Subject:

Hey Baby, you know I'm free later if you wanna meet for lunch? Miss you. My phone don't beep as much now 😞

Jeremy

0946hrs, 13.06.2012 From: Jeremy Nugent

Subject: Missed Calls

Hey, Baby, I've had a few missed calls from an unknown number. I'm guessing they were from you as I don't talk to anyone else as much as I speak to you. I was just thinking about lunch the other day and wondered if you're free today. Hit me up and yes, my treat. PS: I promise I'll stop you from drinking. LOL, you're a funny drunk.

Jeremy

It's early evening when my phone rings. I jump up. I thought it was you until I saw the glow of a little pink light. I answer the phone.

'Girl! Where have you been? No one has heard from you in days, and I got called in today to cover your late shift.'


'I'm sorry.'

'Sorry, are you sick? You could've texted me. You know I would've covered anything I could do with the extra hours. The shop was mad busy tonight. I've just ordered *Nandos*. I'm fucking hungry. Why aren't you talking much.'

'Sorry, I've just woken up.'

'Oh! Have you now, really?'

'Yes, I've been sleeping, I don't feel well.'



I hear her smirk and accept her order, and then she says, 'One minute, let me just get out of here. We need to have a proper chat.'

'I don't feel well. I should be back at work on Sunday, hopefully.'

'oh! Really?'

'Why do you keep on saying that like that?'

'Well, Girl! I bumped into Jeremy yesterday! He was doing some late-night shopping at Tesco, and I felt like someone was looking happy. He then told me about your date! Girl, I've been waiting for days for you to tell me.'

'Date?'

'Yes, date! Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about. He told me how he wined and dined you in TGIs and how you were talking for hours after.'

I'm not sure which word or group of words triggered my tears, but they came rushing down like the flow of a new burst dam. Snot infused with my tears and covered my healing lip. I dropped the phone from my right ear and buried my face into the chest of my oversized hoodie.

I saw your face, and you were opposite me. I was eating Jack Daniels Chicken and sipping lemonade. I don't even drink alcohol. Why would I drink it in the afternoon with you? What would be a special occasion? We've eaten out together many times. Why don't I remember anything between those first sips and waking up in a cheap hotel room? I cry because my head hurts. I don't know what happened, and I'm trying my best to recollect every minute of that day. All I have is bruises, pain, foggy flashes of images, and your confusing e-mails. *Why are you sending so many e-mails?*

1232hrs, 14.06.2012 From: Jeremy Nugent

Subject: Aww Baby


Aww, Baby, I saw a comment on FB from Alisha saying to some of the others that you're sick. That explains why I've not heard back from you since our lunch the other day. Hope you're feeling better soon. I'll e-mail you again tomorrow. You should rest. I'll tell the others to leave you alone so you can get back to your usual self. I feel awful. Had I known that a couple of cocktails would do this to you, I would never have listened to your requests for alcohol.

Luv Jeremy x

Among the usual text messages, I saw a few from Alisha asking me to call her, saying she's there whenever I need to talk, and then saying to speak whenever I'm ready. I opened up my windows and allowed my head to feel a mild breeze from the warmth of sunshine we had been blessed with.

Leaning on my window ledge, I closed my eyes and thought back to Monday, 11th June 2012, a mere three days ago. I can see the lemonade arriving and Jeremy's pint of Coke-a-Cola. I hear the chimes from our glasses clinking and my voice, 'Here's to an amazing friendship!' Then, the darkest cloud fills the memory, only to disperse seconds later, showing an outline of the weight that's pressing on my chest. I feel pressure below my navel between my legs. I open my eyes, and a wasp has entered my room. I grab my phone my bag, and exit. I left my windows open to allow my unwanted guest out or for more visitors to join him in my room.

I board the first bus that arrives at the bus stop. I had remained seated in silence for the past fifteen minutes. I head to the back of the lower deck, taking a seat on the



left-hand side by the window. I look carefully at everything my eyes take in and try tirelessly to match the shape, any shape, with my flashback of a foggy figure.

Alisha calls

‘Hello, are you there?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve been trying to speak with you about what you said yesterday!’

‘Yesterday?’

‘Yes, yesterday.’

‘Oh, about being sick. Don’t worry, and I’ll cover one of your shifts when you need a favour.’

‘No, about lunch with Jeremy.’

‘Oh, yeah, it wasn’t a date.’

‘No, I’m referring to what you said when you started crying.’


I remove my head from the windowpane and sit up a little straighter, my eyes now wide with fear.

‘What are you talking about, Alisha? I’m sure I hung up, and I’m sorry about that. I’ve just been so ill.’

‘No, you never hung up. You told me that you went out for lunch with Jeremy, you ordered your favourite meal and a lemonade. Then don’t remember anything else. You said you were in pain?’

‘Yes, I’m in pain, but I’m sick.’

‘You said, you said you woke up in a random hotel, and Jeremy was on top of you, inside you. And you tried to ask him to stop. Don’t you remember what you told me?’



My hands tremble, and tears creep up and roll out of my eyes. I press the bell, and as soon as the bus stops at the next stop, I get off and sit on the brick wall nearby.

‘But Alisha, I don’t remember much of what happened. Maybe it was all a bad dream, or maybe I was drunk. He e-mailed me the next day and pointed out I had drunk a lot.’

‘Then why was he okay and you hungover? If what he says is true? Why would you be drinking alone?’

‘I don’t know what happened.’ I shout at her because I’m angry at myself and want to scream at myself. But what would I be shouting for? I remember nothing.

‘Please, listen to me. I know it’s hard for you to hear this, and it’s equally hard for me to say it. But I believe that you were date raped.’

‘We weren’t on a fucking date. For fuck’s sake, he just took me out for lunch in the afternoon on a Monday. Why would I be on a date with Jeremy? Fucking hell. He’s my friend. Friends don’t rape friends.’

‘Breathe, please. I don’t mean to upset you, but you need to look at the facts. Why can’t you remember anything? I think he used that date rape drug on you. And I’m sorry to be so blunt, but you need to get checked out.’

‘I’m bleeding. My period has come earlier than usual.’

‘I’m sorry. I should’ve known something was wrong when you never showed up for your shift. You’ve never missed a shift in three years.’

‘I’m so stupid, Alisha. I didn’t see him put anything into my drink. I can’t be sure it was him. He said I was drinking a lot, so maybe I’m just hungover.’

‘But you also said you had bite marks and bruises.’

‘Shut up! Please, leave me alone.’

1804hrs, 14.06.2012 From: Jeremy Nugent

Subject: How Are You?

Hey Baby, how are you doing? I miss your beautiful smile, and it has been a while since we last spoke. I know you're not feeling well. I miss you. I just wanted to send you my love. And don't worry, I haven't really told anyone how crazy you were the other night. I only mentioned to a couple of friends that you got really drunk. But I briefly explained that you've been through a lot lately. So, no one is expecting to see you around any time soon. Let me know when you wanna grab a burger or something.

Luv you

X Jeremy xxxxxxxx

1856hrs, 14.06.2012 To: Jeremy Nugent

Subject: On Monday


For days, I've been thinking. I remember ordering food and taking a sip of lemonade. Then I remember you holding me down with the weight of your body. I tried to say stop, but I could not speak. I can't remember anything else, but I know in my heart, I know you raped me.

I added a delivery report and viewed options in my e-mail. Click send.

The first hour passes, and you don't reply. The second hour arrives, and I receive a notification e-mail, stating **Delivery report: Message opened at 20:13hrs,**

14.06.2012

The third day passes, and it's like you don't exist. This new gent you released into the world seems to have vanished.



The Cut Off

‘Hahahahaha!

(Thug Life bitch, goin’ out like that)


I’m the King! Hahaha!

I’m the King! Hahaha!

(Thug Life bitch)

[2Pac] Y’all can’t kill me!’ – Tupac Shakur

Jam Tarts, lemon drizzle cake, pink jelly and loads of sweet treats cover a floral-printed tablecloth. An old lady smiles at me and asks, ‘Darling, yuh hungry? Yuh want sumting fi eat?’ I shake my head and say, ‘No, thank you.’ My eyes feast on the homemade cakes and biscuits. She places a large jug of something orange between the tiny fairy cakes and a large brown cake that has white cream in the middle and iced carrots lying atop, finished with a dusting of icing sugar. ‘Keith, tek off de picnic dem coats. And tun up de heating.’ My dad takes my coat off with a shaky hand and places it on the arm of the sofa. ‘Yuh see how yuh hand a shake, yuh need fi stop the foolishness. Look pon yuh kids dem.’ I glance over the food, and the old lady approaches with a slice of cake. ‘Here yuh go, mi darlin’, it’s carrot cake.’ I turn my nose up and softly explain, ‘I don’t like carrots in cakes.’ My dad laughs, takes the saucer, and hands it to me. For a moment, it was like the saucer version of *Here Comes the Aeroplane*. The little piece of brown cake en route to me, through a tremor of induction. ‘Your grandma made this for us. Have a bite, it’s nice.’



My eyes fixed upon her and then back to my dad and back to her again. My grandma, but I only have one, I think, and she most certainly is not this woman. Her eyes are big and brown like mine, and her skin is brown like mine. But her hair is long and straight, like Polly's when she moves on TV. I decide she must be nice, as she has nice food on the table, and I just love peach-filled jam tarts.

'Yuh see Keith, dem no know who I is. Fi yuh son eleven and yuh twin eight and dem ah look pon mi like me is stranger, chuh!' She makes a sort of hissing noise with her mouth and watches me as I bite into the carrot cake. I squeeze my eyes shut, expecting the vileness of carrots to make me sick, and the most amazing thing happens. I taste a light, sweet, spongy cake and feel strands of carrot breakdancing on my tongue with its best friend, buttercream, and I love every second of it.



I rub the palms of my hands with the tips of my fingers, back and forth in motion.

Subconsciously, I think this will help. Unconsciously, I'm just massaging sweat from my hands back into my hands. He said he would call at 19:00, but it's now 19:18. I guess my excellent punctuality traits aren't from his side of the family.

I close my eyes, appreciating the silence. My hands feel like they're being pressed in a big, warm stress ball. I squeeze my hands together, and the wetness from them glides around my phone. I try to remember his voice. Was it calm and soothing? Did he have a lisp, or maybe I'm thinking of a character on TV? Trying to recall these details causes my head to ache and nausea to creep in.

I rub my ring finger and think about the golden Claddagh ring that he had given to me; I think I was around nine years of age. I had accidentally shaved my younger sister's eyebrows off as we were playing makeovers, and I was tired of pretending. Mother saw what I had done and shouted at me. She took my sister's hand and went downstairs into the living room, phones around, asking her friends how to fix it.

My dad arrives shortly after, and he hugs me and asks, 'Why are you crying? You do know what you've done was wrong.'

He kneels beside me and gives me a warm hug. The thickness of wool on the collar of his black aviator jacket feels soft, and for a moment, my snot blends in with the flow of my tears and finds refuge between the curly fibres.

At 19:33, my phone rings. The number is on display but not recognised. My hands shake, and my phone slides out of them, falling softly onto my bed. My heart beats heavily, I swallow, and the dryness of my throat is there, only for a moment. Well, until the ringing stops. The silence of my bedroom chimes around me. I pick up the photo of us, press it against my heart and close my eyes.

21:13 The piercing sound of my phone echoes and cuts through my thin pillow. I sit upright and reach beneath until I find it.

It's the same number as before — this time, I hold my breath and press the answer button.

'Hello'

I say nothing. I release my hold, a deep breath escapes me, and tears follow. Racing silently down my face and being caught in my sweaty palms, I try to stop the flow by rubbing my eyes.

'Dominique, are you there?'

'Erm, Hello there.' He sounds normal well, not normal as I sound, but normal as in he sounds like the average Brummie.

'You talk so posh. What have you been doing with yourself?'

'Just studying and working. How are you? Where do you live now?'

'Well, I've been here and there.'

'But where do you live now?'


'East London, Norwich and Brum town with a mate. How old are you now?'

'What, you've forgotten how old I am?' This is the question I ask, but my thoughts are on how a man can live in three different locations with a friend.

'Don't say it like that; I know a lot about you. I know you live near Aston Villa football ground, and I know you have a red front door.'

'You've been stalking us?' I interject, and I think about all the times I've left out in the mornings and felt as though someone was watching me, like how a character often senses when walking through thick fog in a *Sherlock Holmes* novel.

Confirmation of facts often arrives with death.



I wince as he continues to describe the red tartan dress I wore last month.

‘No, I just wanted to see where you are and what you look like.’

‘So, you’ve been watching us, and not once have you knocked on the door.’

‘Don’t be like that. How was school and everything?’ Instantly, I felt threatened by the change in subject, and my mind told me to end the call. But my heart eases in the process, and I answer.

‘School and college were fine. I’m in university now.’

‘You got everything you need for school then?’ I think to myself, I’m now twenty-two, and school feels like an entire age away. I think about *Polly Pocket* and how I buried her in the front garden before we relocated to our new house. I buried her with a hand-drawn map of how to find us.

‘Yes, my mum got us everything we needed for school.’

‘I know, I prayed to God, and I asked him to give you school shoes and food. And I knew he answered my prayers.’ I wonder if his hands trembled during these prayers as I remember my mum struggling to buy all the clothes that were mandatory before each new school year welcomed us back.

‘My mum bought me everything I needed for school; God did nothing.’

‘Listen, yeah, I promise you I prayed, and I prayed. Even in jail on those dark days, I prayed for you and your brother. I asked God to provide you all with food, clothes and that camera you’ve always wanted. God is good, my child.’

‘I saved up pocket money and bought my Polaroid camera. God left us to freeze at night.’


‘I remember I used to read to you every night.’ I think about this and struggle to recollect any memory of that. I remember my mother reading to me from a large



book of fairy tales and how fascinated I was with making things out of *Playdough*.

Nevertheless, He continues.

‘You know, every day, I made breakfast for you, and we went to the park every weekend. All those presents you’ve had over the years, it was me. I prayed for them for you.’ I look down at my trainers; there are stains on them, and the left foot has a small hole growing with each wear. He sniffs hard and repeats, ‘So what have you been doing with yourself? How’s school and everything?’




I dress in a pink and white skater dress with a sky-blue denim jacket that has huge pockets and big silver buttons to fasten. It's slightly too large for me, as Mum believes in allowing us to grow into our clothing. I brush my hair up into a bun and fasten a pink bow around the front. I cream my hands and face with cocoa butter and put a dab of Vaseline on my lips, press them together, dab on my eyebrows and smooth them down, and then I rub my golden ring and wait patiently for my dad to arrive.

The three of us head upstairs to the top deck on the 101 bus. We choose a seat at the front, and my older brother and I hold onto the metal bar that is fixed between the two large windows. We pretend that we're in control of the bus for the whole 10 minutes it takes to get into town. Although there were points, I thought this game was a bit boring, as no one I knew or had seen had ever controlled a bus ride with a fixed metal bar across the top-deck window.

We walked quickly to Chinatown. My dad held my right hand tightly, and with my left hand, I felt around my pocket, and I felt Polly. She's still here with me, hidden in a lilac-shaped heart, deep in my jacket. I smile and look around, and I see colourful Chinese lanterns, the sounds of foreign languages surround us, and the sickening scent of rotisserie-style duck forces me to hold my breath.

We ascend many stone steps and arrive at the entrance of *Fuji Movie Theatres*. I look up at my dad and gasp for air. Then shout out, 'Can I get sweeties to please?' He looks at my brother, who looks worried and says, 'Yes, both of you can get a pick 'n' mix.' I turn to the left pocket, re-fasten the large silver button, and run into the pictures. Right over to the snacks, grab a red and white striped paper bag and a white plastic scoop, and begin to fill my bag with mints. I look behind me, and my



brother is on the other side, counting each sweet he adds to his bag and weighing his selection. Every time, he adds seven more sweets from a different variety. I look towards the entrance, and my dad is looking down at his phone and rubbing his nose. I guess it must be itching him a lot as he keeps touching it. I look down into my bag and admire the different varieties of mint I have selected, and I quickly pop one into my mouth.

‘Oh, I’m telling!’

‘On who?’ I say as I swirl the pearl-coloured mint ball to the side of my cheek.

‘You ate a sweet before paying for it.’


‘No, I never.’ I say as I push by my brother and begin to add pineapple rock to the top of my bulging bag.

‘It’s not stealing if you’re going to pay for the bag.’ I say while I suck harder on my mint as I see our dad walking over. I decide to join the queue, and as I’m now not facing him or my brother, I crunch down on the mint. It becomes chewy, and the flavour bursts into my mouth. The scent is strong and evident with each breath I take.

‘So, what did you pick then?’ I hear my dad say to my brother.

‘Well, I got seven cola bottles, seven chocolate mice and seven each of these. Look, Dad.’ My brother opens his half-filled bag of sweets and shows our dad.

‘And what did you pick?’ I hold my head down, and with my lips barely moving, I mumble, ‘Mints and rock.’




We sit in the middle of the movie theatre. The chairs are large and black, and there is a red lining going around the trim. I smile at my dad and say, 'Thank you. I've wanted to see this movie forever.' He laughs and replies, 'It only came out a couple of weeks ago, and you're only eight years old.'

The film begins after 15 minutes of trailers, and I begin to sing joyfully, '*Flintstones, meet the Flintstones, they're a modern Stone Age family...*' Fred slides down the tail of a huge dinosaur, and he's real, he's just like me. My eyes widen with joy, and my heart feels so warm. I turn back and look at my dad. He smiles at me and wipes his nose. I turn to my brother, and he sinks into his chair and looks away.

'Flintstones, meet the Flintstones, have a yabba dabba doo time, a dabba doo time, we'll have a...' My dad grabs my arm and says, 'We must go.' I push my paper bag down into my pocket and whisper, 'But why? We just got here.'

'Your brother is sulking, saying that your mum doesn't want you staying out so late.' I pull away and scream, 'But we just got here. The film has just started. I've been waiting my whole life to see this.' A woman behind us whispers loudly, 'Shush, the movie has just started!' He puts his phone into his pocket, pinches his nose and starts to walk down the aisle, turning right and then walking up the stairs towards the exit. I see my brother right ahead, and I follow, looking back over my shoulder, watching *Bam Bam* hit his pet dinosaur *Dino*. Tears for this scene, and I spit a piece of mint out on the floor.



Outside feels warmer now. The sun is baking. I feel like the rotisserie duck, larger in size but with a mint seasoning rather than yucky Chinese spices. I rub Polly's lilac house and wish for luck. I look up and see the golden archway. I lick the tears from my lips and ask, 'Can we still go to McDonald's like you promised?'

'I don't think we will have time. I must take you both back home.' His eyes are large and wide, just like mine. Brown is like chocolate chips but red rather than white around them.

'But you promised to take us to the movies and out to eat.' I pull away from him and stand still outside *Woolworths*, fold my arms and repeat, 'You promised.'

'I know, we can come back next time.'


'It's not fair.'

'Come on, let's go.' He shouts and rubs the side of his nostril.

'I'm hungry. I'll be starving by the time I get home.'

'Right, we'll go to McDonald's, but we're not eating in.' I tap my pocket and race back towards him.

Moments later, we're rushing through town to get back to the 101 bus stop. I had a McChicken sandwich in my right pocket and fries in my left. Its warmth rested above my mints and Polly.



The darkness outside was interrupted by the haunting flickering of orange fluorescent light peeping out from the corner lamppost. George Street, Handsworth, Birmingham, quiet for 00:34 am on a Friday night. The flames from a cheap, grey lighter glow through the shadows in a small back room, where a man sits at a wooden table.

He holds the flame for a second, releases and then holds it again. He places the lighter down from his left hand and the blade of a razor down from his right. In front of him lays seven rows of white powder. Evenly split and perfectly aligned, he rolls up a £5 note, puts one end into his right nostril, holds the left, leans forward and sniffs up one line. A euphoric feeling hits him, like your first double espresso brewed from authentic African coffee beans. Only his big brown eyes widen, his pupils dilate, and his mind craves more. He sniffs up three more rows, slaps his face and screams, 'Fuck, fuck, yes!' before falling back onto the floor, and the £5 note unravels itself and rolls out of his hand onto the carpet, leaving nanoscopic clouds of whiteness, for the resident dust mites to explore.

I uncross my legs and stretch them out a bit. My mum passed me the bag of popcorn, and I smiled. 'This is my favourite part.'

She laughs and, in a cheesy impersonation, shouts, 'Say hello to my little friend.' I pause mid-way from placing another handful of sweet popcorn into my mouth. Tony Montana leaves his office and begins to shoot out at his attackers.

Just as he falls over the bannister to his death, my phone begins to ring. It's 2:17 am. Keith is calling.

I turn to my mum and say, 'I'm not answering, it's late, and why is he calling at this time.' I put my phone back on the floor beside me, and the chilling music begins to play out as Tony Montana's cocaine-tainted blood fills his water fountain. *The world is yours.*

My phone beeps twice this time; it's a text message from Keith.

Fuck you. Bitch.

I show my mum, who immediately tells me she's going to call him and cuss him. I say, 'No because he doesn't even know we are awake.'

Hours later, I'm sitting on my bed, exactly where I sat when he called me only three weeks ago, after not hearing from him in over ten years. The rhythm of my heart is steady, my palms are dry, and my mind is clear.

I type my reply:

This will be my final message, Keith! – Fuck you bitch.

I press the send button, wait a moment, and as expected, he rings my phone. I reject the call, select the options beside his number, and block him.

'Baby, don't cry; I hope you got your head up. Even when the road is hard, never give up.' – Tupac Shakur.



Crows Shot


In a world that is overstocked with rapists, murderers and tax evaders, I believe it is great to participate in the most passionate twenty-four hours of the year. Surely, I could not state the most overly commercialised, as my divine Christmas holds the top spot for that category.

Yes, you've guessed right, it's Valentine's Day today. The Brummies are out in full force, wasting even more paper with their cards of hearts, long-stemmed roses and pinkness. Ugh! All that unrecyclable plastic from plastic-wrapped gifts was placed into a household bin in Birmingham, later spotted in Dhaka, Bangladesh. *The Guardian* 2018

I know, I should probably do more. But do you realise how much I have to do already? I got one of my angels, *Gabrielle, my fave*, to support me a bit with the admin. To process a prayer is a time-consuming thing, and as the all-knowing one, I know I can delegate to others.

Today is a mild day. It's not windy, and it's not raining, but it's not particularly sunny either. But that hasn't stopped newlyweds Mr and Mrs Griffiths from basking in the glory of love. Even amongst the corpse of a chunky sewer rat, they skip joyfully along Augusta Street.

From a grey brick penthouse window came the soothing voice of Aaliyah, singing One in A Million. This song is just so fitting for this day. If you're into love and vocalising that unpredictable emotion, this is for you. *I personally don't see the problem with freedom of speech and stating proudly, you're ugly!* In a world with red



tape, nannying and Instagram Influencers have an influence on the malleable minds of the masses.


Around the world, repugnant painted women are sending in more prayers than usual. Demanding that I bless their lives with a man who is fit, healthy, drives, owns his own house and has loads of money. In exchange for what? A vile, misshaped self-identifying human. Interesting levels of demand and supply. Then according to Gabe, many men are forcing prayers up requesting pussy. I mean, when did I, God, become demoted to a mere pussy fairy? Day's like this piss me off!

Why Earth does Eros have such a presence here, on my god-damn earth? All people give him credit for love when they win. But I get the anger and hatred aimed at me when they lose. Pea-brained ghastly creatures. Fuck. Apologies, let me tell you what happened next.

Not every resident is happy. One shudders out of a peaceful sleep where his dreams are filled with the warmth of sunshine on a heavenly summers-day. The flourishing of the buds of flowers that are now mature enough to bloom and the moreish flesh of a worm or two.

Out of the darkness of his surroundings, he peers out of Mint Tower and tilts his head to the left, with his eyes blinking rapidly at the superfluity of the various shades of red. The untuned hums of love songs from the monotonous humming Brummie float up high to where he now perches. He flares his wings rapidly as if he were beating away the notes of love.

Hopping around, he plants his claws into the edge of the entrance and squawks his anger in the direction of the heavens. Like I said previously, I get all the



shit on Valentine's Day, thank God, well thank me for Gabe. Of course, I do nothing, and there were about five million, six hundred and thirty-three thousand and two prayers before he complained. Fair enough, he wasn't praying, but he can't expect me to acknowledge his complaints when he's screeching at me. Fuck that little bastard; I'm more interested in seeing what goes on behind the closed door of Idris Elba. Be right back. Love is in dire need of God.

With no answer from God, the little black ball of feathers broods in Mint Tower. He licks his beak as it reddens with an itch.


Slowly, he looks up at the skies and sees a beautiful man gliding down, shooting pink arrows at random people. He observes him for a short while, soon realising that he can see the handsome man, but the dumb humans can't.

He ponders for a moment, squinting his beady eyes. His claws press deep into the thick piece of timber that leads into his personal entrance to Mint Tower. With no public warning, he grows from the size of a medium takeaway cup from *Starbucks* to the proportion of a dwarf pony.

The beam of wood cracks, and he wobbles a little before stretching out his now four-metre-long wingspan.

A large black bird is seen swooping down from the heights of Mint Tower to the depths or, rather, the corner of New Hall Street. He crows and crows but goes unnoticed, for love fills the world and blackness is a mere background option for many.

With this in mind, Crow follows Eros, always keeping a distance of six metres between them. Like a millennial shadow, he sits and snaps images of this visitor



once a year. The bow and arrow are the keys to the hearts of lovers and fuckers around the city of Birmingham. But before Crow could glide by and swiftly disarm Eros. He bears witness to Eros pausing and then floating peacefully to the roof of The Museum of The Jewellery Quarter, where he is welcomed with a passionate kiss from Princess Psyche. Crow thinks she looks somewhat plain and uneducated. He turns away.


Crow's eyes flare red, and he expresses revulsion by excreting the remains of a red squirrel he killed while visiting Anglesey, Wales, the day before. He looks up and around; he looks back up and to the right. Eros has left, no longer in sight.

Crow flew around and around the city of Birmingham, checking Aston Hall, The University of Birmingham, Cannonhill Park, The Mailbox, Brindley Place and surely Digbeth.

There was no sign of Eros. Only the strong aroma of roses and an even stronger scent of sex. Trails of pinkness cloud the gay quarter, and the large black bird goes unnoticed by the lovers below.

Meanwhile, in London.

'Yes, yes, get in there, son!' No, I can't be labelled a pervert or adopt any of those unfavourable titles, for I am the Lord, the Light, the Sun and the Moon. I am God, and you'll do well to remember that. No, I wouldn't say that I'm fetishizing over Idris Elba. I created him in my image with my hand and a mound of earth. I gave him the best possible start, for me and only I worked tirelessly on his deoxyribonucleic acid, that nanoscopic molecule that is the pinnacle reason that he is the fine man he is today. I mean his height, abs, muscles, lips, teeth, eyes, hands and those eyebrows.



I could lay beside him and stroke them all day. I so would! Do him! No homo here.

Happy Valentine's Day, Mr Elba.


Three-hundred and sixty-four days later, on the eve of Valentine's Day, a pearl white tarantula is bore for the womb of Crow. Who announces to the skies above Mint Tower that this new life shall be known as Thanatos.

With each hour that passed, Thanatos grew not only in size but also in mind. He grew from a pathetic 5cm to a gargantuan 15 metres. (Picture the size of the Spider Boss compared to Link on *The Legend of Zelda*) He strengthened Mint Tower by spinning the most alluring web with images of his life as it is to this very hour. Crow at the top and decapitated unruly inhabitants below. Ted Hughes's last name is now over the Mint Tower sign.

Thanatos has eight legs the width of a heavily pregnant sow. With white hair so beautiful, you would believe he was dipped into the cotton white clouds above us, for he was all the shade of ivory. It was as if God created him, but not just any God, God 2.0. Crow!

As the sun called out to the residents of Birmingham, that today is a day of love, honour and respect. Crow danced around the top of the newly named Hughes Tower, with old embers catching new flames in sight. He sang on and on, 'When God hammered Crow, he made gold. When God Roasted Crow in the sun, he made diamond. When God said: 'You win, Crow,' he made the redeemer. – Ted Hughes

As he did so the year before, he sent a prayer up to God. Gabriel received it and reclassified it from a code red (urgent) to a standard (reply within ten working days.) He thought he should take the day off, as God himself departed for London




yesterday. It appears London has lured him back in, from the glimpse of Idris Elba's rear end to the shower scenes of his well-endowed front. Little did Gabriel know that today would be the day that the greatest love of all is delivered.

As he had done the year before, Crow had grown himself to an enviable size for any living bird. The albatross looks like a hamster compared to Crow. His singing fades. Crow and Thanatos keep watch for a trail of pinkness and the sound of love.

An ephemeral minute later, Eros is gliding down from the heavens above, with the perfect matches in mind and love shooting from the ends of his soft but manly fingertips. The warmth from the sun is mild, but Eros is not. His gifts will warm many beds across Birmingham for this day, and few will have heat for a lifetime. Crow turns his large head to Thanatos and nods as if this were a YouTube video being played in slow motion. Thanatos turns, aims and shoots the most exquisite web the inhabitants of Birmingham have ever seen.

Eros was too chipper to notice the enchanted web coming towards him. His cloud of love dispersed in a heartbeat at the clasp of fine thread. His bow and arrows were rapidly taken before the first layer of the web went around him. Even when it wrapped itself tenfold, he had hope in his heart that love would set him free.

Without his cloud, his bow, and his arrows, the community within Birmingham could see Eros. His pretty baby-blue eyes, handsome bone structure and bewitching physic. They all stood in reverence and shock as he fell four-hundred and forty-three metres from the sky above. Landing hard on the roof of a sapphire blue Mulliner limited edition Bentley. The web split upon landing and revealed an Eros that looked as though he had climbed on top of this beautifully dented car to take a nap.




A student standing a few feet away had pointed his camera and adjusted his lens. He pondered for a moment as he had just taken photos of street art by Banksy right outside of Jewellery Quarter station. He heard the voice of a woman say, 'the most beautiful death.' Then, with a click, he took a photo that will be remembered as 'The Most Beautiful Death' for years to come.

Crow cremates the bow and arrows and strategically scatters the ashes over the local crackhead. He flies up to the top of Hughes Tower and caws for all Birmingham to hear, 'I hereby declare that from this second going forward, time will be known as Crow. This hour, day, month, year, decade, century will be known as CROW!'

Crow ascends into the clouds like the impending gloom of a critical illness diagnosis and squawks with glee and finesse, 'Who owns all of Birmingham? Death!' The sky turns black, icy temperatures invade all space, and hearts begin to break like the hips of the elderly navigating through winter. Cries are heard from households throughout the city of Birmingham. Thanatos smiles in agreement and bores a superfluity of white gold tarantulas.

Crow, now the size of a detached Edgbaston house, scans the streets for trails of pinkness and notes of love. For any hint of romance, he only has to scowl once, and a white-gold tarantula will bite to death anyone who defies the depths of Crow by expressing love.

Crow, now satisfied that peace has been restored, shrinks back to his God-given size. He lands in Hughes Tower and gets some well-needed rest.



In a world that is crammed with narcissists, liars and dickheads who read The Sun shit-paper, I believe Crow is right to remove love from the city of Birmingham. I concur with the absolute abolishment of love in this god-forsaken shit hole.


The key thing to note is Idris Elba lives down south in London, not far from our Queen Elizabeth, the longest-reigning monarch in modern-day Britain. I mean, when last did Prince William grace this cesspit of fake romance? I bet you a fiver. Meghan has never even heard about it.

In the beginning, I wanted life to flourish and shine bright like the diamond Idris Elba. Gabe and I have been overburdened with illogical prayers, and poor Gabe is tired. Therefore, one less Idris Elba-free city is a nice weight off my mind flow. Before I say my final goodbye, I must recommend the Fish Finger sandwich for £6.95 from The Red Lion pub, Warstone Lane. It is utterly delightful.

A few residents faint and are devoured limb by limb. Rumour has it that when Crow created these cabbalistic spiders, he wired their deoxyribonucleic acid to crave the flesh of humans and repulsion at the sight of red squirrels and biscuit tea by Yorkshire Tea.

Others cry and have all holes filled with fine thread. The clouds are now dark with permanent marker ink dripping, landing onto everything and into the eyes of those who continue to stare skyward in disbelief.

Our sweet Angel Gabriel is distressed. He requests our dear God sleep on this. Uttering that if there is no love in the world, there will be no happiness, and people will give up on God. Gabriel stayed up all night, trying to devise a plan to lift Birmingham out of this sunken place. But every time he thought of a potential good



idea, he itched and blamed tiredness on the flashes of spiders he saw on his body.

Our kind Angel Gabriel's efforts were nothing without God at his side.

In a city filled with beggars, bakers, and vlog makers, the body of Eros remains preserved so that all can remember that Valentine's Day is about Crow and love is a mere figment of imagination.



All She Saw Was Red

Once upon a time, there lived a Princess in the heart of Birmingham, in the rich heritage lands of the Jewellery Quarter. Her eyes gazed in admiration over the bright screen of her smart device, for Prince Charming had just updated his *Facebook* feed, and she felt his latest post was directed at her. Beneath an image of his beautiful body was a caption that seemed to have spoken to her in hushed tones.

For my one true love, my only love, I know you feel our connection! Trust the stars, believe in our universe, for our love will flow skyward. Ascension.

A warm glow beamed from her cheeks as she imagined herself to be right beside him, right outside the entrance to the *Button Box* restaurant and bar. A tiny star bore from her left cheek, floated around her nose, then out through the kitchen window.

‘Princess Unique, what would you like for breakfast today?’


‘Buttons.’

‘Pardon your Royal Highness?’

‘Ah! Sorry, Chef Lucca, I would like oats with oat milk, please.’

‘As you wish, Princess.’

She placed her smart device down on the table and opened up her spellbound diary. This diary was given to Princess Unique by the Queen Mother Rarity. The only person who could see the words written in any ink was Princess Unique. Who often spent hours upon hours writing about the three babies, two ducks (one named Summer and one named Lucky), and a Jack Russell called Chip. All the moments in life that she wished to share with Prince Charming and only Prince



Charming. She knew that if she believed in the universe, it would deliver, and she would receive.

‘Your royal oats with oak-milk, your Royal Highness.’

‘Has Whisky been fed?’

‘Yes, Princess Unique. He enjoyed a delicious meal of steamed salmon before taking a stroll across the diamond ball fountain and resting on the marble plaque for Bella, the Bountiful Bunny.’

‘That’ll be all.’

As she excused him, a blue mountain bird swoops through the window and over her 40-gram bowl of oats. She pauses, with her spoon centimetres from her mouth, as the little bird lands on a wicker basket that holds a variety of vegetables and fruits.

‘At HRH Princess Unique!’ Tweeted the bird. ‘Prince Charming is ready to love and be loved. His mother has announced she will find him the most exquisite woman, who WILL become his wife.’ The little bird plucked into a lone Royal Dawn king cherry, then departed through the window he had entered.


She dumps the spoon back into the bowl and calls Lottie on video. After a rumble and groan, Lottie comes into view. ‘Lottie, have you heard about.’ Lottie’s eyes widened, followed by her mouth, and they both screamed, laughed, and then cried.

‘But what if he doesn’t like me?’

‘But what if he wants me instead?’

‘Why would he want you?’

‘I’m not high maintenance. I’ll do whatever he wants me to, whenever he wants me to.’




But before Princess Unique has the chance to reply, Lottie begins to wail with a piercing scream. The image that appears on the screen chills Princess Unique to her core. Lottie is raised and slammed into the wall, face first. Her screams stop, and his head lops and then sways left to right and right to left. Princess Unique freezes as small pieces of what looks like moving wood burst into Lottie. Streams of blood now ooze from her wounds, connecting with the wall to which she is pressed. The efflux continues, forming small pools at the tips of her toes that barely touch the top of her Isfahan rug.

Princess Unique holds tightly onto her smart device, mouthing the words, 'stop' and 'please, stop.' But no word is verbalised. A well-defined shade of Indian red mist engulfed Princess Unique as anger and rage boomed from within. Only before she had the chance to demand help did The Brothers Grimm come into shot, muttering to the splintered corpse of Lottie, 'This is what happens when you lie, and you cheat. When you spew, and you stutter and steal our sweet seeds! We wrote the notes that flowed down the canal of the Quarter. Not you, Lottie dearest, not you or anyone's daughter.' Both of the brothers cackled with glee, for they had erased a thief of a literary masterpiece.

A parcel of blue mountain birds flies right into the kitchen, shitting all over the place they perch while all loudly tweeting. In unison, they squawk, 'At Princess Unique! Lottie Lion has been killed by the Brothers Grimm! Rumour has it she stole their divine collection of short stories. But we shall never know.' They then take off, mini flock after flock, to notify the rest of our universe.

Moments after Lottie died, Princess Unique went to the Warstone and began to tell all who would listen that she witnessed the murder of Lottie. The birds tweeted with



pleasure to the Grimm brothers, and just like that, they appeared in front of Princess Unique.

‘All hail thee, Princess Unique, the child from the stars, yet it’s pavement, not cosmos, that lay beneath her coconut oil-scented feet.’


The brothers jeer and mock her purpose. They don’t give a fuck about royalty or this woman’s status.

‘I will not have you around me, and you are no longer permitted in my land. You are banished from the Jewellery Quarter, forever!’

However, Princess Unique had forgotten to consult with the stars, which meant that as she did not ask, she did not believe, and she would not receive.

The Brothers Grimm were afraid, but only for a few minutes; when they realised nothing was happening, they summoned a plethora of wooden soldiers that charged and splintered her with curses. Princess Unique was unique, alright. She now crawled across the redbrick road, with strangers, acquaintances, and a few second cousins twice removed watching her. Not one offered her a helping hand. Others, like Aunt Mavis, snarled and mumbled, ‘I’ve always said the family was born in the wrong order. If I were queen, she would be on Venus learning how to be a proper Princess,’ before turning away and stomping her mock Louboutin heels from *Primark*. The remaining onlookers had their smart devices out, some recording to upload later. In contrast, others were live-streaming to their social media feeds.

The tiny wooden soldiers were ruthless with their attack; even Betty, who works at the local HSBC bank, was in shock. Our ditsy Princess Unique crawled and crawled until the soldiers had reduced to three. She crept along the Canalside, up the hill and not so far away, saw the cursed handmaids well, and threw herself into it.



Her beautiful, unblemished lips were greeted with a squelch and spew of the puss from a rotten box of chicken drumsticks. The grey-green fluid slithered along her lips and dripped down the side of her face before she tried to scream. Only her scream was this. It was silent.

You see, the thing is, once you confront the Brothers Grimm, and they curse you, everything that made you is sacrificed, and the wooden soldiers will rid the city of Birmingham of you. The three wooden soldiers smiled and returned back to Grimm Mansion. As a reward, the brothers Grimm permitted them to live on the grounds inside the Grounds Keeper cabin for as long as they did not succumb to the dire depths of wood rot.


Prince Charming posted up the following morning:

Princess Unique is missing! Help me find my one true love #FindUnique

But once he saw he had lost 200,000 followers in the space of three hours, he deleted it and posted:

Mother informed me she is looking for my new wife. #MrsCharming

Her Royal Highness Princess Unique lay at the bottom of a well for months upon months. The well was damp, with woodlice creeping in and out of the crevices and rats peeping out of the cracks. The moss that grows around the sides of the well walls provides Unique with enough nutrition to keep her in the position she chooses to stay in. Her once golden-brown legs now contain splinters that seem to have been adopted by her body. The crust from old blood keeps them embedded, and when she attempted to pull them out, the curses from the Grimm brothers swirled around her head and haunted her, as it always felt like someone was near pushing the little wooden pins deeper and deeper until they looked like razor-bumps.



The only reason she did not die from her torture was that her blood was royal, and royalty had to go on and on through the ages of the land.

One night, the stars floated down from our universe and gave a heart to the Bull of the Bullring. He heard her silent cries and came charging through this unruly city, leaving a delicate wisp of red mist in his wake.

Bull trudged up to the well and stomped his heels until they brought him to her level. When he ploughed through the brick wall and startled her, she tried to cry out, but her throat was weak, and her eyes were heavy.

Bull stomped his heels once more, and the red mist returned. Princess Unique was lifted up high into the sky and placed gently onto a bed of daisies. The golden bull bowed beneath our universe, and purple stars came down, covering Princess Unique. They healed her and rejuvenated her trust in our universe. They pressed in closer to her and whispered, 'The golden bull, your saviour, is indeed your one true love.'


They sparkled warmly before ascending back up to the night skies. 'Bull', she called, and he trotted up to her like a bull that got the first strands of grass grown from the night before

'Yes, Princess?'

'Thank you for rescuing me. I'm not sure how I can ever repay you.'

'Your Royal Highness, all I ask is that you free me from this form, and I promise I'll love you forever and for a day. I promise I'll protect you entirely, and my love for you will never fade away.'

'Why, Bull, I have no words.' Little stars emerge from both cheeks and float skyward into our universe. 'Just say you'll marry me?'



Princess Unique closed her eyes, inhaling deeply. She stepped closer to Bull, held his face and leaned in, kissing his nose. She leaned her head back, gazed up to the stars, and whispered, 'Dear Universe, please bless Bull here to be the finest man on our earth. We will marry at sunrise, and I'll be protected forever; Brothers Grimm can't hurt me, and Lottie's legacy will live on forever.' She truly believed in the words she chose, so the stars came down and covered Bull in blessings. He emerged sexier than Prince Charming and instantly gained 333,000 new followers.


Together, they walked along the red-brick road, hand in hand, until they reached the Warstone. Princess Unique announced to all that Lottie would get justice! Then, the blue mountain birds tweeted private messages about the royal wedding.

'At all near and at all far, Princess Unique is getting married! And to one more charming than ours. The wedding is at sunrise. Bring positive thoughts and energy, for our universe will bless all with plentiful memories.'

The Bull of the Bullring and Princess Unique embraced and then parted ways. Tradition states they shall not speak. Until their blessed day, that is, until that moment, they connect under the stars, and their love is warm and everlasting.

That night, Princess Unique enjoyed a delightfully spicy vegan soup, which she desperately ate at the breakfast bar in the kitchen. She requested plate after plate after plate of every dish she really liked. A blue star distended from her left cheek. It glittered with Lottie's name and shot off into the night.

Meanwhile, the Bull, now a man, charged around the ring. He laughed, and he jeered. He danced and smoked. 'For I went from man to bull to man and soon king!'



'Here, here!' celebrated a local named Tommy, who always welcomed a free drink.

'Why, Bull, congratulations, you deserve everything you want and more.' The sound of someone with a really lovely, alluring voice captured Bull's attention instantly. Bull placed down his beer and greeted the speaker.

At 0400 hours, blue mountain birds wrapped the home of Princess Unique in a cluster of blue. Their tweets pierced through every inch of the building, all loud and out of sync. Princess Unique caught parts of chirps that sounded like:

'At Princess Unique, Bull has...'

'At Princess Unique, are you...'

'At Princess Unique, how are the...'

She smiled and muted them, 'It's my wedding day, and everyone must be thrilled for me.' She spun around once, then twice. She threw herself on her bed and closed her eyes. 'Hey Universe, in loving memory of Lottie, make my day really nice.'

Her bedroom shook, and everything turned pink. A sweet melody began to play, and Princess Unique felt magnificent, 'is this all for me?' At that moment, the roof opened up, and something pink was floating down from the skies. 'This is all for me!'


Princess Unique exclaimed in surprise.

Eros glided in and stood adjacent to her face, 'Princess Unique, I have some unpleasant news for you.'

'What's happened? Is Bull, alright?'

'Yes, it's just.'

'Has he been hurt?'



‘Your Royal Highness, with sadness, I now declare, Bull has proclaimed his love for Ivy.’

She trembled and then froze, falling knees first to the ground, ‘is this a sick joke?’

‘No, I received a spark just before midnight, and it was of love's true kiss. I thought there was an error, as love was generated between Bull and Ivy.’

‘But that can’t be. I asked our universe to change him, for him and for me. I told them he promised to love me forever and keep me safe.’ The Indian red mist returned with thickness and a healthy glow.

Princess Unique commanded that Bull explain this to her immediately. Moments later, he skipped up to her driveway with a spring in his steps. He hummed a strange tune and stopped at the door.

‘I’m here as you requested. What do you want me for?’

She squinted her eyes and frowned deeply, ‘You announced your intentions to marry me and protect me!’


‘Aww, your sad, lonely soul. I had no intentions of marrying you, and that you must know.’

‘What the hell do you mean? You told me beneath the stars.’

Bull laughed and then chuckled, and Ivy appeared from the trees. She stared deeply into Unique’s eyes and spat out bees.

‘Princess this and Princess that, Princess my stars and Princess my Universe. Princess, my Charming and Princess, my everything, you did nothing to save me! You sat there and watched. You uttered no words and then hid away for months!’

At that moment, Princess Unique recognised the voice, for it was her friend Lotties.



The bull snorted and interjected, 'Thank you for a magical night. I now have a million more followers and an enchanting insight.'

Let's not forget what Unique has done. She gave a part of herself to Bull so the two could become one. But Bull is not Bull. Bull is Prince Charming; he thrives on fame and followers and Lottie's psychotic behaviour, and that is quite alarming.

Princess Unique pursed her lips, for she dared not to speak, seeing an upgraded Lottie with a sexier Charming together.

That alone was deep!

The red mist covered her from head to toe, flames started in her cheeks, and yes, Unique gave a mighty blow. She lit herself up in a ball of flames and set fire to their feet. She bound them first in a ring of heat, like the Jewellery Quarters' true Khaleesi. She rose higher and higher. She burnt through their skulls and then their pathetic heart-filled desire. She engulfed the red brick road to the handmaid's well and back. She flew over Grimm's mansion and burnt down it down to a shack. She flew into our universe and burnt away every star. She landed beside the Warstone and admired all shades of red, both near and far.

All she saw was red.

How Great Thou Art

At the lowest end of a damp hill sings a large group of people. Some are old and dressed as if the year were 1966 and not 2019. Long faux fur coats, skin-tone coloured tights and an array of over-polished and naturally shiny shoes.

‘Now the time has come for us to say our final goodbye. Often, we say life has no guarantees. But I can guarantee you that if you follow our Lord Jesus Christ, he has a special place for all those who believe in him. I want us to sing one final hymn to give our dear friend, father, brother, uncle and fellow Christian a blessed send-off to heaven.’

The air is warm, but some hands are cold, and other hands are hidden. A well-preened crow starts squawking loudly right after the congregation begins to sing;

‘Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee.

How great Thou art, how great Thou art.

Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee.

How great Thou art, how great Thou art.’

The solid oak coffin that conceals the well-known corpse of Mr Gregory Blackstock is now being lowered into a rectangular hole within Mother Earth. I find it fascinating how we come from the cherished womb of a woman, and by dying, we are concealed within the planet around seven days later. Anyway, the coffin that holds Gregory hasn’t been paid for yet. The tree was cut last May, and *Roger Kenny & Son* bought it from *Alibaba* and made this coffin. Life could not exist without trees, yet they chop them up, place them deep in the ground and sing on.

‘O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder.



Consider all the worlds Thy Hands have made.

I see the stars. I hear the rolling thunder.

Thy power throughout the universe displayed.'

If you listen carefully beyond the different levels of vocal ability, you can hear people whispering prayers, asking why and, of course, asking for sweets. One of the elders with a walking stick and two hearing aids motions the younger generations to sing louder. The crow swoops past multiple lenses, some will agree, that adds a dramatic effect to the many recordings of this expectedly unexpected event. Sneezes dominate the sniffles, with many suffering from hay fever.

'God bless him, soul. Yuh see, Mr Blackstock was a wonderful man. Him devote him life fi him family dem. Him dedicate him time to serve God and now God seh, ah yuh mi come fah.'

An elder from Trinidad clutches her diamanté studded clutch bag to her chest with shellac-manicured nails. Real tears seep from her grey eyes, and she presses them closed even tighter and starts shouting to the sky above all. 'Lord God. Mi wasn't ready fi yuh fi tek, my good friend. Why, God, why now? Mi won't sleep again. Ah, who a guh read de sermon on Sunday? I can't understand.' She raises her hand to the sky, and those around her do the same. About a group of forty elderly people with their hands in the air, eyes closed and singing even louder than before.


'When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation

And lead me home, what joy shall fill my heart

Then I shall bow with humble adoration

And then proclaim, my God, how great Thou art.'

A murder of crows now sits behind the preened one in silence as the preened one squawks in harmony with the congregation.



'If I had social media, I would be the most followed, most revered, most everything *divine* online. Straight facts, and yes, I do support LGBTQ. I mean, I didn't write the bible. But I alone created this earth. Even the text says that, in the beginning, God created heaven and earth.

I've bought the sun out today, all lights on me, I mean them, I mean all. Sunshine brightens up the living for anyone living and keeps the worms warm for the non-livers.

I know it would be amazing. All forms of social media would effectively shut down, as the world would be mentioning me, quoting me and begging me to follow them. I lost count of the number of prayers I received following the partial ruination of our beloved *Notre Dame*. Donations went up tenfold, and the thanks and appreciation drowned out the slander from those rotten Atheists. Now, let's focus on Mr Gregory Blackstock. He was a good man, a kind man, a man. #RIPGB would be my pinned tweet for an hour.

Like I was saying, if I had social media @God on *Twitter* and *Instagram*, GOD on *Facebook* and G in the streets. I have a *Trello* account, and I understand the importance of prioritising.'

*

As the last heap of the earth is piled onto his final resting place. Mr Blackstock's grandsons are blessed by the elders through sight and sound.

'Do you see that wee lad over there? Looks like our Greg has been reborn and is still here with us.'

'Why aye, man. Top lads they are.'

'Well, him ah go live through him grandbaby dem. Praise God.'

'Praise God.'

‘Alhamdulillah.’

One woman looks over her shoulder, squinting at those immediately behind her. *Mr Blackstock is Christian.*


The Blackstock legacy pats their shovels around the mound of dirt. Pastor Williams sprinkles holy water and mumbles so well that no one hears the recycled blessings he bestowed upon the grave.

Seven crows fly in a figure of eight above the many heads of mourning people. The preened crow crows out, ‘Here’s to the fruit for the crows to pluck.’

Uneven wooden planks that are bound together cage in a family. Many observers stand outside this zone and smile with glee and satisfaction. One banana, two bananas? Tossed from all around. ‘Eat it!’ screams the little children of whiter skin tones and fully clothed bodies. Welcoming visitors since before the 1900s. Come see the chimpanzee and his family; come see the zebra and the savages. Ethological expositions across the world for the international jet-setters of their time. But in truth, those on the outside looking in are the real beasts.

‘I didn’t know what to do back then. I was young and undeniably busy. Sorry, not sorry. Did you know 34 million visitors came within the first six months? Life is about legacy, and they will always be remembered. They even got a mention from the *BBC*. What a time to be alive *Parisian World Fair – Ota Benga* RIP.’

‘I must say that the initial plan was to make one kind, and one kind only: Rice, peas and all things green, sugar, rice and all things white, copper, rice and all things proper, crab, dabs and all things evil? Of course, I won’t reveal that! One kind




became mankind, and now feminists will add womankind. Recipes are secret because I know my followers, and trust me, they would turn into self-made Franksteins. Do you know how many remakes we have already? No? Think about the ones you don't know and multiply that by fifteen. Ask Jesus Christ. He's the man with all the stats.

Reality **Jeremiah 31: 34** "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." And the Lord said, and I literally said, forgive me.

Joyce Goodall, over there, prayed every night for seventeen years, begging for her arthritis to heal. She once added, 'I will do anything, Father.' But what they all fail to understand is I'm alone here. Only me, myself and I.

I made two people and set out rules and regulations, which they broke, and now we have their descendants strolling around, claiming benefits and smoking a bit of crack. Where do you think that saying 'better late than never' derives from? What I'm saying is that sometimes you'll have to wait longer than others, like how Elise Myers is still on the council waiting list for them to house her and her four sprogs. Don't hate the G. Hate those ratchet humans that keep breeding humans and birthing more humans. I'm trying my best to keep up with the trend. Six years later, Ota Benga was freed and committed suicide.

The mourners pay their final respects with flowers placed upon the grave. The elders are crying, the youth are staring, and the worms turn in anguish and delight. The pollen from the freshly cut grass makes some sniffles appear as grief. But this




doesn't affect the crows. The seven continue to fly in eights as the crowd disperses, finding their modes of transport to the after-venue.

The preened crow swoops down and lands on the highest peak of the wooden cross that is now standing at the head of Mr Gregory Blackstock's' grave. Two slimmer crows perch on the left- and right-hand side of this symbol of Christ. The remaining four crows, all unkempt and evil-looking, take a corner each at the graveside. Scratch their claws into the dirt, creating a little curve for them to sit comfortably in.

The classy crow looks around at his peers, nodding softly at each one, like *Don Corleone, who pays respect to those whom he respects*. Crow looks up to the sky, down to the grave, across to the elders and co, departing the area, then back to the sky. Then he stands tall and stretches his right wing, and they all whisper, 'For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop.'

It was eight days ago. He had been for a short walk to his local *Pak Supermarket* to buy some spicy chicken sausages. He had a double portion of readymade-mashed potatoes, which he had purchased from *Tesco Metro* in Birmingham City Centre, neatly placed on a glass shelf inside his fridge. He had been at the Church from 11:49 am and felt proud of himself for successfully setting up afternoon bingo and serving refreshments.

Although his hip felt uncomfortable, and his left foot had started to swell. He felt alright; he was in God's house, and he had prayed with his church group for better health. They all said they felt the Lord speak to them and touch their souls, 'Oh, Mr Blackstock, This is Our Lord's home; he's watching over you now. You will




live long.' Mr Blackstock smiled and continued replenishing the plates of biscuits at the refreshment table.

His heart was warmed by the kind words from his church peers. His smile protruded through the pain in his hip. He looked up at the sky through the kitchen window and placed the empty biscuit wrappers in the recycling box. Mr Blackstock felt a little hot, and his hands began to feel slightly clammy. He walked through a short corridor and out into the church gardens. Then, he loosened his pin-striped shirt collar and glanced around the flower beds. His chest felt even tighter. He stumbled over toward a brown walnut-shaded bench. He sat down and held onto his chest, looked up into the sky, and said, 'God, if you can hear me right now, I need you to help me. Something ain't right.' But before he obtained a sign or a glint of hope, a powerful, piercing, painful pang hit his heart. His eyes squeezed shut, and his hand softened from his chest. His left eye opened once more, and he caught one last bright glow of sunshine before his heartbeat stopped.

It was such a beautiful day. I remember I decided to use up my annual leave when an angelic notification came through. 'God,' the angels whispered. A fellow worshipper is dying. He's begging for help. We've estimated that he has 4 minutes remaining. These notifications are so delightful; I mean, they sound lovely. Those little angelic voices sing it out, 'God a fellow worshipper' and so on and so forth.

You see, the thing is, during annual leave, one must stay on vacation if I start to do favours or answer prayers, as some may put it. When do I, the creator of life, get time to rest? Unfortunately, by the time I had concluded to help, our dear fellow Mr Gregory Blackstock had ceased to exist. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family, which ultimately remain with me.




He was an old man, a frail man, a man who had lived a long life. Will people accept it was his time to go to er? Join me?

However, I must confess when his tiresome spirit arrived at my pearly gates after they sang their human hearts out to me, I forbade him to even ask about entering, for I had remembered the time he and his devious accomplices visited the sweet shop just off Poplar Road. However, they had approximately £4.53 between them. They stole £3.78 worth of penny chews. I rejected his entry, for he had once broken one of the Ten Commandments. VII Thou shalt not steal.

Now, I know you may not think it, I know you may not believe it, but I do, as I do every day. I blast spirits back down to their graves and beyond that. Only dead souls can see this action, and they know how hard I work day in and day out; living eyes can't witness what I do every day to keep heaven pure, to keep heaven clean. To keep heaven ready for those good, law-abiding people. My shadow Judas welcomes them with open arms; he welcomes Mr Blackstock because that's precisely where his kind belongs.

You should have seen his face, gory, hollow, and desperately begging for me to let him in the Golden Gates of paradise. Never in a billion, trillion, zillion years would I ever let riff-raff pass these magnificent gates. After all, he only began to go to church after his 50th birthday. His best friend died; his best friend was a dedicated Christian since the moment he drew breath. Mr Blackstock jumped on the bandwagon of the sinners turned saints. He knew that his best friend was guaranteed a place here in heaven. He doubted his worthiness, and you know something? He was right, too.




Blasting blasphemy is my favourite thing to do each blessed day. I know the spirits are on the rise, even before they reach my doorstep. I know the very second the tops of their heads will begin to protrude from beneath the cotton bounce, cotton-fragranced clouds.

I like to listen to their pleas for forgiveness and how they long to see their loved ones once again. I share with them the meaning of life, smile pleasantly at them and boom! With a sharp gust of wind and light, I rush them down to the gates of hell.

*

The primped crow clicked his neck to the side and stared up into the clouds. He crowed in sheer gratification as he spotted the spirit of dear old Mr Blackstock shootdown from the skies above. Although silence surrounded the area, the crows knew Mr Blackstock was screaming from within. He noticed the group of crows watching him, and his chest felt tight once again. Mr Gregory Blackstock saw four crows flap back and his newly filled grave cave in. He watched on in shock and disbelief as his coffin vanished into the wall of the earth, and smoke rose up and hugged his spirit. He knew this was it. His heart pounded for help as he was sucked into his final place of rest.

Lucifer himself was ready and waiting to greet Gregory. He welcomed him home, warm Scottish whiskey in a goblet cast from copper and custard-filled doughnuts overspilling from the turtle shell they were presented in. He eventually stopped crying




when he saw a familiar face, Sarah Milton. He fell back and landed on oversized pairs of discarded silicone breast implants. Sarah Milton used to let him cover her face in his love juice. *Oh, Sarah! God is good*, he thought.

Crows bear witness to many divine happenings here on earth, and this moment was just like many others for them. They crowed on, 'Then sings my soul, my saviour God to thee. How great thou art.'

The heavens opened and rained all over Birmingham. The crows feasted on the brave worms, who thought it was time for annual leave from their daily duties of corpse cropping.

Many may not think it, and few are brave enough to show disbelief in it. But our dear father, how great Thou art.




The Art of Meat

After work last night, I completed the usual route to *Marks & Spencer's*, passing through *Grand Central* train station and walking around the *Rotunda*, arriving at *Marks & Spencer's*, the Birmingham City Centre store. People in my life are always commenting, 'Oh! Sienna, you must be rich when shopping at *Marks & Spencer's*.' They haven't shopped here before, and I get it. People who shop here are almost as amazing as I am.

I stand on the step to go down on the escalators, and I see the bright colours from the fruit and veg section. I intake the ambience of freshly baked bread, both through sight and scent. Makes me feel like I'm wrapped in a warm dough, baked until I'm perfect, people around me because I smell scrumptious. But as a Marks & Spencer loaf, I won't be bought by just any drooler. I can't express how much I love being here; I guess the only way to prove that would be to highlight the 40,000+ points I have gained in the space of two years.

I turn into my favourite aisle, and my eyes wander over the double-walled aisle of meat. We have chicken from British farms and bacon from British farms, and it is reared, packaged, and delivered to this store from Scotland. Angus mincemeat, the price is a few more pounds more than the cheaper options below. But I'm making spaghetti bolognese tonight, with wholemeal spaghetti and mushrooms. I love mushrooms! Even vegans praise it as one of the best meat substitutions. I simply know it to be the best complement to any meat-based dish.

I remove the Angus minced beef from its robust plastic packaging, and I place it into a large plastic bowl. It feels cold as I press it between my hands, bits of meat




pushing through the thin space between my fingers. I pick the meat off from my left hand, grab the pre-opened packet of spices and sprinkle it over Angus.

The sound coming from the bowl as I mush the meat into the seasoning and the seasoning into the meat sounds like tiny squelches as if an old school *Polly Pocket* were alive and walking around this fleshy surface, in wellingtons, of course. Reminds me of a clew of worms, moving so slowly that movement goes unnoticed. My fingers feel like they're freezing within this portion of prime Angus beef. I roll the beef into a ball and place it carefully into my heated saucepan. I take a wooden spoon and break the meat into large chunks, then make smaller chunks from those sections. Later, I add a tin of chopped tomatoes, mushrooms and diced carrots. I place the spaghetti into a pot of boiling salted water, pour out a glass of M&S red wine and take a seat in the living room while dinner simmers to perfection.

I guess it was the amount of wine that I had alone last night, as I woke up late and after a swift wash (as in no shower, just brushed my teeth, washed my face, wiped my front with a warm flannel, dressed quickly.) I race to work, well to Birmingham New Street Station. I get there and see my train is due to depart in 3 minutes. I tap myself through the ticket barriers and run down the stairs to platform one.

I board an over-crowded Avanti West Coast train service, which is due to arrive in London Euston in 1 hour and 22 minutes. I suspect most people will get off at Birmingham International and possibly Coventry. I press select to open the YouTube app on my smartphone, select the Chilled Cow channel, plug in my earphones, and try to find comfort by drowning out the grumbles around me. I sometimes wonder what it would be like to be able to wind down the windows on this




train and feel the air caress my face and welcome me with a jump into the cool breeze of carpe diem.

The train arrives in Rugby, and I depart the service. There's something about the day so far that feels off. *I can't do this today.* I cross over to platform four and wait for the next service heading back to Birmingham. There's one last thing I need to do.

I warm up some of last night's dinner in a small saucepan and add three balls of frozen spinach. I saw a piece in the December edition of *Women's Running* magazine that points out that spinach can fight bacteria and viruses. I wonder if it will help me fight off my perpetuating thoughts. I wait until the spinach has thawed out inside the pan, but I mix everything: spinach, wholemeal spaghetti and perfectly cooked but overheated Angus minced beef.

The intro of *The Archers* has finished playing on a mid-high volume before I hear the brave voice of Pip Archer, pushing her mother, Ruth Archer, to purchase a car for her younger brother's eighteenth birthday. Before she casually speaks to a female cow, 'Here, here lovely, come on over here now. Good girl, you're wonderful.' I hear the pats on the animal, and I feel a sense of remorse; she has a heartbeat, she understands what's said, and here I sit, eating her Scottish cousin.

It's a strange thought to enter my mind, but I continue to eat her. I assume that she's female, as females lead the most challenging lives. For example, when you apply for a credit card to pay off an overdue bill, Your application is accepted, and you pay the bill off, but they increase your credit limit, and you understand you




have £1,000 more now than you did yesterday, so you treat yourself to a packet of Angus beef. After all, many say, 'We all deserve a treat.'

I mean, what else do people do after they've placed a successful order for a custom-made, leather three-piece suite? And a small piece for those comfy pair of Levi jeans millions of people around the world have. It would be criminal not to give thanks by enjoying one of Marco Pierre White's beef wellingtons in *The Cube*. Or a classic Italian dish, with beef from Scotland, alone in Birmingham.

I chew even slower, wondering if any of the cows were depressed before death. Or if they felt a sense of belonging, knowing that they were here for humankind, to give back to humanity in every way possible. When you think about it, we get leather chairs, leather trousers' leather shoes, leather gloves, burgers, hot dogs, Sunday roasts, weekday roasts, instant roasts, roasts-to-go, cheese, butter, yoghurt, gummy bears and cows' milk from cows for baby cows. I wonder which man first deemed this suitable for human consumption, and I say man because back then, women stayed indoors. Also, the fatty acids from cows are used in our plasters. Tesco currently has an offer on three boxes of plasters for the price of two.

During a period where I was signed off work for two weeks, I browsed through YouTube videos and came across a channel by PETA. They showed employees beating a herd of cows with metal rods as their calves cried out in fear behind metal bars a short distance away.


My GP told me I have moderate depression a few months ago and referred me to Birmingham Healthy Minds. Dr Pike suggested that talking through things may help me overcome this difficult time. We were busy at work weeks before I was signed off, so busy I barely had a break or even my unpaid one-hour lunch. During our reflective



meeting after the event was complete, my manager asked why I added my lunch hours and the hours I stayed behind after my shift to my timesheet. I reminded him that I worked those hours as asked, and he retorted by stating, 'I asked for a favour. I didn't say this would be paid. I made it clear it was voluntary.' Of course, he lied. Who works for free when they shop twice a week at Marks & Spencer? Who volunteers at their place of work after ordering non-refundable custom-made Italian leather furniture? Additionally, who volunteers to stay behind in a city created for reprobates and concrete? *Coventry*. I'm usually the first person out the wooden doors at five, power-walking to the train station, boarding an overcrowded train and feeling blessed upon arrival back into Birmingham.

I thought about boiling the kettle, adding sugar, and stirring it quickly before pouring it all over him. Surely, in my dream, he was bound to my desk during lunch break, my lunch break, my unpaid working lunch break! I saw his bald scalp shrivel back, almost as slow as a turtle crawling across the road during the summer months. This caused havoc with mainland drivers, some only stopping as they were on camera but wishing they could just drive over it. *Nothing tastes as good as beef*.

His screams drown beneath the flow of boiling water that initially believed its purpose was for a typical office cuppa. My vegan (now ex) boyfriend once scolded me for updating my WhatsApp story with a comment about brown sugar. Subtly shaming me, 'Sienna, brown sugar contains bone char!' I read it as I think he wrote it, reprimanding my use of animal by-products. I read it like he was commenting, 'Everyone knows that!' You may not believe this, but we broke up because I became a vegetarian and ate a cheese and pickle sandwich, and he said he couldn't kiss me, as kissing me after consuming cows' cheese would mean it would enter his bloodstream and he wouldn't be a real vegan anymore. *Weeks before, I had eaten*




beef fried rice with spicy prawns. When he asked what I had eaten, I told him a vegetarian biriyani that was suitable for vegans. He devoured every drop of non-vegan juice he could get.

The Archers have long since ended; my meal is now lukewarm, and I arrive at the conclusion that I reside within surfeits of Normans. They pat the cows and speak to them like they're part of the family one day/ Then send them to the slaughterhouse the next, stunning their minds after beating them into shock that they dare not move, although they can't stop a leg or two from shaking.

But if I had thrown hot, sugared water over my boss's face in lieu of time, I wouldn't ever receive payment for it. I bet you my Marks & Spencer points card; I'll be locked away, beaten and stunned into silence for the most heinous office attack ever reported.

The group therapy chats feel like my mind is being raped by my actual comments. I want to say, *'No, I don't need to be here! I just want to be paid for the excessive amount of work I've done.'* But instead, I say, 'pass.' I look around and see breathing versions of *The Depressed Person* by David Foster Wallace.

A man named Joe keeps interrupting others with his version of their story. Everything that has happened to others has happened to him. I wonder if he's missing a square patch of skin from his oversized ass? He shared his story, saying his girlfriend bullies him. I imagine her to be the size of the King Kong statue that once stood in the heart of Bullring Birmingham. He often describes her abusive behaviour as 'she pins me down and spits on me.' Joe looks like he shops in *Farmfoods* weekly, and his main purchases are a few packs of burgers and a pork joint.




We #FoodPorn daily and celebrate everything with a trip to the takeaway. Yet, his girlfriend hasn't sharpened a blade, cut away a piece of meat, diced it up, and made Joe chow Mein.

Six weeks in, I feel no better than when I joined. Joe is now claiming he was once a victim of unpaid work. Naturally, I asked him where he worked. He answers once he forces two Aldi chocolate digestives into his mouth before taking the first bite. It sounded like he was explaining that he's injured or can't work right now. Low self-esteem, perhaps, is permeated with anxiety. That's what everyone seems to have in this group.

I stroll into Birmingham New Street station with 20 minutes spare. I decide I'm going to have a steak-bake today because even I'm entitled to eat. I buy two for good luck and a sausage roll for later. I'm listening to a short story collection on Audible.

Oyinkan Braithwaite wrote about a man who buys a scold's bridle to control his wife. He hates it when she challenges him or even makes helpful suggestions. Maybe Joe's girlfriend should get one for him, and if anything good comes from this, it will be a quick weight loss. I'm sickened each time he licks his crumbly fingers and then dips them back into the *shared* bowl of Pringles. A positive thing about Joe is that he's clearly not worried about the coronavirus. Damn, Norman's panic buying hand-gel and then retweeting the consumption of bats, hash-tagging their disgust but ordering in a bucket of KFC? As I mentioned earlier, psychos surround me!

Men are the most selfish forms of life that cloud our lives with grey matter. Daisy and her friends are brutalised daily until death, then cut up and sold, then cooked and consumed, then shitted out and added to the pollution of our waters.




I wonder why one person hurting another is listed as a crime. For one to be the victim of the actions of another, they are sent for counselling. A manager refusing to pay an employee for the additional 60 hours she has worked for over four weeks is listed as management. However, you can be filmed pummelling ten bells out of a cow, as Iron Mike did to his opponents and our society will #disgusting but joyfully skip out of their local supermarket with bags of meat and meat-based products.

I spent the night cleaning up my apartment, throwing the general waste in general waste and leaving recycled items in a box in my hallway as my landlord does not believe in the importance of recycling. I bathe in sensual oils and enjoy the exquisite scent of cherry and vanilla coming from my oil burner. *Chilled Cow* plays on from my iPad, and I turn the volume up, feeling the mellow notes penetrate through my skin.

I had imagined that I would be paid as per my hourly rate for all the hard work I had done and all the long hours I put in. Even after disputing this with HR and Payroll, they found that the decision to pay me remains with my manager.

It wasn't the fact that I found out after completing 60 additional hours of work I wouldn't receive anything for it. Or the fact that shortly after the review meeting, he invited everyone for a day trip away, all drinks included. They returned the following Monday laughing about running the tab up to £700. It was the point that throughout those weeks, he requested I work through lunch and do a few hours at the end of each shift. He promised I would be paid for my time and passed on thanks from those above him. I received a text from my credit card company that my account payment is now overdue, and failure to pay will mean charges will be added. I learnt that during my time off on sick leave, my colleagues were paid time and a half for




additional hours and received paid working lunches. Upon returning, this incentive was never reissued.

I finish my first steak bake and stand to check the display boards for my train service. It's been cancelled! A warm female voice speaks over the noise and states, 'We are sorry to announce that the 0710 Avanti West Coast train heading to London Euston has been cancelled due to a person being hit by a train at Marston Green Station.'

I feel dizzy and find refuge in a corner near a coffee shop; I hear voices around me, above me and beneath my patent leather brogues. My left arm begins to shake, like the legs of many cows before their final breath.

I don't know the person who was hit by a train, but I imagine the train to be coming up the tracks fast and that familiar voice on the speakers, 'Please stand back from the platform and remain behind the yellow line. The next train will not be calling at this station.' Then the person, taking a step back and blending in with the other Normans, sees the train approaching and, with the only ever leap from a platform they'll do, jumps right in front of the train. No more will they worry about the debts they owe on their credit card, the hours they worked voluntarily, or the thousands of animals murdered each day for human desires. Their skull would have cracked on the point of impact, releasing their beautiful mind along the front and down the side of the train.

The train driver hits the brakes to stop the train, *albeit too late*. Employees from a farm nearby look up in horror, witnesses to the mind of a life since past, now smeared along the side of a train. Which, from this distance, one could easily mistake as minced meat? Not from the highlands of Scotland, but from good old Birmingham. As one of the two employees throws up in disgust, the cow he had



beaten a short while ago raises her back, hooves and kicks him. It was no surprise he later died from his injuries, and the papers reported that the cow had gone mad and had to be put down. Society completely ignored the fact that she was bred to die for a place on our tables.




Critical Analysis

I've Got War and Peace Inside My DNA – Kendrick Lamar

This research seeks to examine rap lyrics and their relationship to literature, with a strong focus on contemporary short fiction. From the outset, my argument is that rap lyrics – despite emerging cultural and critical studies – are broadly seen as popular culture, disposable and therefore unworthy of analysis by the general audience. In contrast, the short story remains a high-status form of literary culture, endlessly examined and considered by critics. Consequently, it feels timely to redress this. How can this vessel for words lead to open discussions about areas of life that we avoid? What are the unexamined or unlikely parallels between the two forms?

This research then explores the use of objects and how they integrate into and invigorate any short story, unpacking the question or opinion that rap music glamorises lies, celebrates materialism, hedonism and financial success, lacking much further insight. For instance, can rap lyrics be autobiographical, or are they just tools for entertainment?


We should acknowledge that any writer can easily claim that anything is anything through the use of their characters, scenes and objects. Describe it convincingly enough, and the sky is falling! (Henny Penny, 1922) This naturally comes with a responsibility to meaning, to make deliberate decisions in what we choose to represent, what we choose to exclude, and why. In the critical component of my thesis, I will examine materialism within the literature, discuss how objects can become symbolic and explain why materialism works in a short narrative in a similar way to its function in rap.



I will be looking at a canon of short fiction, which, I will argue, is used as a tool to trigger/promote conversations and thinking about taboo topics, such as race, religion, gender, age and all of the protected characteristics. At the same time, this original piece shines a light on subjects like suicide, depression, and the value (or lack of value) placed on our lives. Again, I aim to compare and contrast the treatment of these vast and complex themes within the form of short fiction and the form of contemporary rap lyrics and shed light on my own creative practice as a short fiction writer. This is a personal endeavour as I have always taken inspiration and the beginnings of ideas from lyrics, and I aim to show the richness of both traditions, that they can work in parallel and ought to be regarded with the same cultural significance. Essentially, this project challenges the boundaries between art and entertainment, high and popular culture, and commercially successful and critically acclaimed works. This is something that I hope persists throughout my creative and critical portfolios.

Benefits

Rap lyrics – in their immense popularity and size of audience – represent a rare opportunity to speak to and educate the youth on a grand scale while reassuring the rest of the world that someone, somewhere, is going through the same thing as they are. While rap lyrics provide a safe space to discuss something pertinent to an individual, this radical subjectivity has clear benefits: this is somebody expressing their truth, their struggles, and their emotional lives on a remarkably granular level. Honesty, candour, and confession of this kind always have the power to console and raise awareness of wider issues.



For example, in 2015, a young girl named Amanda Todd uploaded a video on YouTube titled *My Story*. She presented several large flash cards that told the audience about being bullied at school. Weeks after this upload, she ended her life. Personal tragedies such as this are all around us; many of us struggle, feel alone or misunderstood, or feel that we're wrestling with something shameful and impossible to admit, often with fatal consequences. Rap lyrics, like the contemporary short story, cover a range of topics, generally considered unsuitable or disturbing in general public discourse or polite conversation, perhaps even among friends: from suicide to abortion to rape and even artists disclosing childhood abuse or addictions. Yet, millions of people tune in and immerse themselves in the music, recite the lyrics, and then quote and share the elements that relate to their lives. In rap, as in literature, we can freely and openly express and talk about feelings and issues we might not admit to our closest peers.

Why?

Through close readings of selected short stories (chosen for their literary merits, contemporary settings and courageous exploration of controversial or provocative themes) as well as through self-reflexive analysis of elements from my own portfolio, my thesis seeks to demonstrate and educate readers towards an understanding of the wealth of short fiction inspired and generated – indirectly or otherwise – by rap music. In addition, this research strives to show fellow Writers that rap music can be used as an aid to bring hard conversations into ongoing discussions and how this may lead to events such as Amanda Todd's suicide occurring less frequently. In other words, it can be a powerful tool in improving our sense of community and our responsibilities to one another and to society.

Introduction to Rap Lyrics and Short Fiction


'I'm not saying I'm gonna change the world, but I guarantee that I will spark the brain that will change the world.' - Tupac Shakur.

In the beginning, was the words and words banged on the streets, and the streets spoke in unison about the dark elements that exist within the lives of those hearts that continued to beat through systemic racial defeat.

The research that is to be conducted will seek to establish if a short story narrative exists within rap lyrics and, if found, if they influence the readers. Are they structured in the same manner, or do rap lyrics promote nonsensical themes and the disputable context of a short story narrative? This study will evaluate the influence of rap lyrics within literature and if there is a way in which creative writers around the world can develop original pieces from a simple line of rap music.

'The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the earliest recorded reference to the term 'short story' to 1877.' (March-Russell, 2009) Which I find mind-blowing, for short stories always have a feel of modern-day creation. However, to find out that the earliest recording was dated almost 150 years ago provides me with a warm feeling that my name will form another branch in the tree of creative writing for short fiction.

It is not known exactly when hip-hop was born; however, it is widely agreed that DJ Herc was the founder of hip-hop as a genre, 'Herc pioneered extending the breakbeat on records by playing the same record on two turntables and cueing the "break" in the record, which he noticed had the greatest effect on the dancers at the



parties. This was emulated all over the NYC area during the 1970s, thus spawning the culture of Hip Hop.' – The Source.com.

Following the rise of DJ Herc's turntable skills, black men across the United States of America began forming short stories alongside any musical beat that played during the break. The words spoken were always about current events in their lives, such as the challenges of being black and growing up in America. The plight of being poor and trying to get by each day that they were forced to accept. The tragic loss of lives close to their hearts and often the way in which this is an ongoing theme for black people across America and how 'they don't give a fuck about us!' – Tupac Shakur


'Cops give a damn about a negro! Pull a trigger, kill a nigga. He's a HERO!'
Tupac Shakur

Black men throughout America were fighting to survive in a world that had everything against them. The American Declaration of Independence is often cited for the following quotation, 'all men are created equal' (Thomas Jefferson, 1776) However, the reality in America and around the world displayed a different narrative.

'In July 1967, the beating of a black cab driver by white police officers began a six-day riot in Newark, New Jersey, leading to the deployment of the National Guard.'
– The National Geographic.

Black Americans were prevented from evolving equally alongside their white counterparts. Constantly the victims of systemic racism and societal ignorance. 'It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder how I keep from going under.' – Grand Master Flash – The Message.

To share a story, one must find a way to narrate it to an audience, not just any audience but one with immensity in size. People created lyrics to establish a way to



educate the wider society on what was happening in their daily lives. These lyrics were memorised and recited continuously, and this form of narration triggered more people to highlight their personal experiences and vow to be silent no more.

As Abbott says, 'Narrative is so much a part of the way we apprehend the world in time that it is virtually built into the way we see.' (Abbott, pg. 6)

Hip-hop culture and rap lyrics, in particular, provide a clear depiction of a significant event or collection of events that form a whole or a summary of an autobiographical moment for the writer.


'Broken glass everywhere. People pissing on the stairs. You know they just don't care!

I can't take the smell, can't take the noise. Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice.' – Melle Mal – The Message. (1982)

The 1970s was the birthing point of a new era in the world and a new genre for the masses to embrace and live by. Black men started to share their experiences through rapping, and other nationalities eventually adopted this method and used their own words. The words they spoke delivered a collection of short stories.

'A short-story writer can try anything. He has tried anything – but presumably not everything. Variety is, has been, and no doubt will remain endless in possibilities because the power and stirring of the mind never rest.' (Welty, 1992)

An avid reminder that we can write anything, and many writers have shown us that they have tried writing anything, but, of course, everything has yet to be written about. For instance, we all repeat certain actions daily, like brushing our teeth; while the action and experience may appear similar on the surface, they are different – it is a new day, and the mindset of a character could be influenced by a different emotion, and unless your character is currently in *Back to the Future*, there is no way



they could go back in time to re-experience that precise moment as it was when they first completed actions that pertained to the setting and the narrative. Because of this fact, we are blessed with short fiction that can stir up an array of feelings, such as shock, sadness, anger and even disgust, while enticing readers to continue to read on and possibly have a physical reaction or an emotional response which leads them to question why they feel intrigued from the current book they cannot seem to put down.



Materialism


'Y'all on the Gram holding money to your ear. There's a disconnect we don't call that money over here.' – Jay-Z The Story of O.J.

The first theme that I have selected to examine is materialism within literature and how it may influence the characters' behaviour or alter the narrative of a short story.

Belk (1982) defines materialism as 'the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. At the highest levels of materialism, such possessions assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction.'

Throughout the creative pieces I created, I honed in on some of the characters, paying particular attention to the objects in the scene. I decided to demonstrate how elements of materialism from rap music can be used within literature—showing the readers how any entity, whether real or fantasy, can transform pieces of short fiction into a creative story that will have an impact on the reader's emotions towards the text. If a writer tunes into their ability to draw out any emotion from their readers, then their work has achieved a level of success, achieved by every writer.

Many of us may recognise that we have become quite fond of certain items throughout our lives. For some, this started during our early years, when we seemed glued to our favourite blanket or soft toy. I can confidently share that I was incredibly possessive over my *Care Bear*; she was a ray of bright sunshine yellow, and her name was *Funshine*. I recall cuddling *Funshine* tightly and carrying her everywhere



with me. I remember hosting tea parties with various play foods; *Funshine* and I would talk for hours about toys, food, and, of course, the other *Care Bears*. Whenever I would wake up and not immediately see *Funshine* (because she seemingly had rolled off my bed), I would worry and cry out for my mother to find her. I remember feeling helpless without *Funshine* by my side.

Chaplin and John (2007) remark, 'The desire for material goods begins at an early age. Toddlers and pre-schoolers make frequent requests for certain products and make their desires known in many ways, including grabbing products off store shelves, begging, and whining.'

Still, in this current age of living, we stream live on Instagram, ranting about the fact that our parents bought us *last year's* iPhone for Christmas. We film ourselves smashing it to bits. Absent-minded, as the gift was a newer version of the iPhone they are recording on, with the caption FML, which translates to fuck my life, for those of you that are grateful for a decent plate of food, a warm environment during the cold, winter months.


How far do we develop from this point of origin? Materialism is fairly universal among anyone who aspires to a successful Western existence, and I don't mean to suggest that any attachment to objects is wrong in and of itself. But do we stay as these needy children, whining and begging for the next luxury commodity and identifying ourselves mostly through our possessions? Or, will there come a day when we stand on our own merit, and a luxury item isn't used as a form of recognition? Lil Uzi Vert had a pink diamond attached to his head for a short period and is often cited as 'The Rapper With a Pink Diamond Attached to His Head'.

Materialism in Hip-Hop

We live in an age where society emphasises materialism, where objects are sometimes seen as more valuable than the person who possesses them. An overwhelming narrative exists within rap music, which continuously pushes into prominence lyrics such as, 'If I was you, I would hate me too. Louis Vuitton shoes and a whole lot of booze.' (Lil Kim, No Matter What They Say) and massage your deepest desires with words that roll alongside a summer vibe, 'I'm just getting started, oh yeah, we got it, bitch. I've done made more millionaires than the lotto did.' (Jay-z, Pound Cake) with vast parts of hit singles, waving a magnifying glass over the objects that these people have. With a narrative reiterating how life is better with these things, even more so than some relationships. Belk (1982) talks about 'the importance ascribed to the ownership and the acquisition of material goods in achieving major life goals or desired states', so here, the objects become trophies of achieving certain goals, as well as the material evidence that they've been achieved, aside from the objects and their acquisition being the goal themselves. This can be seen as bragging, even as a vulgar display of wealth, but we should admit that rap lyrics are *honest* about it in a way that other forms of writing might shy away from.

With the above in mind, I will now explore how the narrative of rap music can coincide and anoint any creative piece simply by smearing materialism into the foundation of a short story.


When researching materialism within hip-hop, Richins (1994) observed, 'Materialism is seen as a value that influences the way people interpret the structure of their life and their living environment.' Hip-hop has continuously grown year after year and is widely seen as an influential genre of music. The vessels that channel this effect are



Rappers who embody the narrative that life is filled with wealth, power and beautiful people when you have particular objects, luxury brands, or the means to acquire them. Rappers across the globe reiterate the same narrative against different beats, allowing the public to buy into the notion that obtaining, for instance, a gold chain makes them better than all those without one. Or wearing the latest collection from a brand makes you a step above others still struggling.

Rap music often personifies objects by ascribing to them some sacred power that few of us have access to. 'It is key to note that the younger members of hip-hop culture fail to comprehend that chasing wealth is not a sign of success.' (Dyson, 2007) This coincides with lyrics from *Party in the Club* by international Rapper 50 Cent, 'My flow, my show brought me the doe. That bought me all my fancy things, My crib, my cars, my clothes, my jewels.' (50 Cent, 2003) This Rapper, whose real name is Curtis Jackson, later reflected in his best-selling book *Hustle Harder, Hustle Smarter*, 'Everything you share with the world – your words, your energy, what you wear – tells a story. You must make sure your narrative always presents you as a winner, even when life is testing you. (pg. 155, 2020) which was a poignant moment, as Jackson expresses that it's fine to aspire to live a better life. However, it is better to work smart to get there and not waste what you have trying to impress people who don't know you.

In the words of many memes, 'Stay in your lane.' This means you don't try to live a life that you cannot afford, in the respect that as you have made the decision to share your life, you have to go 'all in' and commit to always presenting the best version of yourself in every element of your life.




Materialism is woven throughout my bespoke collection of short stories, demonstrating with objects the value each character places into them. I believe this was inspired by my time working in customer services at various levels, where I encountered people from all walks of life: the meaning and significance someone can place in a particular perfume, an eye pencil, a dress, or a night out.


While working in retail, customers would vocalise their thoughts on a particular item in-store. For example, customers would happily spend £150 on a pair of chestnut-coloured, twin-faced sheepskin boots by *Ugg Australia*, making comments such as, 'They're so comfortable, you wouldn't get this if you paid any less. Definitely value for money, and I can't stand those people who wear fake ones.' What I hope to balance here is a clear-sighted and thoughtful analysis of our materialism without it becoming cynical or judgmental: this is something more or less all of us do.

During my childhood, there were times 'predominantly' during the school's six-week summer break when the credit would run out on the gas meter, electricity meter or both, and my family and I would sit in the cold, trying to keep warm through the dark nights.

I never shared the truth about my time away after returning to school. I told stories of visiting theme parks and playing outside until late. I shared my 'ideal' summer as a reality. I hid behind these lies because even as a child, I knew that speaking about my struggles wouldn't garner sympathy from my peers. I knew I couldn't cope with the judgement. After all, having your electricity stop working due to insufficient funds, was not a hardship that all children faced.



To get through the most challenging days, I read books. I escaped poverty temporarily to observe and comprehend the issues that affect any protagonist.



Friday Black by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah

D is for Detail, Delusion and Death

Excerpt from Friday Black

'Maybe eighty people rush through the gate, clawing and stampeding. Pushing racks and bodies aside. Have you ever seen people run from a fire or gunshots? It's like that, with less fear and more hunger. From my cabin, I see a child, a girl maybe six years old, disappear as the wave of consumer fervour swallows her up. She is sprawled facedown with dirty shoe prints on her pink coat. Lance walks up to the small pink body. He's pulling a pallet jack and holding a huge push broom. He thrusts the broom head into her side and tries to sweep her onto the pallet jack so he can roll her to the section we've designated for bodies. As he touches her, a woman wearing a grey scarf pushes him away and yanks the girl to her feet. I imagine the mother explaining that her tiny daughter isn't dead yet. She pulls the girl toward me. The girl limps and tries to keep up, and then I have to forget about them.

"Blue! Son! SleekPack!" a man with wild eyes and a bubble vest screams as he grabs my left ankle. White foam drips from his mouth. I use my right foot to stomp his hand, and I feel his fingers crush beneath my boots. He howls, "SleekPack. Son!" while licking his injured hand. I look him in his eyes, deep red around the lids, redder around at the corners. I understand him perfectly. What he's saying is this: My son. Loves me most on Christmas. I have him holidays. Me and him. Wants the one thing. Only thing. His mother won't. On me. Need to feel like Father!" (2018, p. 106) Adjei-Brenyah)



Introduction

Friday Black is a powerful short story with finer points woven throughout; all details matter in this piece. Despite its everyday setting and subject, there is not one line that contains an insignificant aspect of the progression of this essential perspective of something we now see on the news and shrug off as boring and a waste of time reporting: a rush of shoppers on a sale day descending into violence. The protagonist, an employee, is not named in this piece, though he is present in the shopping centre as a detached narrator who tells the story by showing the reader what is happening and how we've come to accept it as the new normal. Therefore, nothing shocks him anymore.


For over two decades, I have worked in customer services in the various industries I entered and enhanced. When I first read this short story by Adjei-Brenyah, it resonated with my life experiences. I was drawn into the preparation of the shop floor and the staff conversations before opening time for Boxing Day Sales. How the crowds stare into the store and look at their watches, counting down to the very second we open at 0900. I would feel frustrated that I'd been scheduled to work the day after Christmas, a shift I could not refuse as I had university fees to pay for. I would process transactions that tallied up to more than my monthly wage, smile and thank the customer for shopping with us today. I would consider how much I would earn for the twelve hours I had committed to work. Why did some people have so much free expenditure to make expensive purchases and treat it like they were buying essentials: milk, bread, butter and topping up the pre-paid electricity meter?

Detail – Pursuit of Expensive Items

This story felt real for several reasons, including the ones stated above. The average reader can probably identify with the situation from both sides: as shoppers and workers. We have most probably, at least once in our lives, pursued the acquisition of an expensive item ourselves, and we're also aware of the plain fact that each year, new compilations are uploaded to *YouTube*, allowing the world to see the violence that takes place during Black Friday. We can judge the perpetrators of this chaos without necessarily feeling implicated in fervent consumerism ourselves.


Adjei-Brenyah writes in such a way that the details evoke a kind of dystopian pandemic for the reader; the consumerist frenzy to buy, to own, to not miss a bargain infects the everyday person and, for one day out of three-hundred and sixty-five transforms them into crazed shop addicts, who will curse, maim and even kill another customer in pursuit of objects they believe will amplify their value in this world. 'The crowd splits. Near the registers, a woman in her thirties takes off her heel and smashes a child in the jaw with it just before he can grab the fleece. She inspects the tag, sees it's a medium, then throws it down on top of the boy with a heel-size hole in his cheek.' (2018, p. 107, Adjei-Brenyah)

In Adjei-Brenyah's depiction, shoppers are not simply taking items from another person's basket; they are participating and ignoring most violent interactions in pursuing objects they believe will increase their happiness. The author does not hide the sickening behaviour of every character seen by the protagonist, including parts where the narrator participates by stamping on a customer's hand and feeling what he believes is the breaking of bones, as shown in the excerpt; the author uses the narrator to demonstrate that the detail is vital. The details are violent and unpleasant but naturalistic and a logical extension of the real-world behaviour



witnessed in documentary films about the phenomenon. The descriptions are detached and filtered through the world-weary narrator, who sees this every year but are still more specific (and therefore more powerful) than news items in that we focus on individual acts of violence in graphic detail. By taking these details and (slightly) exaggerating them in the form of fiction, Adjei-Brenyah shifts the context from journalism to art. In literature, the same scenes can be described with the use of satire, excess, and the grotesque, with the ultimate aim of bringing us closer to a social or behavioural truth than pure documentary. What I would like to suggest is that rap artists and rap lyrics operate in a similar way: they do not shy away from giving their audience the grave details of how brutal one individual can be to another, but in delivering their stories, messages and narratives they are able to use similar techniques of embellishment for rhetorical effect. This can be an in-character monologue; it can involve poetic licence. In lyrics, as in fiction, we should never assume straightforward autobiography and can dismiss a lot of powerful writing if we do this. Rapper Ice Cube sarcastically adds, 'Today I didn't even have to use my AK. I gotta say it was a good day, shit!' (It Was a Good Day, 1992). The entire song is about how the protagonist did not have to participate in anything violent today, such as being forced to use his AK47 rifle. In fact, while this rapper tells his audience about all the 'bad' things he did not have to do, he shares the good things that happened, too. For instance, not getting stopped by the police makes for a pretty good day. Interpreted properly, it is simultaneously a clever send-up of expectations and a social-realist reflection on injustice.

In *The Art of Fiction*, James Woods (2009) states, 'Only in the details can we understand the essential, as books and life have taught me. One needs to know




every detail since one can never be sure of which of them is important and which word shines out from behind things.' (pg. 48)

In Woods' statement, the words and details themselves take on the quality of "shining" desirable products. However, there is a more profound sense in which he calls on the writer's duty to leave nothing out and see nothing as unworthy of our attention. Our duty, in other words, is to describe the world as we see it, with every detail, because we do not know which detail will turn out to be key to understanding contemporary life and our drives and desires within it: a fight in a crowded shopping-centre, a designer label coat, the latest high-definition television.

Tupac Shakur posthumously adds, 'And my niggaz say, we want the fame! One thing we all adore, something worth dying for. Nothing but pain, stuck in this game searching for fortune and fame,' – Tupac Shakur (Fame, 2002), Which affirms the contribution from Woods above. Shakur repeatedly points out the sense of desperation to achieve "fame and fortune" as a direct result of deprivation, the "pain", the poverty, and their reduced prospects in a world where the odds are stacked against them. We could dismiss "fame and fortune" as an unrealistic or vulgar ambition, but isn't it really a desire for stability and safety, having been denied the more modest opportunities of the American dream?


We might extend this to the shoppers in 'Friday Black'; even if we disapprove of the extremes they go to to achieve their goals, we can still understand their desire. As readers without all the details, without the brand names and specific luxury items we recognise – and maybe desire – in our own world, we would be denied Woods' details that "shine". Though authors and rappers use different narrative forms, they essentially both tell short stories; only through detail do we understand the value



each character places on these objects and why. In Friday Black, Adjei-Brenyah reveals, 'Back in the store, there's a new body in the body pile, and in PoleFace™, a young woman is trying to kill Angela. She's clawing and screaming, even from the store entrance, I know what she wants. Angela is pinned against the wall where the SuperShells are...I won't be alone with this, she's saying. They'll like me now.' (pg. 113, 2018)

This character is prepared to kill another to obtain an object she believes will make people like her. I reiterate that the understanding of this text comes from the details shared, based on the era we live in, in the age of social media, where millions of people across the world record snippets of their daily lives and upload them for all to indulge in partial sensory observation of themselves: aspiration, jealousy, identity through luxury. One gets to view the inner sanctum of another, and more often than not, one is permitted free access to hear someone narrate their life. The narration may not quite be in the eloquent style of Sir David Attenborough; however, we can follow the characters who are not afraid to show you that they will fight someone to get that 42-inch high-definition smart TV. Record and upload a video to YouTube, coupled with #BlackFridayFights. I believe you will find what you seek if you want to experience Friday Black vicariously through the lens that captures the violence and the object that fuels their desire to be seen as someone better than everyone else.


The most sinister element of 'Friday Black' is that Adjei-Brenyah does not restrict the focus to the shoppers but glides a laser beam across the foreheads of the store employees. It is revealed that the narrator himself is one of the staff. Although the employees are human, they appear to be affected by the Friday Black effect differently, as they opt for a less obvious way of getting what they want from this



unforgettable period in retail. Here, the protagonist describes his second year working at the store and what his colleague Wendy did that year. 'That year, she bought in a pie for everybody. I made sure not to eat any of it because I don't eat anything anybody tries to shove down my throat, and she couldn't stop talking about the pie. "We can have Thanksgiving in the store! It's homemade." Everybody was saying how nice she was, how thoughtful. Then Wendy and I were the only ones who didn't have the shits all day. (pg. 110, 2018, Adjei-Brenyah)

Through the assiduous use of details, Adjei-Brenyah has reminded us (outside of the festive season) that we have turned into a world that is desperate to please people we both know and don't know in exchange for attention and temporary appreciation, and this can be via misguided acts of generosity or status symbols, as the protagonist confidently states, 'Soon I'll have a five-hundred-dollar jacket as proof to my mother that I'll love her forever.' (pg. 108, 2018, Adjei-Brenyah.) The sad part about this is that the respect given is solely for the item you now own, not for who you are. The author shows us that, in this reality far too close to our own, a blue SleekPack PoleFace trademark holds more value than the life of a six-year-old child. The juxtaposition of mass-produced luxury items with Wendy's "homemade" pies is interesting: rather than providing a wholesome contrast to consumerism, the pies make everyone sick as if such an act of simple generosity cannot exist in the same world.

In the contemporary Western world, we see visual examples in the news where we will hit at full force to get an object we feel we deserve. We will also publicly admonish those we witness repeating the same behaviour. The characters in *Friday Black* are a satirical yet realistic representation of our modern situation, where we can judge or participate but seem to be powerless to actually change



anything. We can be self-aware, or hyper-aware of the problem, but our comments on it become absorbed back into the product. To return to Tupac Shakur's lyrics: 'Our lifestyles be close captioned, addicted to fatal attractions picture of actions be played back in the midst of mashin' no fairy tales for this young black male.' – Tupac Shakur (Smile, 1997). These lyrics indicate strength and cynicism ("no fairy tales") as well as a theme of surveillance, interpretation and commentary, which does nothing to improve the material or social conditions that lead to poverty, desperation and a society in which the acquisition of high-end material possessions is the most we can hope for. It is striking that this was written in 1997, twenty-five years before 'Friday Black' and before the development of the internet as a means of mass communication and cultural record. In the 21st century, *everything* has a caption, and we provide a lot of the captions ourselves, from the daily news feed to our input on the congested and congealed megabytes we use up through regurgitating segments of our lives, elements around our existence and things that do not need our input.

It is assumed that everyone has some kind of addiction; the details convey the type. Through this short story, the shared element around each character is that they desire an item they believe will make everything better. Even the narrator observes this first-hand, 'Using the last of their energy to haul their newly purchased happiness home. And there are the dead everywhere.' (pg. 111, 2018, Adjei-Brenyah)


It is fair to add that the narrator hopes to win the employee competition and win an item from the store, which he makes clear from the start would be one of the most expensive coats. He is determined to win this coat to prove to his mother that he loves her eternally.




Writing a story set in a mall or shopping centre still feels like a radical act: it remains something of a neglected space in literature, even though it is also a space we interact with on a daily basis. Adjei-Brenyah, in reporting parts of modern-day human nature that we do not discuss on a professional level, nor do we pay serious attention to anything other than sharing it for selfish entertainment or clickbait exchange for social-media attention. Adjei-Brenyah appears to be asking his readers to consider if the demise of best practice is worth it. Why are news stations only focusing on the fights people engage in to own an item? Where is the understanding of why they are motivated to behave in such a way? Even the ones who are aware they are being filmed do not care about the aftermath of being caught kicking another shopper to get closer to the item they have waited to purchase at a discounted price. He gives his readers no choice but to reflect on the society in which they live and ask why so many people are struggling. I have found that this story encouraged me to evaluate my life today and recall similar events in my history where I would spend a third of my wages from my employer, Ugg Australia, on Ugg Australia genuine twin-faced sheepskin slippers, as proof to my family that at Christmas, I love them all. I would wake up on Boxing Day and work twelve hours in an attempt to begin working towards paying off the six months' worth of debt I incurred for one day of love and happiness. Like the characters in 'Friday Black', I was motivated by the belief that these items would make Christmas the best and that although we had no gas last week, everything would be perfect with this purchase.

Delusion – Selective Disassociation and Blindness to Violence

As in the lyrics I have discussed in this thesis and which informed my own short stories, Adjei-Brenyah, through his use of narrative, dialogue and objects, shines a



floodlight across issues that contaminate our society, with a prime focus on those who are marginalised. Interestingly, Adjei-Brenyah takes violence, materialism and identity and tells a story of struggles that people face or have faced in their lives, which is a standard key attribute of rap lyrics and story-telling through that narrative. A story could have been written in the same setting which demonises poor people or mocks them for their relentless focus on material possessions, but 'Friday Black' avoids this: the perpetrators of the violence are also victims of a system which only values them for their spending power and encourages nothing other than the profit motive. The greater the deprivation, it suggests, the greater the desperation to escape it and the greater the desire for the product. Both the story and the lyrics serve the central idea well; only the author of the short story has more reach to utilise if they wish and perhaps less risk of being taken at face value. In this story, the author parades around the descriptions of the objects the characters are dying to attain. 'The SuperShells are the most expensive coats we have this season: down-filled lofted exterior with a water-repellent finish, zip, vents to keep the thing breathable, elastic hem plus faux fur on the hood for a luxurious touch.' (pg. 105, 2018, Adjei-Brenyah) This object, alongside others such as jeans and a 42-inch high-definition television, becomes symbolic as they are the reason for the disgruntled customers to engage in heinous acts of violence. Because of the high value, the customers place on these items, they all appear to validate their disgusting behaviour through dialogue that briefly touches on why they must buy this item today before the special offer ends, and they can no longer afford it. In other words, Adjei-Brenyah shows us the sad conditions of late capitalist consumerism, where our purchases are directly linked to our self-esteem, our future prospects and even our ability to demonstrate love to our families.



Tupac Shakur surmises, 'Some see me stranded in this land of hell, jail and crack sales hustlers hardly think of the culture, or for repercussions while bustin' on backstabbing vultures. Selling my soul for material wishes, fast cars, and bitches wishin' I live my life a legend immortalised in pictures.' (Smile, 1997). In 'Friday Black', we are *all* "hustlers".

Rap lyrics embody the use of selective disassociation to violence by often providing a reason why such unspeakable actions were taken. In 1996, Tupac Shakur elucidated, 'Witness my enemies die when I ride by; they shouldn't have tried. I send they bodies up north, with their faces, they wrists, and they nuts cut off.' (Ghetto Star) Like Adjei-Brenyah, there is a justification from the characters as to why they believe violence is okay. However, unlike literature, where authors are praised for being daring and bold in their literary creations, rappers are chastised for ruining the minds of the youth, and I suppose if it were the seventeenth century, society would accuse such people of being witches and burn them to death. The irony is that the violence they fear is created by such people actually resides deep within themselves, and we could form a reasonable assumption that this is activated when triggered.

It is important to note that some authors, in their transgressive or violent portrayals of contemporary life, such as Bret Easton Ellis, *have* provoked pockets of our society to voice that they are a terrible influence. However, the powerful impact that rap lyrics can have in modern literature should be embraced as a key instrument in the arsenal of creating a body of high-calibre contemporary fiction truly in touch with contemporary struggles and issues.




Conclusion to Friday Black

Perhaps it was the familiarity with the character's position at work that made this story appealing, or maybe it was how he showed the reader his vulnerable side by sharing that his family are poor, which meant I was compelled to include this author in my analysis of details in short fiction. Whatever the reason, it is clear that details matter in this form of narrative. Ensuring you use the right level of detail will be the main factor that either keeps your readers reading or propels them to post on social media, tarnishing your work in 160 characters or less.

By reading, I found there are fundamental similarities between Rap Artists and characters created by Adjei-Brenyah, such as the arrogance of who they are, why their purchases are more valuable than any other and most importantly, the unapologetic use of shocking violence to emphasise that neither one is afraid to speak their truth, the way they see life and how it is healthy to discuss controversial topics beneath the layer of comfort.

Rap lyrics express the same elements as literature with the heavy mix of its use of slang, which some may find challenging to follow. However, if one avoided challenging literary pieces, one would miss out on some of the most remarkable texts, *Ulysses*, *War and Peace*, and a personal favourite, *A Clockwork Orange*. All of these contain violence, poverty, and wealth's unequal divide; we ought to extend the same appreciation and interpretation to lyrics as a form.

Adjei-Brenyah has given readers full access to his perspective. 'Friday Black' is one of several short stories that shows us a unique but familiar outlook on the version of an event we know will occur every year. Nevertheless, some of us continue to battle through, no matter the financial or emotional cost at risk. For



instance, the protagonist tells the readers he makes \$8.50 per hour, his mother has lost her job, and his parents argue about money most nights – yet even knowing all this, he decides to purchase a new GameBox. (Adjei-Brenyah, 2018)

‘Friday Black’ takes readers on a journey through a pivotal day in retail, Black Friday. Adjei-Brenyah shows us that no matter the place, time or price, characters will strive to get what they want from this life, even if the way they choose to do it is morally wrong. As a writer, I accept my characters for who they are and indulge the readers in a realistic take on the impact of financial deprivation on an individual. As shown in *The Art of Meat*, the protagonist Sienna acknowledges her debt but still consciously chooses to pay extra for Scottish Angus minced beef from Marks and Spencer rather than settling for a cheaper version. Like Adjei-Brenyah, the characters I have created can be described as reflective roamers; they are going about their lives, and we look in on them through the lens of the story; they reflect aspects of life we have either lived through or heard about – death, pain, suicide, debt, love, the list is long, and it will only end once the rappers and creative writers of this world, stop expressing their perspectives.

The Husband Stitch by Carmen Maria Machado

Power, Play and the Polarisation of Love

Excerpt from The Husband Stitch

'I go into labour in the middle of the night, every inch of my insides twisting into an obscene knot before release. I scream like I have not screamed since the night by the lake, but for contrary reasons. Now, the pleasure of the knowledge that my child is coming is dismantled by the unyielding agony.

I am in labour for twenty hours. I nearly wrench off my husband's hand, howling obscenities that do not seem to shock the nurse. The doctor is frustratingly patient, peering down between my legs, his white eyebrows making unreadable Morse code across his forehead.

"What's happening? I ask."

"Breathe," he commands.


I am certain that if any more time passes, I will crush my own teeth to powder. I look to my husband, who kisses my forehead and asks the doctor what's happening.

"I'm not satisfied this will be a natural birth," the doctor says.

"We may have to deliver the baby surgically."

"No, please," I say. "I don't want that, please."

"If there's no movement soon, we're going to do it," the doctor says. "It may be best for everyone." He looks up, and I am almost certain he winks at my husband, but pain makes the mind see things differently than they are... They take my baby so that they may fix me where they cut. They give me something that makes me sleepy, delivered through a mask pressed gently to my mouth and nose. My husband jokes around with the doctor as he holds my hand.



"How much to get that extra stitch?" he asks. "You offer that, right?"

"Please," I say to him. But it comes out slurred and twisted and possibly no more than a small moan. Neither man turns his head toward me.


The doctor chuckles. "You aren't the first" (Machado, 2018. Pg 15-17)

Introduction

Carmen Maria Machado, creator of *Her Body and Other Parties*, published an inventive collection of short fiction in 2018, set in 21st-century America. A mixture of realism and psychological traumas, such as a national pandemic. While reading through her characters' lines, a reader will understand that Machado is an author who is not afraid to be sensual, demonstrating the importance of self-love and the value a woman brings to this world. Machado showcases womanhood in all aspects, such as parenting, changes through the critical stages of life, selective judgement, assumptions about how others should behave and her innate understanding of the importance of having a voice and the freedom to express it. As readers, we see this through a series of narrators and how they recall their experiences.

Through her stories, Machado raises questions about gender-inclusivity and demonstrates how male characters appear to have a kind of God-complex personality type. Set in the present day, when we might assume equal power and status between men and women, the male characters clearly benefit from a society which is still essentially patriarchal. They feel they are entitled to take and do whatever they want, with no consequence or thought of punishment, and frequently exercise power, influence and control over the women in the stories.

Machado glides her fingers across the taboo border, reaches into the centre, and brings a profuse number of topics into view. Readers of *Her Body and Other*




Parties will understand there is no whispering in dark corners. Today, I will discuss how the term ‘consent’ is flippantly respected by the male characters throughout this collection, how the female counterparts are mostly confident in their lives, knowing what they want and exploring sexuality in ways archetypes such as Aphrodite and Poseidon would be proud of and if you enjoy oral sex, then hey, that’s okay! The protagonist in *The Husband Stitch* shares, ‘When he tells me that he wants my mouth, the length of my throat, I teach myself not to gag and take all of him into me, moaning around the saltiness.’ (Machado, 2018, Pg. 9)

The explicit areas of Machado’s writing aren’t hidden away for you to dig out once a year during a spring-cleaning session. They are eating the runway and seducing minds with the secret and often deviant ways her characters find pleasure. In short, with no apology, welcome to the epitome of taboo and like rap artists, the author is not scared to speak her mind.

Telling in Different Voices

This leads my research into the voice of the author and the ways an author can speak through their narrative and change their voice without losing their identity. Lodge (1992) interjects, ‘the language of a story is not a language, but a medley of styles and voices, and it is this which makes it a supremely democratic, anti-totalitarian literary form, in which no ideological or moral position is immune from challenge and contradiction. (pg. 120)


Lodge reminds us that the key aspect of voice flows undisguised within writing. There is nowhere to conceal the author’s voice; there is no avenue run down (unless you are a co-writer or, more controversially, a ghost-writer), and the other writer takes the lead. However, using your voice as an author gives you the stage to



choose the point of view, showcasing many voices, such as the author, an individual character, or a narrator. An author may put on many different voices and may even use a character to express views opposite to their own, but they do so in the service of their overall message, and the voice – in numerous disguises – remains their own.

Chatman (pg. 153, 1978) informs us that our voice is how we communicate directly to our audience (readers). We use our voice to translate life from our stories into the minds of our readers for them, for example, to see the imagery of the Highlands of Scotland and the herd of highland cows grazing, through to that gambling addict and why that character chooses to repeatedly gamble, over being home and present for their offspring. As a writer, my voice allows me to control the depth of exploration of the characters and whether I should excavate the dark history they have tried to suppress. Or should I hint at it? But decide against revisiting? As the author, I am in control of the level of understanding, to a certain extent: whether a character should be judged by the reader or seen with compassion, whatever their flaws.


In *The Husband Stitch*, Machado gives the protagonist both the script and the microphone to own her story, the truth about what she goes through within her marriage, and to provide readers with her direct point of view. ‘In the beginning, I know I want him before he does. This isn’t how things are done, but this is how I am going to do them.’ (Machado, 2018, pg. 3). Here, we are presented with a confident character who knows what is expected of her by society and her contemporaries (“This isn’t how things are done”) but consciously defies it. It also serves as a mini introduction to the high confidence levels that Machado’s main characters (all female) possess and exude.



This confidence and defiance is significant in a contemporary political and societal context. Across the world, on a daily basis, we hear stories of women being oppressed by their male counterparts, either of men who dominate in a particular area or industry or of outright violence and coercion. We hear both what societies may deem somewhat unfair instances where a man is promoted over a woman because women bear children; we hear the iniquitous stories of times when a man or a group of men have been wicked to a woman. On the 16th of September 2022, it was reported internationally that a 22-year-old woman named Mahsa Amini was beaten to death by morality police in Iran for refusing to adhere to the country's hijab laws. *Rouzbehani, R* (2023) *The Guardian*) In China, two-thousand-eight-hundred and sixty-three miles from Iran, a woman was brutally attacked for telling a stranger who approached her to stop touching her. He left, only to return with other men and beat her (Vivian Wang, NY Times).

Then, across the lands in the United States of America, a woman was hit in the face with a brick by a man for refusing to share her number. (2023, Fox News. In the United Kingdom, in September 2023, a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl was stabbed to death on her way to school after she tried to protect her friend from a boy brandishing a knife. (Liam Coleman, Metro) This section of my thesis could be endlessly updated, like Claudia Rankine's dedication page for her collection *Citizen*, where new victims of police brutality and murder are added with every reprint.


Given these constant reminders of women's oppression, Machado's stories are both a powerful voice of rebellion and an exploration of the tactics women need – even confident women in an outwardly civilised society – in order to survive at all. In 'The Husband Stitch', Machado brings up the topic of consent and places it under scrutiny in a subtle but powerful way, with a protagonist who shares common threads



of resilience with her fellow real-life counterparts. We have a character, the wife, who tells her husband that he is not allowed to touch a symbolic green ribbon tied around her neck. The more she insists, the more he seems determined to violate her request. 'I touch the ribbon at the back of my neck. "It's just my ribbon." I run my fingers halfway around its green and glossy length and bring them to rest on the tight bow that sits in the front. He reaches out his hand, and I seize it and press it away. "You shouldn't touch it," I say. "You can't touch it." (Machado, 2018, pg. 4)

I will return to this central image and conflict within the story later. For now, we can focus on the surreal nature of the events: we are not told, as readers, why the narrator is wearing the green ribbon or, indeed, why she is so determined that her husband mustn't, shouldn't, can't touch it. It becomes an emblem: a small way in which she can exercise some control, some small power over her situation, a line which she can draw. And a line which he, the husband, continually tries to cross. We might think about why he wants to touch the ribbon at all in the first place: essentially just because he's been told 'No.' We don't have the full explanation yet, but for most of the story, the green ribbon feels like a symbol of the narrator's confidence and power.

Interestingly, Rap Artists follow that blueprint within the music they release; it is significantly rare to listen to a hip-hop song where the artist is anything but confident: their lyrics are assertive, powerful and celebratory of that power. For instance, in the worldwide hit *Barbie World* by Rap Legend Nicki Minaj, featuring Ice Spice, Minaj states, 'And I'm bad like the Barbie, I'm a doll, but I still wanna party. Pink 'Vette like I'm ready to bend. I'm a ten, so I pull in a Ken.' (2023). Like Machado's narrator, who knows she is going to "pull in" her husband before he does, here we have a Rapper showing female confidence and ' not holding back on using



her voice to specifically tell us that she is beautiful and will get the man she wants.

This is a visible part of popular, mainstream culture, but is it really reflected in reality, or do we only accept it in the form of music?


Throughout the many recorded eras of life, numerous examples exist where a male protagonist overshadows the woman's voice. As women, we are sometimes told that we can accomplish anything, that equality has been achieved and that we should be equal in the workplace and in our relationships. At the same time, we are being told to learn how to make bread and butter pudding, ensure the bedding remains bright white, raise all the kids we birth into this world, and serve our husband as and when he commands.

In Machado's work, we find an exploration of feminist ideals, of the promise of 'girl power' that came to prominence in the 1990s, of female empowerment and confidence in the context of the systematic patriarchal oppression that puts the very possibility of liberation and independence under threat.

This means, in the most cliché way possible, that sometimes women bring home bacon, too. Like Minaj, Machado (2018) echoes some of the direct authority and approach to accomplishing goals, regardless of the probability of success. Perhaps this is the meaning of defiance. We haven't come as far as we're told we have, but we have to persist and reassert.


A Stream of Consciousness

With the above in mind, I think it is paramount to discuss the minds of characters that both authors and rap artists create and develop. I would like to talk about this in the context of the stream of consciousness. 'A stream of consciousness was a phrase



coined by William James, psychologist brother of the novelist Henry James, to characterise the continuous flow of thought and sensation in the human mind.’ (Lodge, 1992, pg. 41.) In *The Husband, Stitch* Machado (2018) shows the intricate flow of thoughts through her protagonist, who identifies as the wife. The ease of the state of flow through the narrator’s recollection of crucial parts of her relationship to the shorter stories between them. For instance, right after the main character opens the story with a set of rules for the reader and then flows into how she met her now-husband, and surprisingly fluxes into microstories about her childhood and folk-tales of women who all ended up dead either through following the rules of others or trying to please a man. Akin to *Frankenstein*, *The Husband Stitch* has complex layers, such as the deep understanding of themselves that the heroine has and how both the novel and the short story, though published in different periods, share a diary-like/epistolary way of storytelling.

The excerpt that started this chapter shows the actions of all the characters in that chapter and the internal monologue, with the stream-of-consciousness pressing on the lips of the protagonist trying to save her from receiving a surgical procedure that she did not consent to. The passage shows the blatant disregard the male characters have towards the main character, who is about to bring life into this world. One would assume that during such a life-changing event, the doctor and the husband of the central character would check in on her to see if she was okay, prioritising the health and well-being of the mother and unborn child. The husband and the doctor are presented as normal, decent men who would probably think of themselves in this way and would describe this as the priority if asked. However, the story reveals that the opposite is true.




Rather than this, they are more concerned about a semi-cosmetic, possibly dangerous surgical procedure which promises the husband's future sexual gratification. They make a joke out of this, laugh and wink about it (and the narrator notices all of this), but the fact that it is even on their minds, let alone prioritised over the very serious matter at hand (we only need to look at maternal mortality rates to understand this) should give us pause. The very concept, not to mention the name (which obviously becomes the book's title) of the procedure, is shocking and should be shocking.

Through this narrative device, we are shown awareness of the wife's vulnerability, which permits the reader absolute and privileged access to her thoughts during her labour and birth.

A notable example of a stream of consciousness in rap music can be drawn from therapeutic rapper J.Cole (2018), where he effortlessly speaks as an observer of the impact of drugs as the protagonist from the perspective of an ex-drug user, 'I got thoughts, can't control, got me down, got me low, rest my mind, rest my soul. When I blow, when I blow, am I wrong? Let them know feels so right to let things go.' (Friends) This snip is one of many illustrations of the shared characteristics that rappers and writers use through their narratives.

The wife's spoken voice, thoughts, and specific actions are repetitive. She repeatedly attempts to dissuade her husband from touching the green ribbon tied around her neck. Although we aren't privy to his thoughts and the items that may be streaming through his mind, we can ascertain from the dialogue below that the husband is frustrated with his wife's constant refusal to permit him to touch her neck-tie.



“Come back here,” he says.

“No,” I say. “You’ll touch my ribbon.”

He stands up and tucks himself into his pants, zipping them up.

“A wife,” he says, “should have no secrets from her husband.”

“I don’t have any secrets,” I tell him.


“The *ribbon*.” (Machado, 2018, pg. 20)

The dismal aspect of this piece is that it is clear the narrator loves her husband and loves being a mother to their only child. The narrative shows her transparency with everything she does and how she pleads with her husband to respect her boundaries and tries to educate him to respect that he does not need to know everything; her green ribbon is hers, it is visible to all, and to her, it is precisely that – a green ribbon. Regardless of her never-ending petitions to her husband to leave her green ribbon alone, his failure to adhere to this request leads to her demise.

‘My weight shifts, and with it, gravity seizes me. My husband’s face falls away, and then I see the ceiling and the wall behind me. As my lopped head tips backwards off my neck and rolls off the bed, I feel as lonely as I have ever been.’
(Machado, 2018, pg. 31)

Conclusion

This short story contains the DNA of originality and authenticity of voice and narration. The distinction between Machado and the other writers I have carefully selected to interpret in my thesis is that she is a highly *sauve* female fearless in positioning her principal characters in prominently male-dominated settings, such as seeking a spouse, sexual enjoyment and, of course, the unspoken rules to courting and, eventually, marriage. The fact that these rules are unspoken means that a huge



amount of misogyny, oppression and control goes almost unnoticed, the danger being that we might celebrate our liberation from something which is very much still going on.

Waxy by Camila Grudova

What's on the Menu? What Can You Afford?

Excerpt from Waxy

'I felt intolerably miserable. There were posters everywhere reminding me I was manless:

TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOUR MAN
A GOOD LADY DOES NOT LET HER MAN LOITER
FEED YOUR MAN WELL

I traded a tin of meat with Pauline for a nice bra and panty set. I styled my hair into ringlets, it was a nice golden syrup colour and used the lipstick I hadn't used since Rollo left me. I spent all my time off work sitting in cafes, looking for men.

I felt ill and never went back to that café again. It didn't much matter, and the café menus were the same everywhere:

COFFEE
GOLDEN SYRUP TOAST
BOILED TINNED MEAT WITH TOAST

The tinned meat became grey when it was boiled and made the toast all wet; most people just ordered Golden Syrup Toast with Coffee. There were also pubs that sold beer and gin, but like libraries, women weren't allowed in those. They were places for men to socialize and study for their Exams in peace.' (Grudova, 2017, p. 43).




Introduction

When I close my eyes and think about creativity and how writing contributes to that exclusive area of fiction where the writer dares to explore, in new ways, the topics we discuss amongst our inner circle of people we trust, I think about Camila Grudova (2017) and her mesmerizing collection of short stories, *The Doll's Alphabet*. All of her stories in the collection are a sublime combination of zany examples of everyday life with a tight twist of surrealism at the core.

Her most extended story, 28 pages in this collection, is *Waxy*, a weird story that, in my opinion, has the intention of making every section of Maslow's hierarchy of Needs visible and uncomfortable. In the excerpt above, we are given a list of menu items; these are the only things that the majority of the population can afford. As shown by the narrator, it does not matter which café they visit as they all sell the same thing. From the need for sustenance, Grudova (2017) takes readers through safety and security, showing us that the protagonist lives in a house where the landlord has removed all the doors apart from the bathroom door.

Further into the story, readers are shown how one housemate keeps entering the room belonging to the protagonist and threatening her. The same housemate later dies of suspected poisoning, with his partner, shortly after his death, being subjected to non-consensual sex. Climbing up the pyramid to the love and belonging section, you'll find that all the women in this story are raised to feel shame and disappointment if they don't find a man in a café and keep him satisfied in their relationship. All women are sent to work in factories that can cause life-changing injuries, such as body disfigurement and burns to their skin from the chemicals they use in their roles; this is the only choice of work.




‘Boys and girls are taken away from home at age three. Girls were given five years of schooling, Life Skills and Prospects, then went to work in a Training Factory, which usually made boys clothes and toys, while boys stayed in school until sixteen when they started Examinations and began looking for a woman to care for them.’ (Grudova, 2017. P. 50)

Women are not permitted to study and are taken out of education from age eight. Men are brought up with a potent reminder that they are the superior sex. They deserve to be worshipped by their partner; they only need to study psychology and pass their exams.

Moving further up the hierarchy, you will find self-esteem, and Grudova shows her readers that women undervalue themselves and have very little or no confidence due to the way both sexes are placed into these gender-specific roles and have no authority in the pathway of their lives. Then, finally, self-actualisation, where we see the protagonist, her partner Paul and their newborn Waxy break away from the conformity of common law and seek to establish a new life away from that society and the awful characters they’ve encountered. It’s incredible how being born female means an instant lifetime of being subjected to shame and ridicule, yet only the female characters can bring males into their society.


Essentially, the story shows our modern-day society that we take a lot for granted; it gives us an awkward insight into how some characters are forced to live. For example, the main character rents out a room in a house that contains a broken fridge filled with rotten food, and she suspects a dead baby – in this life, if someone were to find a dead baby, the police would be called. She tosses it in the bin and uses the fridge for clothes storage. Like Machado (2018), Grudova shows us how



women are devalued and subjugated in a fictional world that has uncanny resemblances to our own.

This is clearly not a story of escapism or pastoral celebration. It would be easy to read Grudova's story as a work of surrealism or dystopia, to be entertained by it as a kind of science fiction and think no further about the issues it raises. It may be easy for some people to turn away from those less fortunate than them and ignore their difficulties, assuming they can do nothing to change their circumstances or improve their position in society. However, 'Waxy' had a profound impact on me as a reader, partly because the pressures to date, to find the right man, to seek validation from that and, eventually, to have children are very familiar to me.

There are many things in life that we take for granted or fail to see the value of, like the taste of a fresh morning coffee or the luxury of having a roof over your head, let alone a bathroom, that you don't need to share. The story shows the reader that if you are in a position to own a copy of this collection or have the time to sit and read it, then you are in a better position than most characters in *Waxy* and, we should remember, a better position than many people in the world, exhausted by dangerous work, oppressed and living in poverty. Grudova (2017) gives readers a mirror image of society today, only seen through a dark pair of Orwellian lenses, in the understanding that you should appreciate what you have in this life, as there are people throughout every habitable area who are worse off than you can imagine. Nonetheless, we could also read the story as a stylised exaggeration of the issues women face in the relatively affluent West despite our freedoms and opportunities. We still live under an essentially patriarchal system in which we are expected to be the carers, to look after our men and to bear children, and we still live in an age of




rampant capitalism and consumerism that offers little escape from our dissatisfaction.

Life today involves people across all age groups buying things they can't afford to impress people they don't know through social media. In May 2017, a well-known rapper, Bow Wow, posted online an image of a limousine parked next to a private jet and heavily implied that he was about to board. Moments later, a passenger on the commercial plane snapped a photo of Bow Wow, who was sitting in front of him in economy class. Active social media users then started the #BowWowChallenge, where they showed one photo that implied one thing (a materialistic lie) and another that displayed the truth. It was later discovered that the rapper's picture was from Google Images. (Bailey, N. 2017)

Grudova (2017) allows us to examine the sincerity of the struggles everyone goes through trying to fit into a world in which you did not ask for a membership. Women born into that life are thrust into a period that resembles traits of the Victorian era in England, as well as Soviet countries under communist dictatorship. Women are expected to cater to a man, keep a respectable home and ensure that they work hard to treat their male partners to luxuries such as tobacco, alcohol and even contraception.


In a modern-day setting, some people are praised for having opulent homes, eating sumptuous meals and sharing their private moments with the world. Others who do the same thing are chastised and reminded that people are starving in Africa, people are homeless in Britain, and the money spent on that new designer piece should have been donated to a charity that supports the people of Ukraine. It is important to note that Rap Artists proudly boast about the limited edition or bespoke items they own while reminding their fans and foes that they are on another level to



normal citizens, and this is seen as acceptable behaviour, as the same artists quickly sell many copies and gain many of streams for their music – which is predominantly about materialism and being blessed by God. We may also be reminded of such artists' humble origins, making their celebration of materialism a recognition of a previous lack: a defiant display of wealth to demonstrate how far they've come through their talent and success. As stated above, this tends to be celebrated in the form of popularity, record sales and reputation, but at the same time, it is looked down upon by higher forms of culture as crass or vulgar.

The realm of materialism can be viewed from different perspectives, and one may argue that it is an individual's right to treat themselves to the finer things in life, and if they can afford to do so, why shouldn't they? Especially if they've worked hard to accomplish such wealth. As Grudova observes, when a male character passes his psychology exams, he is rewarded with cash, and men are encouraged to treat themselves to the finer things in that world, like gin and steak.


It is worth examining this along class, race and cultural lines. In modern society, a middle-class white man is praised for the expensive items he buys with his money. He is encouraged to take more time off work and treat his family to extravagant holidays in exclusive hotels that an A-class celebrity has frequented. In the same society, all other demographics are scrutinised, and a swarm of strangers will not hesitate to share their comments on your lack of shame and compassion. They will also demand that you give them your money, as they would spend it better helping others and buying things that benefit the world. It would seem that certain forms of materialism (a nice watch, an expensive but not too flashy car, understated high-fashion clothes) are acceptable, but some are not.



Still, in 2023, you can easily find the above examples and see the aftermath of such lifestyles and their impact on individuals and larger groups. Through authors like Grudova and Rap Artists like Nas, we are reminded that in all these years, not much has changed. 'Everything on this planet we preserve and can it. Microwave it and try it. No matter what, we'll survive it. What's hu-? What's -man? What's human? Anything along the land we consumin'. Eatin', deletin', ruin.' (2010)

Grudova is very clear in describing the life pathway of every person born into the world of 'Waxy', male and female, from childhood to sixteen. Pause and imagine, momentarily, that you have a group of children re-enacting adulthood from age three.


In 'Waxy', girls are given five years of targeted training to prepare them for a life of devotion and servitude to a man by the time they are instructed to work. In this piece, the girls start work at age eight, and the boys complete the first part of education by age sixteen and then focus on studying for psychology exams. The fact that the chosen subject for the boys' education is psychology is a particularly harsh and satisfying joke: we can assume that either it is a grotesquely limited form of the discipline of psychology which works to confirm the prejudice and mass abuse of women, or alternatively we can assume it is a similar subject to the one we know in our own world, but used or manipulated to the same effect. Some boys deviate from the rules by convincing girls to have unprotected sex with them and then walking away when the unlucky girl discovers she is pregnant. Again, we may reflect that this isn't dissimilar to the ways men and boys have behaved on countless occasions in real-world scenarios over time; isolating it in a dystopian story gives it a little more focus.



The above provides better insight into why many of those young girls then go on to harm themselves in a painful attempt to abort their unborn. This isn't a distant event from our world in modern-day living. For example, in America, on June 24, 2022, several judges decided that the law named Roe V Wade (that allowed women to have an abortion for their unwanted pregnancies safely) was overturned. Like in Waxy, which was published five years prior, it is now a criminal offence to have an abortion. It is also considered breaking the law if a doctor or medical professional assists anyone with this procedure. They will be struck off and punished with the full force of the law.


I think it is fair to say that Grudova imagined a time when child labour was legal, and abortion was illegal. Which helped shape this inharmonious piece into a dark personal insight into the lives of some of the characters in 'Waxy'. This story shows us how female characters are treated abysmally, with the added characteristic that this treatment begins from their early years. Normalising the inequalities between the two genders and the destiny of a life of subjugation that awaits all girls. In the song 'Patience', Damien Marley (2010) interjects, 'We born not knowing, are we born knowing all?' (2010) This summarises the life cycle of these children; they're born not knowing but taught to know all. Well, the definition of 'all' they are privileged to know. In Nas and Marley's lyrics, this idea of social conditioning is contrasted with the idea that we may be born with some innate qualities, a soul that is better than what we're gradually taught or indoctrinated with.

Again, we have a rap artist translating a story around life and humanity in rap lyrics and an author sharing her interpretation of life for some people worldwide. Both pieces are equally powerful and have reached wide audiences. On some occasions,



both the artist and the author have a piece that reaches a shared audience, such as myself – I have experienced the rapper’s words and had the privilege of reading Grudova’s take on a dystopian avenue that her characters are navigating aimlessly. In ‘Waxy’, the protagonist wonders what an alternative life looks like after she struggles to keep her unregistered child and illegitimate relationship under wraps. Her curiosity leads her to convince her partner to pack up and leave, hoping they can find a version of utopia that allows them to love one another freely and raise their child without fear of ridicule. Most compellingly, the protagonist only starts questioning the world around her after breaking several rules and fearing the consequences of the law. She religiously obeyed the laws until she chose her life over life under rules and regulations.


Damien Marley seemingly mocks the leaders of all nations by pointing out, ‘Some of the smartest dummies can’t read the language of Egyptian mummies. Plant a flag on the moon and can’t find food for the starving tummies.’ (2010) In essence, he highlights that humans created and built rockets and have, to date, been to the moon and back several times. Considerable investments have been and are still being made for space-related projects, yet back here on Earth, we have people starving for long periods between eating a morsel of food or dying of hunger. We still have not been able to translate the hieroglyphics from ancient Egypt or understand the purpose of the pyramids. This is an evocative account of something we know but do little or nothing about. Instead, we would happily part with \$75 (£60) to visit the Kennedy Space Centre but form a gripe about homeless people sitting outside our local Tesco, begging for money to buy food. Marley, in the most obvious way, asks about the purpose of visiting the moon when people need support. While I understand the intrigue and fascination of exploring space and venturing far out into



our universe, I get that some people argue it is vital for the knowledge of humankind. But surely, having men, women, and children die of hunger should be a top priority in establishing a sustainable resolution. Many of the characters in 'Waxy' get by with barely any food, and when they can afford food, they have the same options for working-class women: bread and syrup. The artist is explicit in stating an issue with world hunger. In contrast, the author permits her readers to see snippets of her characters' struggles while ensuring that the arch of the impact of laws that benefit one gender and hinder the other.

Ultimately, it does not matter how you unpack this information; it is the reality for many people across the globe and, unfortunately, will become a reality for many unborns – it's that notion of repeating the same action and expecting a different outcome. Sadly, it has dawned on both the artist and the author that this has been a toxic triage where assessments are conducted. A plan to improve the issue(s) is agreed upon, like a woman's right to have an abortion, a child's right to have a good home and be loved and a person's right not to be subjected to abuse of any kind and to live in a world that is about equity and equality. Not one where the amount in your bank account becomes the determining factor for the love and adoration you deserve or even the amount of credit you have access to, contributing to how well Maslow's hierarchy of needs will ensure you are covered for every primary level.

In a surplus of ways, it can be argued that characters depicted in both text and through sound can be viewed in a way that Voldemort of Harry Potter is, and not be named, just spoken of in hushed tones. They cause the reader to feel uncomfortable because it is natural to feel anger, sadness, or even emotional pain for the characters who are victims of a broken society. It would not feel normal or even acceptable in many spaces to raise the topic of child abuse as a casual



discussion over a cup of English tea. Maybe both the artist and the author felt apprehensive about having a conversation but obliged to share this so that a more significant audience could digest it, thus the creation of 'Waxy' by Grudova.

Marley (2010) concludes, 'The average man can't prove most of the things that he chooses to speak of, and still won't research and find out the root of the truth that you seek.' To the women of this world, I stand with you.

Red Sultan's Big Boy by Chuck Palahniuk

The Privilege that Privilege Brings To Some


Excerpt From Red Sultan's Big Boy

'Compared to Signal 30 and the barbershop magazines, what Randall found on the internet was worse. A person might as well eat poison to download this clip. He didn't have to watch for more than a couple of minutes to recognise his horse. What Red Sultan's Big Boy was doing to a naked, bent-over man was the ultimate abomination—an image Randall would be burdened to carry to his grave.


If nothing else, it felt comforting to know he was the last among his friends and neighbours to be stained by watching this strange, sad outrage. It was equally galling to imagine what others were imagining, him hosting the purebred under his roof. But where they saw sin, he recognised loneliness. A brand of loneliness that Randall hadn't known existed.

He hit Enter and watched the video clip play a second time. It could be what occurred in the video wasn't about pleasure as much as it was about surviving the real version of what life did to you every day. Randall reasoned that it was about subjecting oneself to a greater power. Whether that be pleasure or a physical test, it wasn't cluttered up with ideas of romantic love.' (Palahniuk, pg.62-63, 2015)

In a world of cancellation culture, reality TV and viral faux pas, we have Chuck Palahniuk serving up a feast for your eyes and compelling you to eat it; after all, gluttony is permitted when it comes to reading. In the opening line of *Twelfth Night*, William Shakespeare wrote, 'If music is the food of love, then play on.' (Act 1 Scene 1, 1623) Effectively, with his nauseating collection of openly perverted short stories,



Palahniuk instructs the reader that if reading is the food of dark curiosity, then read on. It is vital to highlight that he named this collection *Make Something Up, Stories You Can't Unread*. The title might first be taken as a joke, but it is actually quite accurate. Just as his narrators and protagonists cannot unsee or undo the acts they seek out or perpetrate, we, as readers, are also unable to erase them from our minds once read. When I first read 'Red Sultan's Big Boy', my stomach churned, and I wondered how on Earth something like this got clearance for publishing. However, I could not forget or file it into the archives of my mind. Unsurprisingly, I should confess that I have read his unique collection several times over, and my reaction remains the same, but like Randall, I return for more. This is the paradox of Palahniuk's fiction: his characters live to satisfy appetites that disgust them, full of either shame or defiance over their objectively disgusting predilections. Unable to look away, horrified but fascinated, the reader is placed in the same role as his characters. We may assume 'Red Sultan's Big Boy' (2015) is designed to make any good-minded, law-abiding citizen regurgitate their breakfast and close the book scandalised. Only to re-open it and re-read what they just read to confirm if it was real and to relive the disgust that people behave in this manner in the same world we all reside in. Palahniuk demonstrates that you can have eerie characters that aren't monsters, vampires, witches or ghosts. These menacing characters look and behave like every other pedestrian around you. In most fiction, film, television, and even news reporting, the things these characters do or 'get away with' are seen as a sure sign of evil or moral degradation, inevitably indicating some far worse sin. But in Palahniuk's work, these are ordinary people, like you or I, with access to the same internet and the same ability to witness the most horrifying scenes at the click of a mouse. The only difference, perhaps, is impulse control. In our lives, we can choose




not to watch, not to participate, but Palahniuk confronts us with the fact that just as many people – ordinary people – in what feels like the privacy of their own minds, *do* choose to hit play, to type in that search, to subject themselves to the horror. And that we might do just the same in the right mood or circumstances.

Palahniuk is an author who is unafraid to give shadow characters the lead in any chapter. It is almost as if he ventures down an abandoned road, discovers a derelict prison, wanders inside, picks up an eroded rock laid untouched beside a putrid toilet and finds the most revolting characters known to all. Then he picks them up and quotes, 'Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.' – Oscar Wilde. Then, the characters accept the advice without hesitation, and readers are gifted with a fully heinous act of a horse penetrating the rear end of an adult white male.


In 2005, Jennifer Sullivan from the *Seattle Times* reported that a man died after having sex with a horse, aptly named 'Big Dick'. The police later discovered that the farm had been operating as a secret space for people interested in the crime of bestiality to meet up and experience their dark sexual desires in the privacy of a secluded farm and with the peace of mind of knowing that every attendee shares their inclination. Ten years later, Palahniuk reminded the world, 'From the recorded grunts and groans, the man under the horse thought he was having a grand old time. He must've known he was on videotape.' (pg. 63, 2015)

Palahniuk reveals this sub-category of society through his short story, along with giving us some psychological insight into how we ended up like this – either perpetrating degrading acts or, on some level, being entertained by them. This may be a shocking or uncomfortable insight, but Palahniuk's work reminds us that nothing is off-limits or out of bounds for writers. Essentially, anything that happens to anyone, anywhere and at any given time can and will be written about.




We could read his motivation as a subverting of the heroic narrative. If we look at the most popular works of fiction of the last fifty years, we could focus on fantasy such as *The Lord of the Rings* or even the Marvel cinematic universe. Stories of heroism, perseverance against the odds, fantasies of our struggles against and, ultimately, victories over evil. If we look at works set in the real world, we may still find moral messages, characters rewarded for good behaviour, and wicked acts punished. Often, it feels as though popular writers shy away from the chaos, violence and brutality of real life, and we enjoy fiction that gives us a model of fairness, justice, or adventure where nobody does anything too unacceptable. Palahniuk turns this on his head, and he demonstrates that stories can have characters and situations who behave in sickening but – if we're really honest with ourselves - familiar ways. Stories can have modern-day human characters, such as Randall in the excerpt above, and they can show the characters behaving familiarly to the reader – in the sense that we may judge Randall and look down on him when we read the story, but the fact is that when we ourselves view something shocking and unbelievable online, many of us will play the video again and even share it with our friends. To want to shock them, to see their reaction, maybe even to make sure that we've reduced them to our level: I can't unsee this horrible thing, and now neither can you. The alternative is too lonely. We have, after all, chosen to read a book named *Stories You Can't Unread!*

We could interpret 'Red Sultan's Big Boy' as a story about privilege and the desire for some members of today's society to be a part of an exclusive group, however grotesque. The route to such membership is accessible through being cash-rich. With a clever measure of foreshadowing at the story's start, 'She had her




heart set on it: a purebred Arabian three-year-old the red-brown of polished mahogany. The horse had to be priced thousands out of their reach from its bloodlines.' (Palahniuk, pg. 50, 2015) Readers are treated to an innocent start to an insight into class and wealth in a rural town and how, on the peripheries, the locals voice their unanimous agreement that they are disgusted with the new horse Randall has purchased for his thirteen-year-old daughter: it feels like a crass display of wealth and power. However, the unknown begins to contact Randall, bidding on his horse that was put on sale by his not-so-innocent daughter. The premise in Randall's mind is that he believes he is doing his best by protecting her from the darkness that the internet brings. Even when he is shown signs that his daughter is not entirely innocent, he continues to plead ignorance by filling signs of her wrongful behaviour with excuses. It is not until close to the end of this story that he plucks up the courage to ask her why she's put Big Red up for auction; is it due to her watching the video? At this stage in the story, readers now know that Randall's daughter, Lisa, is an only child, and her father lives on a ranch that has been passed down through the generations of his family. In a time when people are struggling with the cost of living and selling their pet horses, Randall purchases Big Red for \$6000, a week after his daughter's first horse, Sourcrout, suspiciously passes away. After around two weeks, Randall finds out that Big Red has been put up for sale, and the bidding reaches a figure just shy of three million dollars. Palahniuk then shows us, through Randall and Lisa, how we place values on life as a society. Through internal monologue, we become privy to Randall's thoughts after discovering what has happened with Big Red. He attempts to rationalise the situation he has found himself in by asking if it is okay to sell Big Red as the horse did not look miserable in the video and even weighing a life of pulling a plough against time participating in zoophilia with an




owner that will ensure Big Red will live a comfortable life. Randall even starts to spend the money in his head. However, we see the flip side to Randall's expression of concern for the horse through his daughter Lisa and the dialogue on how they will be wealthier than ever before. Lisa places justification for the secret sale and disregards the death of the male by explaining that the video is funny, 'Paris Hilton. Kim Kardashian. Pam Anderson. Rob Lowe has all made sex tapes!' (Palahniuk, pg. 65, 2015) To Randall's shock – and to ours as readers – Lisa goes on to emphasise that this tape is funny and okay to share, as it was about a wealthy, heterosexual, divorced white male with one child who died as a result of his own absurd and self-destructive decisions. Randall challenges Lisa during this dialogue, and Lisa explains that if it were a girl, it would be a criminal offence for anyone to watch; if it were a black man, it would be considered racist to share; and if it were a woman, it would be seen as misogynistic and seen as a way to promote violence against women. (Palahniuk, pg. 65, 2015) As it is, though, the privileged and self-selecting victim has his very status as a victim denied; it is not even a tragic accident; it's comical, and he deserves to be mocked. The one thing nobody in the story (apart from Randall) questions is *why*; what could happen to somebody to make them do this?

Throughout the entire duration of this story, we are showered with reminders and inferred notes that Lisa is a child. A child who has already become desensitised to some of the most unspeakable actions in life. Even though she has a father who claims to have done his best to protect her from the dark world online, he also chose to turn his head away from the fact that he has given her a smartphone and has heard her occasionally mention a horse video online. Here, we have Palahniuk using a magic mirror, analogous to the one owned by the Evil Queen in Snow White



(Brothers Grimm, 1812), where the mirror shows the owner this is happening. Yet, like many characters across the vast realm of stories and authentic characters, you may have encountered, evidence of something wrong can lead to the witness turning away in the hopes that it will go away.

We do not need to look too far at analogies in rap. It is worth remembering that these examples come from some of the most high-profile, successful and easily accessible examples of mass popular culture of the 21st century. (With perhaps a side note that there is nothing more mainstream, nothing less subversive, and unfortunately nothing less shocking than violence against women). On 'The Marshall Mathers LP', world-famous Rapper Eminem bellows, 'Shut up, slut! You're causin' too much chaos. Just bend over and take it like a slut, okay, Ma? "Oh, now he's rapin' his own mother. Abusin' a whore, snortin' coke, and we gave him the Rollin' Stone cover?" You goddam right, bitch, and now it's too late. I'm triple platinum, and tragedies happened in two states.' (The Marshall Mathers LP, 2000). Here, Eminem confesses that he's aware that everything he said on this track and several others were highly controversial and that he pictures big corporations worrying about the awards and accolades they have publicly bestowed on him, with their subsequent regret due to the backlash from people across the globe. However, he also points out that he has reached triple platinum in the industry, which is comparable to winning the Pulitzer or even the Nobel prize in the writing world. In other words, he's saying yes, some of you might be unhappy with the content, but most listeners are appreciative and understand why I'm saying this; he even concludes, 'Know why I say these things? Cause ladies' screams keep creepin' in Shady's dreams and the way things seem, I shouldn't have to pay these shrinks. These 80 Gs a week to say the same things tweece, twice, whatever, I hate these things.' (The Marshall Mathers



LP, 2000). Whatever we may think, the self-awareness, meta-posturing and pre-consciousness of an audience's reaction to the shocking material he is *expected to deliver* is key to his power as a lyricist and to his ability to comment on the industry and his status within it as he does so. These are, in that sense, 'songs you can't unhear'.

In the same manner, Palahniuk is an author who openly acknowledges that haters will attempt to harangue him with questions about the content of his work, and many will condemn him for writing about shocking things. However, like a true writer, he asks if what he writes about happens in life, and seeing that it does, what are the repercussions? What does it mean for the characters, and what does it mean for us? That is his approach to any reader that challenges his moral compass, as actual life isn't all about calm days lounging on the beach with a mojito in hand, listening to the distant sounds of wildlife and inhaling the fresh ocean air. Life is far more complex and can be sinister. Therefore, it is important to write about everything and not assume it will be ignored or censored because it is not to your taste. After all, these are stories you can't unread.


For me as a writer, reading such dark and dehumanising literature, I feel it inspires me to be less anxious. As the literary world loves gore with a hint of debauchery, I'm positive Crow and all the other realistic yet corrupted characters will fit in nicely in the minds of readers across the globe. Palahniuk is an author I return to when I need to remind myself that it is acceptable to write about the raw, the shocking, and the taboo.

When did Death Become Entertainment?

Excerpt from Zimmerland

The patron looks like he's in his forties. He's kind of fat, with reddish hair, and is wearing jeans and a T-shirt. He sits on a couch. He has an orange bracelet on his wrist, which means he's signed the waiver for full contact. Green means I can't touch them. Orange means I can engage the patron with reasonable and moderate physical contact to enhance the module's visceral engagement. Green or orange. I don't know which patrons are worse.

The induction process begins: in house 336, a voice like warm gravy comes in through speakers shaped like books on a bookcase: "Welcome to Cassidy Lane, your home, your safe place." The voice recaps how the patron has performed to the point, explaining everything in a tight little narrative that covers whether or not they succeeded in identifying who was stealing money in the Work Jerk module, how amazing it was when they stopped that terrorist plot during the Terror Train module (if they choose to pay an additional \$35), and how now, finally, they can go relax, safe at home. That is until...the voice tremors with worry. "What's this? It seems today isn't just any day on Cassidy Lane." Then, automation sends the blinds shooting open as if the house is possessed by a poltergeist. "He's here again. The stranger. You've seen him walking around. Wandering closer and closer to your home. This week, you're the head of the neighbourhood watch. Maybe it's time you asked him a few questions." A chime goes off. Three holes in the wooden floor open, and up pop three different pedestals. Pedestal A has a holophone that could be used to call the cops, family members, or anybody else. Pedestal B has a gun (a BB gun




that sounds and looks like the real thing). And pedestal C is empty. It's for the tough-guy patrons. Almost all patrons (84 per cent when I've been on the module) grab the gun on pedestal B. Almost nobody uses the holophone. "Remember, this is your home, not his." And then it begins. (Pg. 87, 2018, Adjei-Brenyah)

Disclaimer: In February 2012, George Zimmerman of Florida shot and killed a black child named Trayvon Martin. Zimmerman stated that as he drove through the neighbourhood that evening, he spotted Trayvon Martin walking along the street, which made Zimmerman feel threatened, so he waited for him to pass by, left his car and shot him dead. It is important to note that Zimmerman is a white adult man. – The Guardian (2013)


Introduction

Some people look into the sky and send praise to the heavens above, begging their god(s) for a sign that one day, soon, he will save them from the plight of misfortune and even death from being born with darker-than-white skin. I imagine Adeji-Brenyah looked down on Earth and zoomed into his community at both national and international levels. He then tapped into his inner thoughts to the archives where the memories of racial injustice are swirling around amid confusion. Repetitive questions, like 'Why?' When will the world see black people as equals? Will black lives matter in my lifetime? What can I do to help? Adjei-Brenyah picked up a pen and a notebook and developed a unique, 'well-informed' collection of short stories that place black characters at the centre. With an often intrusive insight into how it feels to be black in a world that holds the equality act up as a transparent façade that attempts to blur the reality, which is that many will consider you less than human



because the shade of your skin is viewed as dangerous, untrustworthy and more often than not, a threat to life.


Within this rare collection, *Zimmerland* was written. An astonishing look into what a potential future could look like in our world now. Reading this particular story made me feel uncomfortable and inspired. I have effectively spent a lifetime reading stories, ranging from happy thoughts about the delightful things in our lives to the sinister mind of a serial killer and how they got away with it for years. I remember cringing in my seat as Humbert Humbert from *Lolita* described how his actions were justified and how Patrick Bateman confessed to his peers in *American Psycho*. To a certain extent, both novels depict the way we can ignore or overlook even the most heinous acts. When something is particularly uncomfortable or shocking, like Bateman's colleagues, we ignore it and continue as usual. However, I have never felt so angry at a story that takes something many of us enjoy doing: going to a theme park and briefly indulging in a fantasy life. 'Zimmerland' combines this popular pastime with survivalist fantasy, violent hero complexes, and brutal acts of murder. In the fictional theme park, white Americans pay to live out a fantasy of acting as a kind of private, racially profiling militia. Furthermore, the basis of 'Zimmerland' stems from the fact that a white adult male named George Zimmerman killed a child and did not face the consequences of taking a life. Because the victim was black, it's okay. You get a pass. Adjei-Brenyah wrote this story unapologetically; some of us express our opinion through conversation, and many of us use typical convection such as a tweet with a hashtag, hoping that somewhere someone sees and offers validation in the form of a like. In contrast, Adjei-Brenyah wrote a story and did not water down any aspect of the narrative, structure or inner monologue of the characters. If the concept seems far-fetched, we might reflect that it is a potential reality in an already weird



world where, every other day, another person is killed because of the shade of their skin. Their loved ones rarely get justice, but the recently deceased get a pinch of selective outrage and their name trending on social media.

Through *Zimmerland*, readers get a firsthand preview of what life could be like if we continue to ignore critical issues of inequality, police brutality, racial profiling and a shocking lack of justice. Then the ideology of 'Zimmerland' has the potential to be conceived and delivered successfully as a new breed of experiences, the kind that assures the ignorant-minded that their discriminatory thoughts are okay and that this is a place for you to express yourself, with the added bonus of a certificate at the end. "He attacked me!" the patron says. "He tried to kill me!" I keep my eyes dead and continue to shallow-breathe. According to the guidelines, he's to be brought into the station for brief questioning, after which he'll be e-mailed a complimentary story about how he was found innocent in court after claiming self-defence.' (Adjei-Brenyah, pg. 90, 2018)

This section explores how writers imagine a notional future through literature, using objects that are both familiar and new to the reader and places that demonstrate that it only takes one change to alter the future of humanity. Adjei-Brenyah blends the emotions of the characters (realistic) into their vision to show the reader how plausible this could be. Finally, details that act as a sealant to prevent key factors from escaping. If this is an uncomfortable experience for the reader, it is because we are usually encouraged to see acts of violence and outrage like the murder of Trayvon Martin as the *exception* or tragic mistakes and the perpetrators as a few bad apples who do not represent the majority. As opposed to what they are: systematic,




worryingly pervasive... In 'Zimmerland', we are forced to confront this head-on. It only takes a minimal shift in our reality to reveal some uncomfortable truths that lay beneath the surface.

Imagining the Future – Writers/Rappers alike imagine 'better or worse' futures.

Many of us have the ability to dream, and as writers, a copious number of us have the potential to create new ideas, objects and worlds with our skills. And as readers, we can imagine exactly how what is written will look, feel, sound, taste and smell. Therefore, through notional futures or fictional dystopias, we can live out our worst fears, test the boundaries of what is possible and critically explore the extreme truths of our present reality. It's worth considering 'Zimmerland' as part of that dystopian tradition. David Lodge comments on *1984* – one of the highest profile and influential examples of dystopian fiction - that 'Orwell, in short, imagined the future by invoking, modifying and recombining images of what readers, consciously or unconsciously, already knew.' (pg. 137, 1992)

The essence of this writing trait is remarkable. A writer writing about the same scenario but adding their unique twist by presenting an amalgamation of common/familiar objects to invoke an imagined future. Similar to the combinations mentioned above in my thesis.

To visualise the future and convey it through narrative, Adjei-Brenyah has created a story that provokes the mind to think beyond history and the present day. Essentially, he is asking readers to consider what our future may look like if we don't work together to make our world more balanced with true equality by being kind to others no matter the status of their protected characteristics and fairness in the justice system if one of us fails to abide by the law. Also, as a genuine and raw factor to this




story, Adjei-Brenyah introduces his imagined future with imagined technological objects such as an endo mecha-suit and settings like the Cassidy Lane module. 'Two minutes. I strip down to my briefs; then I put on my armour. We use outdated versions of the exoskeleton battle suits that the Marines use. I start with the mecha-bottoms: a pair of hard brown ergometal pants that make me limp before they're activated. Once they're activated, I can squat a half-ton.' (Adjei-Brenyah, pg. 85-86, 2018)

As a reader, you might feel inclined to conduct an online search for the exoskeleton battle suit and discover that it exists in the world you inhabit. You may find that this fact enhances the realism of the story, although set in an imagined future; as a reader, it made me pause to digest the gravity of what Adjei-Brenyah has created.

As an author of short stories, Adjei-Brenyah encapsulates a fraction of imagining the future but reminds readers that an imagined future could also be mephistophelian: 'He points the handgun at me. I locate: your life is in the hands of someone who doesn't even know you and thinks you don't deserve it.' (Adjei-Brenyah, pg. 89, 2018)


Central to the success of 'Zimmerland' is the way the imagined theme park experience gives patrons the motivation and self-justification to commit their crimes (within the safe environment of the park): paid actors provoke them or threaten them and allow them to retaliate or to feel like the victim who has to defend themselves. They externalise their internal racism in the most extreme ways, and they are paying to enjoy the experience and feel good about themselves. There are moments where this relationship between the actor and the action is blurred: 'I make sure I'm close enough that when the pouch explodes, warm what-would-be blood gets onto the



patron's face. He's breathing hard, and Murderpaint TM faux blood is sprinkled on his face, and he's forgotten that he's paid to be here with me.' (pg.89, 2018) Everything is fake and given a trademarked name, but the actor manages to get close enough to the patron to make him feel something real as he gets splattered in fake blood. Either this is an unwelcome turn of events or just adds to the "authentic" experience for the patron. What is horrifying, ultimately, about this vision of the future is that it externalises the real and present racism, violent inner fantasies and fascist wish-fulfilments that exist in our world.

In writing about the future, we are always expressing something about our present – either to critique or satirise it, to bring something into the light, or to express our desires and aspirations. As a young girl, I imagined I would marry a prince, live in a castle (one with a moat), have three children and master the art of baking a homemade apple pie with a nice golden crust around the edges and juicy baked apple filling. My grandad would also remind me to attend church and imply that I'd find a nice Christian boy to marry. However, I longed for a future of wealth, success and power.

An imagined future is an aspect of rap lyrics, as many rappers usually start by telling their truth in the form of a song. For example, in 1998, a song titled *White Manz World* by Shakur was posthumously released. It focused on the harm the black community caused, with the additional racial discrimination from white people. Shakur highlights, 'Sometimes we overlook the fact that we be' ridin' hard on our sisters. We don't be knowin' the pain we be causin' in this white man's world. In this white manz world, I'm not saying I'm innocent in all this. I'm just sayin', in this white man's world. This song is for y'all. For the times that I messed up, or we messed up.' (Shakur, 1998)



In his song *White Manz World*, Shakur encourages best practices by acknowledging how some black men treat black women and expressing that this community needs to improve. Even more so, as the black inhabitants of this world are already at a disadvantage of racial injustice, through the lyrics, Shakur admits to failing and points out ways society can improve. Adjei-Brenyah highlights the same practice by showing how many secondary characters protested the initial construction of the theme park, subsequently targeting the players, as the protagonist notes, 'It's early, so my car is clean. No flyers asking me what it's like to sell my soul.' (pg. 99, 2018)

This form of writing could be considered conscious, as both the author and rapper are creating stories linked to our current climate. Many rap artists imagine a life that has improved positively. 'We gotta make a change. It's time for us as a people to start makin' some changes. Let's change the way we eat, let's change the way we live and let's change the way we treat each other. You see, the old way wasn't workin', so it's on us to do what we gotta do to survive.' (Shakur, 10.13.1998)

However, like Zimmerland, a potential future could look menacing and remorseless. 'Shoot first, look at their head burst bleeding, don't wanna hear no shit this evening, believe me.' (Shakur, 10.13.1998)


In these lyrics, Shakur is speaking about what he aims to do during a future encounter with a foe. A violent fantasy of revenge or self-defence. Both the author and the rap artist are similar in executing this writing trait, showing a global audience an imagined future on different scales.



Internal Monologue

With great sadness, with each page turn, more heartache continues. As a reader, you may feel a particular way towards this text. I have felt anger and disgust. I understand this story may have teased out anguish, or perhaps you are surprised by your agreement with Heland Zimmer, the CEO of Zimmerland, that the modules create a better society. Meaning it is safer for players to get 'fake-killed' by the patrons than to get killed in real life outside of the theme park. Adjei-Brenyah introduces readers to a variety of emotions through the protagonist Isaiah's self-questioning and dealing with internal conflict, 'I wouldn't bother with my usual argument: that it was better to get fake blasted ten to twenty million times a day than for an actual kid to get murdered out in the world forever. Did anyone ever think of that, ever?' (pg. 92, 2018)


Being given a chance to sit inside a character's mind and watch firsthand how their thoughts play into their actions, readers are offered an opportunity to understand better why the characters behave as they do. This interpretation echoes that of Lodge (1992): 'For the reader, it's rather like wearing earphones plugged into someone's brain, monitoring an endless tape-recording of the subjects impressions, reflections, questions, memories and fantasies, as they are triggered by physical sensations or the association of ideas.' (pg, 47) It's also important to note that in 'Zimmerland', we are placed in the first person perspective of one of the employees of the park, not a patron or a manager. Whatever our own profession or status, this is an insight into what it might be like to play this part, employed for our own identity and paid to re-enact the violence routinely visited on that identity over and over again. A living nightmare, but one the narrator uneasily justifies to himself as making a difference in the real world.



Adjei-Brenyah unapologetically expresses his disgust at the ignorance we as a society have allowed to plague and tarnish our world. He takes a slice of an ongoing societal defect, adds it to a plate of entertainment through the construct of a theme park and serves with a delicate drizzle of full-fat cream of facts that are hard to swallow.

This conversation has occurred across many generations. Yes, it is true; you can join in by tuning into the international news reports and answering questions on camera if you live in the area where a person lost their life. Or perhaps you can interject into a plethora of comments online and add yours behind the disguise of a celebrity photo, a username with no meaning, and a few emojis to make your uneducated comment make sense to others doing the same thing and then leave the conversation there.


The deceased loses traction, and they remain in a state of purgatory until another life is taken and someone, somewhere, replays the footage of the interviews the last time this happened. The catfishes will once again flood the comments section with re-posts and new posts until the hype dies down again. Some participants will be either pleased or horrified at the number of jokes made by those following this trending topic. Ranging from a pleasant image of the victim coupled with a hashtag: First name, Last name, Rest in Peace. Through the graphic pictures of how Kendrick Johnson was found rolled up dead inside a gym mat. *The Forensic Pathologist declared that he died from blunt force trauma to his neck and the back of his head. The state ruled his death as no foul play* (2013)—the New York Times. Author Claudia Rankine created the lyric essay collection ‘Citizen’ which opens up with a page of dedication for each victim of police brutality and racial attacks from



other members of the public. With every reprinted edition of the book, the list of dedications tragically grows longer.

These common traits above create a lot of temporary noise. We can assume some helpful conversations are taking place, but a subject is being scraped off the plate into a bin-liner and disposed of on Thursday, with the rest of the three-day-old cake. Noise that shows readers the actions or end result of their inner monologue. Adjei-Brenyah gives his readers the actions snippets of how this awful societal issue has affected the protagonist, who feels a sense of duty to continue showing up for a job, where he feels a sense of responsibility to play a character in a role that feeds through the ignorant narrative that black people are dangerous. He is placed in a no-win situation, and perhaps we all are. The fact remains that a work of art, music or literature has a specific and lasting power to comment provocatively, thoroughly and intelligently without reducing the situation or needlessly adding to the comment pile. It can be an act of protest or witness or a memorial that will last.

Lyrics can have the virtue of a quick response: a timely and provocative reply, sometimes in anger, sometimes to express the anger and frustration others are feeling but don't have the platform to share it with much effect. Three years after Trayvon Martin was killed, Rapper Kendrick Lamar released a song titled 'The Blacker the Berry' (2015) 'So why did we weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street?' Three years after that, Jay-z contributed even further to spreading awareness about the devastating loss of Trayvon Martin's life, but echoing his anger in response to death threats from George Zimmerman, he said, 'Georgie Porgie sinnin' and sending me threats, save your breath. You couldn't beat a flight of steps, try that shit with a grown man; I'll kill that fuckboy with my own hand.' (Top Off, 2018)



Both the rap artists and the author express how this fatal real-life news has affected their lives and how they seek to use their platform to share information, with the desire to aid the eradication of racism and societal injustices that people of colour face from birth, and that white readers and listeners may have the luxury of ignoring. Like the protagonist Isaiah, the rapper and the author convey their opinions and visions in a familiar way, with a common end goal: equality and equity for all. 'The seal and the constitution reflect the thinking of the founding fathers, that this was to be a nation by white people and for white people. Native Americans, blacks, and all other non-white people were to be the burden bearers for the real citizens of this nation.' (Shakur, 26.09.1996)

Seventeen years after Shakur said the above, Neighbourhood Watch Leader George Zimmerman was acquitted of murdering Trayvon Martin. He reiterated that he felt threatened. (2013)

Detail

The details in both fiction and lyrics are a key component of storytelling, as Wood (2009) explains, 'But it's not possible any other way; only in the details can we understand the essential, as books and life have taught me. One needs to know every detail since one can never be sure of which of them is important and which word shines out from behind things.' (pg, 48)

Essentially, Wood underpins a core element of fiction, which is there is no story without detail. Perhaps the untrained eye or the indifferent reader may disagree with Wood's comment. They may overlook the fact that there is more to the successful


construction of fiction than simply the common thought of a beginning, middle and end.

While reading Zimmerland, I paused to absorb the depths of the 'Zimmerland Mission.

- 1) To create a safe space for adults to explore problem-solving, justice, and judgment.
- 2) To provide the tools for patrons to learn about themselves in curated heightened situations.
- 3) To entertain.' (Adeji-Brenyah, pg. 95, 2018)

Taking that statement from Woods and allowing time for Adeji-Brenyah's words to digest into a palatable understanding, I found the details that glowed brighter than anything else. For instance, at this stage of the story, the reader has already been shown a disturbing interaction between the protagonist and main player, Isaiah and a patron during the Cassidy Lane Module. This exploration comes at the cost of ending a life, albeit in a safe environment and a dark form of live-action role-play. The place in question prides itself on mimicry, as the main character, Isaiah, explains, 'The patron opens his door. He's not smiling. The engagement protocol on the lane is response through mimicry. If he's not smiling at me, I'm definitely not smiling back at him.' (Adeji-Brenyah, pg. 87, 2018)

This is the first glance of interplay the reader is shown, and if we examine this part and compare it to the mission statement, then contrast it with the engagement protocol of the Cassidy Lane Module. I think we can agree that it eviscerates point one of the mission statement. Those small details could feel insignificant at first because all businesses have mission statements. But who is paying attention to this fine detail right after experiencing being shot (presumably dead, as this is a curated



real-life experience) vicariously through exclusive access to the inner monologue of Isaiah?

Even more alarming is the way Heland Zimmer (CEO of Zimmerland) seamlessly announces what he deems to be a minor change to the Zimmerland Mission.

'3) To entertain patrons of all ages.' (Adeji-Brenyah, pg. 95, 2018) Imagine waking up and completing your usual daily tasks, whether gardening, buying groceries, playing on a games console or heading to work. Now imagine your actions being interrupted and, in most cases, ended through the power of bullets entering different parts of your body from a weapon that was aimed at you, as unbeknown to you, your life is a target because your skin is black.

'He's wearing a shirt with a knight on it, a local high school team mascot. He always wears it. It's his killing shirt. It's stained a brownish red already.' (Adjei-Brenyah, pg. 103, 2018)

The above is taken from the final page of this short story, showing the reader a chilling reminder that despite all these ideas/plans to resolve the grave matter of apparent racial injustice, nothing has worked so far, and the purpose is lost through the attainment of ways to capitalise off death and promote it as a resolution. If something brings in a constant stream of revenue, why disrupt that? If the experience is a justified one, why stop it? I assume those who respond with backlash will be met with questions such as, would you prefer a fake death or real lives lost? Then the argument would be, why not invest in preventing the loss of innocent lives due to the police? However, it will bring us back full circle, asking why disrupt a constant and ascending income stream.



Conclusion

Reacting directly to the events described above, *Zimmerland* is a unique short story that exudes the truth under a thin layer of satire, as Adjei-Brenyah crafts a piece of art that effectively affirms the life of a black person matters. The lives of black people aren't levels on a game for you to play with. Black people do not form a segment of time in your life where you spend a few hours at a theme park, re-enacting ways in which you can kill them and justify it by stating you felt threatened. This is real life, and most bullet wounds end in death.

Death is Not the End by David Foster-Wallace


After the Thoughts and Prayers, What Next?

Excerpt from Death is Not the End

'Now fifty-six, lying in an unwet XL speedo-brand swimsuit in an incrementally reclinable canvas deck chair on the title deck beside the home's pool, a poet who was among the first ten Americans to receive a 'Genius Grant' from the prestigious John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, one of only three American recipients of the Nobel Prize for Literature now living, 5'8", 181 lbs., brown/brown, hairline unevenly recessed because of the inconsistent acceptance/rejection of various Hair Augmentation Systems.' (David Foster-Wallace, pg. 1, 1999)

'Death is Not the End' *is a concise story from David Foster-Wallace, a unique collection, Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999). Wallace had an unmatched writing style: complex, self-conscious sentences which sometimes seemed to unfold infinitely, and which Zadie Smith identified as 'hysterical realism'. Through examinations of his self-consciousness and unmasking the motivations of characters and why they believe in pursuing objects, happiness will be equated with a legacy fit for royalty. Foster-Wallace introduces readers to a point of view that is intrusive and self-critical.


It is a story that, at first glance, may feel strange, as if you're missing the point. Foster-Wallace paints a clear image with the narrator's detailed description of what is happening at this precise, brief moment in time for the protagonist – which, to summarise in the most uncomplicated and -inoffensive way, the character is lying beside his pool, reading a magazine which 'absurdly called him the closest thing to a



genuine literary immortal., (Foster-Wallace pg. 2, 1999) The character does not appear shocked at the reviews; it's more of a sense of disappointment as if the comments are ridiculous; how can he be a literary genius? We encounter him here at rest, slightly overweight, at the peak of a celebrated literary career, his financial and cultural success indicated by his material wealth (his swimming pool, expensive hair treatments for balding) and various literary awards – which he doubts at the same time as resenting the ones he hasn't won.

There is an element of the author's shadow trait on display here, as Foster-Wallace was an author who battled with many internal demons and seemingly churned his inner pain into the most remarkable pieces I have ever laid my eyes on. As a writer, I was drawn to Foster-Wallace for many reasons, like how he confidently expresses his trauma and life fears and the repetitive act of self-analysing through some of his characters. I, too, ask myself, who wrote that? When I review my literary creations. I become guarded when a reader shares positive feedback, and I have often laid in my bed in a state of self-denial, like I'm dreaming that I'm undertaking a PhD. Or maybe there are little elves that complete the work for me, grafting away like *The Elves and the Shoemaker* (Brothers Grimm, 1812)


Reading this story forces me to consider what I want from this life and whether praise and rewards are enough. Or will I crave something more? Like accepting that I, too, am a unique writer and what I create are precisely my creations. I'm unashamed to say that this author broke my heart because he is no longer here in this life; he made the decision to end his life on September 12, 2008, thus ending the production of even more prodigious works of textual art. Reading his collection of intricate, detailed stories, I felt a sense of belonging to the innumerable



people who also write about alien-like situations or subjective events and perceptions surrounding such moments. The exploration into the depths of the character's mind is done through bravery and going into more profound depths than the exposed layers at the surface. He becomes analytical and vulnerable enough to share this through the narration and dialogue in some of his pieces: helpless, almost pitiful, admitting to things most of us never even articulate.

As a writer, I have been through many periods of self-doubt and mental deprivation. Throughout this experience of creating my thesis, I have cried a thousand oceans and wandered alone through dark forests, forever questioning if I'm real.

From the excerpt above, we are shown through the character's description that they can't possibly be viewed in such regard, as they are slightly overweight, lazy, and have a receding hairline. Even knowing this, they still choose to wear swimwear that is too small; as Foster-Wallace points out, 'his penis curled tightly on itself inside the tight swimsuit.' (pg. 2, 1999) The level of detail in this story gives the impression that the author may have written about himself and amended fiction writer to poet. The age, height, hair colour, and other details match the author's appearance; some of the mentioned awards match the literary awards that Foster-Wallace himself won. We are also shown the writer/character in a very unguarded moment: this isn't how he'd present himself in an interview or his fiction; it's him in a private moment in his own home—the kind of moments where Palahniuk's characters might do something obscene. Here, though, it's more about what the writer-character does not do. He does nothing. He lies in his sun lounger. The protagonist is more successful than the vast majority of writers will ever be, both in




terms of critical acclaim and monetary reward for his art. He is, from most aspiring writers' perspectives, living the dream. And yet, he's not satisfied.

In a way, dissatisfaction is a consistent theme in all of Foster-Wallace's work. If Palahniuk is obsessed with transgression, obscenity and our wants and desires being mostly very bad, Foster-Wallace is concerned with how we're not fulfilled by what we think we want. In an earlier essay, 'A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again' (1995), originally commissioned as an article by Harper's magazine, Wallace writes about the experience of being on a luxury cruise liner: your every desire satisfied, every moment entertained by shows and pastimes, as much sumptuous food as you can eat and alcohol you can drink, constant service from reliable staff. Rather than being enjoyable, having every whim catered to makes Foster-Wallace, the reporter, unhappy. It makes him focus on the small things that are wrong. This reaches a peak when another cruise liner passes the one he's on, and Foster-Wallace finds himself fantasising about how much better it might be on board that ship.

"I am suffering here from a delusion, and I know it's a delusion, this envy of another ship, and still it's painful. It's also representative of a psychological syndrome that I notice has gotten steadily worse as the Cruise wears on, a mental list of dissatisfactions and grievances that started picayune but has quickly become nearly despair-grade. I know that the syndrome's cause is [...] plain old humanly conscious me, or, more precisely, that ur-American part of me that craves and responds to pampering and passive pleasure: the Dissatisfied Infant part of me, the part that always and indiscriminately WANTS." (315-316)


We can compare this to our writer in 'Death is Not the End'. He has already achieved everything he could have dreamed about as a writer. He is well-published,



well-regarded, and financially secure, and he lives a life of comfort and material luxury earned only by his art. He hasn't even compromised or sold out to achieve his success. But far from making him happy, it makes him hyperfocus on the wrong things. It makes him more petty, more insecure, more likely to perceive slights or insults to his status – we could even say it's made him less happy. He seems concerned or paranoid about his physical appearance; he seems bored and listless. Maybe he's won most of the literary prizes, but he hasn't won *that* one.


'Winner of two National Book Awards, a National Book Critics Circle Award, a Lamont Prize, two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Prix de Rome, a Lannan Foundation ing Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, a president emeritus PEN, a poet two separate American generations have hailed as the voice of their generation.' (Foster-Wallace, pg. 1, 1999)

As a reader, it is a perspective the author shares for them to interpret. Foster-Wallace does not give direct instructions like Machado; instead, he overshares the details, although he is candid with his audience. There is an evident flurry of ambiguity. It may always be there because he has blended showing and telling so finely that it is difficult to be sure of the author's intention with this story. However, this story gives another account of what it is like to become a successful writer and how all the awards in the world aren't enough when you've missed out on one. In the same respect, if the poet had won that missing award, would he automatically become fulfilled? Perhaps this story is about showing aspiring writers that it is important not to associate success with objects such as awards, a swimming pool, or even a house. If you are passionate about your craft, then allow your consistency to be a measure of success, as opposed to the objects, laws and definitions created by man. Tupac Shakur tells aspiring Rap artists, 'To all the seeds that follow me, protect




your essence. Born with less, but you are still precious.' (1996), Shakur explicitly asks that those who succeed him safeguard their soul. What makes them unique requires protection; otherwise, you could get lost in the wave of mimicry and lose your sense of self by feeling compelled to do what their predecessors have done before them and spend all their income on expensive items to demonstrate that they have made it. They are solitary in their feat, as very few people reach such heights in life. This serves as great advice for people seeking a career in the hip-hop industry, as many artists tend to get consumed with chasing a never-ending definition of success. The latest designer bag is forgotten when another rap artist shows their latest haul of expensive items. Then where is the value of the purchase? What is the purpose of spending so much? To impress whom, what does it do for the person spending all that money? Like the protagonist from the short story, there is an evident lack of fulfilment in the lifestyle they choose to pursue. Here, we have both the writer and the rapper sharing knowledge with the next generations that follow and, in a kindred spirit, different eras and lifestyles kind of way – they seek to educate others on the realities of life along that pathway.

Considering the title, 'Death is Not the End,' it is like a mini allegory that gets straight to the point. 'Death is Not the End' for some of us, in the respect that our legacy lives on for a period that seems forever. For instance, the works of William Shakespeare were first published in 1609, and still, in 2023, his writing is cited, re-written and even repeatedly made into film. The title serves as a small reminder that if you create something original, you will be remembered long after death. At the other end of the spectrum of death, Shakur shares, 'My childhood years were spent buryin' my peers in the cemetery. Here's a message to the newborns waitin' to breathe: if you believe,



then you can achieve: just look at me!' (1996) We are a society where some of us live vicariously through others and learn through their mistakes, and essentially, Shakur is saying that if you believe in yourself, you can be as successful as he is. The waiting to breathe is symbolic and serves as a metaphor for those waiting for their chance to get to the top. In other words, it is known that the odds are stacked against all those who choose the creative routes in life – but if you are genuinely passionate about your craft, then you will be blessed with all you desire and more. Foster-Wallace tells his audience that death is a guarantee for all life. However, your legacy will supersede your final heartbeat. The story subtly illuminates that some of the awards the poet won were nearly impossible to achieve. For instance, he points out, 'A poet two separate American generations have hailed as the voice of their generations.' (Foster-Wallace, pg.1, 1999), Which is another way to reiterate that 'Death is Not the End'. Now, the protagonist has two distinctive generations relating to his poetry, which means they will continue to share and introduce his writing to others, young and old. For successful writers and rappers alike, their creations outlive them, with many being posthumously given awards and having acknowledgement of their impact on our culture. To this day, the art of Shakespeare is being deciphered by the next generation. Foster-Wallace was discovered by a literary novice, and Shakur is appreciated for the understanding and insights he shared during his lifetime. All three writers have since passed on, but let us take a moment to give them their flowers by honouring that they opened doors and made a path for creative individuals to pursue their dreams. Shakur adds, 'Embrace my words, make the world change.' (Smile for Me Now, 1996)

Rapper Scarface (who created Smile for Me Now with Shakur) stresses to other rappers, 'A man without focus; life could drive him insane. Stuck inside a ghetto




fantasy, hopin' it changes. But when I focus on reality, we broke and in chains.'

(1996) Scarface underlines that those in this world with no end goal will lose their minds. As they will forever lay in the form of metal purgatory, repeating the same redundant steps their predecessors completed will somehow work out better for them. Then, by the time they realise, it'll be too late, as they would've spent all their wealth on lavish items and at the end of their peak season within an industry that once adored them, they will be left in chains – either handcuffed in prison, or no income but still holding onto their diamond-encrusted crucifix, or unconventionally so, after all the fame, fortune and frivolousness all they have in the mental chains of depression that they can't break free from. The weighted dissatisfaction hits hard when they look in the mirror and look back on life, now knowing that all these expensive items and accolades mean nothing in the end. What do you now feel when your lyrics are no longer landing with your audience, or your books aren't selling and are dumped in the bookstore's bargain bucket? Have you accomplished enough or spent a lifetime chasing the unattainable?

There's a nice quote in Wallace's graduation speech on freedom: "In the end, the really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways, every single day."

This suggests a kind of duty – that we find real meaning in whatever else we're doing in our lives, in our presence in other people's lives, our care, concern and sacrifice for the people we love. In the end, that's all we have.

Essentially, it prompts the writer/rapper to examine themselves, ask those questions and have a preview of what their potential end may look like. Even with all



the gold, the awards (often cast in gold) and all the cheers and celebration – it may not be all you presumed it would be.

After the death of Tupac Shakur, Scarface added a small blessing and farewell to a great life lost which serves as a conclusion that 'Death is Not the End', 'Let us pray, and as you journey into outer space. May the angels help to lead the way. May the prayers that our families made shine up on your soul to keep you safe and all the homies that done passed away. They there to greet you as you pass the gates and as you headed to the tunnels light; I hope it leads to eternal life. We say the prayers for our homie 'Pac.' (Smile for Me Now, 1996)

A kind of audible emblem that serves as a farewell and a blessing to the next chapter after death. The elements to look forward to seeing all those that passed before you and the wish that such a period helps the dead transcend through to eternal life. All the prayers that loved ones have sent help one on the journey through to outer space. For anyone in pursuit of their definition of happiness, and for all types of creative writers, your pieces will be remembered and cherished by someone somewhere on this planet.




Thesis Conclusion

This year has marked the 50th anniversary of hip-hop, a celebration of the genre and, most importantly, the tracks that changed the world. Since its conception, the unapologetic, direct and provocative content of rap lyrics has been seen as a damaging trope, and one many have shunted into a pile of unwanted narratives in our cultural history in the sense that they have been considered nonsensical, worthless and not something to be discussed alongside writers such as Foster-Wallace, Adeji-Brenyah, Machado, Pahlanuick or Grudova.

However, rap lyrics have influenced my unique collection of short fiction, with the aspiration that the literary world might start to view rap lyrics in the same tier as writers of poetry, drama and literary fiction. We do not need to look far to find the same concerns expressed by canonical, internationally acclaimed, canonical authors (love, jealousy and infidelity in Shakespeare; self-loathing, doubt and status anxiety in Dostoyevsky; zany, paranoid and mysterious narratives which seem to question the fabric of reality in Franz Kafka).


Examining such an art and its relationship to literature was no easy task. It was endemic to the negative opinions and connotations associated with rap, to the point where the literary world sometimes seems to disregard it as insignificant or only worthy of comment to accuse it of misogyny or glorifying violence. Why analyse Eminem when you have Bret Easton Ellis? To many, that makes sense, but I believe it is essential that we digest short fiction through the narrative the author intended and seek to understand the meaning or purpose of the story being told. Why go with the belief of the 'few' and speak untruths into the world about rap music when you can take a moment and learn about how rapper 50 Cent was raised or the moment



Kayne West was shot in the jaw and how this inescapably influenced their world view, their lived experience and ultimately their writing?

In my thesis, I have demonstrated that lyrics are a portal into another dimension of literature. One that has been rarely explored due to the reluctance of society to view, for example, the writings of rappers Tupac Shakur and Kendrick Lamar in the same breath as acclaimed poets like Ted Hughes or even popular novelists such as Gillian Flynn. Some people may even view this suggestion as offensive to the legends of literature and its relative cultural status. My argument, though, is that we find no less sophistication in the narrative and expressive techniques of rap lyric writing and, conversely, no subject too lowly, pathetic, violent or shocking that hasn't become the subject of serious literature.


With some exceptions, rap lyrics remain an area of writing that has yet to be investigated in depth and considered, particularly in relation to the discipline of creative writing and practice-based research undertaken by a writer such as myself. This is, I hope, by the intervention of my thesis, and it is my hope that it could inspire future writers, scholars and practitioners to do likewise. Throughout the construction of my thesis, I ensured I kept the essence of the short stories foremost in my mind, and by essence, I mean the influence of rap lyrics and how I've held true to my voice through exploring those original kernels of inspiration. Navigating through an area of writing that has often been at the epicentre of conservative cultural criticism was not an easy feat; however, I was not going to let the dismissal of the value of rap lyrics be a factor against using them alongside the phenomenal short fiction created by the core authors selected. For instance, in *Friday Black*, I focused on the importance of details and how the level of detail is key within short fiction. Rappers are equal



pioneers of this, as shown through the writings of Tupac Shakur, Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Nicki Minage and more. In short, for every critically acclaimed piece of fiction, a rapper has lyrics that will coincide and not only that, but they also tend to speak on a level that a mass audience can understand and empathise with, a gateway to cultural critique and awareness which does not exist at this scale in any other form. It would be wonderful if writers of literary short fiction had audiences in the millions, too. However, ignoring artworks and genres that *do* so on the grounds of populism is, at best, reductive and dismissive, not to say snobbish.

It is imperative to highlight that Kendrick Lamar was awarded the rare Pulitzer Prize in 2018. No Rap Artist before or after Lamar has accomplished such an award, and there aren't many rappers with the unique penmanship and mastery in writing lyrics that will ever come close to a Pulitzer Prize. As an avid reader and hip-hop connoisseur, I feel incredibly proud that the 'lyrics' were the core focus of his achievement. Hopefully, this award will encourage more literary scholars to cast a keen eye on rap lyrics in general and embrace and gorge on the vast number of stories waiting to inspire and influence the next generation of writers.

Every short story reviewed shows the narrative tools fiction writers use to develop and present strong pieces of literature. As I have demonstrated, this can equally be applied to most rap lyrics, as rappers are storytellers and creative writers like the authors we proudly praise and study. The tools used in rap and fiction writing are Character, Plot, Point of View, Setting, Object, and repetition, to name the principal elements. This may be seen as a bold argument, but I think it is fair to say that rap lyrics and short fiction share the same DNA; the only difference is that rap stories are told against a beat, and short fiction is presented in a book. At times, it




seems as though the misunderstanding of rap arises from a critic's inability to ascribe the same qualities (point of view, setting, characterisation) to the form.

In rap lyrics, I identified similarities to the materialistic values that characters place on objects. Some stories appear to directly reflect life today and the different levels of worth assigned to life – a critical question in the troubled 21st century as we reckon with entrenched inequalities, racism, classism, misogyny and genocide. It was beautiful to see that both the fiction writer and rapper aren't afraid to break the expectations imposed on them by society. Instead, they both ignored that invisible barrier and went on to produce some of the most controversial and eye-opening pieces of art that, to date, audiences still embrace and talk about. As a writer, I am as much in dialogue with my fellow authors of short fiction as I am with the musicians and lyricists, and I see no point in pretending otherwise.

Turning towards the creation process for my short fiction. This PhD has been the most amazing journey I have ever embarked on. As previously mentioned, I have cried so much as the desire to complete a life goal, with originality and eloquence delivered packages of intense self-doubt. Who am I to be writing nearly 100,000 words for a thesis in 2023?

I'm a writer who was constantly told I would not get further than working the tills in Kwik-Save (a grocery store that has since vanished from our high streets). For the past few years, I've been a writer who has had to hold down a full-time job, as I did not have the luxury of researching full-time or a nest egg of cash stored from birth. Throughout the development of every word in my thesis, I have struggled with depression due to the imbalance of life outside of work and university. I have been



diagnosed with OCD through the worry of losing my files from my computer, and I now wholeheartedly accept that I'm a writer who overthinks and the overthinking leads to wonder, the intrigue transitions into words, and the words become life. Life is my thesis, and the characters are the core; beating hearts are the epicentre of each phenomenal story. Ironically, this was all done alongside listening to hours of rap music, the secret authors behind some of the greatest stories I know.

I hope that I have demonstrated that rap lyrics serve not only as a strong point of reference when teaching the art of short fiction but also as a narrative that can and should be taken seriously for their technique, content and power to raise awareness of injustice and change.

My thesis has clearly expressed how significant rap lyrics can be to writers of all kinds. I have given birth to a stream of authentic pieces of short fiction. To clarify, I am not devaluing the inspiration from our literary Kings and Queens. I'm simply showing the world that rap lyrics are a barely explored province in our sphere of creative writers. Universities worldwide focus heavily on poetry, prose writing, and short fiction narratives; why not adopt rap lyrics to your arsenal and inspire the next generation of fiction writers? After all, every story has yet to be written.



Bibliography

Works Cited

Abbott, H. P. (2008) *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press.

Allah, B. S. (2020) 'Happy 65th Birthday to Hip Hop Pioneer DJ Kool Herc!', Available at: <https://thesource.com/2020/04/16/happy-65th-birthday-to-hip-hop-pioneer-dj-kool-herc/> (Accessed: 24 February 2021).


Adjei-Brenyah, N. (2018) *Friday Black*. United States of America: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.

Bailey, N. (2017) *Rapper Bow Wow Mocked After Posting Photo of 'Private Plane'*. Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/music/rapper-bow-wow-mocked-posting-fake-photo-private-plane-n757731> (Accessed 13 November 2023).

Belk, R. W. (1985) 'Materialism: Trait Aspects of Living in the Material World', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 12(3), pp. 265-280. (Accessed: 17 January 2022).

Carey, M. (2005) *Joy Ride*. New York: Island Records.

Chatman, S. (1978) *Story and Discourse Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca, New York, United States. Cornell University Press.



Chaplin, L.N. and John, D.R., 2007. Growing up in a material world: Age differences in materialism in children and adolescents. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34(4), pp.480-493. (Accessed 6 October 2022).

Cole, J. 2018. Friends. [song] In: KOD. Dreamville, Roc Nation, Interscope.

Coleman, L., 2023. Stabbed to death after rejecting flowers. *Metro News*, 15 May. Available at: <https://metro.co.uk/2023/09/27/croydon-shopping-centre-incident-police-paramedics-19563585/> (Accessed: 15 October 2023).


Dyson, M.E., 2007. *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip-Hop*. New York: Basic Civitas Books.

Eminiem (2000) *Kill You*. [song] On: *The Marshall Mathers LP. Aftermath*, Interscope.

Foster-Wallace, D. (1999) *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. United States of America: Abacus.

Grudova, C. (2017) *The Doll's Alphabet*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions.

Houseman, P. (2022) *Roe v Wade Overturned: What It Means, What [article]* Available at: <https://www.american.edu/cas/news/roe-v-wade-overturned-what-it-means-whats-next.cfm> (Accessed: 20 November 2023).



Hughes, T. (1970) *Crow*. London: Faber & Faber.

Ice Cube. (1992) It Was a Good Day. [song] On: *The Predator*. Priority Records.

Jackson, C. (2020) *Hustle Harder, Hustle Smarter*. United States of America: Harper Collins.

Jay Z. (2017) [song] On: 4:44. Roc Nation.

Jay Z. and Drake. (2013) Pound Cake / Paris Morton Music 2. [song] On: *Nothing Was the Same*. Cash Money Records, Republic Records.


Lamar, K. (2017) *DNA*. [song] On: *DAMN*. Top Dawg Entertainment, Aftermath Entertainment, Interscope Records.

Lil Kim. (2000) No Matter What They Say. [song] On: *The Notorious K.I.M.* Atlantic Records.

Lodge, D. (2011) *The Art of Fiction*. United Kingdom: Vintage.

Machado, M, C. (2019) *Her Body & Other Parties*. United States of America: Graywolf Press.

Macey, D. (2000) *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. London: The Penguin Group.



March-Russell, P (2009) *The Short Story: An Introduction*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. [13 May 2021].

Marley, D. (2010) *Patience*. [song] On: *Welcome to Jamrock*. Universal Records

Minaj, N. and Ice Spice (2023) *Barbie World*. Atlantic Records.


Palahniuk, C. (2015) *Make Something Up Stories You Can't Unread*. London: Penguin Random House UK.

Pilkington, E. (2013) *Trayvon Martin: How a Teenager's Death Sparked a National Debate* Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/14/trayvon-martin-george-zimmerman-trial> (Accessed: 21 May 2023).

Richins, L, M. (1994) 'Special Possessions and the Expression of Material Values' (Accessed: 2 March 2021)

Rouzbehani, R. (2023) *Mahsa Amini and a Year of Brutality and Courage in Iran – in Illustrations*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/gallery/2023/sep/14/mahsa-amini-and-a-year-of-brutality-and-courage-in-iran-in-illustrations> (Accessed: 16 October 2023).

Shakespeare, W. [1601-1602] 2008. *Twelfth Night*. Edited by Roger Warren. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Shakur, T. Johnny, P. (1996) Smile for Me Now. [song] On: The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory. Death Row Records.

Shakur, T. (2002) They Don't Give a Fuck About Us. [song] On: Better Dayz. Interscope Records.

Shakur, T. (2002) Ghetto Star. [song] On: Better Dayz. Interscope Records.

Shakur, T. (2002) Fame. [song] On: Better Dayz. Interscope Records.

Smith, J. and Lamar, K. (2018) I am. [song] On: Black Panther: The Album. Interscope Records.

Sugrue, J, T. (2020) *2020 is not 1968: To Understand Today's Protests, You must Look Further Back*. Available at:
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/2020-not-1968#:~:text=Casting%20their%20eyes%20to%20the,the%20police%20and%20African%20Americans>. (Accessed: 22 February 2021)

Sullivan J. (2009) *Man in Infamous Enumclaw Horse-sex Case Faces New Charges in Tennessee*. Available at: <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/man-in-infamous-enumclaw-horse-sex-case-faces-new-charges-in-tennessee/> (Accessed: 29 November 2023).

Thornton, J. (2017) 'Historical Fiction in the Life of Kunta Kinte' pp.47-63. (Accessed: 15 March 2021).

Wood, J. (2009) *How Fiction Works*. London: Vintage.

50 Cent. (2003) *In Da Club*. Dr Dre.

No Author

Henny Penny the Sky is Falling [story] <https://americanliterature.com/childrens-stories/henny-penny-the-sky-is-falling> (Accessed: 30 January 2022).


<https://thesource.com/2020/04/16/happy-65th-birthday-to-hip-hop-pioneer-dj-kool-herc/> (Accessed: 24 February 2021).

Woman Hit in the Face with Brick in Houston, Says Man Attacked Her for Not Giving Him Her Number <https://www.fox26houston.com/news/woman-hit-in-face-with-brick-in-houston-says-man-attacked-her-for-not-giving-him-her-number> (Accessed: 15 October 2023).

Works Consulted

Abrams, H. M. and Harpham, G. G. (2015) *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 11th Edition. United States of America: Cengage Learning.

Ackerman, A. and Puglisi, B. (2012) *The Positive Trait Thesaurus, A Writers guide to character attributes*, Cyber Witch Press.com



Ackerman, A. and Puglisi, B. (2012) *The Positive Trait Thesaurus, A Writers guide to character attributes*, Cyber Witch Press.com

Allen, G. (2011) *Intertextuality*. Abingdon, Routledge.

Anderson, B, R. (1986) *Dostoevsky*. Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press.

Anderson, L, C. and Wells, D, W. (1983) 'Fictional Materialism' pp. 120-125.

(Accessed: 21 June 2021)

Bainbridge, S, W. (2017) 'Future Tense, Fatal Guidance, In a Series of Interactive Murder Mysteries, I Might not Have Done it, But Maybe I Did. pp. 119- 120.

(Accessed: 9 April 2022).

Barbara, H. (2013) 'Tellers and Listeners: The Narrative Imagination' pp. 3-18.


(Accessed: 20 May 2022).

Barry, P. (1995) *Beginning Theory An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*.

Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Barnes, J. and Binnie, J. and Dudley, H, S. and Walklate, J. (2012) *Narrating Objects, Collecting Stories*. Oxen: Routledge. (Accessed: 6 October 2020).

Bell, S. (2007) *The Artful Edit*. United States, W.W. Norton & Company Inc.



Bennett, A. and Royal, N. (2016) *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. 5th Edition. Abingdon: Routledge.

Branton, M. (2012) *Writing a Bestselling Thriller*. London, Hodder Education.

Brown, E. K. (1998) 'Beloved Objects: Mourning, Materiality, and Charlotte Bronte's Never Ending Story' pp. 395-421. (Accessed: 6 October 2020).

Bishop, S. and Lane, J. (2002) *Birmingham Noir*. Birmingham, United Kingdom: Tindel Street Press.

Brant, S. (2003) 'David Foster Wallace' (Accessed: 15 March 2021).


Breu, C. (2011) 'The Novel Enfleshed: Naked Lunch and the Literature of Materiality' pp. 199-219. (Accessed: 6 October 2020).

Carr, D. and Harrison, T. (2015) *Educating Character Through Stories*. United Kingdom: Imprint Academia.

Carruth, A. (2020) 'Modernism and Gastronomy' pp. 88-97. (Accessed: 18 May 2022).

Carver, R. (1995) *Short Cuts*. London: The Harvill Press.

Chiang, T. (2015) *Stories of Your Life and Others*. Oxford, Macmillan.



Chilombo, E, A, J. (2018) *2Fish (a poetry book)* United States of America: Ulysses Press.

Cosgrove, S. (2020) 'Controlling the Clock – How Showing and Telling Impact Time in Short-Short Fiction' pp. 101-106. (Accessed: 31 March 2022).

Costa, D, P. (2013) *The Accidental Call Girl*. United Kingdom, Ebury Publishing.

Coyle, M. and Peck, J. (1999) *The Students Guide to Writing Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar*. 3rd Edition. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Ellis, E, B. (1991) *American Psycho*, United Kingdom, Picador.

Erdinast-Vulcan, D. (1999) 'The Strange Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad: Writing, Culture, and Subjectivity. pp. 1-7. (Accessed: 9 April 2022).

Gasperini, A. (2018) 'Dirt in Victorian Literature and Culture' pp. 351-352. (Accessed: 6 October 2020).

Greene R. (2012) *Mastery*. London: Profile Books LTD.

Greene, R. (2000) *The 48 Laws of Power*. Great Britain: Profile Books Limited.

Greene, R. and 50 Cent. (2009) *The 50th Law*, Great Britain: Profile Books Limited.



Hamilton, P. (1938) *Gas Light*. United Kingdom: Constable and Company Ltd.

Hart (2012) *New Oxford Style Manual*. United Kingdom, Oxford University Press.

Heath, M. and Heath, T. (2016) 'Once Upon a Time was a Consumer...Stories of Magic and the Magic of Stories. pp. 811-823. (Accessed: 6 October 2022).

Hensher, P. (2015) *The Penguin Book of the British Short Story*. Volume 2. United Kingdom: Penguin Books.

Hislop, V. (2013) *The Story, Love, Loss & The Lives of Women*. United Kingdom, The Head Of Zeus Ltd.


George A. (1999) *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. England: Penguin Books.

Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (1982) *The Message*. On: *The Message*. Sugar Hill Records.

James, H. (1963) *The Turn of the Screw*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Keyes, L, C. (2004) *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*. United States of America: Board of Trustess of the University of Illinois.

Kitwaa, B. (2002) *Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture The Hip-Hop Generation*. United States of America: BacisCivitas Books.



Kowalczyk-Harper, H. (2015) 'Sort Stories: 6 Reasons you Should Write Them.' pp. 1-3. (Accessed: 26 February 2022).

Krims, A. (2000) *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lee, S. and Yuuf, J. and D,C. (1997) *Rap, Race and Reality*. New York: Dell Publishing.


Li, Y. and Lovell, J. (2009) *Lu Xun The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun*.

Lodge, D. (1988) *Nice Work*. Great Britain: Seckor and Warburg.

Mason, D. (1995) *Race and Ethnicity in Modern Britain*. London, Oxford University Press.

McKibben, B. (2011) *I'm with the Bears Short Stories from a Damaged Planet*. London: Verso.

Mihkelev, A. (2018) 'Literary Symbols as the Creative and Original Impulses of Literary Creation' pp. 367-382. (Accessed: 6 October 2022)



Mitchell, T. (2001) *Global Noise, Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA*. United States of America: Wesleyan University Press.

Mikkonen, J. (2008) *Literature, Science, and the New Humanities*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Nabokov, V. (1995) *Lolita*. London, Penguin Classics.


Norval, J, A. (2008) 'A Democratic Politics of Acknowledgement: Political Judgment, Imagination and Exemplarity' pp. 2-17.

Pate, A. (2010) *In the Heart of the Beat The Poetry of Rap, African American Cultural Theory and Heritage*. United States of America: Scarecrow Press, INC.

Perry, I. (2004) *Prophets of the Hood Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop*. United States of America: Duke University Press.

Ritivoi, D, A. (2016) 'Reading Stories, Reading (Other) Live: Empathy, Intersubjectivity, and Narrative Understanding' pp. 51-75. (Accessed: 13 January 2021).

Roesler, C. (2006) 'A Narratological Methodology for Identifying Archetypal Story Patterns in Autobiographical Narratives' pp. 51, 574-586. (Accessed: 6 October 2022).



Cox, G. (2009) *Satre and Fiction*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Schmidt, L, V. (2001) *45 Master Characters Mythic Models for Creating Original Characters*. Canada: Writers Digest Books.

Strand, C, M, A. (2014) 'Introduction to the First Part of the Issue on Materiality & Storytelling' pp. 8. (Accessed: 6 October 2021)

Tolstoy, L. (2005) *Master and Man and Other Stories*. London: The Penguin Group.

Toth, C. (2019) 'Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology' pp. 1-14. (Accessed: 6 October 2020).


Watkins, C, S. (2005) *Hip-Hop Matters Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press Books.

Watson, J. (1999) *Literature and Material Culture from Balzac to Proust*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: The University of Cambridge.

Williams, A, J. (2013) *Rhymin' and Stealin' Musical Borrowing in Hip-Hop*. United States of America: University of Michigan.

Williams, A, J. (2015) *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Wood, W, G. (2000) *Sex, Lies & Stereotypes*. London, New Holland Publishers.



Rankin, C. (2014) *Citizen: An American Lyric*. United States of America: Graywolf Press.

No Author

Powered Exoskeleton Available at:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Powered_exoskeleton (Accessed: 21 May 2023)