

The Anthology **2013**



Clonkeen College Press

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Foreword

This collection of works, as part of the Clonkeen College's Transition Year Creative Writing programme, includes short stories, poems and essays. The bulk of *The Anthology* is formed by Clonkeen College's Creative Writing students, although it also showcases work from students throughout the school. A special mention, too, must go to the exceptionally talented Transition Year students of St. Joseph of Cluny Secondary School, from whom we also accepted submissions.

The stories have all been edited and sorted into themes – THRILLER, LOVE, CRIME, ACTION, LIFE AND LOSS, SPORT as well as a POETRY and an ESSAYS section.

We would like to recognise Ciarán Nolan's dedication to designing the cover, Ben Hogan, as Chairperson, assisted by Jayniel Opingo as Secretary, and Earl Echivarre for his all-round contribution to the project. Equally, the editing team - Kyle O'Keeffe, Rob McMahon, Stephen Carroll, Sam Molloy and Mark McMorrow - must be complimented for their devotion to the cause, trawling and proofreading every single submission.

We hope to have continued and improved on the glorious Anthology of last year. With more entries this year, we feel this has been achieved. I hope you take pleasure out of all the wonderful works produced for this book, Clonkeen College's *The Anthology*, 2013. On behalf of all members of the

Clonkeen College Press, I would like to thank you for your support of our Creative Writing project.

Kevin Dunne

THRILLER

Slender

Mark McMorro

'...it would stalk the victim for protracted lengths of time, causing what is known as 'Slender Sickness'. The symptoms of which were massive paranoia, nose bleeds, hallucinations that appeared only to the sick person, and many others...'

I stand in the darkness, the stifling silence broken only by the rasping of the air as my starved lungs draw it down my raw throat. My room, once a place of comfort and security; now twisted by my fear, I view it only as yet another place where it could be, lurking in the shadows. But it's not here, not yet. Soon.

I draw in a lungful of air and burst into action. I lunge across the room, diving to the ground beside my bed as my hands reach out, groping in the darkness underneath my bed. For a second I feel nothing, and panic rises in my throat like bile. Then my fingers brush against cold metal, and my heart lurches. My hands scramble for purchase on the rounded shape, and I pull it into my arms. The small sliver of light from the landing glints off the cylinder I hold as my shaking fingers, slicked with cold sweat, struggle to twist the small valve at the cylinder's end. I feel it give, and a sharp hissing fills the room, accompanied by the nauseating stench of gas.

I stumbled backwards, coughing violently. As I begin to overbalance, I throw my hands behind me, seeking the surface I know to be there. My palms strike smooth wood, giving off a hollow sound. As soon as my balance is regained, I spin around, wrenching the doors of the wardrobe open. Searching between the piles of clothing, I quickly feel the muffled form of the lighter I had stowed there, and the bundle of oily rags that encompass it. I pull it out and stuff it in my pocket, turning towards the door as I do so. Instinctively I step forward, preparing to make my exit; my mind not having made sense of what my eyes are seeing. The image registers just in time as my body freezes, my joints seizing up. I stare dumbly, face blank as a zombie's at the shadow that breaks the line of light located at the base of my shut door. Sweat bursts from my brow, and I suddenly double over, my stomach hit by a sudden sickness, an indescribable pain. Convulsions rack my body, and I retch dryly, barely able to remain upright. Although the fear instilled in me by this apparition is mental, its manifestation is all too physical.

The shadow remains motionless, unaware, or uncaring of the commotion on my side of the door. But it won't remain that way forever.

With a supreme act of will, I drag the back of my hand across my forehead, wiping away the perspiration that threatens to spill over into my eyes, obscuring my vision. I cannot afford to allow anything to distract me now; I need an alternate exit, and have seconds to find one. My eyes need not scan the room, knowing as I do, the only remaining option

is the second-storey window I find myself moving towards. The adrenaline coursing through my veins paints the scene in startling detail, deepening the colours and cross-hatching the shadows. My hands reach vainly towards the window's clasp, and, finding it, tug sharply upwards.

The window doesn't open.

Never has. I'd been meaning to have it fixed for some time, but had never gotten round to it. I had never felt the need. After all, Ireland isn't known for her tropical climate. Now, I curse my inaction, and lash out in anger at the offending pane. A sharp crack issues from the glass, the sound reverberating around the room, its crystalline quality piercing my ears, amplified by my heightened senses. My eyes rest on the split as it snakes its way across the window, and I realise that I still have my exit. My right hand stretches out towards my bed, and I gather a fistful of duvet, dragging it off the mattress.

As I begin to raise it to my head, I am struck by a sudden light-headedness, my body coming close to failing me at this small exertion. I have forgotten the danger of suffocating from the lack of oxygen, as it is forced out of the room by the gas. And while death by suffocation would be preferable a thousand times over than that at the hands of the nightmare in the landing, my plan involves neither.

My gas induced dizziness causes the floor to pitch and roll as I battle my way across the room towards the door, the duvet clutched to my chest. I can feel my strength waning as I move; my eyelids drooping, my head falling towards my

breast. As my line of sight trails downwards, I catch a glimpse of the shadow behind the bedroom door. It obscures the entire line of light that struggles to squeeze through the narrow gap between the door and the floorboards, reducing it to two miniscule slits on either side. They leer at me, as if taunting me to challenge that which lies beyond the door. But the crazy idea is banished from my mind before it even has chance to take root. I'm defenceless. My only safety lies in flight, for now.

Putting my back towards the door, I turn and face the window. My gaze is drawn to the crack in the glass, the sliver of silver becoming the focal point of my entire mind. In one flowing gesture, I throw the blanket over my shoulders, gathering a knot at my throat in a cruel mimicry of a superhero. I brace one palm against the door, shuddering at the unnatural coldness of the wood, inhale the thin air through my burning nostrils, and fall forward.

For one heart-stopping second, my body fails to respond. Then, my leg lurches in front of me, planting itself on the floor, and my momentum throws me forward. My other leg follows the first, taking the energy of my fall to propel me towards my escape. I cross the room in the blink of an eye, barely having time to throw the blanket over myself before the crown of my head hits the window, experiencing a fleeting feeling of resistance before it gives way. The crash sounds dull and surreal through the thick blanket which encompasses my entire upper body. I feel the cool air of the night blow past me, accompanied by a disturbing sense of vertigo. I am

plummeting towards the ground, and the thought that I am the wrong way up has barely entered my mind before I am hit simultaneously in the shoulder and the neck by the unforgiving earth, and my head is whipped against the ground by the sudden impact.

The blanket slips from my head, revealing the face of the house. My addled brain struggles to make sense of the light flooding my room, streaming in from the landing. The light dims and begins to fade, plunging me into a world of darkness.

Pain. The pain is the first thing I notice. It feels good, the pain. It proves that I still exist. It's only a dull pain in my head, but it's distracting. I don't want it there, I try to will it away; but there it remains, squatting stubbornly behind my forehead like an ill-tempered toad. After a few seconds, I open my eyes.

I lie spread-eagled on the front lawn, the house to my right, facing into the dense forests which surround the house for kilometers. Remembering the circumstances in which I find myself, I twist around, searching for the lighter and cloth. Seeing them to my left, I reach out. The dull pain in my head intensifies into sharp agony at this, and I release an animal cry of pain. I have, however, managed to grab the bundle, and hastily I fumble to unwrap it. The lighter spills out onto my lap, and it is only as I look down to it that I realise that my front is soaked by the blood flooding from my nose, and I feel faint.

Fingers slick with my own blood, I struggle to work the lighter. After what seems like a lifetime, but what could have only been a few seconds, the flame catches, and I dangle the

rag in it. As they quickly catch fire, I bundle them in my right hand and turn to face the house.

Second floor. My window. The smashed glass frames a tall figure, shrouded in darkness, but for its blank, featureless, unforgiving face, a cold, brilliant white. With a single glance, my body is numbed. I act instinctively, not thinking about what I am doing. Raising my right arm, I see that my sleeve has caught fire. I do not feel it. Drawing my arm back, I throw my handful of fire at the figure with the desperate energy of a cornered animal. My eyes barely tracking its flaming arc, I see it curve through the air, curving towards the window, and it is still a few feet away when it touches the invisible cloud of gas that has been seeping through the broken window from my room all this while.

It makes a soft *whoomph* noise, the sound not doing justice to the spectacular sight that unfolds before me. The gas catches fire instantaneously, the wave of flame rushing into my room where the hellish inferno burns furiously before rushing back out into the oxygen-rich night. My mind is filled with the most horrible, inhuman screech of sheer agony, one which I hope to God that no-one will ever hear again. But through the feeling of dread which accompanies that scream, a sense of triumph rises in me. I have done it. The unearthly nightmare that has plagued me since my childhood is gone. But at what cost?

The numbness of my body disappears, and the pain comes flooding back with a vengeance. My entire right arm is in

flames, and I feel every bit of pain it causes me. Yet I do nothing to stop it, for the simple reason that I can do nothing.

With my senses fully restored, I now feel what seems like a shard of ice driven through my brain. It radiates its freezing cold throughout my entire body, ridding me of the pain, but bearing the promise of something much worse. I realise now that I must have suffered serious brain damage in my fall, the effects of which I am only experiencing now. Once again losing control, I collapse.

My body crumples onto the ground, my flaming arm stretching out, and my head lolling onto my shoulder. As my eyes flicker, I see through the fire. I see the impossibly tall figure approach from the forest, the figure that just perished in my burning house. I see the charred suit hang from his thin, slender frame, his white face streaked with soot. Yet even as I watch in horror, the darkness twists around him, flowing over his body and hiding him from sight. When it retracts, it reveals a spotless, whole suit, and a face wiped of any mark. Even as a harsh, ringing laughter sounds in my head, a ball of darkness blossoms across my vision, reaching the edges and submersing me in the euphoria of the shadows.

It's Only a Headache

Ben Hogan

Ugh, where am I? I can vaguely remember a blinding flash like no other I had seen in my life, then screams followed abruptly by absolute darkness. There will be time to contemplate those events later, right now finding out where I am would be infinitely more helpful. *Thump! Thump!* Ugh, and there it is again, that infernal pounding in my head ever since *it* happened.

Okay, focus, where are you? I instruct myself. What can you make out in this light? Stairs, benches, a railway...a railway...YES! The train, that's it, I was going...somewhere. I just can't think straight with my head feeling as if it's about to cave in on itself, and Jesus, what's that god awful stench? Like rotting meat. It smells as if a butcher decided to dump all his gone-off stock right in my lap.

Help! That's it, call for help. This place was bursting with people before that flash. 'Urr...ains...guh'; What's wrong with me? I want to shout but my vocal chords can muster nothing better than a rasping groan.

Come on, you've been lying here for how long, doing nothing productive. Get on your feet, walk out that door and find someone now! My body is as stiff as a corpse and agonising pains shooting through my legs aren't making this task of getting up any easier. Right, I'm up. Time to get

moving. This day couldn't get any better; my head is about to burst with pain, my mouth is allowing me to barely produce what can be considered a form of speech, and guess what, now my legs have decided they can achieve nothing more than an awkward shuffle, due to numbness.

It took an unimaginable amount of effort (and cursing) but I'm finally in the open. Better scan my surroundings and get an idea of what's what. Brilliant, that stench is even more overpowering out here. The streets desolate, save for a few abandoned cars. But wait, is that...no it couldn't be...yes, it's a person. Finally. It's a woman, she's hunched over...a body? And wait is she sobbing? *Thump! Thump!* I stumble but I force myself through the pain as help may finally be at hand, or at least, some answers.

I stagger towards her and try to get her attention. 'Gah...ains.'

She with the speed of a bullet turns to face me, staring wide mouthed and suddenly decides to take off without a word being spoken.

I would shout or even chase after but in my state what would that achieve? Why would she run and what about that body? Heck it, could still be breathing for all I know. Hoping the latter question might be more easily answered, I begin to approach the body.

'Freeze, you hellish monster!' I turn to be greeted by a police officer with his revolver aimed squarely at my head. *Thump! Thump!...Thump. Thump!* My mind is racing, cold sweats are making me shiver. As I begin to speak in protest it

all become clear what that flash has done to me.
'Braiiiins...braiiins...'

It's Only a Headache

(alternate ending)

With his revolver aimed squarely at my head I knew my time on this ravaged world was coming to an end. As I spoke what I believed would be my final words, it all became clear to me what I had truly become, 'Braiiiins...braiiins.'

See that's where I expected this tale to end but to my surprise the officer just stood still, his hand shaking as if it were possessed. Shock was holding him in place and I knew this would be my only opportunity to save myself. So, with that, I did what any zombie would do, I sluggishly raised my hands and gave in to the thumping in my head.

'*THIS IS THRILLLLLLLERRR!*' I felt alive, finally I was fulfilling my true purpose in life. '*THRILLERRR NIGHT!*' Suddenly I was joined by some of my zombie brethren, shuffling in from the moonlit side streets. Like a well-trained army we began to dance and shuffle in unison. It was glorious, yet in the back of our hollow minds we knew something was missing.

It was as if our devilish prayers were answered because a grey mist descended on the street and *there he was!* Our supreme overlord - Michael Jackson! Here, in the rotting flesh!

The Vault Complex

Ronan O'Byrne

He stumbled through a panicked crowd of men, women and children. He wore a long trench coat which draped over his body like a blanket over a baby and he walked slowly towards the toilet.

He entered the well-lit toilet from the dark, sweaty cavern and was greeted by a gentle breeze from the air-conditioning vent. He took a deep calming breath and whispered, 'Ah, the good life.'

He casually reached under his trench coat and pulled out a heavy tyre-iron. He slowly walked to a man standing at a urinal. He struck the urinating man in the back of the head and dragged the limp body into a stall. He then stripped the body of all valuable possessions. He fumbled through the unconscious man's pockets and pulled out a small folded envelope stamped with the unmistakable logo of the corporate giants known as Cryo-Tec, along with their slogan 'The light at the other end of the tunnel.' He studied the page for a short while and then placed it in his pocket.

He heard a distant *thump* from above; he looked towards the roof waiting. *Thump. Thump.* The bombs had begun falling and he heard the screams of the people in the cavern, he sighed, opened the doors and joined the terrified

crowd in their pilgrimage towards the great lead bunker known simply as *The Vault*.

He arrived at the lead door and was greeted by ten heavily armed guards. He handed the closest guards the crumpled envelope and smiled. The guard looked him up and down. The man was tall with black hair, and was relatively handsome, apart from a scar trailing from his ear to his cheek bone.

‘Name?’ the guard asked

‘Robert Tenpenny but my friends call me Rob,’ replied the man with a sly grin.

The guard ushered him towards door marked ‘Luxury.’ The man walked inside and the door closed, all that was left was silence. He stood in a small unpainted room with a desk covered in name tags, and picked up the one labelled ‘Robert T.,’ along with a swipe card and a room key marked 36B.

After an hour of searching the labyrinth of a bunker he found the room marked 36B in gold characters. It was large. Larger than his old apartment, in fact, and with more furnishings. He stood in the doorway staring in awe, wondering who the real Robert Tenpenny was. He realised that it didn’t matter who Robert was, or even who he once was, he is Robert now.

Rob sat in the room 36B for a while thinking of what life underground would be like and how it would change him. He lost his train of thought when a commanding voice came over the intercom.

‘I trust you are all settling in well to your new homes. My name is John Davidson and I will be your *Protector* from the harshness of what is now nought but an atomic wasteland outside this Vault. Oh yes, and dinner will be at six o’clock’.

Rob looked at his clock, it read 17:30, 10th December, 1953. The idea of his first three course meal since he was young was the most tantalising thought to pass through his mind in a long time. He happily walked back into the maze and got lost once more.

He wandered the ominous corridors seeking any sign of life. After nearly forty-five minutes he rested against a wall, exasperated. As he rested he began hearing a strange high pitched noise, barely audible, yet hurting his ears. He set off searching for the source.

After only five minutes of searching he found his way to the dining hall and the noise diffused into nothing. Confused, he sat down and distracted himself with the second course of three.

After he had finished eating Rob sat at his table, both to think of the strange noise he heard earlier and because he was too lazy to stand up. He watched the steady stream of people file slowly out of the dining hall and back to their luxury rooms to live their luxury lives under the once great Washington D.C. while the rest of the world burned above. This both saddened Rob and made him grateful for his current predicament.

After about thirty minutes of sitting in the dining hall he finally made the effort to stand up and walk back to his room. The corridors were near deserted and he began hearing the

noise once more, fainter this time. Just like before he sought the source and it led him straight back to his room. He sat down and decided to stop asking questions.

Robert grew accustomed to his new life of luxury. Lazily lounging around his room, playing cards in the mess hall, and eating. He lay on his couch staring at the clock. Ten past three, 30th January, 1954. He smiled to himself. 'Almost two months now,' he thought.

He thought back through the last two months and remembered the noise he used to hear. His *guide* to The Vault, as he used to call it. That noise slowly disappeared as time went on but yet he still manages to find what he's looking for without really trying.

He set out into the now bustling underworld called The Vault in search of his lunch. He managed to get lost for the first time in nearly two months yet he still held a steady calmness in his mind and he simply knocked on the door of room 51D.

'Hello is anybody in there? I'm looking for the dining hall.'

There was no reply so he tried to open the door. It was unlocked, which was odd. He pushed the door open.

'Is everyone okay in here?'

He glanced inside. The walls were amassed with monitors and there was a keyboard under each row of monitors, each surrounded by more buttons, levers and pulleys. He walked to one row of monitors and looked at the keyboard; one of the buttons was labelled 36B, his room. He pressed it, slightly fearful of what would happen. Every monitor instantly

changed to his room except one which changed to a computerised control panel covered in various words and symbols, none of which he understood. One button caught his attention; it had a small symbol which was reminiscent of the sound waves he had learned about as a child. Above this button was a slider surrounded by various numbers and on top of the slider was the abbreviation Fq, which he assumed was frequency.

He pushed the frequency higher and pressed the button. The noise was back louder than before. He clutched his ears trying to block it out but it permeated through his hand like water through a sieve. He pulled back down on the slider, defeating the noise, and he ran back out into the hallway and down the corridor, leaving the door of room 51D slightly ajar.

After calming down he returned to where the room once was but it was nowhere to be seen. There was a look of bewilderment on Rob's face as he stared at the empty wall and he staggered back to his room with the same look of bewilderment the whole way. By the time he got back he had completely forgotten about his lunch and his mind stayed fixated on the room. He sat through dinner and wondered what secret he had stumbled upon in that room until he finally fell asleep on his couch, his mind awash with ideas and conspiracies.

Three more months have passed. Rob began to feel paranoid; The Vault was becoming a winding, lead, prison. It seemed darker; shadows seemed longer, time was becoming irrelevant with little variation between the days, weeks and

months. Over the last few weeks Rob had sat quietly as people around him went insane, he didn't know any of them well enough to mourn but their insanity still worried him. One of the men went down in a hail of bullets, killing three other people and finally, himself. The vault's population was in drastic decline due to recent events and mysterious deaths and there were suspicions of a radiation leakage poisoning the residents and their food. Rob had become distrustful of the people whom surrounded him in his underground prison, everyone's eyes on him at all times, those cameras in his room, the noise which instead of guiding him, tormented him, constant fear and paranoia. Finding it difficult to leave his room, he hadn't eaten in two days but now that day he had to.

Rob left the safety of his room on a quest for food. As usual he walked straight to the dining hall without getting lost and when he reached the hall it was practically abandoned with only one lunch lady and five patrons, each at their own table. He sat in a solitary corner eating alone, as usual. The meals had become sloppy lately, with little effort made; canned vegetables and dehydrated meats. It tasted revolting but as long as it was food Rob was happy.

John Davidson made his first announcement since the attacks and his voice has often heralded bad news recently. 'Good evening Vault residents, we regret to inform you that the gym and the pool have been shut down due to minor radiation leakages which are only in these two sections of the

vault and we assure you that the rest of The Vault is not contaminated. Thank you.'

The only surprise there was that The Vault had a gym. The radiation rumours had been circling for a while, or at least they were in Rob's head. He looked up from his food, he felt eyes prying into his life, he quickly ate what they passed off as a *meal* and left. As he left he began to hear the noise again. He had become distrustful of his former *Guide* so he intentionally went against anyway it told him to go. Following this path lead him deep into the vault's winding corridors and straight to room 51D. He stared at the door for a while but he mustered the courage, or stupidity, to go inside. He pushed open the door to find the same room he had found three months ago, only three men stood around one monitor. Rob snuck up behind the one in an army uniform and grabbed the gun out of his holster and yelled

'What is going on in this vault?'

'Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to go back to your room please,' said one of the men. As he walked towards Rob a fourth man came into view. This one sat in the chair in front of the monitors. Rob recognised him as the famous owner and creator of Cryo-Tech, Carl Maas.

'What the hell is going on here?' Rob yelled in confused surprise.

Carl stood up and extended his arm

'Carl Maas, nice to meet you, Mr...Tenpenny? Yes?'

Rob stood there trying to take in what was happening. He looked down behind Carl, there was a book, the title read 'Effects of Pitch Experiments on the Human Mind, No. 74A.'

'So that's what's going on here? You're...experimenting? On the residents of The Vault? And for what? The war is over and we lost, there's no need for these tests anymore!' Rob pleaded.

Carl glanced at the others in the room. 'Well, technically the war is still going on. As long as we're alive those Red Army idiots aren't safe because America will live on.'

Rob stood there.

'Are you crazy? If you keep up with these experiments the last remnants of your *America* will die. As long as one American lives, America will live, Mr Tenpenny,' Carl Maas said. 'And my associates and I intend to live.'

Rob lifted his gun and began to shoot the monitors and sound boards one by one. The men ducked for cover but Carl just stood there with the stare of a madman, smiling. When Rob stopped shooting Carl said calmly, 'It's too late, Mr Tenpenny, the radiation leakages have started and soon this *Vault* of human life will be all but a memory. We've won this battle and we will win the war.'

Then, with an expression of pure hatred, Rob raised the gun once more to the forehead of Carl and whispered, 'We've all lost,' and pulled the trigger.

As Carl slumped on to the floor Rob dropped the gun and looked up just in time to see a bullet flying towards his head.

But instead of trying to dodge the inevitable, he took the bullet with open arms and greeted death thankfully.

Mystical Halloween

Jayniel Opingo

It was October 31st 2020. It was 6:30pm, and there was only an hour left till Halloween night began. I finished eating my dinner, went upstairs to my bedroom and got dressed for Halloween.

It was 7:30pm. I was dressed as a knight. My costume was made with cardboard and it was covered with tin foil. I headed towards the door, but my Mum called me back.

‘Be safe out there,’ she said and started hugging me.

‘I will,’ I said.

I tried to escape free and go to the door. I ran towards the bus stop, opposite my house, where I had promised to meet my friends. Mark, Alex and Joe were at the bus stop waiting for me.

‘Epic costume,’ said Joe. ‘Where did you buy it?’ he asked.

‘I didn’t buy it, I made it myself,’ I said.

‘Wow! How long did it take you to make it?’ asked Joe.

‘It took me about two weeks,’ I said.

‘What?’ shouted Joe, in a shocked way. ‘Can you make me a costume next year? It took me three weeks to make my vampire costume and it’s been badly made,’ he said.

‘Ok, I’ll do it for €30,’ I said.

‘Ok, I’ll buy your finest costume next year,’ shrugged Joe.

‘But it has to be a vampire costume and in good shape, or else I’m getting my money back,’ grinned Joe.

‘Ok, no problem,’ I said.

I looked at Mark’s costume, he was wearing a zombie costume and it was well made. Alex was wearing a mummy costume made out of toilet tissue and with a mummy mask.

‘Can we get going there’s only ten minutes left and I don’t want to be late for the party,’ said Mark.

Five minutes later the bus arrived, we talked on the bus. We finally arrived at the mansion. There were about twenty people in the party. There were twelve year-olds and sixteen year-olds at the party. There were a couple people drinking and someone got a twelve year-old boy drunk.

Two minutes later, the party started and the people started shouting and cheering. At the end there was a huge firework display that lasted about ten minutes. The party ended at 11am and everyone had a good time.

‘That was some party back there,’ said Alex excitedly.

‘Yup, I had a great time,’ said Mark.

We were about to cross at the traffic lights when suddenly, a white Honda sped through the lights. The car squealed as it halted to a stop. We ran to the man that got hit by the car and I noticed that it was the same place that my Dad had an accident last year and died. I stood on the road dazed, shocked and frightened. I ran home as fast as I could, leaving my friends behind.

‘Hey, wait up,’ said Joe.

They ran after me, but I was too fast. I turned around the corner and saw a pretty girl with white hair.

‘Oh, it’s you from the party,’ I said trying to catch my breath.

‘Hello, my name is Rebecca,’ said the girl.

‘There is no time to waste, people are dying every minute and we need to act fast,’ said Rebecca.

‘What do you mean, we?’ I said, in a panicking voice.

‘As you know, I’m not wearing a witch’s costume. I’m actually a real witch,’ said Rebecca.

‘Oh, ok,’ I said, and I suddenly fainted.

I woke up on a comfy sofa, my head still in pain. I realised I was in a chamber because of the cracked ceiling and walls.

‘Where are we and how long have I been out?’ I asked.

‘You’re in my lair and you’ve been out for about five minutes,’ said Rebecca.

‘Ok,’ I said.

‘Someone help me, I’ve been captured by a real witch,’ I shouted, in a panicking voice.

‘It’s okay, I’m not a bad witch and nobody would hear you from down here, the walls are too thick,’ Rebecca said and started to smile.

‘Drink this, it’ll make you feel better,’ she said.

I looked at the cup, it was filled with green ooze and there was a frog’s leg sticking out of the cup.

‘Ugh, what is this?’ I said.

‘It’s frog medicine, drink it, we don’t have time to lose,’ Rebecca said, stirring the fiery pot with a big wooden spoon.

I drank the cup slowly. 'Not bad, it actually tastes sweet,' I said.

'I put sugar in it so that it tastes sweet, otherwise you wouldn't drink it,' Rebecca said and started to smile.

'So, how do I save the world,' I said.

'All you have to do is kill a giant demon, are you sure you're ready for this?' Rebecca asked and started to worry.

'Yes, and are you helping me kill the demon?' I said in terror.

'Yes, but I won't actually hit the demon. I'll only cast magic spells, that will protect you and make you stronger,' Rebecca said.

'Where is the giant demon right now?' I said.

'The demon is outside in the park.'

'Ok, I'll be heading out now,' I said.

'Good luck out there,' Rebecca said.

I was now outside the park and there was still no sign of the giant demon. I walked a bit through the park and at last I spotted the giant demon. The giant demon was the same height as the building. Suddenly, a large bubble appeared in front of me.

'Go ahead and kill the giant demon, people are dying because of that demon,' Rebecca said.

'But how am I supposed to kill that giant demon with this cardboard costume,' I asked.

'I forgot to cast your costume. Silly me, I'll cast your costume now,' Rebecca said.

Suddenly, my costume started glowing and it turned into golden armour. The cardboard sword also turned into a golden sword with inscriptions on it.

‘You are now ready. By the way, you only have one shot at this final attack. Charge the golden sword by gripping it tightly, and you will eventually fly about 100 meters and chop the giant demon in half,’ Rebecca said.

‘Thanks,’ I said and ran to the demon.

I was running faster than the speed of a car. I attacked the demon with all my might, in the chest, in the head and in the feet. Ten minutes later, I was so tired. I was about to faint again. Now it was the demon’s turn to attack. He took out an enormous, flaming hammer from his back and struck the hammer in front of me, the ground started to shake. I suddenly flew up a bit and hit my knee on the ground. I felt a little bit of pain, as the armour protected me. A bubble appeared in front of me.

‘This is your chance, use the final attack now,’ Rebecca shouted.

I gripped the golden sword in my hand, I suddenly started flying, but a few seconds later I fell down. I put the golden sword in front of my face and chopped the giant demon in half. The giant demon screamed and blew up.

‘I did it!’ I shouted in relief and I suddenly fainted.

Two hours later, I woke up in my room and saw Rebecca waving at me and flew off. I looked at my hand and saw that I was still holding the golden sword.

‘So it wasn’t a dream,’ I said to myself. I put the golden sword under my bed and went back to sleep.

LOVE

Memories

Kealan Maas

Lately, my life has been depressing. It wasn't always like this. There used to be a time when I was happy...truly happy. How did I get here, from the top of the world? To this day, it still puzzles me. I have been trying to connect the dots, trying to understand where I went wrong. Could this be a test from the unknown being we call God? Some may question my faith. Well when you are my age and have already gone through the things I have, you wouldn't be surprised to be lacking faith. My life may not be one of William Shakespeare's tragedies, but I doubt it's any less.

I lay on my bed, shivering from the cold and more awake than ever. It was five forty-five am and soon, the sun's arms would be crawling and spreading over the city. I stood up, no point in sleeping now; I was leaving in fifteen minutes anyway. I picked up my pack of cigarettes and a box of matches, and left my dark apartment.

I ascended the spiraling staircase to the roof and sat on the cool ground. I often came here just to sit and think. There were cars in the street now. People were getting up and getting ready to start their day. I sat beside the water tank, closed my eyes and took a deep breath; a slight chill ran through my body. Then I opened my eyes, struck a match and lit a cigarette. I hadn't always smoked but I thought, if there

were any time to, it was now. After a while the sun started to rise, it slowly rose over the city, long dark shadows were cast from the high buildings. To me it was cue to put on a fake smile and get through the day. 'Today is the day..,' I said to myself. Today was the day I had to leave her. I sat and thought of her, memories flooded my head and a smile cracked through the side of my face. I thought of the day I first met her back when we were just kids...

I stood by myself in the school corridor, awkward and nervous. I was just a short, pale scrawny boy that blended into the background. I stood alone while being pushed and shoved by the stampedes of troglodytes which attended my school. There she was, right out of a fairy tale, one much better than any I had read. I so very badly wanted to introduce myself. I had never seen her before and presumed she must be new. I tried to gain the confidence to say a word, any word would do. My throat closed up and mouth went dry, I just couldn't. After some time she vanished amongst the hordes of other students. The list of people who were not aware of my existence continued.

From that day on a new feeling stirred within me. I didn't understand what it was. It was a bit of a spark, filled with hope and glee. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. She was something... something amazing. I started thinking about her every now and then. I longed to see her once more. I had always kept to myself but... I didn't want to be on my own anymore. I sensed something in her that intrigued me, made

me want to befriend her. I had always been alone, and was getting used to it... but for some reason I felt as if this was a turning point in my life. An exit to the old ways of living.

You see, as a kid I didn't really have any friends, I was alone in school. Forced to sit by myself at lunch and in class, I had grown accustomed to being by myself and to the insults and the punches thrown at me. But when I saw her, I knew my head would be riddled with ways to talk to her and introduce myself.

As luck would have it, I ran into her again. She had enrolled into my school, 4th class. I was in 5th class. I had been thinking of a way to break the ice. It would've been easier with an ice pick, or...a polar bear. Sadly, I was only allowed to use words. Every time I tried to say something to her I got tongue-tied. I stood like an idiot while she smiled angelically and walked by. Finally one day I saw her walking down the corridor and said, 'Hey.'

Everyone turned their heads toward me. Embarrassed, I realized I've just shouted that word. I had to build up a lot, and I mean *a lot*, of courage. It was probably enough to kill a lion barehanded.

It all vanished when she started to laugh.

I froze on the spot, thinking, 'God please get me out of this and I will never do anything bad ever again.' God did his part, but I never kept my promise.

The bell rang and everyone went to their classes, including her.

That day I was so embarrassed I hid for the next few classes. I kept down low and didn't do anything to reveal my position...or so I thought. I'm sure somebody noticed the pile of quivering coats and books in the corner. The nightmare eventually ended. I took off, what at the time I thought of as my cloak of invisibility, and was ready for round two.

Southside of the lunch room there was a small table. I always sat there alone, staring through the window at the old oak in the school yard. It too stood alone, it looked strong and proud. But today it was different. There she was, standing in front of me. She began to speak: 'Hey, I'm Hayley'.

I immediately froze and stared at her like an idiot.

She smiled and said: 'Are you okay?'

I somehow regained my grip on reality and answered: 'Yes...Yeah,yeah,yeah. I'm fine. Hi.'

Hayley: 'Is this seat taken?'

Me: 'No.'

Hayley: 'Mind if I sit here?'

Me: 'Uhh...not at all.'

Hayley: 'So, do you have a name?'

Me: 'Umm...'

Hayley: 'You don't, or have you forgotten your name?' She giggled.

Me: 'It's Jack. My name is Jack.'

Hayley: 'Will you be my friend? I'm new around here and I could really use a friend.'

My eyes lit up.

Me: 'Of course.'

Hayley: 'Yay!' she smiled.

The bell rang.

Hayley: 'Well I'll see you tomorrow at lunch'

She skipped off and I left for my next class. The rest of the day I kept thinking about what had happened. It felt like a dream, except it wasn't.

Eventually the school day was over and I went back home. I went straight to my room and put on the happiest song I could find. It took me a while to find on my iPod, however, as my usual routine was to listen to heavy rock. But today was different. I just couldn't get her off my mind.

The next morning I woke up a bit early, I pulled on a pair of jeans and a hoodie and looked in the mirror. My hair was a mess and covered my eyes, but I didn't care. I ate very little and went off to school. I kept looking at the clock during class, thinking, 'Come on! Hurry up!'

At last the clock hit 11:30am and it was time for lunch. I had never been this happy ever in school up until now. I rushed to the lunch room. I guess I wasn't thinking much and wasn't paying attention to my surroundings. I bumped into trouble. It was the school bully, Frank Crain. He and his friends often harassed me for my lunch money. I'd usually take a stand but today I had something better to do.

Frank: 'Where are you running off to, hippie boy?'

Needless to say I looked a little different to my classmates.

Me: 'Look Frank, please don't do this today. I have to go. You want my lunch money? Here, take it but please let me go.'

That was a big mistake. It's like they could sense the urgency. They dragged me to the alley next to school. Three of them held me down with their gorilla like hands as Frank went through my pockets, taking every last cent. Then he proceeded to punch me in the stomach a few times and took his leave, sniggering as he walked. I lay there in agony until the bell rang. I picked myself up, my blue jumper covered in dirt and a little blood. The pain was going away but my eyes were watering. I had really been looking forward to seeing her. I made it to class a few minutes late.

Ms. Donna asked me what had happened.

I answered, 'I fell.'

She asked, 'You fell? Okay. Never mind, just go take your seat.'

I did as she instructed. As I sat there with my head down, I thought to myself; 'Why does this always happen to me?'

The following day I went back to my usual routine. I had given up on making friends and accepted my fate. I was pretty sure that I could never be happy.

She did try to talk to me but I just avoided her as much as I could.

About three weeks later, on a Thursday, she confronted me.

Hayley: 'What happened? Why won't you talk to me?'

Me: 'I've been busy with school work.' I lied.

Hayley: 'I thought you said you'd be my friend. You just said that to be polite, didn't you? Don't you like me?'

Me: 'I do like you. I've been really busy, honest.'

Hayley: 'Okay then. My mom is taking me to the movies this Saturday. Wanna come with me?'

I knew there was no way of avoiding this. So I agreed.

On the Saturday morning Hayley and her mom came to pick me up. We went to the movies and saw...well, I can't remember what we saw, all I remember was I got to sit next to her. Till this day it's one of the best memories I have.

Seven months had passed. It was August. We were the best of friends. From going to the movies to homework, we did everything together. My birthday was coming up soon, so I invited her. It was strange having a birthday party with just one friend. It didn't matter to me, the person I wanted to be with was there. We cut the cake, we ate, we had fun.

Afterwards Hayley asked me to show her my room. We went up to my room and sat on my bed. She had a cute smile and asked me to close my eyes. With a puzzling look I asked her the reason.

She said, 'Just close your eyes'.

I did and braced myself for the unknown. In a few seconds I felt her breath on my face, followed by something soft touching my lips. It was...our first kiss. I was surprised and opened my eyes and she backed away. Her cheeks were slightly red from embarrassment. After a long pause I asked her what was that about. She said it was my birthday gift from her. Then she proceeded to make fun of me. I guess it was her way of coping with the embarrassment. I sat there looking at

her talk while thinking 'Well...this is new.' It was a moment I knew I'd remember till my dying day.

From that day on she started acting a little different. She always hugged me when we saw each other. She always wanted to hold hands and whenever we were alone...we'd kiss. Most days she'd come over after school, other days I'd go see her.

A few blocks from where she lived, there was a small lake. We used to go there and take small walks or just sit in the grass and talk. Don't get me wrong, I didn't hate those things...it was just all new to me. I was still figuring out what this was or if it was one of my dreams. Everything was...just...so perfect. Not a care in the world. One day we sat, holding hands and promised each other we would stay together forever. I told her I'd give her my heart. I didn't think much of it at the time, I had heard it in the song. What I'd give to be young again.

I put out my cigarette and stood. I noticed how everything seemed darker since then. Oh, yes, I was still with her, but things had changed, we no longer held hands and awkwardly kissed. I walked down the staircase, taking each step slowly. I walked down the street, taking in the day. My steps seemed to echo around me as I walked. I arrived at the hospital to find her lying down, pale. Not long ago she had developed a heart disease and she didn't have long. I spoke to her, about our life as kids, and kissed her forehead. I knew this would be the last time I'd see her. It was cruel how you could love somebody so

much but would never be able to tell them again. I stood, and said goodbye. I found the doctor and exchanged a few words.

Three weeks passed. I was quiet, with a blank expression, and around me people cried uncontrollably. They wore black and the sound of church bells rang through the air. It was raining and the sky was grey, and seemed to purposely block the sun - a horrid day.

Everyone experienced the joint feeling of sadness; everyone, but me. I lay still as Hayley looked down on me, a tear running down her face. I was overcome with joy that she had come to say goodbye. In the words that the doctor had spoken to me three weeks before, he had told me we were the same blood type. It wasn't that I didn't love her, I would love her forever, and I had told her, I would give my heart for her.

Road Trip

Amy Lambert

So this morning I did the usual. Got up, went for a pee and looked for something to eat. Of course there was nothing to eat because it wasn't meal time. There's never food around when it wasn't meal time. Quite sad for someone who likes to be fed three times a day. After I failed to find food, I went to see where everyone was. I found them packing up the car. I was excited as I love going on long journeys in the car. It's the best place to sleep.

After some playtime, they called me to come to the car. I assumed it was going to be a long trip so I stretched out along the back seat, making myself comfortable. I was right about it being a long journey. We had to make two stops along the way. The first was to let me go to the bathroom (I love long car trips, but my bladder doesn't) and the second was at a park. I didn't recognize it so I thought we must be far from home; I knew all the parks close to our house because they are my favorite place to play.

Then we all piled back into the hot, stuffy car and off we went again. We were driving for what seemed like forever when we made our second stop. Lunch. Oh was I glad to hear this word. We had stopped at a service station along the road. I sat under a shaded tree and gobbled down my lunch while the others sat at a picnic bench nearby. After they had

finished their lunch, they got ice-cream. I had dozed off so I wasn't offered any. When everyone was finished we were back in the car.

We drove for a while until we came to a house I had never been to before. We walked up the steps and a man answered the door. I remembered this man; he smelled funny. We all walked into the house and for some reason all my belongings were coming too. I just thought we would be staying for the day. I took no notice of it and trotted into the kitchen. The man had a dog. I don't think the dog liked me because as soon as I got into the room it started growling at me.

I decided I would be the good sport and make friends with the dog. We went out into the garden and played ball for a while. Then the dog got bored and went off for a nap. I had already had my nap for the day. I was young so I had a lot of energy; this dog obviously wasn't. I plodded back into the house looking for someone else to play with.

When I got back into the kitchen, everyone was standing up so I assumed it was time to go. I took it upon myself to make my own way to the front door. I always did this. I was excited to get back into the car. As they reached the hall door, they stopped and looked at me with strange faces and said, 'Sorry, darling, but you're staying here for a sleepover.' I had never been on a sleepover so I thought it would be fun. Oh boy was I wrong!

As soon as the goodbyes were over, they left, no looking back. Just left. I felt a bit abandoned really. I thought it best to go and sulk somewhere for a while to show that I was not

impressed with my being left behind. I choose a nice comfy arm chair close to the fire to keep myself warm. I was quickly ushered off the chair with the man saying, 'No you can't sit on that chair, that's the good arm chair. Go play outside'. He didn't even notice I was sulking, I thought I was making it quite clear, letting out a soft whimper every now and then. Maybe I was being too quiet.

Dinner time rolled around. I didn't like the man's food so mine was given to the old dog. I was left to starve. After dinner I was allowed sit on the floor in front of the fire but not on the chair. He was a very strange man if you ask me. I thought I'd do what I was told and stay on the floor. The heat of the fire made me sleepy and I dozed off. I woke to a loud voice telling me it was bedtime. I went for a quick wee and flopped into bed. Tired after the day's events.

I was woken, at what I can only imagine was the middle of the night, by the old dog trying to crawl into my bed. I didn't like sharing my bed. I had heard someone once say, 'Sleep with dogs, wake up with fleas,' so you can see why I didn't like sharing my bed with strange dogs. You never know what sort of disease the thing could have. I've had all my shots so I'm nice and clean. The man came into us during the night to check up on us. He told the dog to get into his own bed but he didn't listen. I think he's deaf.

The next morning after an awful night's sleep, I was astonished to see that no one had come to collect me. I thought for sure I wasn't going to be left for another night with this strange man and his dog.

At around lunch time we went to the park. I didn't like this park. It wasn't like my park back home. He threw the ball for his dog. Then he thought it would be nice to throw it for me. He threw the ball. Except he didn't. He only pretended to throw it. He let me chase after absolutely nothing for fifty feet or five hundred feet. Or five miles. I don't know, I'm not good with judging distances. The point is that no one had ever been so mean to me before. I sat sorely for the rest of the ball games. After a sad few hours in the park, we went back to the house.

As we were approaching the house, I smelled something. Something I had smelled before. No, wait not something, someone! It was them! They had come back for me. I ran up to the steps and greeted them warmly. It was all hugs and kisses. I could tell they missed me. We all went into the house. We gathered my things, said, 'Thanks,' and left.

I jumped into the back seat, resumed my position, as from the journey the previous day, trying to look all cute.

As we drove off, they turned around and said, 'What a cute little dog.' Mission accomplished.

Reminiscing

Aisling Kearns

A cold, dull, wet night in the middle of winter: Jane strolled along the path of the early night, all she could hear was the squelch of the wet colourful leaves as she stood on them. She could hear cars in the distance, but where she lived no cars or people were in sight. As she walked slowly home, her mind wandered back to the night in the hospital where she had worked as a temporary receptionist. All she could think about was the man with the blue eyes, and the nasty cut on his arm!

She had been sitting at her desk in the reception area, her dark black hair up in a tight ponytail, her new glasses resting on the end of her nose, her light green eyes scanning the files and computer in front of her. She didn't really have much to do. It was a quiet night but a few people still lingered in the waiting room, waiting for the doctor to check their injuries. Drifting in and out of her thoughts, she noticed a man walking in. He was tall, had spiky short hair, broad shoulders, glasses and a small bump on his nose that indicated it had been broken before. But you couldn't have missed his arm, wrapped in white gauze and stained red. He casually walked up to her desk and she looked down and got the forms he would need to fill out.

‘Hi, I think I might need stitches for this cut?’ he said in a deep low voice with a grim look on his face.

‘Alright, if you could fill the forms out, the doctor will be with you as soon as possible,’ she said with a smile.

As he went to sit down, he stopped and turned back. He wanted to know her name. She told him and they started talking. They talked about different things, about how she got the job and about what happened to him. While they were talking they didn’t notice the time flying by. They were interrupted when he was called in to see the doctor. Jane was hoped that he would ask to see him again as he turned and walked into the doctor’s room.

When her shift ended she packed up her things and headed home. After getting on so easily with Paul, she thought he would ask her to see him again. Jane wondered whether he might have had a girlfriend or maybe he was just making conversation so he wouldn’t have to sit through the boring, dullness of the waiting room.

A week later, Jane decided to go to the shop and get a quick snack before her fifteen minute break was over. Taking her time walking back to her small desk and her uncomfortable chair, she heard someone call her name and turned to see Paul catch up with her.

‘I’ve been looking all over for you, you weren’t at your desk! I wanted to ask if you would go to lunch with me this Saturday?’ he asked.

Jane was still a little shocked to see Paul again but there he was. She didn't think she would see him again and never would have thought that he would be coming back to ask her out. She couldn't help the smile that spread across her face.

'Eh...yes, I've nothing planned,' she answered nervously.

'Great, I'll see you on Saturday then. At the restaurant around the corner,' Paul said with a grin.

He walked her back to her desk and left.

When her two weeks at the hospital were over, she was offered a part time job in an office. She was disappointed that her lunch with Paul didn't happen. He had come back in to tell her that he would be in Limerick for a football match for the whole day. Her job at the hospital had finished and she had no way of contacting him and he had no way of contacting her.

Jane was working at the office for a few days and her mind would sometimes wander back to Paul and wonder if she would ever see him again.

She was sorting through some files when she got a call on her phone. It was Paul! He had gone back to the hospital to get the stitches out and he asked the new receptionist where she was. The new receptionist told him she got another job. Paul told Jane that he rang up the agency that hired her and made them give him her number. All Jane knew was that he could be a persistent man but was glad he went to all that trouble to find her.

They went on their first date on a Saturday. Paul took Jane to a very nice restaurant to make up for the lunch he had

to cancel. When they got there he held out the chair for her. They talked about everything, where they went to school, where they lived, birthdays, family and holidays. Most of the time Paul talked and Jane listened. She knew then that he talked when he was nervous, but she noticed too that he would always ask her something and listen intently to what she had to say.

They arranged another date and a lot more after that.

Coming in from the end of her walk, she entered into the dark house. As she opened the door to the kitchen, there was Paul, with a surprise anniversary dinner for her.

CRIME

Delinquency

Ciaran Nolan

The ground had picked up a layer of frost since Dan had arrived. He knew he shouldn't be getting himself into more trouble after the fight in school last week. Dan didn't care anymore. He had run his life into the ground before it even got off it. He had been convicted of theft, twice, and convicted once for assault. He was a good person at heart, but he was controlled by the group around him.

He knew it himself, which made it all the worse. It gave him a level of respect, however, and that was something he was addicted to. He was in with some of the most violent gangs in the London area. Everyone at school was afraid of him, but also respected him for his status in the gang. People stepped to the side to let him through in the corridors. His mother had given up on him, and he felt sorry for her. It wasn't that he didn't love her, he was just too deep into this gang scene to stop now. It was either go through with it or the last two years would have been for nothing.

A car pulled up beside Dan, he did not recognise it, but he recognised the people inside. It was a blue Ford, license plate covered in mud.

'Dan, my friend, how is it going?' A thick Jamaican accent asked out of the window of the passenger seat.

‘I’m...I’m good thanks, Marley,’ Dan replied, clearly intimidated.

‘You better be ready for this,’ Marley told him, adopting a serious tone.

Marley reached towards the floor of the car and pulled out a package. He handed the package to Dan.

‘You do this and I guarantee you, the boys and I will take care of you,’ Marley said, followed by a dry laugh.

The car sped off leaving Dan immersed in a cloud of exhaust fumes. He retreated from the kerb and tore the top off the package. What he saw nearly made him swallow his tongue. It was a pistol, a 9mm. This was way out of his league; did Marley want him to kill someone? Or was it just for protection? Guns were the only thing Dan ever had an interest in and identified it as a Glock, semi-automatic. He released the magazine to see it was fully loaded. He stuffed the gun into his waistband and turned his attention to the remaining contents of the package. He pulled out a sheet of paper. It gave an address and a name. Under the writing there was a picture of a man, presumably matching the name of the writing above. Under that was a caption, ‘Kill him.’

Dan’s heart nearly burst through his chest as he realised what he had to do. He had to kill another person, who went by the name of Louis and had black hair and brown eyes. He had no idea who he was or what he had done wrong, but Dan knew if he had any chances of making it into this gang he would have to do it. He pulled out his smart phone and did a search for the address on a map application. He found it with

relative ease and was only a bus ride away. He folded the paper into his pocket and binned the empty packaging.

Dan headed off to the bus stop, hood up and head down. He could have been in class right then, listening to a teacher trying to give him useless information to learn. He knew he would never return to school if he went through with this, maybe not even return home, but he half wanted this gang life.

The bus arrived soon after and Dan was sweating as he got on, the grip of the pistol digging into his stomach. He paid his fare and sat at the back of the top floor, thinking about what he was about to do. His head was all over the place, half of him wanted to go home and just hug his mother and apologise for what he had done, the other wanted to be part of these London gangs, full of adrenaline and danger.

The bus was pulling up to his stop. He got off and looked around. He didn't recognise the area. It was on the wealthier part of the city, so he took his phone out of his pocket again and got directions to the address. He went over several plans in his head as he made his way to his target's house. He decided to go for the breaking and entering plan. He would knock on the door and force the target to allow him to enter using the gun.

He arrived at the target's address. It was a huge detached house with three floors and a shiny, new looking BMW outside. Dan took deep breaths before finally finding the courage to ring the doorbell. A very tall man answered the door. It was definitely Louis, it matched the picture fully.

‘Are you Louis?’ Dan asked, just to be sure.

‘Yes, I am. What do you want?’ Louis asked.

‘I’m sorry for this,’ Dan said as he pulled the pistol out of his waistband and pointed it at Louis.

‘Get inside,’ Dan ordered.

Dan closed the front door behind him and followed Louis through a large hallway into the kitchen. Louis took a seat at the kitchen table. Dan stood pointing the gun at him.

‘Take whatever you want,’ Louis said, sighing in the process.

‘I’m not here to rob you,’ Dan replied. ‘Marley has ordered your death.’

Louis’ face turned to one of horror as he struggled to find the right words.

‘I have kids,’ Louis said to him, ‘please don’t kill me.’ Louis started to tremble, and started sobbing.

A scream rippled across the room as Louis finished his sentence and two small children ran towards their father.

‘Don’t hurt my Daddy!’ one of the girls screamed.

Dan didn’t know what to do. Memories of his fatherless childhood came flooding in and he realised how he missed a Dad in his life. He couldn’t do this. He didn’t have a savage in him.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Dan said, tears streaming down his face. ‘I didn’t mean this,’ he sobbed. He still had the gun pointed at the man. He let out a roar - a mixture of regret, frustration and fear – and he threw the gun against the tiled kitchen wall.

BANG!

The gun discharged, another scream rippled through the room. It was Dan. The gun had fired after he threw it. He had been hit in the shoulder. He tried to sprint out of the kitchen. He made it only a few steps before collapsing unconscious.

He woke up to the feeling of warmth and comfort. He was in a hospital bed with one hand cuffed to the railing. A police officer stood at the doorway and his mother was asleep in a chair beside him.

‘Mom,’ Dan called. The police man looked up and left the room, speaking into his radio.

‘Mom!’ Dan called again, louder this time. His mother’s eyes open slowly until they met Dan’s. She hopped up out of the seat and ran over to Dan.

‘Thank God you’re okay,’ she said crying. The police man returned this time with a man dressed in an expensive looking suit. He asked Dan’s mother to wait outside.

‘It’s okay, Dan,’ the man said ‘We know everything that happened. You won’t be in trouble, but you must agree to help us take down the East London gang.’

‘Of course,’ Dan said. ‘Tell my mother and Louis I’m sorry for everything.’

The official placed a piece of paper on the tray in front of Dan. It promised his immunity in return for a testimony and to help in the police crackdown of the gang. Dan sighed with relief, picked up the pen, and signed the document. Gang life was over for him. His mother came in and hugged him tightly.

‘I’m sorry,’ Dan said.

Señor Juan

Kevin Dunne

Juan Carlos waved at his young, slim secretary, Mary-Jane, who replied with a smile of acknowledgment, as he left the dull office after another week of hard boring work. Carlos, of Mexican origin, was a highly successful stockbroker in his thirties, with his chestnut brown hair already beginning to show slight hints of grey. His high-paying job allowed him to keep in shape, with expensive gym memberships and beach houses on exotic Pacific islands. It wasn't as if he and his wife, Penelope, needed to escape from their beautiful hillside villa in the suburbs of San Diego, but it was a luxury he could afford.

Driving home in his luxurious, convertible BMW, with the roof down, life seemed perfect. the warm summer breeze ruffled through his wavy hair. The deep growl of the engine combined with the whisper of the warm wind, blocked out all noise, as the nimble, lightning blue sports car wove through the heavy traffic, crowding out the bustling streets as Juan drove onto the San Diego Highway. Juan knew, however, that his multi-millionaire life was far from perfect, and as he pulled into his hillside villa, the flashing blue lights and men in uniform would only suggest that life was about to get an awful lot worse.

‘Juan Ignatius Jesús Carlos?’ a towering, African-American police officer asked, in a firm tone.

‘Si, Señor, is there a problem, why is my house blocked off?’ Juan gulped back in reply, with a knowing sense that a terrible atrocity had happened.

‘Sir, I’m afraid it’s bad news,’ the officer began to explain as he took off his hat. ‘Penelope was found this morning with a broken neck, we believe she fell down the stairs. I know this is a lot to take in right now, but we are doing all we can and a full murder investigation is under way. We are ruling nothing out.’

‘Well, eh, where do I go now, Sir?,’ Juan managed to choke up, struggling to comprehend that his beautiful Colombian wife had been found dead.

‘Well, Sir, Inspector Myles is leading the case and will be in contact over the next few days. Until then, I suggest you stay with a friend or family member,’ he replied to Juan’s query in a comforting manner.

Juan managed an acknowledging nod before peeling off further down the road. He quickly glanced around, so as to make sure no acquaintances of his were in earshot of him. He scrolled through the many contacts on his business phone, with his hundreds of business contacts. He stopped at Mary-Jane before pressing the call button.

‘...Okay, man, thanks for your time.’ Inspector Myles hung up the phone. A week of investigating, and still no leads. Maybe, he thought to himself, it was an accident. Then again, there

was no explanation for the masked figure leaving the house on Mr Carlos' personal security cameras. Logically, Mr Carlos was the only other person with access to the house. Myles had already followed on this lead, but his personal secretary confirmed that he checked into work a full hour before this footage.

'Hey yo, T-Dog, you finished man? It's late, man, I ain't got all day. The basketball's starting soon, dawg,' called Charmaine, his younger partner.

'Not yet, Charmaine. Ya'll go home, man. I'll see ya'll tomorrow,' Inspector Myles called back in a tired, sullen tone.

Inspector Myles was losing sleep and pulling out his thick black hair with the stress of this complicated, clueless case. Myles was an intimidating, muscular six-foot-six black man. His upbringing made him as tough as nails; his father was unknown whilst his mother injected herself with heroin on a daily basis. However, Myles excelled academically at school, and on the sports front, a broken leg hampering his basketball career weeks before the NBA draft. These were the least of his worries now, as he contemplated where to go next with this dead end case. After a few minutes of deliberating, he decided to pick up the phone.

'Miss Smith? Yeah, this is Inspector Myles again, I was just wondering if I could talk to you about, well, you know, Miss Penelope Carlos?...Well, alright then, I'll be over in an hour.'

Myles poured himself some piping hot, black coffee to keep himself awake on his journey to Miss Smith's house. Miss Smith was the neighbour of Penelope and Juan Carlos. The

cream, leather seats in his sleek, black Mercedes-Benz invited sleep; especially for a man who hadn't slept in thirty four hours. The roads were slightly deserted once he had peeled off the San Diego Highway onto the dusty back roads. He cut the engine once he reached the house, before exiting his car and making his way slowly to the front door.

'Do come in, Inspector. I wasn't expecting your call quite so late. Not to worry though, I'm not really a sleeper myself.' Miss Smith welcomed Myles with a warm smile. Even into her old age, she portrayed a sense of activeness with her movements around the house.

'Thank you ma'am, I just have a few more questions about the case, I'm struggling with any leads,' Myles said as he placed himself down on the ageing, fabricated sofa. 'Now, once again, did you notice anything peculiar occur on the morning of the incident, ma'am?'

'Well, the young secretary called to the house at around nine,' Miss Smith explained as she mulled the story over in her head. She has been around a lot lately. Penelope was worried; she loved him from the bottom of her heart, she would've died for him. Juan on the other hand...'

'Holla right there, dawg! Sorry, I mean, ma'am. What y'all mean, playa...ma'am?' Myles returned with haste.

'Well it wasn't that he didn't love her, but he changed in those last few weeks, you know. He'd become somewhat of a murky character,' Miss Smith struggled to get her words out. 'Him and that secretary had been together a lot recently, and it jus-'

‘But she checked them in at seven o’clock that morning at his office.’ Myles muttered quietly to himself. ‘That’s it, I have it. Sorry I rushed you but I think I have it you know what I’m saying?’ Myles said as he rushed out the door.

He barely heard Miss Smith utter the words, ‘You’re welcome,’ before he had sprinted out the door.

Myles used the speed dial to ring Charmaine. The phone hadn’t rung once before Charmaine picked up.

‘Charmaine, get over to Juan Carlos’ assistant’s apartment - now! They murdered Penelope Carlos,’ Myles hurriedly explained down the phone.

‘What!? For real? OH HELL, NO! Ain’t nobody got time for that,’ Charmaine replied with a tone of utter shock. ‘I’m coming now, man, you’re gonna need your PIC’.

Charmaine instantly hung up the phone, while Myles started the engine with a deep groan almost instantaneously. Charmaine was waiting at the apartment, his black, metal battering ram at the ready. The two men shared a nervous glance before breaking the front door down. Surprise was on their side as they made their way up to apartment number sixty-nine, belonging to Mary-Jane Jackson.

‘Juan Carlos and Mary-Jane Jackson this is the po-lice,’ Myles bellowed at the door, ‘You both have five seconds to get out this door, or we are breaking in. You are under arrest for the murder of Penelope Carlos. One, two, three, fo-’

Bang. The definitive sound of a handgun went off in the apartment. Charmaine and Myles heard a thud from behind the door before noticing a trickle of blood flowing from under

the door. Charmaine instinctively battered the door down. Both men recoiled in horror as a woman's body blocked the door from falling all the way to the floor.

They were greeted at the end of a long narrow hallway by Juan Carlos holding a gun to his own head. His sweaty hand was wrapped around the trigger of the smoking gun.

'Sir – NO!' screamed Myles at Juan.

But it was too late. Juan smiled a wicked, evil smile before pulling the trigger. Blood splattered on the white walls either side of him. Charmaine threw up as pieces of brain shot out just feet in front of them. Myles picked up a piece of paper out of Juan's pocket. It was a full confession to pushing Penelope down the stairs with the intention of murdering her.

Teenage Troubles

Kate McDonald

He was staring at me. His eyes were cold and dark. I could feel him breath heavy as he shouted in my face. I could see veins popping from the sides of his eyes. And to make it worse - my parents just walked in! I could sense the anger my Dad was feeling for me. And the look of disappointment on my mum's face as she stared at the floor. 'Oh no, I am in serious trouble,' I thought.

'Oh that top would look great on you, Em,' Leah said to me as we strolled through River Island.

'Hmm...I'll try it on, I thought to myself.

As we walked towards the dressing room to try it on, I glanced at the price tag - €30! That mightn't seem like a lot, but my family had been having some problems and money was tight.

I tried it on and it looked gorgeous. Leah even said so too. With all her praise and persuasion, I just had to buy it. The only problem was I couldn't afford it.

As I was getting changed I noticed there was no security tag on the top. I also noticed that there were no sales assistants in the changing rooms; River Island wasn't a very big shop. A strange thought came into my head and I couldn't

ignore it. I thought to myself for a moment and finally decided...I was going to steal the top.

I had never done anything like this before but I felt I had to. I was too embarrassed to tell anyone about my problems at home. I slipped it into my bag and put my top on the hanger. I nervously left the changing room and walked up to the counter, pretending to pay for the top (so Leah wouldn't expect anything was up).

All was going well, Leah thought I had bought the top and we were heading for the door. I was so nervous as I got closer and closer. I kept telling myself, 'It will be alright, it will be alright.' But just as I thought I was safe...BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

I pretended I didn't even notice that loud security alarm but I knew I was the one that set it off. A loud voice shouted, 'Hey you! Can you let me check your bag?'

A large man dressed all in black walked over to me and I knew I was dead. I was so nervous my hands were sweaty and shaking. I quivered as I gave him my bag.

'Ehh..,' I said. 'It wasn't me who set off that alarm!'

That was stupid of me to say. Just as I said it, he lifted the top out of my bag. 'What's this I see?' he asked, smiling at me with satisfaction. 'Can I see your receipt?'

I knew I didn't have one but I pretended to look in my purse. 'Em...it should be here somewhere.'

He didn't believe me.

'I think I might have dropped it on my way out or something.'

‘Oh, did you?’ he sarcastically snapped. ‘Why don’t you come with me and we can check on the security tapes to see where you *dropped* it.’

Leah looked at me. ‘Emma, what’s going on? Did you steal that top?’

I didn’t know what to tell her so I asked her to call my parents as I went to the security room with the guard. She was very confused and I felt bad that I got her mixed up in all this.

When I entered the security room, it was cold and dark. I could feel my legs shake as I walked to the chair. I felt a lump in my throat as the man walked to the computer. He asked again, ‘Did you steal that top? The truth is always the easiest way out of this.’

I nervously shrugged my shoulders and said I didn’t.

He still didn’t believe me. He watched the videos and saw that I went into the changing room with a different top to the one I left with.

I was speechless and had nothing to say. I knew he wouldn’t understand my situation - how I was embarrassed, and how I knew that it was no excuse to steal. I tried telling him it was a mistake and it fell into my bag.

He knew I was lying. He came closer to me and got louder, ‘No one steals in my store.’

I didn’t respond.

He flipped. ‘Who do you think you are, ignoring me? You broke the law and you’re going to pay.’

I could feel sweat drip from his face. I didn't understand why he was going so crazy. I'm sure he's had much worse situations than a teenage girl stealing €30 worth of clothes.

At that stage, I had given up. And just as I thought things couldn't get any worse, my parents arrived...

Money Problems

Rory Kane

It was the end of summer, signalling the end of my stay in France. I was broke. I had spent all my money. I was sad summer was over and it was the start of Autumn.

I arrived in Dublin airport at twelve o'clock. I found a café. I sat down and ordered a coffee. I was sitting on a sofa in the shop minding my own business when a man in a black suit came and sat beside me. He whispered to me; 'Would you be interested in making some money?'

I was attracted by his proposition. I asked him what would I have to do. He said to me that I would have to smuggle drugs from South America back to Ireland. I told him I would do it. He handed me my plane ticket and told me my flight was in two hours and that there would be somebody waiting in the Colombian airport to explain the rest of the details.

I was sitting in the terminal waiting to board my flight when it hit me how dangerous this would be. I could be killed while I'm over there and nobody would notice, I could be kidnapped or I could get caught and put in jail. I knew I had to do it because it was the only way I could make quick money. I heard an announcement and began boarding the plane.

A part of me was excited about this. I had watched T.V shows where the people who smuggle drugs get caught and I had always thought to myself that I could do it without getting

caught. It was a thirteen hour flight so I decided I would try and get some sleep while I was on the plane. After about an hour I began to drift asleep. The plane was surprisingly comfortable as it was a cheap airline. We landed in Bogota at one o' clock in the afternoon local time. I was greeted by a man called Enrique when I got off the plane. He was a small, stocky and friendly man.

When I collected my bag we walked to the car park where he had parked his car. He owned a rusty old white Mercedes; there was a big dent in the side of the car. I put my suitcase in the boot of the car and we began driving. He said the hotel was an hour drive away. I wasn't expecting a nice hotel but Enrique said it was nice. We arrived at our destination and I was pleasantly surprised. From outside the hotel, it looked very fancy. I got out of the car and Enrique said he would come around later that evening and talk to me about the job at hand. I walked into reception and told the woman working there what my reservation details were. She gave me my key and told me my room number.

I walked down the hallway to my room on the 9th floor of the building. I was in room 505. I opened the door and dropped my suitcase in the bedroom. I went asleep for an hour then I woke up to somebody knocking on my door. It was Enrique. He told me to get changed because we were going out for dinner.

He drove me to a restaurant about ten minutes from the hotel. We sat down at a table and waited for the waiter to take our order. He began telling me how much cocaine I would

be smuggling back into Ireland. He told me that he was able to sell me four kilos for €1000. I was amazed at the price because I knew it would sell for €15000 back in Ireland. We agreed that I would give him and his organisation five grand and I would get to keep ten grand. We shook hands and he told me he would come around the next day and drop off the drugs. We then left the restaurant and he dropped me back to the hotel.

I woke up the next day and Enrique was banging on my door. I opened it. He walked in with a black bag with four kilos of cocaine inside it. He put it on the table then asked for the money. I went into my bedroom and got my money from the safe in my apartment. I counted up €1000 and handed it over to him. He told me it was a pleasure doing business with me then he left and I never saw him again.

I opened the bag and took out the drugs. I placed them on the table. I then got a vacuum sealed bag. I poured the cocaine into the bag and sealed it using the hoover I got from the utility room. I knew that dogs may get the scent of drugs from the bag, so I got a basin and filled it with bleach then put the bag in the basin to get rid of the scent.

The next step was hiding the bag. I would hide it in my suitcase. I got in contact with Enrique's friend who said he would cut a hole in the suitcase and stich it up with the bag inside the bottom of the suitcase. He came over to my apartment and did it for me that evening. Then I went to bed early because I had a flight home early in the morning.

I went to bed that night and began panicking about the risk that I was taking. If I got caught I would either spend

twenty years of my life in jail or even worse; be killed in jail. It was a big risk but I needed the money and I was willing to take the risk.

I woke up at 3:00am I had a terrible night sleep. I had packed my bag the night before. I got up, grabbed my bag and got a taxi straight to the airport. I arrived at the airport and at this stage I was very nervous. I got my bag from the boot and walked through the door to check-in my bags. This was the moment of truth. I was handing over my bag and wouldn't know if it was a success until I boarded the flight.

I walked up to the desk to check-in my bag. There were two people ahead of me. Sweat was dripping from my forehead because I was so nervous. The wait to check in seemed to last forever. Finally the person ahead of me was finished. I walked up to the desk slowly, my heart felt like it was about to beat out of my chest. I put my bag onto the conveyer belt. The women at the desk seemed to take forever going through my paperwork. At last she said; 'Everything here looks alright, you may go through.'

This was a relief to hear. I walked away as I saw my bag go down the conveyer belt. It felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders but I knew I wasn't out of the woods yet. I had an hour to kill before I had to go through security so I got some breakfast. After I finished that I went to go through security. I wasn't too worried about this part because I wasn't carrying the drugs on me. There was no line and I was first in the queue.

I went up to put my carry-on luggage through into the machine. While I was doing this the security guard began asking me basic questions about my stay here. I had thought about what I would say before I came here so the conversation went quite smoothly. Once they saw there was nothing visible in my bag, they got the dog to smell it. After the dog didn't react to it they told me to go ahead.

I was waiting to board the flight. Now I began to get nervous again. I was half expecting a security guard to tap me on the shoulder and take me away. I kept imaging this scene in my mind but it never happened. We were called to board our flight. I went up to the desk with my boarding pass and passport. I was shaking as I handed my documents over. She took a good look at them so I began to think that it was the end, but eventually she told me to go straight through. I felt on top of the world when this happened I had done it. I sat in my seat and began smiling. I quickly fell asleep the pressure made me very drained, emotionally and physically. I woke up shortly before landing.

I got off the plane and went to collect my bag. I was waiting for ages but eventually to my relief it came through. I walked out of the airport happy and I knew some time in the near future I would be making another trip to Colombia.

The Bank Job

Conor Cullen

It's not that I didn't love her, it was just that I didn't think I could forgive her after what she put me through. It had been the longest two weeks of my life and I could see many more long ones in the near future.

It all started two weeks ago and I had just moved in with my girlfriend, who I had been seeing for the past three months. We had rented a small three-roomed flat in Dublin city centre. It wasn't big but it was affordable; it had a kitchen, a bedroom and a bathroom. The best part was it was over looking Stephan's Green. Everything was starting to look up for the pair of us, finally.

I was in my car on the way to work and I heard that the Central Bank had just been robbed by a man and a woman who were armed and wearing hockey masks to cover their faces. It was a shock as the Central Bank was only five minutes away from our apartment.

I pulled up at my work in my Volkswagen Golf (which I had bought the week before) and went into the office. I programmed software for a living. I hated my job but it paid well so I was working there full-time until something else came up. I walked into the canteen and started to make a cup

of tea. There was a television in the room and the news was on. It was still on the bank robbery story.

The reporter, Jane Anderson, had to shout to be heard over the crowd of spectators. She shouted at the camera, 'We have just heard gunshots and believe there is an officer down outside the bank and the emergency response unit is on the way. At the minute, the guards are just trying to contain the situation.'

It seemed crazy that something like this could be happening just around the corner to my house. I couldn't think about that now as I had to get back to my incredibly tedious job.

At half-four my boss called everyone into the canteen and told us that we could have a half-day as the Central Bank was two streets across and the authorities were clearing the area to control the situation.

To be honest, I was delighted to have the day off so I jogged down to my car, hopped in and started to drive home. As I was driving home I saw police cars, fire engines and ambulances heading towards the Central Bank. It all seemed to be happening so quickly. Then as I approached the top of the road an armoured van suddenly rammed the front of my new car. It went flying up the road and out of sight. Within about five seconds a blur of police cars and a riot squad van followed.

As I reached home I was praying God that my insurance would cover the damage to my new car. I parked in the underground car park and began to walk up the stairs; I

usually took the lift but today decided I would walk. I reached my apartment and noticed that the lock on my door was broken. I couldn't have been that unlucky to be robbed and been in a car crash in the same day. So I walked in and hoped for the best.

I was met by a roar of police as they shouted at me to raise my hands. I was tackled to the ground and cuffed immediately. They dragged me down the stairs; they shouted abuse at me as they took me away. They said things like, 'You're a low level thief! Do you have any idea what we do to garda killers in this city?' I couldn't figure out why they thought I robbed the bank at the time so I waited till I got a chance to explain myself. Unfortunately the Garda van was not the place, as they attacked me almost as soon as the doors closed.

At the police station they interrogated me for hours, saying that they had found illegally imported weapons that had been used in the robbery. Ballistics said that the shells at the crime scene matched the firearms in my house. They had tonnes of evidence that linked me to the crime scene so even though I was innocent I was certain to be convicted.

They said they would reduce the sentence and grant me bail if I told them where I had stashed the money. But all I could say was, 'I don't know anything. I'm innocent.' I was given a life sentence (with no bail), which is fifteen years, maybe thirteen years with good behaviour.

But I was unwilling to serve the time as I was innocent. I had to get out but I didn't see how I could. About two months

after being detained in prison I got a letter from my girlfriend, whom I had not seen since the morning of the day I had been arrested. The letter said:

‘I’m sorry you were given a life sentence. You weren’t supposed to get a sentence that long but you were the perfect cover for me. I have left the country and I doubt I will ever see you again. It was a plan from the start, to move in with you, to rent an apartment close to the bank and to frame you so I could get away. So, again, I’m sorry. You will not receive any more letters from me and do not try to contact me.’

ACTION

Avenging the Fallen

Earl Echivarre

A gust of wind shook the branches of the oak tree above me bare. The leaves were scattered across the headstones. The scent of maple lingered in the air. Decorative witches, ghouls and things that go bump in the night covered every inch of every house in the estate across the graveyard. It was like Halloween threw up on the place. I leaned against the tree, my Italian leather shoes firmly planted on the ground and my hands, stowed, deep into the pockets of my dark brown trench coat.

‘Halloween,’ I spat in distaste, ‘What a pathetic excuse for a holiday, foolish morta-’

I stopped abruptly, half-way. A sudden feeling of nausea and fear overwhelmed me. I tried my best to swallow it down. I took a few paces forward and quickly surveyed the area one last time, my eyes like a hawk. I saw everything, which wasn’t so good since I managed to spot at an overweight man jogging 2km up the road, jiggling. It wasn’t a pretty sight. I quickly shuffled back under my tree and was enveloped by the shadows. Gone.

Slice! A Maserati Granturismo lay in a million pieces, scattered across the marble floor of the training room. Scraps of leather interior and bits of metal were everywhere in the vast room.

Beams of light shone from the ceiling, illuminating the room. The walls were 30ft high, covered with deadly weapons and coloured pink with floral patterns. It was like a day care for notorious villains.

A girl stood in the middle of the room, a glowing katana in hand. Sweat covered her forehead just above her deep grey eyes, oil-grease covered parts of her arms, and her clothes were in tatters, her breathing heavy. In one fluid motion, she returned the katana to its sheath and tied up her jet black hair. She moved like lightning, sprinting to the wall, mounting her sword, then leaping, pirouetting mid-air, and landing perfectly on an armchair across the room, by the floor-to-ceiling windows. The busy rush hour traffic, honking and beeping, echoed 100ft below.

‘Is this your idea of fixing my car?’ I called.

‘Oh yeah, I got bored and needed to practice my swing. So one thing led to another,’ she muttered with a sly smirk.

‘Great, Gwen. Just great.’

‘You’re not mad at me are you Nikki?’

‘First off, don’t call me Nikki unless you’re going to follow it up with, *You’re so fine, you’re so fine you blow my mind*,’ I said sarcastically.

‘Secondly, we need to call a meeting. Now. Because *he’s* on the loose, and you know what that means.’

She stood motionless, eyes wide, her facial expression filled with sorrow and despair.

‘I’ll call Finn,’ she muttered.

Then she left briskly. Her shadow-like hair swayed from side to side, her body was rigid as she walked away.

‘Henry! Pass the ball!’ a little girl muttered.

Henry skilfully ran around her in circles, kicking the ball towards her, then teasing her by kicking it away again. His hair wavered in the wind, his forehead was covered in sweat.

‘Up yours, Sophie!’ he roared with laughter. ‘Girls can’t play football!’

Sophie began to cry. She sat on the ground clutching her knees against her chest. Her eyes red from crying and her clothes bedraggled. A tall man towered over Sophie, casting his shadow over her.

‘Are you okay, honey-bunch?’ he whispered.

Sophie didn’t look up, but shook her head in reply. The tall lanky figure watched Henry play with the ball; his fedora covering his face and his pinstriped suit neat and elegant.

‘Well I better sort this out then, shouldn’t I?’

Sophie stood up, about to thank the man but stopped half-way. She quickly ran back to her mum on the park bench, shrieking loudly like a banshee.

‘Are you alright, Sophie?’ her mother called.

‘A man went up to me mom!’ she stuttered ‘h-h-he...’

She was cut off. An ear piercing screech echoed through the park. Sophie quickly looked for Henry, her eyes scanning the area he was playing on. But he was nowhere to be seen. All that was left was his football, punctured, and the man’s fedora.

‘Sophie, where is Henry?’ her mother asked nervously.

‘I think he was t-t-taken. Taken by a man with no face...’

‘What is love? Baby don’t hurt me, don’t hurt me no more,’ a man boomed, as he walked through the hall. His voice echoed through the halls, so that it sounded like the song was on constant replay.

‘I see Finbarr is here,’ I muttered through clenched teeth. ‘My ears certainly aren’t happy. His singing hasn’t improved after fifty years. Has it?’

‘Oh, don’t mind my uncle Finn. He trained you, after all,’ Gwen teased, a smile finally on her face again.

After she got the news, she wasn’t a very happy camper, I tell you. My Lamborghini and Ferrari can vouch for me when I say she was angry.

‘Finbarr was a great mentor, but he will never be the next Elvis,’ I replied. ‘He is better than Justin Bieber though, I can’t deny that.’

The door shot open, a man 7ft tall entered the room. A sawn-off shotgun, two meters long, was strapped to his back, and a large blade strapped to his boot. His long dark beard had specks of grey and was covered in biscuit crumbs.

‘Ah, Nicholas!’ He bellowed.

‘Me auld apprentice, how be yerr hunting? You still with my niece, I see. You better be treating her well or I’ll beat your ass for a year, like whenye werr only a lass!’

‘No, no, no, that’s fine. You don’t have to ‘beat my ass’ anymore. I’m treating your niece well, of course,’ I replied, nervously.

‘Can’t say she’s treating my cars well though, not my Maserati anyway.’

‘That’s enough fellas,’ Gwen barged in as she hugged her uncle. ‘We have a critical situation - the faceless one has returned. Slender Man is back.’

Dead silence filled the room. No one has mentioned his real name, I thought. It’s taboo. Cursed. Not to be spoken.

The floor boards creaked as Finn shifted his weight. Gwen’s face was stern but her eyes filled with fear. My feet were planted firmly on the ground, my breathing was low and my eyes glowed a pale blue.

‘Ah, I understand the situation one ha-nnndred pa-rrrrcent,’ Finn whispered. ‘We better get off our arses then and get ready before he starts abducting children.’

Gwen leaped off her leather swivel chair and sprinted out of the meeting room, in a flash. She was gone. I sighed heavily.

‘It had to be *him*, didn’t it?’ I murmured. ‘Oh, my dear, I hate seeing her like this. It just pains me to see her unhappy and to be honest her sudden outbursts of rage creep me out.’

‘Let her be, Nicholas! She’s a warrior. She’ll pull through, I’m just sorry for auld Faceless, he never should have messed with Gwen’s brother.’

My eyes were focused on the floor-to-ceiling windows. Moisture began to condense on it. The sun was just at the point where you can’t tell if it’s dusk or dawn, because it was

twilight. A speckle of light entered the training room, the weapons decorated on the wall sparkled excitedly.

I wore my usual sleek black pin-striped suit, with a few...attachments. The smell of premium blend coffee wavered in the air and I picked up my mug gently with my tattoo covered palms.

‘Enjoying yourself, Nicholas?’

‘Well, if you call hiding several blades under my suit enjoying, then yes. Yes, I am.’

Finn chuckled heavily, it was almost deafening. He wore a large silver breast plate under his sweater vest, and bits of armour decorated all over his body, hidden under his massive trench coat.

‘Rocking the sweater vest, I see?’

His reply was a sly smirk and a wink.

‘Ready, boys?’ Gwen called.

‘Oh wow...’

These were the moments when I would remember what a lucky man I was - she was simply un-describable. Even with razor sharp blades and guns hidden beneath her dark leather trench coat, she looked amazing.

‘Eh, hello, Nikki?’

I attempted to say good morning, but all that came out was a gargle of words. I was completely and utterly gobsmacked.

‘What the bleedin’ hell are ya wearing!’ Finn roared as he strolled out of the room. ‘Yerr ma would have died seeing you in tha!’

She ignored her uncle's statement and grabbed my hand; her palms were ice cold and her grip firm. Our eyes locked and she gave me a quick smirk, but it quickly faded.

'So are we taking your car, Nikki? Or sha-' She was cut off mid-sentence.

A monstrous roar shook the building. The weapons on the walls shook violently, threatening to fall from their mantles. It was a car revving its engine!

'Eh, ye ready or wha'?' a bellowing voice called from below.

'Looks like we're taking uncles car then!'

'Oh great, it's not like a bright neon blue hummer, with a *daemon hunters* logo, will give away who we are! And I thought we were supposed to be inconspicuous,' I muttered sarcastically.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Fireworks shot up into the night sky, flashes of red, blue and green sparkled in the heavens. Beams of light shot from beacons, illuminating the dark clouds above.

'Welcome, one and all, to the grand opening of the Hyrulian Mega Mall tonight on All Hallows' Eve!' a voice called from the speakers.

Children tightly grasped their parents' hands in excitement, and in their other hands their bags, ready to be filled with candy. Men, women and children, all, wore costumes of superheroes, monsters and other sorts of

creatures. The wind blew gently, causing the bare trees in the parking lot to rustle.

A man wearing all black, standing 6ft 9' in height, was in the middle of the crowd. Towering over them. His breathing was low and quiet but slowly started to speed up with eagerness.

'Five seconds till mid-night and Halloween!' the announcer called.

5!

The man in black spread his feet apart.

4!

He began to remove his gloves, showing his bony pale fingers.

3!

Cracking his knuckles and clenched them into fists.

2!

Finally adjusting his fedora hat.

1!

KA-BOOM!

Confetti showered over the crowd. The lights inside the Mega Mall erupted with power and the doors flew open after the mayor cut the large red ribbon. Cries and cheers of joy echoed throughout the parking lot but it died very quickly. The doors of the mall shut closed again and the lights went out in a flash. The man wearing black was nowhere to be seen, and neither were the children...

'What's that coming over the hill? Is it a Monster? Is it a Monster?'

The neon blue hummer bounded up the motor way, playing The Automatic's *Monster* at full blast. The shrill sound of Finn singing freaked out the passengers in the cars beside us.

'So, where are we going, uncle?'

'Thaaat's eashy, hun. I hearrrd abou' a Mega Mall opened lasht night and at midnight all the kids thaa were therr ferr the opening disappeared and the Mall mysteriously locked down, and now no one can get in err ouu,' Finn muttered.

'Okay, so the plan is?' Gwen asked.

'Easy. We burst in, blow crap up and save the day! Daemon hunters only get to do that once a year, babe, and Halloween is tonight,' I answered with enthusiasm.

Police cars surrounded the ten acre complex. Flashing red and blue lights were everywhere, and the occasional *crssh* from walkie-talkies was heard. The air was so cold; frost began to form on the Mall's windows. I cursed to myself silently.

'We need to get in now, he's beginning to feast. That's why the area is so cold, he uses the ice to freeze his vict-' I stopped suddenly, for Gwen's sake. I felt so guilty reminding her of her brother's death.

'Let's get in there so I can destroy the bloody thing,' she called through gritted teeth, her voice full of anger.

We parked the hummer on top of the hill overlooking the Mall and sprinted towards the building, hidden in the shadows and our weapons cleverly concealed beneath our clothing.

We leaped over the 10ft wall that surrounded the building with ease, and began scaling the building like Spider-men. But before I could reach the top, a tremendous force shattered through the piece I was grasping and it pulled me through, into the darkness. I could hear the sound of Gwen shrieking in the distance.

Ever got hit by a bus? Well that's what I felt like, crashing into the ground after being dragged and flung at 110km per hour. The room was pitch black and a crater formed where I landed. Fragments of tiles were littered around me. I quickly leaped onto my feet and un-sheathed my double edged sword. It quickly began to glow with power. I put my right foot forward and went into a stance, my eyes scanning the shadows, my gloved hands, twitching.

Crunch! I turned suddenly and brought down my sword with full force on what was behind me. A little boy in a tiger onesie stood there, motionless, with his hands covering his face. I stopped my swing about an inch from his head. I don't think slicing a five year-old would look good on my CV. It would also cause too much paper work; I hate paper work.

'Hey, buddy! What are you doing in here?...Hey, kid, it's rude not answering somebody's question...Hello?'

BUZZ!

The boy lifted his head and pointed to something behind me. Oh crap, I thought. A dark tentacle made of shadows slammed into my back, lifting me off my feet and flinging me into a shop window. I rose quickly, preparing to defend myself from his next attack, but before he could move, a fiery sledgehammer pummelled him to the ground. His pin-striped suit was reduced to tatters.

‘Tha’ is how ye slay demons, Nicholas! Ye grab a hammer and throw it at it,’ Finbarr squeaked with glee.

Gwen and Finbarr ran to me. Standing ready to fight, weapons in hand, rage filled our eyes.

‘Let’s end this!’

Slenderman rose from his crater of fire. He flexed his hands and tensed his shoulders. He began to buzz and tentacles of shadow erupted from his back, oozing dark liquid dripped from his finger-tips. We stood for a split second, in strange state of peacefulness, but that disappeared as fast as it had appeared and we ran at each other with ferocity, ready for battle.

I ducked his first wave of darkness and parried the other. Gwen dodged the blows so elegantly, like she was dancing. Finbarr was not as fortunate. Both blasts of darkness hit him square in the face, sending him through a shop window into a rack of mannequins.

Gwen and I launched our bodies as one, we were like an extension to the other. Our attacks precise, our strategy flawless. But we couldn’t go on for much longer. Slenderman’s

infinite tentacles flanked our sides. Gwen's left arm was bleeding as she struggled to hold her ground.

Finbarr groggily rose up, his face covered in soot.

'Give up, pitiful human! As you can see, I cannot be captured. I cannot be destroyed. I am the darkness!' Slenderman mocked as he shot one of his tentacles at Gwen.

She ducked easily, but she wasn't the target. Finbarr shrieked in pain, his face began to crumble into dust as it sucked his life-force from his body in seconds; his arms frail and his once muscular body now reduced to bones.

'No!' Gwen screamed. She moved like a ninja, dodging all of Slendy's attacks, penetrating his defences.

I ran to aid her but it was all over. Her sword was impaled in his chest. His tentacles shot back into his body as he quivered.

But no battle is without loss; Gwen was severely bleeding, a gaping hole in the middle of her stomach. She lay in a pool of blood beside her uncle's ashes.

I quickly ran to her side.

'I'm sorr-' she began. 'I love you...'

'Love you too,' I whispered into her ear, as I fought back the tears. 'I promise this is never going to happen again.'

I ran at full force towards Slenderman, my sword in hand. I sliced his arms with ease, wrenching Gwen's blade out of his chest and driving it through his faceless head.

Dark blood splattered everywhere, his arms severed on the floor. I was a killing machine, and I loved it. 'I'm here to return the favour,' I yelled, swinging my sword at his neck and

slicing the head clean off. His body dissolved into nothing. It was over. Gwen's brother had been avenged.

I stood under the oak tree once again, two freshly dug graves beneath it, a sword and a sledge hammer impaled into the fresh earth. I patted each grave one last time and left. Tears streamed down my cheek, but this was my life - the life of a demon hunter.

The Organisation

Simon O'Rourke

Jamarkas quickly sprinted towards the mangled, burning car in the distance. He realised out there were people in the car as he heard people crying out for help.

He reached the mangled car to find two women with their legs crushed against the dashboard, and the fire quickly spreading towards them. A small puddle of black liquid started to surround Jamarkas' right foot. The pool of liquid was petrol, he only had one choice. He fled from the car and stood behind a thick tree trunk on the other side of the road.

Waiting anxiously for the explosion, he started to fidget with his phone. Suddenly an ear splitting explosion came from the other side of the tree trunk. The flames climbed high into the night sky as the autumn leaves rained down from the trees. The explosion had caused the trees to almost go bare, incinerating the already weakened leaves.

When the flames died down a bit, he returned to the burnt out car and began to search for something. He picked up a bit of shrapnel from beside the car and examined it very closely and then sprinted into the darkness like a frightened cat escaping from a vicious dog.

Suddenly, a black Ford Transit pulled up beside the car. A dark-skinned man got out of the van. He searched the site

thoroughly and then shouted to his partner in the van, 'It's gone.'

Jamarkas is a tall, bulky man. He has a wide frame like a boxer would; the kind of guy you wouldn't want to get in a fight with. He has a square face, with dull brown eyes and a very distinctive scar cutting his cheek in half. He is a very self-involved person who keeps to himself. Some people say he's crazy because he's always talking about a secret organisation which makes vicious murders look like horrific accidents.

He studied the piece of shrapnel. It seemed like it was from the engine but he found out that it was from something else, a bomb. A bomb made by the infamous crime lord, Shemar, and his organisation of murderers and ex-cons. This secret organisation that makes the murders of very important people look like horrific accidents. The only weakness in this organisation, if they could have been said to have had one, was that their specialised, powerful bombs contained a certain, vital component that survived the deadly explosions. This single piece of equipment must be retrieved after every mission, which is what they were retrieving from the murder scene.

Jamarkas arrived at a large derelict warehouse at about five in the morning. It was still dark and there was a nasty chill in the air. He gingerly opened the door of the warehouse and stepped inside. There was nothing inside except piles of rubbish and the rats that lived in it.

He immediately went to the right side of the warehouse and hid behind a pile of rubbish. He was like a shadow in the

darkness. He was waiting for something. Suddenly, a large black jeep pulled into the warehouse, the floor of the warehouse and started to drop like some sort of huge elevator.

As the floor fell into the darkness it suddenly came to an abrupt halt and blinding lights from every direction cascaded onto the floor. The jeep's engine started to rumble and then roar as the jeep sped off down a long narrow tunnel beside . Jamarkas followed the jeep down the tunnel.

He reached a large dark room with flashing lights all over it. Suddenly a masked man came out of the darkness and hit him across the face with a steel pipe. He fell to the ground with a loud thump. He lay still as the masked man dragged him into the darkness.

He woke to muffled voices in the shadows. He tried to sit up but he was tied down. A man in a white coat walked out from the shadows and approached Jamarkas. The man in the white coat slowly took out a large syringe. He found the vein in the crook of Jamarkas' elbow. He slowly inserted the needle into his arm while looking him in the eye and telling him, 'Everything's going to be all right.'

Test Group TBS

Conor O'Neil

The sun was starting to recede as the day came to an end. It was still bright, but not for much longer. The old ruins of a once vibrant town were silent. There were two buildings on either side of a park with tall trees and years of undergrowth preventing sight all the way across; one was a restaurant and another used to be a research centre with a glass conservatory on the second floor. It was called The Bank. The park had long, yellow grass that hadn't been cut in a long time. Even the large river flowing through it was barren. The buildings were now small bases to each, two very different sides in the war that destroyed the town.

Two men watched the ground for movement from an old outdoors dining area on the second floor of the restaurant. They looked identical from a distance, both well-built and in light-black armour and black fabric. They also had black helmets that covered their faces and dog tags. The differences were small, but these differences told the men, and others, that they were in the same squad.

The taller of the two men was also slightly skinnier. He was leaning on the old marble wall watching the park. He had a pump action shotgun leaning against the wall at his feet, with a bolt action pistol strapped to his right leg. The shotgun was black and covered with dried blood. He had named his

shotgun and scratched the name on the sides of it, 'Gnashty'. His dog tags said, 'TBS-T.'

The slightly smaller but more built man stood straight, his arms folded. He looked like a walking armoury. He had a fully automatic assault rifle with a sharpened knife strapped under the barrel on his back. The knife and front of the gun was covered in blood. He had an identical shotgun on his back, grenades around his belt, a knife strapped to the left side of his chest, and two automatic pistols in holsters on each leg. He also wore two bandoliers to carry his ammo across his chest. His dog tags said, 'TBS-N.'

'Hey, buddy,' croaked the taller man in a deep voice. 'What do you think will happen if we survive this war?' He turned and looked at his squad mate. 'We are the only two left after all.'

There was a pause as the other man thought about this question. 'Well, Tango,' replied November in a strained voice, 'we are royally boned either way. I don't think anyone else but Kilo can have survived.' He walked over to Tango and flipped his shotgun up with his boot and held it out for him. 'So what do you say?'

Tango took his shotgun and pumped it. 'I say we kick some ass and walk outta here, November!'

'Well, there are three guys trying to edge their way along that wall, but that's not happening - why?' asked November.

'Cause it's just not on,' replied Tango

‘Exactly, so I’mma lean over and pop ‘em in the head and you are going to kill the two crawling up the stairs and move down into the park and wait for me. Think you can do that?’

‘I’m on it!’ November started counting down from five with his fingers. Once he hit zero he gave a thumbs up and Tango went off. He grabbed his rifle, turned safety off leaned over the balcony, but didn’t fire.

‘Crap!’ he shouted.

The men looked up at him, too stunned and scared to move.

‘What is it buddy? You all good?’ yelled Tango between the two shots he took at the men.

‘Yeah I’m bloody marvellous, except I was wrong for once. There are four guys over here! Can you believe that?’

Tango snorted, ‘Just kill ‘em.’

November looked at the men and they stared back at him. ‘Sorry, guys, you picked the wrong side.’ With that he opened fire, two shots each to the head, one after another. He didn’t miss one. ‘Forty two shots left.’

‘Turn on your HUD this time and you might kill them in one shot.’ November looked to his right to see Tango sprinting down the stairs, over the bodies of the two men and jumping the wall into the park. The gunfire started as soon as he landed.

November turned on his own HUD and turned to see a scrawny man pointing a similar rifle at him. The safety was on; an easy kill. He cracked his knuckles and dove onto the man,

landing a vicious punch on the man's nose that left him out cold. He took the rifle and shot him with it.

'Best keep my ammo for people who deserve it mate,' came a completely different voice through the voice modifier in the helmet. He moved down the stairs and went through the park gate. It was a massacre, nine people to kill one man and the one man won. No sign of the one man though.

'Hey, buddy! Where the hell are you? You're missing all the fun!' Tango's voice, perfectly identical to November's with the helmet on, shouted through the ear piece.

'There was somebody trying to be a sneaky ninja assassin, alright? Where are you at now?'

There was silence for a minute. 'I'm kinda pinned under the first bridge by a sniper on a turret dead ahead, and a few guys on the left. I could use a hand here before they realise I am pinned!'

'Yeah, alright. Anything to help me with that buddy?' asked November.

'Erm...yeah! One of the guys at the entrance had a sniper, see if you can still hold a scope straight will you?'

'I'm on it!' November walked back and found the sniper, the man holding it wasn't quite dead but that was quickly corrected by November's boot. 'Only three shots? You can't be serious!!' November continued cursing the man until he could see the turret. He stood still, spreading his legs slightly, aimed, took a breath and fired.

‘Turret down, and, sniper down!’ There was a pause that lasted a few seconds, then another ear splitting shot ‘BOOM! HEADSHOT! Go, buddy! Go!’ ordered November

‘Thanks for the assist, buddy.’ Tango heard gunfire and sprinted up the side of the river and climbed over the top. November stood there reloading his rifle.

‘You’re a little late, they kinda died of boredom.’ Tango reloaded his shotgun and looked at November, ‘Okay, if it makes you feel any better, it took me forty-two shots to put the evasive ones down.’

‘It does, and ha. Forty-two shots? You’re losing your touch.’ Before November could say anything Tango continued ‘Let’s move up through the trees, stick to the middle of the path and make lots and lots of noise.’

‘Wouldn’t that kinda be like a black person walking into a KKK gathering?’

Tango nodded.

‘We have the greatest and most thought out plans ever! Let’s go make some noise!’

They both started running forward when November stopped. ‘What’s up?’ asked Tango.

‘Well do you think we should give Kilo a shout so she knows where we are. She might be our last chance to clear our names, after all,’ November suggested.

‘I thought you were gonna say our last chance to repopulate the planet, but I’m not up for that man ‘cause she is one fugly girl.’

‘Tango, shut up. She isn’t that bad and plus she can kill us both with her fingers so let’s not p*** her off, okay?’ said November

‘Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realise you two were getting married. I’m sorry for calling her a cow,’ mocked Tango

‘I’mma call her then, give me two minutes.’ November hit a button on the wrist guard of his armour and it opened a channel to Kilo. ‘Kilo do you hear me?’ November paused for a few seconds. ‘Kilo, come in!’ Static came through the ear piece. ‘Kilo, where are you right now?’

‘I’m in The Bank. It’s kinda eerie. Get over here before nightfall, and be careful and extremely quiet!’ a strained feminine voice whispered.

November turned to Tango and hit the button again. ‘Well, Kilo has been captured - *kinda eerie*? She actually said that. Now it is a rescue mission, not just a kill everything in sight mission.’

‘Man, why can’t anything we do just be a kill everything in sight? It used to be - ‘Go escort him!’ Or ‘Retrieve this thingy for us!’ Or even, ‘Kill ONLY this guy!’ Now it’s all, ‘Tango did an impression of November without realising the voice modifier was still on.’ And now - ‘It’s a rescue mission!’ It’s insane!’

‘No, Tango, it is not insane, it’s survival. You wanna tell the enemy how close we are to them? Remember before you answer that when we get close they will surround us and kill Kilo. Then when we kill them all. We are still being hunted by The Agent and he is invincible.’

Tango stared at November for a minute without saying anything. Then he spoke. 'That's what I thought, let's go make a plan of assault!'

'No, 'cause I have our plan. I will be bait while you sneak up the river after being *killed*,' Tango said, making air quotes as he said the word *killed*. I will drag you into the river or something and you will keep them distracted.'

It was now November's turn to stare at Tango. 'That...is the most brilliant idea you have ever had!' exclaimed November. 'We need some blood, and we just so happened to destroy some volunteers behind us.'

After a quick trip back to drain some blood, November and Tango were ready to execute their plan to rescue Kilo. November had a sealed bag strapped to his forearm. It was already pitch dark. 'Ready, buddy?' whispered Tango

'On my mark,' replied November. 'One. Two. Three. MARK!'

November and Tango mounted the wall and opened fire to be retaliated against immediately. November started shouting out the enemies positions as he spotted them.

'November! Thermal!' November muttered. 'Op Heat Sigs!' and his HUD turned on its thermal setting.

A count down hit ten seconds and he darted nearer to the river. He stood behind a tree and popped out at zero. He slammed his forearm against his chest and the blood filled bag exploded and he screamed. 'I'm hit!' Then he keeled over and fell into the river. After a while he stood up and ripped the bag from his arm and began moving up the river.

‘What do they think, Tango?’ asked November.

‘DIE DAMMIT! Plan worked by the way, buddy. Just pretending to be angry. Don’t worry about me, get your girlfriend!’

‘She is NOT my girlfriend. Switch to the static channel in case they try intercepting your transmission. I will do the same. Sync and check back in fifteen.’

‘Done. Good luck, mate!’

November moved up the river quickly, but soon the undergrowth got too thick to manoeuvre through so he climbed out and moved up to the wall. He hauled himself over the wall and dropped down on the corroded road. He glanced left and right and saw nobody, so he dashed across the road to The Bank.

‘I’m going to regret this so much, I know I am.’ He took a deep breath and switched to Kilo’s channel.

‘Now, Kilo, are you going to tell me what I want to know?’ asked The Agent.

Kilo spat and coughed, ‘Come on Chaos. You have done worse than this to me before. Remember when you threw a locker at me? Good times, right?’

Chaos stared at Kilo. She could feel the empty eyes staring into her own through the mask and hood. ‘Want to know something important Kilo? Of course you do. The only way out of this is if you tell me where those two idiots are. But that’s not important, what is though...is your answer.’

‘Kilo, I’m going to move through the front door and up to what floor?’ asked November.

‘Hey Chaos what floor are we on?’ asked Kilo casually.

He shifted from one foot to the other. ‘Why?’

‘Just curious, wondering if it’s taller than the building you kicked me off last time, that’s all.’ She put on her best smile for him.

‘Relax, it’s only the fourth floor this time, not the 206th.’

Kilo sighed.

‘I’m on my way up, hang in there, Kilo.’ November switched his channel again. ‘The radio implants are actually really handy after all,’ he thought to himself.

November moved in through the front door silently. Then he crouched under the reception desk that had now rotted. A patrol came around the corner and they stared at him in shock. He had his automatic pistols out, aiming for their foreheads.

‘I know you wanna live, so sit down, heads on your knees, hands stretched forward,’ whispered November.

The men did as they were told.

November hit them both on the back of the head, leaving them unconscious.

He moved up the stairwell, the metal completely rusted. He reached the fourth floor door and peered around the corner. There were five doors. He knew it wasn’t going to be the first or last. He moved to the second last door, took a deep breath, kicked the door open and stormed in.

‘Welcome, November. It is so nice of you to join us today,’ said Chaos with a smile.

‘Let her go. You know you don’t stand a chance against me,’ November demanded.

CLICK...CLICK.

Chaos held a pistol to Kilo’s head. She flinched. ‘Nah, I’m okay, I really wanna talk. It’s about your experience with the...’

‘What was the second click? Chaos, what have you done? Tell me or die!’ ordered November

‘It’s okay, I only needed this much time anyway, and I wish you luck, November. I have finished my mission.’ He took the pistol and shot himself in the temple.

Kilo looked at November. He stared at Chaos. In his right hand, he held a trigger.

‘No, Kilo!’ November grabbed the chair she was tied too and threw it out of the room. Kilo fell unconscious as the blast went off.

Kilo awoke in a bed. She was stiff and drowsy. She glanced left and saw the man who saved her life, asleep in a chair in his worn and shot up armour. She slipped into darkness again.

When she woke up again, November was sitting in the same chair, watching the door.

‘November...’

He turned his head and stood up. ‘No, I am Tango. Agent November was K.I.A. when he saved you. I’m sorry, Kilo. I didn’t want to wear the helmet but I was advised it is best to keep my identity secret. You have been here for eight days. I’m sorry I have to tell you this. The funeral is tomorrow. I will

be escorting you there and back after everything is taken care of. Goodbye, Kilo.'

She hated the formality of Tango's speech, but that was what they had to do. No emotion could be shown when a friend was killed. She knew he was dead inside.

Tango left and Kilo felt alone. More alone than she had since she joined the programme. She cried, her sole motivation for continuing was gone.

The funeral wasn't a funeral, it was a protocol. His body, armour, weapons and possessions, destroyed. The only things she had to remember him by was a note, and all it said was 'Tell me a story,' and an empty book.

She got back to the infirmary, took Tango's pen, said her last farewell, before he was partnered up to train a new recruit. And then she began to write.

She wrote about November and her. She told their story, she even included Tango. It took her a while to pick a starting point, but she found it; the first thing she had been told about him - he had killed his girlfriend. 'Do not try get close to him. He killed his last girlfriend,' Tango had muttered, as he put Kilo's dog tags around her neck. She read them. TBS-K.

'Because he didn't love her?' she asked him.

'It wasn't because he didn't love her... it's because she was spying on him for the enemy. As you can imagine, he didn't like it too much.'

Anarchy

Sam Molloy

‘Inhale, exhale, squeeze the trigger.’

That’s what I was told every single day for three months. Not a day goes by that I don’t remember those words.

So, as I was told, *Inhale, exhale, squeeze the trigger*. First target down. Okay, off to a good start, I thought to myself.

Inhale, exhale, squeeze the trigger. Second target down.

Just one more target. The last goddamn target – the one I always miss. But not today. *Inhale, exhale, squeeze the trigger*. Missed!

‘Every goddamn time!’ I shouted in frustration.

‘Well,’ said Cpl. Dunn, ‘there’s always next time, Miller.’

‘Come on,’ I said to Cpl. Dunn, still fuming, ‘let’s go get lunch.’

After queuing in the mess hall we sat at a table on our own. ‘So when do you leave?’ asked Dunn.

‘Tomorrow morning,’ I answered with a hint of a smile just brushing past my lips. I was heading off in the morning on an assignment with my spotter, and best friend, Dave.

It was a fresh autumnal morning as Dave and I waited on the cold tarmac of the runway to board our C130 Hercules. Our destination was an old Russian prison that had been liberated by the militia. Our target was the militia’s leader, Vladimir Dima.

Dima was a known anarchist, and was thought to be plotting a full scale revolution. Dima, his younger brother, Ivan, and his right hand man, Alexei, were holed up in the top room of one of the guard towers. The marines sent us as there was only one entrance to the room, a small hatch in the floor in the centre of the room. It would have been far too dangerous for ground troops to attack so they sent us.

In the early hours of the morning we were nearing our jump zone. We were five minutes out and I was strapping on my parachute. The light beside the door flickered on to a dark red shine. This signalled that we were a mere 90 seconds from our drop zone. Dave and I hooked up and waited for the signal. The light turned green and I leaped into the air and felt the cold rush of air in my face.

I hit the ground a tad harder than I might have liked, but it wasn't too bad considering we were landing in a forest. Dave on the other hand, had gotten his chute tangled up in a tree.

'Get me down from here!' Dave called to me from 30ft off the ground. I began to shed all of my gear bit by bit. After unstrapping my webbing and rifle I began to clamber up the tree adjacent to the one Dave was stuck in. When I reached the same height as Dave, I took my knife from my belt and began to saw through the strings entangling Dave.

'Hold onto my arm,' I told him as there was only two strings left and I could see they were starting to tear. The last rope finally gave and I took the full weight of Dave and all of his gear. 'Jesus Christ,' I exclaimed as Dave slowly climbed down my body and latched onto the tree below me. Once we

were on the ground I picked up all my gear and we got on our way.

We had the entire day to get to our vantage point and the hike itself was expected to take close to twelve hours without a break. We hiked for about four hours before we stopped for lunch. I had some dried pork and rice and Dave had some fruit. After that we hiked for the rest of the day, taking ten minute breaks every few hours to hydrate and rest. We stopped about a kilometer from our spot which was about four hundred and fifty meters from the guard tower where Dima and his comrades were. Dave and I put on our ghillie suits. They were a mixture of brown red and yellow to mix with the decaying leaves that had fallen from the trees.

The next morning at about eleven o'clock was when things finally started to happen. Dave and I had been lying in wait for hours just watching the guard tower. We had checked and re-checked the distance a hundred times over, and had been monitoring wind speed every ten minutes.

Dima sat up in his bunk, slowly; he rubbed the sleep out of his bloodshot eyes and got up. I watched as Dima stretched and began looking around the room for a T-shirt. For the plan to work, Alexei had to be up as well as we could only see Dima and Ivan's bunks from our spot. Thankfully, Dima knocked over an empty vodka bottle whilst picking up his T-shirt. The clunk of the glass bottle hitting the concrete floor, and then rolling across the room, stirred Alexei and his eyes fluttered open sluggishly. As Alexei stood up with a yawn, I took aim.

Inhale, Exhale, squeeze the trigger. Dima was dead before he hit the floor. Blood spouted from the hole in his neck.

Before Alexei had time to react I had taken aim again.

Inhale, Exhale, squeeze the trigger. Alexei slumped back onto his bunk, his sheets turning a sickly pink colour.

The sound of the two bullets ripping through the window pane at one thousand five hundred feet per second, and the noise of a body hitting the ground had woken Ivan. He knew something was wrong the second he opened his eyes.

Ivan jumped up out of his bunk and sprang into action. With a glance Ivan knew his two comrades were dead. The amount of blood he could see made that obvious. Ivan ran for the door.

Inhale, Exhale, squeeze the trigger.

Ivan didn't hit the floor.

'Did I hit him?!' I say with a pang of nausea rising in my stomach. I already knew what Dave was going to say before he answered me.

'Just clipped him. In the leg, but now's not the time for talk. We need to get out of here while we still have a head start.'

Our extraction point was about two kilometers away from the prison, in a clearing just big enough for the chopper to land. We had packed up our gear and climbed down from our perch when a siren began to wail from the prison. The noise of the siren seemed to echo as if a tidal wave had just come crashing down and engulfed the entire forest.

'Time to run.'

We had been running through the forest for about five minutes when I heard the shouting and the rough bark of a dog on our tails. We kept running but I could tell that they were getting closer and closer as time went on.

‘We’re not going to make it to the LZ,’ I called to Dave.

‘Should we take up a defensive position?’ he asked me as we skidded down a mud bank and began running again.

‘Yes, but not here. They’ll have the advantage of being above us.’

‘Good point,’ Dave agreed

And we kept going with the barks growing ever closer. Finally, we came to a suitable place to make a last stand. It was a small ledge on the side of a steep hill where Dima’s men couldn’t get up behind us. We had thick tree trunks for cover. In the little time we had left before Dima’s men arrived, I set up my sniper rifle with its bipod and adjusted the scope for a much shorter range. I also laid out all of my ammo in its magazines, ready to reload quickly. Dave had his assault rifle ready and had the safety off and set to fully automatic.

Dima’s men started to run into the area that we were overlooking. We took out a good few in the first few seconds before they realised where we were. There were about twelve men left when they started to fire back at us. We got a rhythm going after a while where Dave would give suppressing fire so I could take aim. With this tactic we got about half of them, but they started to realise what we were doing and they would all take cover when Dave started to fire. Soon, we were

in a good old fashioned gun fight, just trying to pick them off and take cover again before they hit one of us.

After more of this we had managed to narrow it down to just one more person. Dave and I made a plan that I would distract him and keep him in cover so Dave could climb down and sneak up behind him.

The plan worked and Dave successfully snuck around and shot him from behind. I was just about to get down from the ledge when I heard the rumble of an engine closing in on our location. I could see from the look on his face that Dave had heard it too; he was looking around for a place to hide. He set his sights on a tall tree a few meters from where he was standing. Dave ran over to it and began climbing as fast as he could. He made it just in the nick of time.

A jeep went flying through the forest and jerked to a halt just past the bodies of Dima's men. To my surprise Ivan stepped out of the passenger seat, his trouser leg torn and a bloody bandage around his calf, and another guard came out of the driver's side. I can't imagine how Dave was feeling just a couple of meters above the two men, with his rifle still lying on the ground beside the last man we had killed. I slowly took aim, prioritising the guard with the AK-47 whilst Ivan had only a pistol.

Inhale, exhale, squeeze the trigger. I hit the man square in the chest and he hit the ground at Ivan's feet.

Ivan's head snapped around looking for the source of the shot, looking for me.

I took aim again. *Inhale, exhale, squeeze the trigger.*

Click.

'Oh, sh..'

By now Ivan had spotted the ledge that I was hiding on and had heard that ominous *click* from the empty chamber of my rifle. Ivan began walking towards me with his pistol aimed at the ledge where I was now lying flat upon.

'Come down here and face me like a man,' Ivan shouted up to me.

My mind was flying trying to come up with a way out of the situation; I had my knife but he had a gun, if I could get close enough I might be able to disarm him. But he wasn't that stupid. I slowly stood up and began climbing down from the ledge, all the while keeping an eye on Ivan and the pistol he had aimed at my chest. I saw a flit of movement out of the corner of my eye but I was a too pre-occupied to register exactly what it was.

'There we go,' he said as I came to stand about ten feet away from him.

'Now, consider this...shall we call it revenge? For my comrades,' Ivan said and began to grin at me.

I closed my eyes and waited for the shot to come; but it never did. I opened one eye to a squint and then both. I was staring down at Ivan on the ground with blood seeping from his back.

'You, okay?' Dave asked as my heart slowed to a steady pace.

'Yeah, thanks. But what took you so long? Another second and we wouldn't be having this conversation.'

Dave and I made our way to the extraction point after that, continuing to lie low in case any more of Dima's men were lurking in the forest. We made it to the EP without any more hassle and waited. When the time came, I climbed the tallest tree in the immediate area and lit the green signal flare for the chopper to see. Within five minutes we were on our way to the aircraft carrier, and to safety.

K.I.A.

Kiernan Fitzgerald

Everything in this world withers and dies so new things can take their place. I guess that's what autumn's really about, making room for spring. I used to like autumn, back home when the ground was mixed with vivid colours, browns, yellows and oranges. When the nights became dark at six o' clock and you'd get used to feeling cold.

It must have been sixty degrees celsius. It was so hot. I remember the rubber on one of the guy's boots started to melt and left sticky footprints on the road.

I checked the time, twenty-six to five, and yet the sun still looked like it wasn't going anywhere. When we got back to the barracks after our daily patrol it was quarter to six. I opened the flap on the tent and there was Marcus cleaning his AUG, while Tommy was in the corner of the tent reading a letter he just got from home.

'Any news?' asked Marcus.

'Nah, just the usual, some old farmer complaining about Taliban activity just East of his crops,' I said, while plonking myself down on my bed and wiping the sweat off my face.

'He can't be lying, he must have seen something,' said Tommy.

'Yeah, right! That guy's nuts. He must be at least seventy years old,' said Marcus, sniggering.

‘Whatever, I’ve had enough of this,’ I mumbled as I left the tent.

Two strips of crispy bacon, some mash potatoes, two fried eggs, beans and some sausages. It didn’t get much better than an Irish full. I sat down beside Marcus, with John and Dave sitting across from us, and Michael sitting beside me on my right. Before Dave even had time to swallow his food he ran back up with his plate asking for more.

‘By the time he gets back in the queue there’ll be nothing left,’ whispered John.

The guys all laughed, except for Michael, who was playing with his dinner, wishing he was somewhere else.

‘You alri,’ Michael?’ I asked.

‘Not hungry,’ he said, while he got up and left the table.

‘What’s his problem?’ said Marcus eyeing up his dinner.

‘Not hungry,’ I said.

Within seconds Marcus lunged towards his dinner, grabbed Michael’s plate and put everything onto his , before John even had time to realise Marcus had just finished two helpings of dinner.

I finished off my sausages and then left the table.

The sun finally started to set. It was around seven o’clock and I could see the moon coming out. It was so quiet. All I could hear was the low conversations between some of the guys and the smokers exhaling. The entire sky was a bright orange with a few clouds scattered here and there. I felt like going for a walk but the last patrol had come back two hours ago and no one was allowed to leave the barracks, so I just

killed some time by cleaning my uniform, having a shower, cleaning my guns and having a game of cards with the lads. I asked Sgt. Ryan whether there had been any letters for me.

‘Let’s see here. Fitzgerald, Fitzgerald, hmm, nope. Looks like you don’t have any, sorry.’

‘Alright. Thanks,’ I said,

And with that I trudged into my tent and lay on my bed and began to stare at the top of the tent for a good hour before falling into a deep sleep.

Something made my eyes spring open; I woke up to the sound of something or someone moving their feet. I squinted my eyes and I could just about make out the silhouette of someone standing up looking outside the tent. After a while I soon realised the person had the same build as Marcus. Before I could speak he turned around and put his finger on his lip, he then waved at me to come forward. I was sleeping in my trousers so I didn’t bother getting changed; I slowly crept up beside him. We stood in silence for a few seconds.

‘Do you hear that?’ asked Marcus.

‘Hear what,’ I asked.

‘That...that sound,’ he said.

I listened for a while and heard nothing, only my heartbeat. Then my ears pricked up and I heard a very faint sound of ticking and I thought I heard metal clinking off something as well.

‘What do you think it is?’ said Marcus.

‘It sounds like people are loading something, but, it can’t be can it? I mean it’s hard to tell.’

Marcus didn't say anything he just stood there, ears pricked up, scratching his knuckles.

I started to gaze at the stars. There were so many. It was like Iraq was a different place at night. One star, particularly, caught my attention. It looked like it was moving but if it was moving it was doing it so slightly that you would hardly notice, like the hour hand on a clock.

I thought I was probably just tired, after all, I hadn't slept for more than five hours in two days. The sound had stopped and Marcus was just waiting to hear it again. I looked up and the star seemed to be a kind of egg shape, it was definitely moving. For sure. Then I heard a hissing sound. I looked at Marcus.

'I can hear it too,' he said. 'But, it's different.'

Then I realised what I'd been staring at, it was moving fast. I was speechless.

Marcus reacted quickly. He shouted at the top of his voice, 'Incoming!'

A few dozen officers woke up and started shouting at the rest of the soldiers, 'GET UP! MOVE! MOVE! MOVE!'

Marcus started waking up as many people as he could while I just...just stood there.

The barracks looked like a colony of ants with everyone moving around, trying to get something or someone. Dave and Sgt. Ryan were loading the artillery as quickly as they could but no one knew where the mortar was coming from. John was running around asking anyone had they seen Michael. I looked around and I couldn't see him either. I was in

the centre of the barracks, just standing still observing everything else that was going on. Then the sound of everyone running around me stopped. I looked ahead, the barracks looked like a barren wasteland. I could see the mortar slowly approaching, it was seconds away by now. Then I saw Michael slowly walk out of his tent, rubbing his eyes. Everything went dead quiet.

I heard Marcus screaming at the top of his voice behind me. I ran towards Michael but I was too late.

I put my hands up to cover my face from the impact.

Michael stopped in his tracks and just looked up at the mortar. It landed right in front of him, consuming everything in a thick, black cloud of smoke, dust and fire. He disappeared; it was like the mortar took Michael down to hell, leaving no trace of him whatsoever.

I couldn't even find his ashes. He was gone. Forever.

An Easy Day Out

Kyle O'Keeffe

It was approaching dawn as Captain Price was reciting the plan with his team one last time. They had received word from a known associate of theirs that some vital Russian intelligence was in an abandoned estate nearby. At first, Price thought this was too good to be true, but upon following up on this information, found out that this *place*, consisting of three two-story houses and a small shed, turned out to be a major Russian control base.

The team were heavily armed, from guns and grenades to advanced technology such as electronic beacons and portable radars. They had trained many times for the plan, but had no idea what they were about to walk into.

Captain Price was in charge this time around, with Sgt Gary 'Gaz' Anderson second in command. Including Price and Gaz, there were five Elite Task Force members handpicked to retrieve the Intel and get out safely.

The pilot gave Gaz the thumbs up.

'Ready, on your mark, sir,' Gaz said in his thick, London accent.

'Let's do it,' replied Price, who was also British.

With that the three mercenaries jumped, followed closely by Gaz and Price.

Price landed with a thud accompanied by his parachute. Making haste, Price got rid of his parachute in some nearby shrubs and took cover behind some young trees. He activated his beacon, which gave the other four team members his location.

Gaz regrouped with Price, with only two Task members following.

‘Where’s Griggs?’ Gaz asked.

‘He must have landed off course,’ replied a mercenary.

‘Captain Price, come in. Over,’ they heard over the radio.

Price realised this was Baseplate contacting him and immediately replied, ‘Go ahead, Baseplate. Over.’

‘Griggs has activated his emergency response beacon in a nearby village. We think the Russians have got him. Find him and get him out, Price!’

The team arrived at the perimeter of the small area.

‘Gaz, cut the fence,’ Price whispered.

While Gaz was blowtorching the fence, Price gave a quick word to his team. ‘Gaz and I will take this house, you two scout the opposite house. We’ll regroup out back at the small shed.’

The four men squeezed through the fence and took their positions around the house. Price gave the two mercenaries a quick nod, and they breached the doors. Price and Gaz didn’t have to breach as their door was already open. They looked uneasily at each other and readied up. They stormed the bottom floor, which came up clean. They crept up to the top floor, where they were met by screams behind closed doors.

Quickly, Price and Gaz breached the door, slaughtering the two soldiers torturing Griggs.

‘You okay, chap?’ asked Price.

‘Yeah, I can fight,’ replied Griggs in an urban, New York accent.

Price glanced out the window to be met by the two mercenaries holding the Intel in the air. He radioed their exit chopper and walked to the LZ. ‘Good job, lads. We’ve given the US government some badly needed help.’

A Brief Encounter

Adam Cannon

Space - the last of a vast unexplored world, as humanity reached out to the known void of darkness, with its faster than light spaceships at its fingers.

Mankind sent out its first exploring ships almost fifty years before, exploring many worlds which became the first colonies and now are industrial planets in the United Planets Alliance.

The First encounter with an alien race was by the warship nicknamed Zeus; a Dreadnought Class ship and her standard Viper Fighters. Zeus was on a patrol around a colony planet, New Dublin. The planet's orbital defences spotted Unidentified Fighters, usually belonging to space pirates, around one of its outer planets. Zeus warped out of its hyper-drive FTLs (Faster Than Light) engines, the hull heavily armoured for combat. The ship had a long hull which stretched out the size of old skyscrapers. Its bridge was at the end of the ship near the engines. The bridge was where all the main controls were made; this was where the pilot sat and the captain of the ship.

Although there were windows - they were rectangular in shape, and welded in a domed shape frame - when flying a Dreadnought Class ship, or anything that wasn't a fighter, the need for windows were unnecessary as the ship used sensors

and targeting systems to engage hostiles and to fly around with great precision and accuracy.

Along Zeus's hull there was many automated and manual gunning platforms built in to the armoured hull. They ranged in different sizes, each designated a different job of space warfare.

There was the Apollo. A 1200mm range weapons system - these beasts of guns where military issued on all dreadnoughts. There were six of them, three on each side. Then there was 600mm Rail cannons; these were are standard issued on smaller Class ships as they were heavy weapons. Also, on Zeus, there was forty-six small 200mm guns all together, they were spread out twenty-three on each side. There was smaller weapon platforms called A-Fs, too, much like AA guns used in the world wars of earth which included a fast firing system which would tear through fighters like a knife through paper.

Zeus had fifty-nine levels, three of which formed a bay with hollowed out floors for holding fighters and launching pads for them

Zeus' captain, John Redford, spoke on the ship's intercom.

'All Pilots to report to the viper bay for reconnaissance on the outer planets.'

Roland was running to the bay doors. He was late. There, standing in a line, was Roland's squadron, all nicknamed. There was Mango, Hollow, and Grim and his officer, Toby. Roland paced up and down with a scowl on his face, walking in

a military style, head up, arms straight and saluted him, and followed with a shout, 'Viper pilot, Roland, reporting...'

'Rookie, where the hell have you been?'

The scream of Toby's voice should have echoed this massive bay, but could be drowned out by hundreds more voices and the sound of machinery and loading of the vipers.

'But Sir-'

'No buts, Rookie. I swear if *you* are late like this again I'll personally send you back to the academy with my left hook.'

'But Sir, I was late...and wait that doesn't make sense?'

Roland knew what he had done; he *saw* what he had done. It was like watching from above and wanting to grab his mouth to stop him from uttering those words of disrespect and cheek.

His commanding officer was about to erupt, his red face and stress veins telling that he was about to explode with curses, threats and all sorts of nasty things to inflict on Roland.

Roland braced himself for impact. His head shrank into his shoulders, his eyes squinted. But luck struck Roland; he heard the sweet words, 'Captain on Deck,' and followed by a deadly serious silence.

Roland's Officer forced himself to stay quiet by putting his hand close to his mouth and did a sort of screamed mumble. Roland also heard, 'All viper teams report.'

The Viper teams began huddling around a makeshift stage, made from empty Viper ammo cases and small crates. Then Roland stood away from his team who had to gather around their officer. Roland was at the back of the huddled

pilots. Then the crowd began to gaze up in awe as a figure stood on the makeshift platform. It was Captain Redford. He stood with his hand behind his back, standing straight, his eyes filled with experience. His black uniform finely crisp and the space where his war medals had been was vacated. Redford was holding his head high; Roland could only square his jaw, which was cleanly shaved, from where he was standing as the light shined off his bald head.

Redford began talking with a serious tone, 'Pilots, you know what our mission was. It was to perform recon for the planet known as New Dublin, as some of their orbital defences picked up unidentified fighters. As you may know, most of New Dublin's military has been moved to join the main battle fleet, to provide support and assistance to our buddy's and sister ship. That is why I'm assembling all fighters. I am here to make sure no pirate makes it near the planet New Dublin. We're damn gonna help them, do I make myself clear pilots?'

The crowd around the flimsy stage went, 'Sir! Yes, sir!'

'Okay then, assemble those fighters,' Redford demanded with arms crossed and head cocked.

The crowd scattered, Roland ran watching as all vipers were being loaded up and being locked onto the rails. There were three of them and these rails went along the bay and out to the heavy armoured doors. The doors stopped the bay crews from getting sucked out into the black void of space along the rails which propelled the aircraft out when the bay doors were open. The zero gravity meant that the vipers could be lined up one after other. When a viper hits the edge

of the bay, which laid out into darkness, the fighter's engines would kick start, and the pilot would break in any direction to allow room for the next fighter.

Roland stopped to gawk at one viper being locked up to the rail by the bay crew, or the Railers, as they were nicknamed. There are many crews which worked in the main bay and many also had nicknames: from the Goblins to the Blind Men. The Railers were the best *and* fastest at locking and doing safety checks on the vipers when hooked up to the rail. Roland watched as crew swarmed each ship and did the safety checks three times in a matter of minutes.

But the gawking had to stop as, yet again, Roland was late. Toby hadn't had the chance earlier to erupt with rage which meant that if Roland was late again, Toby would be like an atomic bomb set to blast Roland's ear off.

Roland made it to his viper and one of the bay crew helped him into the ship. Roland took his helmet off the dashboard; his helmet had a yellow smiling face with a tinted yellow visor.

Roland made his checks, clicking buttons left right and centre. The canopy closed and Roland made the second round of checks and then gave a thumbs-up and the Railers moved on to the viper behind his. The same happened with the other Vipers behind them. Then Roland heard Toby through the Comms system. 'Roland, after this I'm going to make you suffer. You won't sleep for a month!'

Roland clicked a button and replied with a sigh, 'Yes, Sir.'

The bay began to clear of bay workers all the machines and lifts and equipment, and only the vipers were standing in line ready to be launched out.

The speaker system in the bay declared, 'Clearing oxygen for launching.' This was repeated.

All airlocks to the bay were locked so no air would be in the bay. The vipers were air-pressured so Zeus could contact them directly.

The system in the speaker of Roland's helmet drummed into Roland's skull. Roland began to shuffle to turn the volume down.

'Opening bay doors,' and a small deathly silence. Then a countdown began. 'Launching in three, two, one, Vipers are launched!'

Roland jerked forward as his Viper followed the others as they flooded into darkness. Roland's engines kicked in and Roland pulled on his viper's joystick.

Then Toby came shouting orders, ordering them to form up and get into scouting formation. Roland followed orders and found his squadron going towards the nearest moon.

Roland joined up with Toby, Mango and Ghost, in formation, and then as they reached the moon Zeus's emergency signal was broadcasted: 'All Vipers return to Zeus. An enemy ship has appeared. I repeat, enemy ship has appeared. All Vipers return to Zeus!'

'What the hell?' asked Toby, taking the lead.

'What is it, Sir?' replied Ghost, with his thick Russian accent, which had a serious tone.

‘I’m picking up multiple tangos. Almost 200 fighters coming...’

‘That’s not possible,’ interrupted Roland

‘Incoming!’ screamed Mango

Blue flashes flew past him and hit Toby’s ship, who was ahead of him and the rest of his squad. Toby’s ship was turned to scrap metal.

Automatically the three pilots broke, but they were being swarmed by flashes of blue. Roland swung his ship left and did full flips to dodge the incoming shots from these unknown fighters. Then Roland caught a glimpse of the ships that were desperately trying to hit him. The ship was blue and it was dome-shaped with two sorts of blade sticking out of it, and it had a weapon-like device at the front, and a blue flame at the back.

Roland then noticed more blue flashing pasting him. Roland saw Zeus ahead of him. All guns were blazing and Roland’s Viper joined Zeus’ battle grid.

Captain Redford gave orders to the Vipers and he heard commands for the whole ship but the Vipers were left out in the cold. Roland thought and clicked his local Comms as he was dodging the blue flashes. He was calling shots in his head and he spoke with an almost calm voice, and a few curses, after almost getting hit. ‘All Vipers report in!’

Multiple teams flooded in but there was enough for three squads. ‘The survivors,’ Roland whispered.

Then something took over. Roland started issuing commands and squad placement and two Vipers joined him into a formation and began attacking the swarm.

These blue fighters could barely hit them. Roland told them they had no targeting system, 'So light them up.'

Roland spun off in a direction and turned on his main gun, which began tearing the blue ships ahead him and Roland spun his hand to bank left as he had too many attacking him. The hoard of fighters were dropping but there were too many on his tail. Roland almost got sick from doing so many spins.

Then Redford came on the Comms and shouted, 'Keep them off the main guns. We're taking too many hits here.'

Roland followed the order and told the others to prioritize ships near the Apollo.

Roland and Zeus' guns were still blazing all over. Then the Comms started lighting up with cheers, 'THEY'RE RETREATING!!!' It was over.

Roland clicked the button on the microphone and said in a deadly tone, 'We lost most of our fighters. Zeus has taken a massive amount of damage, so...No, it's not over. It's just about to begin.'

LIFE AND LOSS

The Tragic Tale of Lonely Joe

Neal Dawson

Lonely Joe was very lonely. Nobody ever wanted to talk to Lonely Joe, let alone be friends with him. Every time he got a pet it would manage to get away from him, even if it was a fish. He was so lonely that sometimes he would talk to trees. The trees couldn't talk back, but it was nice to have someone to listen to him. Though he really did wish those trees would talk back. They must have had such interesting lives. Lonely Joe didn't have an interesting life. He just read books all day. He learned many things from those books, especially things about trees.

After years of doing nothing but reading and talking to plants he decided to make a change in his life. Using his vast knowledge of trees, he invented a ray gun which could turn them into people. He went out to his back garden and shot the biggest tree there was, which then shrank down and took on the shape of a human. Then it grew skin and hair, and in a few seconds it was fully human. Joe named his new friend Bob, and they became great friends. Lonely Joe was known from then on as Friendly Joe.

All summer they had fun together, and their friendship brought smiles to people's faces. But when the summer ended and autumn set in Bob began to grow ill. After a week, his skin began to fall off. He assured Joe that this happened every

year, and that he would be better by spring. But when winter came and all of Bob's skin had fallen off, he died of blood loss. Joe buried Bob in his back garden, and he became known as Lonely Joe again.

He spent the rest of his days alone and died ten years later, never once thinking to turn an evergreen tree into a human instead of a deciduous one.

Bikes, Rides and Drinks

Eoin McCrossan

His hand clawed for a glob of Brylcream and brought it up to apply it to the brown jungle upon his head. He looked into the bathroom mirror and saw a pale, freckled face, blue eyes, and hair sticking up through the centre of his skull like a series of spires, shining amber in the morning sunlight.

Josh Kettling was warring with his conscious until finally he caved-in to pressure from his peers. He decided that he wouldn't go into school like the rest of the lads. He didn't see the point of having school on a Friday anyway.

He washed the sticky wax off his hands and went out through the bathroom door.

The can of Coke and the clacking noise of his bike wheels, accompanied Josh as he cycled through the empty Tesco parking lot towards seven adolescents; all dressed in trainers, hoodies, and school slacks. He parked his bike by a row of trollies and looked up.

'Alright, Kettle,' a thin voice, exuding confidence, exclaimed.

Joe Kelly was a skinhead. There was hardly a time in the day that you wouldn't find him wearing a pair of loose grey trousers, pulled about halfway up his backside so people could

see his bright boxers. He had a very lean face, distinctive green eyes and a nose that was as long and narrow as a bird's beak.

Joe strutted towards the trollies. He had a demeanor so relaxed that his back could almost be parallel to the ground, with his left hand down his trousers.

'How's it goin', mate?'

'Not too bad. Yourself?'

'I'm alright, as you can clearly see,' Joe said with a sly smile, showing two rows of crooked teeth.

'Decided to show up then,' declared a nasal voice that seemed to slithered up behind Josh.

Josh took a quick glance at Murph, then quickly glanced down, like he was a mouse being cornered by a hungry cat. 'I thought it would be good craic,' Josh mumbled down towards his chest.

'Indeed it will, as long as everybody pitches in. Why so sour, Kettle? Come on, keep yur chin up.' Murph had come over to Josh and began to repeatedly give Josh a soft back hand tap so Josh's chin was up from his chest and their eyes were level.

Josh held Murph's steely, blue-eyed gaze until Murph finally turned away and started laughing. Josh dropped his unblinking stare and continued to look at his rusty handlebars.

'Come on, boys,' Joe yelled back to the other lads, 'I want to get to the park before ten.'

And with that he hopped onto his bike.

All the young adolescents began to cycle away. Josh threw his Coke can upon the ground and went to join his new companions.

As they were cycling towards the amusement park, Murph began imitating a loud motorbike as he hunched over his handlebars, like he was involved in a high speed chase.

It was just after ten o'clock when they arrived outside the park. Josh saw that there were no queues outside the dark red walls surrounding the amusement park. The entrance to the park was guarded by turnstiles that had a smidge of orange rust on its silver coating. To the right of the turnstiles was a green vending machine containing an assortment of drinks.

'Do you have any money on yi?' Murph asked looking back around at them.

They all shook their heads to the disappointment of Ian Murphy. A man in a black suit, white shirt and red tie walked by the gang. He had crisp brown hair topping a stern face.

'Got any change, mate?' Murph called out towards him. Ian Murphy has always had the confidence to ask strangers personal questions. In any group of people, he always messed about as if he was a clown in a circus, trying desperately to get the applause and laughter from his audience. He was bony, had short black hair and he was wearing a green hoodie and Adidas tracksuit bottoms.

The man kept walking, back straight, ignoring Murph.

'Hey, Joe. Watch,' Murph called and he started walking behind the man, imitating his movement.

The man started to arch his back in order to walk faster.

Murph began to do the same, pulling faces.

An outbreak of laughter erupted from the boys. Murph turned back toward them. He was like a sponge, soaking up all the appreciation that was thrown at him.

Joe turned in towards the park. 'Let's go, lads.' Everyone swarmed round him and he herded them all into the park.

They all lined up outside the turnstiles, paying a bored, obese woman the required fee to get into the park.

As Josh stepped across the threshold, he was greeted by the rattling roller coasters, whizzing about on the clanking rails. There was a giant billboard standing over him, welcoming him to 'Fun Land'. He caught the fragrance of cotton candy wafting from a closed stall. There were wire-gauz bins scattered around the park, overflowing with food wrappers and blue Pepsi cups.

Murph looked adoringly at a black and yellow roller coaster, travelling through a series of loop-the-loops and free falls.

'Argh, can we go on *The Screamer* first, Joe,' he begged.

Joe looked down at him. 'Nah. We're goin' in the bumper cars.'

'But bumper cars are really rubbish.'

'Shut up! It's better than a bleedin' roller coaster.' Joe looked back for support, but everyone remained silent, not wanting to upset either of the boys.

‘Come on, lads. Leave this little twit to his roller coaster.’ Joe began to stroll towards the dodgems, all the boys following in his wake.

‘Wait up Joe,’ Murph called out chasing after him. He clambered into the driver’s seat of a red dodgem beside Joe. Josh got into the passenger’s seat with Gavin O’Byrne in a dark blue car. The other four boys got into yellow and green cars.

There was a steady *thrum* as the dodgems started up and a *screech* when they began to skid across the black plastic surface. Josh felt a *thud* as the red dodgem rammed into his car.

‘Little eejit,’ Gavin growled. He turned the car in the direction of Murph’s hysterical laughter. As he neared the dodgem they were bumped by the yellow car.

‘Fool.’

Gavin’s comments seemed to get more aggressive as his and Josh’s dodgem kept on getting bumped but they didn’t ram into any cars themselves. To Josh, the dodgems couldn’t end quick enough.

After their session on the bumper cars was over, they headed towards *The Screamer*. Everyone enjoyed the rollercoaster a lot more than they did bumper cars. All the bad comments that Joe made about it seemed to disappear as he flew, his hands up over his head, going round a loop-the-loop.

The gang of boys continued to go on different machines, enjoying the fact that there was no one else getting on the rides. They had spent two hours in the park before they wanted to leave. On their way out, Gavin spotted a carousel.

‘I’m gonna ride on that silver horse,’ he declared in his booming voice.

All the boys laughed at the idea of it, and even harder still as Gavin heaved his huge bulk over the plastic horse. There was a small squeak as he settled himself onto it.

‘You’re too fat, man,’ Joe yelled above the chaos.

Gavin just replied with his favourite hand gesture. When the music started, a picture of an ice-cream began to form in Josh’s head, until he heard the creaking of the horse, struggling to rise with Gavin on its back. The creaking continued as the merry-go-round kept going round and round. When it finally stopped, Gavin jumped off the horse gracelessly. He took out his pen knife and began to scrawl inscriptions on the horse’s blue backside. He made a gruff comment on how the babes had to learn about the language of the street sometime.

All of the boys were red in the face with laughter as they walked out of the Theme park.

‘Alright, so she tells me to stop buying the stuff, but she likes me better when I’m on it.’

The gang was leaning on the walls outside a housing estate. It was half past twelve in the afternoon and the sun was reflecting off the white pavement, blinding anyone who looked upon it. The boys were sweating under the sweltering heat. Trees leaned over the walls, eavesdropping on the gang’s conversation.

‘Women are a mystery, Murph. I find it’s better when you just don’t give a rat’s ass what they say, just nod your head and keep doing what you’re doing.’

‘Yeah. Women know nothing, Joe,’ an anonymous voice piped in.

Joe stifled a yawn. ‘Murph! Where do you get your stuff?’

‘Off Mick Johnson. He gets it from Vietnam.’

Gavin stepped off the wall and turned to face Murph. ‘Don’t go to Mick. He’ll rip you off.’

‘Who should I go to then,’ Murph snapped.

Gavin looked at Murph as if he was a dunce. ‘*You* should go to *me*.’

Murph sneered at him. ‘You’d probably sell me some dodgy shit.’

‘Why’d you say that?’

‘‘cause you’re a traveller.’

‘Call me that again and I’ll put you through that wall,’ Gavin roared viciously, jerking his finger toward Murph.

Murph looked like he wanted to make a retort but Joe cut across him. ‘Gav, look who’s coming.’

They all looked up towards the approaching gang of five. They were led by a brutal looking seventeen year old.

Gavin stayed stock still for two seconds, then strutted towards the leader of this new group. After about eight paces both boys stopped. They looked at each other for a couple of fleeting seconds. The air was humid with the tension. Josh was starting to think that the silence would never be broken.

‘What are you doing here, Malone?’ Gavin asked, looking hatefully at the seventeen year-old who approached him.

‘I’m here to give your ma a call, O’Byrne,’ Malone replied in a nonchalant fashion. ‘I trust her business is still going, despite all the unemployment that has come about our country.’

When Gavin realised what his rival was insinuating, his face began glowing a deep, intense red. It looked like steam was going to start spouting from his ears any minute. ‘I’m going to kill you,’ he growled.

Malone let out an exasperated sigh.

‘You’re too stupid to kill me, O’Byrne,’ he told Gavin, condescendingly.

At that, Gavin charged. Malone caught Gavin and pushed him away from his body. A flurry of punches and storm of kicks followed. After half a minute, Gavin grappled Malone into a headlock, tensing his muscles to tighten his hold on him.

Abusive shouts washed over the fighters like a waterfall from both sides, until the ringing of a Garda car was heard coming round the corner. The fight broke up and both groups scattered in different directions.

When they finally stopped, everyone was heaving heavy breaths. Gavin’s face was tomato red from the fight.

‘Unlucky, Gav. You really had him till the pigs showed up,’ Joe said between breaths.

Gavin stretched his back, swung his arms around his head and grunted, ‘He’s such an idiot.’

‘Yeah, but did you hear what he did to Mifty?’ Murph said. Then, in a more conspiratorial tone, ‘Broke both his hands and dislocated his *right shoulder*.’

Some of them nodded in agreement to Murph’s statement while others gasped and cursed in shock.

Joe got up and walked back to the scene of the fight to get his bike.

‘Come on, lads. I’m tired of hearing about Paddy Malone. Let’s go get some drinks from O’Malley’s.’ Everyone got up and followed him.

A bell rang as Josh and Joe entered the off-license. Josh saw hundreds of wine bottles racked on dusty brown shelves hanging from putrid green walls, with a variety of countries labelled above them. There was an intoxicating smell of alcohol drifting through the air and it always seemed to linger underneath Josh’s nose. Cans of beer took up space in the center of the shop with signs above them displaying brand names like ‘Cobra’ and ‘Heineken’.

Joe picked up a twenty-four pack of Miller and ambled his way towards the counter. The tiller looked up from the newspaper he was reading and asked for identification. Joe took his left hand out of his pants and opened it to reveal a driver’s license stating that he was nineteen years old. No more questions were asked. Joe and Josh were soon outside dividing the cans between everyone.

After all the young adults had had about two cans each, Gavin took out what looked like a rolled-up piece of paper. He

lit it, brought it up to his mouth, inhaled deeply from it and passed it along so that everyone else could do the same.

After that, Josh's vision went fuzzy, like a group of clouds were passing in front of his eyes and a weight had been put on his eyelids. He couldn't recall much of what happened after that. He remembered a lot of laughter and angry adult voices. There were lots of big city lights, tripping over bins and the sound of a police man's siren. He was running, they were all running. He tripped and scraped his knee. People were running away from him and heavier feet towards him. He felt betrayed, and blacked out.

When he came to, he was lying on a bench in the police station. His mother was talking to a constable, red-faced with embarrassment. The anger and sadness he had felt, numbed at the sight of her and he felt only one thing. Shame. The shame of what he had done to cause her such distress burned through his insides until he was doubling over. Shame; because he didn't make the right choices the day before, and followed people he didn't even like. But it was the shame of him knowing that he would repeat his actions again if he were faced with the same dilemma again, that really set his veins on fire, and burned throughout his body.

The Lucky One

Grainne Fay

I hate that sound, that universal tune of depression every morning when your alarm clock goes off. Well maybe depression is too strong a term, but the sheer temptation that fills me, just like every other school morning, to drowsily walk downstairs and tell my Mum, 'I'm sick.'

I don't know where the strength comes from (probably the hunger inside me) but I unwillingly drag myself from my warm comfortable haven and throw on my crinkled school skirt, baggy jumper and repulsive chequered shirt. That uniform gets uglier every time I look at it, trust me.

With my eyelids feeling heavy, I make my way downstairs and I get hit with the rotten stench of overcooked scrambled eggs that my Dad thrives on in the morning. Just after he's munched down his breakfast I get a quick kiss on the cheek and a 'Goodbye, Ally. Have a good day.'

I love having the kitchen to myself in the morning when Mum's in bed and Dad's gone out to work; it's so quiet and peaceful. I make my usual creative breakfast - a cup of tea with toast and melted butter. I quickly grab a packet of popcorn for lunch and, feeling guilty for not being healthy, I grab an apple to go too. I gulp down my scorching hot tea, which burns my mouth, grab my bag keys and phone and slam the door on my way out to school.

The heavy wooden swinging door hits me and I find it even harder to enter the school building because I know I won't be leaving until four this afternoon. But I don't have long to wallow in my self-pity when a Third Year on my hockey team chirpily says, 'Morning, Ally. Did you remember your gear for our match later?' Still half asleep I reassure her I did and she immediately skips on to assembly.

I head on to my own assembly and sit through another fifteen minutes of Mr. Hanratty, our Year Head, lecturing us on the achievements of Fourth Year. I'm all up for getting involved in T.Y. but not at half-eight in the morning.

After assembly I'm greeted with the reminder of why I hate Tuesdays - double Irish and then Maths. I painfully sit through three classes attempting to keep my eyes open and rejoice when break comes. But after only lasting for what feels like seconds, I'm quickly back in class - double Biology in the downstairs lab that smells like dissected rats from the class before break.

I begin to find myself starting to zone-out as the day proceeds along its regular course when I'm startled by our school secretary, Caroline, rushing in, humbly carrying her small frame. She looks distraught and it's the most excitement in the class so far when she blurts out she needs to speak to Freya, my best friend, who is sitting beside me at the back - sleeping. I nudge her from her nap, 'Caroline wants to talk to you.'

'Ugh, trek and a half. I'll be back in a minute.'

I didn't see Freya until after lunch when I went with Annie our other best friend to the office to see if she was okay. We both had no clue what to expect. Freya was never sick so it couldn't be that, she wasn't that badly behaved so it couldn't be that either. So the final logical excuse was that her granny was quite old and she may be ill.

We tried to prepare ourselves to sympathise and console her but all our efforts went out the window when we walked into the office and saw her in floods of tears. When she managed to get a breath in between the tears, she blurted out, 'Mum died in a car accident.'

I broke down crying along with Annie as we realised the obvious absence of Lisa Freya's mum already. I knew that however sad I was at the thought of losing a mum Freya's sadness was denser, heavier and more permanent.

We consoled and attempted to sympathise with Freya for the next few weeks but it seemed so hard for her, and Annie and I felt so helpless. She had this huge challenge laid out before her to live the rest of her life without her Mum and it seemed like a challenge too hard and too cruel for a sixteen year-old to face. She had two siblings her older brother, Greg, and younger sister, Georgia, but she felt like an only child. Greg was always looking after Georgia because she was only nine and her Dad was hardly a help when he was so upset himself. I tried to be there for her as much as I could but the more I tried the more I realised I just wasn't a sensitive person. Annie said it was my being there that she appreciated.

Months passed and although Freya was still mourning and missing her Mum, she came back into school. Everyone was great. They offered loads of support, talked about it when Freya wanted to, and offered the occasional shoulder to cry on when she had those realisations, midway through the day, that she'd never have her Mum's home cooking again, or never hear her voice again.

Annie and I found it hard because we wanted to be there for her, but after four months we had to stop putting our lives on hold and went about our daily business. We still went back to hers most days after school and helped out Michael, her dad, at home. We tried to ease Freya back into everyday routine without being too harsh. We didn't want to make out as if we were saying, 'Come on, carry on with your life, even though your mum's gone.' But we couldn't just stand back and watch her miss things she'd regret, like our Fourth Year skiing trip.

I began to learn more about Annie from the whole experience as well. We made a fantastic team, the *Dream Team* we called ourselves. We needed each other as much as Freya needed us.

Freya's family were great and really close and helped each other out a lot. Every Saturday after her mother's death they would gather in their house and spend the day there. One night, with our school musical coming up I needed to get my costume, when Freya and her family were gathering for dinner, I didn't want to go into town by myself. So I asked Annie, knowing Freya was busy and she said, 'Sorry I can't. I'm

going to Freya's.' She then added, 'I'm helping out because they're all going to her house for dinner tonight.'

Taken aback I responded, 'Oh, I thought that was just a family thing.'

She ended the conversation with, 'Yeah, but I feel she really needs me tonight.'

Slightly annoyed I must admit, I accepted her excuse and hung up the phone. I pushed the thoughts out of my head and started getting ready. Ridiculous as it was, the more I thought about it the angrier I got. As I was sitting on the DART by myself I was furious that Annie had just blown me off. I knew Freya's Mum died but Annie just forgot about her other friends. Freya had her family tonight for support.

Anyway, I hopped off at Tara Street. The first thing I noticed was a bearded man sleeping with no socks on, in tracksuit bottoms wrapped in a child sized blanket. As insensitive as I was I couldn't help but notice this, but I wrapped my scarf tighter around my neck and walked towards the North side reminding myself that there were numerous homeless people living on the streets. Passing alleys and dodgy areas on my way, I saw dealers and receivers of drugs, nicotine and alcohol addicts.

I suppose I always came in to town with a friend and never really paid attention to what was around me - all the good, all the bad. You could say I lived by the saying, 'If you don't see it, it's not there.'

It was no outer-body experience or a spiritual awakening but a sheer wave of relief swept over me. It made me stop and

think, which is not something I'd usually do in the middle of town. But I realised how lucky I was. How my life was so unbelievably easy and others so difficult. I felt guilty for getting angry with Annie for wanting to be there for Freya. She had it so hard and I breezed through the days and weeks and my biggest dilemma was not getting enough sleep. I felt embarrassed thinking my life was tough because my Mum wouldn't let me have a day off school when children all around the world would die to wear my uniform, sit in my school classrooms, do my work and have a future. I have both my parents healthy and happy, an amazing house, plenty of food, while people my age - no different, just on the other side of the world - only have the clothes on their back and their families; no food or shelter.

I made a promise to myself that day that I would appreciate everyone, everything, and every opportunity in my life, because I was so lucky to be alive, to be who I was, have all the things I have; amazing friends and family, and everything I need. I'm a firm believer in the old saying, 'Everything happens for a reason,' and it sure does.

If I had never gone in by myself to town I would never have opened my eyes to the world around me and the hardship of others. I would never have gotten the opportunity to help people like I have now, and the best thing about it is that I want to help people. I want to lend a helping hand and my first hand goes to Freya, one of my best friends, the strongest girl I know.

Autumn in the Woods

Stephen Carroll

It was a cold morning, mist covered the lake and blocked out the shore line, which only lay about fifty meters away. Adam Jacobson woke to this; yet another, autumn morning, to which he saw the first of the brown withering leaves fall from the tall oak tree in front of his small one bedroomed home in the secluded woods of Northern Colorado.

Adam went hunting almost every weekend and he couldn't help but love autumn. It was the time he felt it easiest to hunt, the deep foliage, along with his homemade ghillie suit, provided the perfect cover and made him completely invisible to any deer.

Adam lived a very lonely life, he would openly admit to his only true friend being his four year-old Alsatian, Buck. Adam found Buck while hunting early one morning, in a microwave box on the trail which leads from the interstate, twenty-five miles away, to the lake beside Adam's home. Buck was the only survivor of five pups which were already dead when Adam came across them. Instantly they became inseparable, from the time Adam picked his tiny malnourished body in one hand, to the day he defended the cabin from two wolves.

People in the nearby town knew Adam as the crazy guy who lived in the woods and never left his dog. They couldn't have been more wrong. Adam was in his late forties; fifteen

years ago he was a very successful lawyer in Boston. He lived a very happy life there, surrounded by family and friends. Adam had a wife, Jane, and two children, Sarah and Jake, who were twins. Fifteen years before, to the day was the day Adam would never forget. Jane had been planning a family holiday to Europe for months. Adam knew he couldn't go but decided not to tell her and the kids, he wanted them to go take a break from their busy lives near the city.

The morning before the holiday Adam broke the news, he had to go to LA to meet a client. Sarah and Jake, along with their mother, were annoyed he had not told them.

That night, the kids - who normally are full of chat - ignored their father, and Jane - who would usually have been so interested in his day - went straight to bed after dinner.

The next morning Adam woke to an empty house. They had gone without as much as a goodbye. Later that day Adam heard the same thing he would hear over and over again, every time he closed his eyes. It was on the radio in the taxi on the way to the airport, 'Flight number A3536F to Paris has crashed down in the Atlantic. Engine failure caused an explosion which ripped apart the Airbus A380. There are currently believed to be no survivors.'

There was no mistaking it, they had been on that plane. Adam held his unused ticket in his shaking hand. He could feel his hands beginning to clam up, beads of sweat rolled down his now pale face. Everything stopped. Adam just wanted the ground to open up and swallow him.

After this day Adam's life almost completely stopped. He left his life of noise and cities for a quiet and secluded life in the woods. Adam completely disconnected himself from the outside world. He built his cabin by himself in about two months. He worked nonstop, it seemed to keep his mind off grieving. Every day Adam was kept busy by the sheer amount of jobs to be done around the cabin; collecting wood, getting clean water, hunting for food, and catching fish in the nearby lake or river. He had to keep working as any time to think brought horrific memories to light. Buck was his only friend and companion.

On this morning, as usual, Buck came bounding into the bedroom, from his bed which was situated right beside the wood burner. Buck seemed to know what day it was - *Today they would hunt!*

While walking through the dense autumn leaves blanketing the ground, with Buck in close pursuit, Adam came across dinner. A strong healthy stag, which would feed both of them for at least a fortnight. Adam stopped dead, slowly pulling his rifle from behind his back. They were in the perfect position, downwind, so their scent wouldn't alert the stag.

Buck lay down and kept quiet; soon he would be needed.

Adam lay about twenty yards away with his rifle now in his arms, looking down the sight, and adjusted the focus, to get the perfect lethal shot. Just as Adam began to slowly putting pressure on the trigger something startled the stag - it popped up its head, ears and nose and furiously sniffed and listened for the slightest change in its surroundings.

BANG!

Adam had missed his target; the heart. The bullet sliced through the soft flesh in the front of the stag's chest.

'Huff,' sighed Adam.

He looked at Buck, who knew what this meant and like a shot he took off after the stag. Normally Buck was a kind and loving dog, but when out hunting his instincts took over. Adam could see his beloved dog run off into the dense wood, after what he hoped would be dinner.

Half an hour later, Adam still hadn't seen Buck. Where was he?

The Day the World Watched

Rob McMahon

It was a normal autumn day in the city of New York. Workers were making their way to and from their workplace. The sun was shining, the clouds were nowhere to be seen, and the birds were happily singing from the trees.

As I made my way through Central Park on my way to work, tourists and runners were out in numbers as they enjoyed the beautiful orange and yellow colours of the trees. It was a rather busy day, much busier than usual. It was a warm September morning, and everyone was enjoying the morning sun.

I took this route each morning, the scenic route. I'd walk in the south entrance, the tall gates towering over me. I always make my way through the middle of the park, admiring the colours and the beauty of the nature on offer. I sit on the bench by the lake and watch the swans as they paddle around and walk on the side looking for food. As I make my way towards the exit I usually buy a coffee from Michelle, the coffee vender near the exit. We chat for a few minutes, talking about the news, friends, and work. Michelle is one of the few people who I associate myself with in New York. We normally meet up after work for a bite to eat or a drink. We say our goodbyes and I move on, reluctantly, towards work.

But that morning was different. With Michelle behind me, I heard a noise from the sky. I looked up to see a bright blue sky, but what I heard I could not see. It was the sound of an aeroplane, but it sounded more peculiar than just that. I started spinning, endeavouring to see what I could hear. Nothing; the plane was a good distance away, I assumed, as I couldn't see anything. I walked to the exit and looked up, where no trees could block my view. I saw a large figure in the air. But something was wrong; planes are normally supposed to be steady with both wings out by its side, but this wasn't the case. The left side of the plane was arced downwards, the right side angling upwards. Others had realised something was wrong and many were looking up and pointing. Some had their hands across their face and others were screaming.

I dropped my coffee and started running in the direction of the plane. I passed people who were stuck to the ground, watching in awe. I kept running as fast as I could and then I heard it.

There was a deafening explosion from a few roads away. Screams echoed all around me. I could see smoke billowing from a building not too far from me. I kept running and realised that the World Trade Centre had been hit. I sprinted through crowds of people running the opposite way to me, dipping and dodging as I kept my eyes fixed on the smoke that was freely blowing only around the corner. As I reached the end of the road I turned sharply and started sprinting once more towards the stricken buildings.

There were more terrified people standing on this street than the last, screaming and shouting, not knowing what to do. It was immediately obvious what had happened - the out-of-control aircraft had careered into the World Trade Centre. Fire was protruding from the higher levels of the building, black smoke blowing in all directions. There was a cloud of dust on the ground, and I could see survivors stumbling out of the smoke and dust. I looked up, and what I saw I will never forget; innocent people jumping from their office window, falling from over three-thousand feet to their death.

People were looking up as well, tears streaming down their faces. Others couldn't watch, they had their hands covering their faces as they cried. Some were on their hands and knees, screaming, while others couldn't do anything but watch.

I made my way closer to the building to offer my support. I started to inhale the dust and smoke, coughing as I did so. Ambulances, fire brigades, and police cars had made their way onto the scene, diverting people away from the buildings. Just as I made my way through the dust, still about one-hundred yards away from the building, it collapsed from the top down. Everyone started running in the direction from which I had just come, screaming even louder than before.

I could hear the buildings collapsing, a deafening sound coming from behind me. More dust and smoke protruded towards us, impairing my vision. I wouldn't be able to make it back to the other street. I looked along the street to see what shelter I could find. I spotted a café just beside me and ran

inside, shutting the door behind me. I walked slowly backwards, staring out the window at what looked like the beginning of World War III.

I looked around; there were no more than ten people inside the café, all watching in awe at what was unfolding just outside their door.

Behind the counter the waiter had put the television on, and on every channel there was live coverage of the attack. Helicopters were hovering above the buildings, giving every aspect of what happened.

I made my way back over to the window. I could see people running for their lives, as if something or someone was chasing them. The dust cloud had passed but was still hanging not too high off the ground. Even from inside I could hear people screaming from the outside, crying for help. I couldn't take it anymore.

I ran back outside and approached a woman who was crawling on the ground, blood dripping from all of her limbs. I picked her up and assured her everything would be okay, and I brought her over to the closest ambulance.

I made my way back into the dust, covering my face with my top to prevent anymore inhalation. I could hear more pleas for help, and I saw two young boys, no older than ten years old, both stumbling away from the building. They were both badly injured, one had a large gash in his leg, the other had blood pouring from his shoulder. I ran over to them, and picked one of them up and put him over my shoulder, while the other one said he was okay to walk. We made our way

back to the ambulance where I had just been, and let the medical staff take them off my hands.

I was growing tired. I couldn't prevent inhaling the smoke and dust into my lungs, and my eyes were starting to sting. I started to retreat, walking back the way I had come, back towards Central Park. I started running, tears started to roll down my face as I ran. I couldn't help it; the things I had just witnessed I would never forget. Wherever I ran there were people either crying or screaming, running or kneeling, praying, or just stuck to the spot as they watched their city fall before their very own eyes.

Sixty-eight Storeys Up

Olwen Wymer

Patrick and I came to Manhattan in the summer of 1932. We left our bleak Cork village with high hopes for the future, only to have them dashed upon our arrival in a New York so devastated by the depression that it bore no resemblance to the city of wealth and prosperity that we had been expecting. It was smokey and overcrowded but it felt somehow empty. People drifted around with a kind of quiet desperation etched onto their faces. The city was starved and so were its people.

We were desperately homesick. We longed for the open spaces and craggy cliffs we were so familiar with. In New York, it was difficult to find enough space to breath and the smoke was everywhere. Clouds of it filled the streets and blurred our vision.

Yet we did not quite despair. We had a little money saved so we set about finding lodgings. We found a large town house that had been divided up into rooms. The rent wasn't much and it was clean enough. The window needed fixing but we had a home once more.

There were five other rooms in the house. The room across from ours was occupied by a large family with four children, all under the age of ten. I ran into the father in the hall on our first evening. His name was Frank Morland. We talked for a while about the other people in the house. He said

that living in the house were two more families, a young couple, and an Italian man. It felt strange to have so many people under the same roof and yet it was oddly comforting. It made me feel a little more at home.

For me, the most impressive thing about New York was the buildings. Back in Cork, we had lived in a humble cottage with three small rooms. We weren't used to buildings with more than three storeys. Here in New York, I finally understood the term *skyscraper*. These buildings literally brushed the clouds. They towered above me, obscuring the view. There were a number of these structures still under construction. Men would be working seventy storeys above the city streets. This was not a popular job. Injuries were usually fatal and men died. The construction workers on these buildings were as desperate as they came. Among them was Mr Morland. It wasn't hard for him to put in a good word for us and he was more than happy to do so. That's how Patrick and I found ourselves on the sixty-eighth floor of the RCA building.

It wasn't good pay. They didn't need to pay us much. They knew that we wouldn't quit. We couldn't.

It was hard work too. I had never felt so tired after a day of labour as I did every evening in the days that followed. However, sleep did not come easy to me. Patrick did not even try to rest. He was out every night playing cards with some of the other men from the construction site. Often he did not arrive home until early the next morning. This made it even harder for me to sleep when I didn't know where he was.

Sometimes, I would leave our room and wander the streets half searching for him.

In the area that we lived, the streets were never empty but if I walked far enough, I reached streets so quiet that my footsteps seemed to rebound off the walls and houses. In these streets, the street lamps gleamed through the mist, making the scene ethereal. I wished that Patrick could be there with me.

Growing up, Patrick and I had always been close. Even as we got older we never drew apart. Now, however, Patrick was constantly distant. We never spoke any more. Worst of all, it seemed that gambling had taken over his existence. He was immersed in it. He gambled away all his earnings every week and we didn't have enough money to pay the rent. I confronted him and he simply said that he would take care of it. I wrote home in the hope that our mother could talk some sense into him. Then, one night, he woke me up and thrust money into my hand.

'I told you that I would take care of it,' he said.

He was unhappy though. I could tell. He became gaunt and cadaverous. Sometimes he would look like he had been fighting. He always showed up for work but we never talked like we used to.

I think my happiest memories from that time were of when we would sit on the scaffolding, sixty-eight floors up, and eat our lunches. We felt like kings - up there, above the smoke. Everything below us was so small. It was then that I felt at peace with Patrick.

One morning, Patrick seemed more stressed than usual. He had not come home the night before and had arrived late to work. A purple bruise was blooming on his temple.

I didn't get a chance to speak to him until lunch. We sat, as usual, right on the edge, swinging our legs. I looked at Patrick. He had lit a cigarette and was staring down at the city streets with a strange, sad expression.

'I'm in trouble, Jack,' he said quietly, without looking up. 'I owe a lot of people a lot of money'.

'We'll do something,' I said. 'It'll be fine'.

He shook his head and took a drag from his cigarette. 'I'm glad we came here,' he said, after a while.

'Where?' I asked.

'Here,' he said. 'New York. This building.' He looked up into my eyes. He was calm now. 'It's so fragile, isn't it? Life?' he said softly. 'But I'm glad we came.'

Then, in one fluid motion, he slid forwards and off the scaffolding.

I didn't watch him fall. The city had claimed another victim. I left a month later, never to return.

Better Days

Emily Kavanagh

The icy wind bombarded her exposed face, like a starving, ruthless vulture devours its prey. The brutal cold gnawing away at her fleshy cheeks stung and the numbness intensified. She casually shuffled her shoulders forward in a pathetic attempt to appear unfazed. Burying her hands in her pockets and her chin in her chest, she continued on.

She walked with a pace that was not hurried. Her worn out shoes barely left the path with each step and it was a wonder they had any soles left in them after all those years.

Her ears were burning, not only from the sub-zero temperatures but also due to the fact that she was gradually approaching an elderly couple. They looked uneasy as she neared. The man broadened his shoulders in a measly attempt to look tougher. It didn't work. She walked on past them, her eyes scanning over the shiny tarmac. They weren't focusing though, she was looking but she wasn't seeing. The more she emptied her head, the blurrier the images of the ground became, until she was seeing them in a large grey blur, spinning continuously and dancing in her head to the beat of her steady footsteps.

She could hear the music to accompany it ringing in her ears and as the tempo increased, so did her speed. She soon found herself sprinting down the relentless road; almost

toppling over at every abrupt turn, each one demanding logical strategies of physics and balance. But she had no time to think logically.

That's when a sharp screech halted her movement and the headlights blinded her.

The old Peugeot had a poor maroon DIY paintjob and the tires didn't match. The registration plate wasn't from Dublin, and accompanied by the flashy seats it was obviously from the now middle aged country girls college times. It had seen better days.

'Much like me,' she thought with a small smile.

'Jenny, hurry up,' her mother snapped as she hurried in the automatic doors.

Jenny reluctantly lingered for a few moments. She examined the grooves and mismatched touch-ups on the old car, envisioning the different situations where each one was obtained. She was sure the owner had great pleasure recounting these now humorous events, that at the time where the worst thing that could ever have happened to her.

Jenny heard her mother's frantic footsteps echoing through the abandoned car park, as she paced up and down while impatiently waiting for the lift to arrive. She had travelled in that same lift multiple times each day; waiting the same amount of time for it to arrive and nonchalantly open its doors for her. However, with each journey her restlessness had only intensified.

When Jenny eventually joined her withering mum in the lift, she pressed the button and stood there. The silence hung in the air like the smell from the concoction of products used to clean the upstairs. The relentless number of buttons seemed to extend forever. It frightened Jenny that there were that many floors. It frightened her even more when she realised her little brother, Jake, would not have been able to reach the top rows. Not even if he jumped. When he could jump.

The driver of the car leapt out, apologising over and over again, which, accompanied by her lifeless expression, rendered her comparable to a robot.

Once she reached Jenny she was obviously embarrassed that her new CD could still be heard through the open door of the car. She made some excuse that she wasn't concentrating and Jenny just ran out in front of her.

She abruptly stopped mid-sentence and simply covered her mouth when she realised who Jenny was.

However, Jenny, who was frozen, inches from the maroon, worn-out bonnet, smiled weakly. That is when it hit her. She realised that if this woman could listen to Nikki Minaj after a day at work on the pediatric ward, she too would be alright.

The nurse didn't say any more. Jenny felt an arm gently wrap around her slouched shoulder, as she was guided to the nurse's car. Once inside, the nurse instinctively leaned forward to turn off the music, but Jenny changed the song.

‘This is my favourite one, do you mind?’ she asked.

The nurse shook her head and started the engine.

When Jenny walked down the familiar corridor, her mother was sitting in the seat. She sat there so often it had moulded itself to her shape. However the mould was now far too large to support her fragile frame. Her face scarred with tears, she embraced Jenny.

‘We won’t be visiting Jake here anymore,’ her mother began.

‘I know,’ Jenny replied. ‘He preferred to be outside anyway.’

Dark Day

Eve Cunningham

The sound of rain hitting my window usually comforted me when I was in bed. At the time, though, it was just one of the many things making it hard to sleep. A gust of wind rustled the autumn leaves that had fallen recently. It had happened so suddenly. One day, the trees were full and green the next they were bare.

My clammy hands reached for my phone as I checked the time – 4:00am. I didn't have to be up for another three and a half hours, but there was no way I could sleep. Not when my stomach was churning and my knees were shaking. I thought of the day ahead of me. It was going to be long.

I thought back to when I did the exams. I had tried my hardest but as my mother often pointed out - I had a brain like a sieve. I was sure I had failed maths. I remembered the blank spaces I left on trigonometry questions and the feeble attempt I made to write something for the theorems.

An abrupt snore from my brother's room broke my train of thought. He never had to worry about exam results. He was the smart one.

I tried to avoid thinking about the results and I listened to the sounds around me instead. Someone had told me once that doing this can help you sleep. The birds were singing and a single car drove down the street. My brother was snoring,

the fridge was humming. It was still lashing rain and the wind continued to rustle the leaves. These noises went through my head as at last I fell asleep.

I was awoken by loud sirens at 7:00am. My parents and I went outside to see what was going on, and were surprised to see an ambulance next door, its blue lights flashing in the rain. A paramedic emerged from next door, wheeling a female body to the ambulance, as my neighbour, his face drawn of all colour, followed. Their two children were brought to our house to wait until their grandparents arrived. The youngest, aged four, was unaware of what had happened and was playing with some sort of action figure. The eldest, however, had tears streaming down her face, knowing that it was too late to save her mother.

All my worries from before evaporated as I tried to console the other girl. Once the two were collected, I was sent off to school. It was only upon arrival to see my panicked classmates and friends that I remembered about the results. They suddenly didn't seem to matter as much.

The classes went by very slowly. All the teachers were telling us not to worry, that it wasn't a big deal. It was only then that I realised they were right, that it wasn't a big deal. Although that didn't stop the rest of the class from being hysterical. Each class it got worse. People were feeling sick, others were talking about all the subjects they had failed, while others looked on the verge of tears.

I couldn't concentrate on anything anyone was saying to me. The image of the girl crying was planted in my mind. She

wasn't much younger than me and yet her whole life had changed forever. It was her I was thinking of when we were finally called to collect our results.

We entered the hall and some people burst into tears. It all seemed like a big joke to me. I couldn't believe I had been so worried about something that in the long run meant nothing. It almost angered me to see what a state these exams had left my classmates in. Not only had we been extremely stressed during the exams but then they had literally brought people to tears.

They called my name and I collected my envelope, my name in bold on the front. We all waited until everyone received theirs. We were told we could open them. The sound of ripping paper surrounded me, but I didn't open mine.

I thought again of the girl, now the only female in the house; the young boy - too innocent to understand; and the husband, ashen faced, as he followed behind the body of his wife.

I looked down at the envelope and made a spontaneous decision. Slowly I started ripping the envelope and its contents into tiny pieces. I threw them in the air and watched as they fell to the ground like autumn leaves.

Bad Timing

Caoimhe NíBhroin

The day had finally arrived. After months of waiting and preparing, I couldn't believe that it was time. I never realised that time could move so fast. After Christmas, I thought I had loads of time, that I was fine, and that I didn't need to worry. Time management isn't a skill of mine, and before I knew it, there were three weeks to go.

I started to panic. Everyone was telling me that it wasn't going to be as bad as I thought it was, that I should relax and try not get too stressed. That's easier said than done. How could I not get stressed - *Today I start the Junior Cert*, I thought.

I didn't sleep a wink that night. My stomach churned all night and I couldn't seem to get myself comfortable. My mind was racing. I kept checking things off my imaginary list, making sure that I had everything covered, the poems, the quotes, the structures, the grammar, everything that I had tried to cram into my mind the night before.

I got up earlier than normal, just to make sure my notes were up to scratch and that I would be ready to leave on time. I couldn't be late for my first exam.

I sat in the car with the notes on my lap, last minute revision anything I could. I had extreme butterflies in my stomach and I kept fidgeting with my hands.

I got nervous as we entered the school gates. We drove around the back of the school, to the sports hall where the exam was being held. A group of my classmates were already waiting outside the front door. Relief washed over me as I realised that they looked just as nervous as I was. At least I wasn't alone. As I reluctantly stepped out of the car, my mum told me to text her when I'd finished and she wished me good luck.

I slowly walked over to meet my friends, clutching my notes tightly to my chest. As we talked, I felt myself calm down and my nerves drift away.

The examiners arrived soon after me and opened the doors into the hall. Both examiners were men. One was tall, lanky and dark haired. He had a large moustache and small spectacles which sat comfortably on the tip of his pointy nose. He held himself up when he walked, which made him look even taller than he was, and made his nose point out further. He looked strict. The other examiner looked more or less the opposite. He was a chubby, short man with blond, curly hair and a matching beard. He was smiley and reminded me of a jolly Santa Clause.

We were told to leave all our belongings, except for our clear plastic bag of stationary, in a small room before entering the examination hall. We all nervously walked into the hall to take our seats. There were six vertical rows of desks and chairs, all perfectly aligned one behind the other. There was a big aisle between row three and four, separating the six rows

into two sets of three. There were two large, metal desks at the top of the hall, one for each examiner.

Each of our desks contained a small piece of paper taped up in the right hand corner containing our name. The desks were assigned in alphabetical order. I found my name quickly. I was in the third row, around four desks from the back. Like everyone else, I took my seat and waited for the exam to start. I was relieved when I saw that our three rows had the chubby examiner, he seemed nice.

It took a while for the examiners to quiet down the hall. First they read out the rules - no talking, no phones. Basic stuff. Then they began to hand out English Paper One.

I started to get nervous again. My palms were sweating and I started fidgeting. The man came to my desk, placed the exam paper upside down on my desk and gave me a smile. Once everyone had a paper, the examiners told us to begin.

As I read through the paper, I realised that it wasn't as bad as I expected and that this *was* possible. I answered the questions as best I could. I even remembered my quotes and poems.

As I turned the page to my last question, I felt my pocket vibrate and before I had time to stop it, my phone burst into tune. I looked up to see every student's face gawking at me. I felt my face burning red and my eyes beginning to water.

I could see the examiner marching down to me, looking surprisingly calm. As he reached my desk, he slowly put his hand out for my phone. I basically threw the phone into his hand, scared of what was going to happen next. I apologised

and pleaded that I wasn't using it and I'd just forgot to take it out of my pocket when I arrived. I looked down at my desk, knowing what was about to happen. He was going to make me leave and eliminate my paper. I was so disappointed, I knew all the answers and I didn't cheat.

I finally looked up to see the man smiling down at me. He must have felt sorry for me, because somehow he believed that I was telling the truth. He knelt down beside me and told me to finish the paper. Shocked, I quickly thanked him and apologised again.

As the examiner reached his desk at the top of the hall, the other examiner stomped over. They bickered for a while until the tall man quickly scurried away. I then glanced at the clock, sitting on the wall above the examiners desk, to realise I only had ten minutes left. I redirected my attention and concentrated on finishing the paper.

Once time was up, the examiners collected the papers. The room filled with chatter and girls began to pack up their stuff and leave the hall. The examiner walked towards me. I sucked in my breath as he began to talk. He told me he was going to overlook the phone incident and that I needed to be more careful because the next time he would not be as understanding. I stared at him for a moment, wondering if he was joking. I thanked him for giving my phone back and before he could reconsider, I quickly left the hall.

Waiting

Aileen McGrath

I glanced up at the clock for what seemed like the hundredth time that day. Only five short minutes had passed since I last checked but it felt like an eternity. I gazed around the room, studying the various facial expressions of my fellow peers. A range of emotions flickered across their faces, from calm to concerned to hopeless to helpless. It was an important day for all of us, one we have been waiting to experience for a long time, and now that it was here, I wasn't sure how I felt about it.

I focussed my gaze on a loose piece of thread dangling from the sleeve of my jumper and allowed the noise of the classroom to fade into the background, as my mind began to wander. After all the hype surrounding this day, I felt indifferent. I don't know what I had expected - certainly not for the world to stop turning, - but I hadn't expected this day to feel so normal.

I had been through my usual morning routine of showering, putting on my uniform, eating breakfast and mumbling about how I refused to be forced to walk to school, before I caved in and realised I had no choice, but nothing special had happened. And now, two hours later, it was still the same. Besides the odd 'Good luck' or exchange of anxious looks with my friends, Wednesday was Wednesday and school

was school, and our teachers certainly weren't going to let us off the hook with class work. At that moment I was sitting in English class, wondering why we were being tortured so cruelly by making us wait another four hours. We had been waiting all summer, was that not enough?

I thought back to three months before, when the only thing that mattered was getting through the exams. I was living in the present back then, as the exams approached, not thinking about summer or Fourth Year or results, but only all the work I had to cram into my unsuspecting mind in order to get through the next two weeks. I was like a horse with blinkers on, only focusing on the light at the end of the tunnel, or in my case, the light from the door of the exam hall. At that time I had cursed myself for not putting in enough time and effort and made it my duty to stuff my brain so full of knowledge that it felt like it was going to explode. Knowledge that would soon be forgotten as soon as I stepped out of the exam hall and into the light, refreshing breeze, ready to kick off my work-free summer.

Looking back, all the panic and worrying seemed so frivolous, considering I hadn't given any thought to those all-important two weeks until right then - the day of the results.

I let out a sigh of relief as the bell sounded throughout the school, signalling the end of class. I was now forty minutes closer to discovering my fate.

Everyone chatted absentmindedly amongst each other, trying to keep their minds off the pending results. People scrambled to reassure themselves, mumbling 'Oh well, there's

nothing I can do now. No point worrying about it.' But we all knew they were only fooling themselves. Everyone wanted to do well, and the fear of being disappointed was overwhelming.

Time dragged as the last class of the day neared an end. The clock seemed to be frozen in place as we waited for the last ten minutes to pass. Finally our teacher led us down the corridor and into the hall at what felt like a snail's pace. Our year are unusually quiet and the conversation was minimal, with only the odd, last minute whispers of 'Good luck' sweeping through the crowd. I smoothed down my skirt and fidgeted with my hands as we rounded the last corridor.

We were greeted by our Principal at the door and a new wave of nausea and nerves swept across me as I took my place on the choir stand, packed tightly in amongst my friends. My eyes narrowed in on the thick pile of creamy white envelopes stacked on top of the piano. It seemed as though I was not the only one who noticed; I took in the squinted glances of everyone around me as they cautiously studied the envelopes, trying to see through them by burning holes with their intense stares. The Principal stood up to say a few words and once again I found my mind beginning to wander.

My breath became jagged and uneven as my clasped hands began to shake. I hadn't thought I would be this nervous. I had prepared myself for the worst and had endlessly reminded myself of how unimportant the Junior Cert really was. It was only a practice for the Leaving Cert, after all – and that was something that mattered! I thought of how

lucky I was to have parents who didn't pressure me or cause me to fear telling them my results; no matter what they were. They didn't need to because they knew the only person I was afraid of disappointing was myself, and the fear of letting myself down was greater than any pressure they could have put me under.

Slowly the envelopes began to be handed out, class by class, and in alphabetical order.

I held the envelope in my hand trying to decide whether I should rip it open as soon as the last girl received hers, or if I should take a few steps outside the hall and open it up in only my own company, where I could process my results in private. I decided on the latter, afraid of what might happen if I opened up the envelope and saw what I had feared since I returned to school in September.

So...I look up, and I notice that they have reached the final class. My heart is racing and all of a sudden my brain is whirling. Had I had time to finish my Irish essay? Had I somehow managed to skip an important English question even after triple checking both sides of the page? Had I answered enough maths questions to scrape by with a pass? Suddenly everything I had seemed so confident and sure of earlier is uncertain and I fear that perhaps I haven't fully prepared myself for the worst.

As the last girl stands up to receive her envelope, everyone begins to prepare themselves. Envelopes are repositioned in hands for ease of opening and phones are taken out of pockets, prepared for the emotional phone calls

soon to come. The next few seconds are silent and tense but all of that changes when the Principal utters the words we have all been waiting for all day: 'You may now open your envelopes.'

Chaos erupts throughout the hall as envelopes are torn open and it isn't long before the shrieking and the tears arrive.

As I look around at the astonished tear-streaked faces of my pleasantly surprised friends, I throw my plan out the window. I brace myself and in that moment I rip open the official white envelope and dare to look inside.

Winston's

Daragh Browne

My job is extremely interesting. The job itself isn't very interesting, but the people I meet are. I am a bartender in Winston's pub in the small town of Lipston. The characters I encounter on a daily basis are all unique in their own way. I have been working in Winston's for four years now, and each day a new person comes in and impresses me. Some of the regulars are very intriguing. There's Peppy Pippa, Eccentric Pete and Mysterious Joe.

Pippa Riller is a middle-aged woman who is very interested in everyone else's life. She is talkative and happy, most of the time, hence the nickname 'Peppy Pippa'. She is a tall, lean woman with blonde hair that is usually tied up in a bun. She has an unusually high-pitched voice and wears pink-framed glasses. She is the town's Gossip Girl who seems to know everyone's life story. She spends her time in the pub interrogating people, forcing them to tell her about anything anyone did, at any time. Pippa is the first person you would go to if you wanted any information about a person, or any event that happened in the town.

Eccentric Pete is another interesting regular to the pub. He is a peculiar old man who is said to have escaped a mental institution (rumoured by Pippa, of course). Pete is a man full of weird and random stories from his life. He has a lisp, so it

can be hard to understand him, but his words are comprehensible for the majority of the time. He talks of his trips to India, Peru and Mongolia, all the women he has been with, and of his previous occupations - a doctor, a lawyer and a professional footballer. Nobody knows whether he is telling the truth or not, so the only choice we have is to believe him.

About three months ago Pete had a run in with the local police. A woman had called the police saying that a man was at her door shouting at her and harassing her. When the police arrived they met with Pete, who was still banging on this woman's door and cursing at her.

When they asked him what the problem was he told them that the woman had stolen his cat. The police then asked the woman and she stated that it was her cat.

Using the police officers conversation with the woman as his chance, Pete ran into the woman's house, picked up her cat and pegged it down the road. He spent that night in the police station's holding area, and was released the next day on a warning.

Each night after Pete's stay at the pub, he walks off into the forest down the road, not to be seen again until the following day. Some say he lives in a small cottage in the back of the woods, while others say he sleeps in the trees. Nobody has dared to follow him for fear of their own lives.

The last person I wish to tell you about is a very mysterious man called Joe, or 'Mysterious J,' which is how he is commonly referred to. Nobody actually knows his name; we just accepted Pippa's idea that his name was Joe, as we had

nothing else to call him. He arrives at the pub most nights and goes directly to the darkest corner of the room, near the pool table. He sits there by himself and I give him a pint whenever he nods in my direction. Joe has rarely spoken, if ever, so nobody knows a thing about him. For the most part people just leave him to himself and forget about him.

All in all I enjoy my job at this small pub in this small town, as people interest me, and I love meeting new people. What better place is there to meet interesting people than at the heart of social life in any town - the pub.

The Blind Wave

Orla Kavanagh

The day started out the same as any other, nobody would have known that by evening Abbie would not have returned back to the home.

Abbie Duffy was a thirteen year-old girl. She loved doing lots of different things such as playing piano, reading, and listening to music. Abbie loved her own company. She lived in a foster care home and had been brought up there since she was six months old. Abbie had never met her parents, but she made herself believe that her Dad left her mum because of her; she thinks maybe he didn't want a child.

Sadly, Abbie thought she would probably never see her Dad again. She thought that one day her mum became a famous singer and had to put Abbie in a home. Abbie still hoped and dreamt, every day, that one day her mum would come and collect her.

The staff members of the foster home said that Abbie was a very quiet, respectful young girl, who always looked out for others. Abbie tended to keep to herself and not talk to anyone. The younger kids at the home tended to aggravate her and the older kids were very childish and misbehaved a lot of the time.

One day after school, Abbie was fed up of everything. She was fed up of living in the home, having to put up with all the

other kids and all the staff trying to talk to her. She was fed up of not knowing who her parents were. All of the emotions that had been building up inside her were about to explode! She couldn't handle any more of the interviews with random people to see if they would adopt her or not.

Abbie decided instead of going back to the home she would go off on an adventure. She decided she would go to the shop and get something to eat with the little money she had. She then walked to the beach which was about four kilometres away. Abbie took her time walking to the beach and she enjoyed the peace and quiet, the fresh air and the breeze blowing against her.

She couldn't believe how much she was enjoying herself. How good it felt not being at the home having to listen to staff members give out and children screaming. It was great!

While Abbie was at the beach she spent her time thinking about what she would do next. After a while she hadn't thought of much, only that she was getting tired of skimming the flat rocks into the sea and watching them jump.

Things had been tough for Abbie in school that year, with her having no friends and not studying or doing her homework. The school always seemed to be in contact with the foster home, which Abbie hated.

It had been a long day at school, she thought, and she was extremely tired. She decided to lie down and have a rest, unaware of what could happen.

Meanwhile, she had no idea that the foster home had reported her missing to the Police when she hadn't returned

home from school. The Police, staff from the school, and some of the people at the foster home were all out looking for her. They searched nearby areas, asked people in her class at school, and people at the home, but nobody knew much about Abbie because she kept to herself so much. She liked it that way. She always had a feeling that nobody liked her (apart from her mum, who she hoped would collect her soon!)

Abbie woke up coughing dreadfully. She was spitting out water. She had been dragged out to sea. Immediately she knew she was in danger. She had been swept out a good bit and she could not swim! As she tried and tried to keep her head above sea level, the waves were getting stronger and she was getting weaker and weaker. She knew she could not keep it up for long.

Before Abbie knew it, she was gone. Her head slowly drifted under the water and slowly out of sight. The only thing that remained above sea level was her cap; she had handmade herself.

At this time the police still did not know where Abbie was. They had been searching all day and all night and had found no evidence of whereabouts. The investigation lasted for three days.

It was around one o'clock, on a bright summer's day, that Abbie Duffy's body was found. A fisherman came across her cap, then later discovered her body. The news was then passed on from the police to the people at the home, her school, and of course her parents (neither of whom responded to the messages about Abbie's death).

Everyone was extremely upset. If only Abbie had been there to see that everybody cared about her and that she was deeply loved by everyone.

My Time In Chicago

Leah Costello

‘Just five more minutes! Five more minutes won’t hurt,’ I thought to myself, as I heard my pounding alarm scream in my ear. Each vibration was getting more annoying than the previous one. I slowly opened one eye, which was quiet painful to do.

It was the day after Christmas, my first official day of midterm, so, ‘Why am I being disturbed from this blissful lie-in?’ I wondered. Then it hit me. I felt the butterflies fly into my stomach at an astonishing pace and all of a sudden I felt wide awake - ‘This is it!’ It was the day I’ve been waiting for, for a long time. My first time to visit the United States of America. I leaped out of bed like it was Christmas morning all over again.

I can remember the phone call well. It was the day of my Junior Certificate results and I was on the way home from my friend’s house where I had been celebrating. My phone lit up and had my brother’s name on it. What could he want at half-one in the morning?

‘Hello?’

‘Leah, its Kevin. You out or can I chat to you for a second?’

Uh-oh, had I done something wrong? ‘Um, yeah. I can chat. Fire away.’

‘I heard you did well in your results, well done! Keep the 26th of December to the 1st of January free because, as a reward, you’re coming with me and Siobhan to America!’

My first reaction was, ‘Ha-ha,’ as I presumed this was a typical prank from my brother. But as no ‘Only joking’ or ‘Keep dreaming’ had popped up in conversation, I thought this could be the real deal.

‘Are you joking or what?’

‘Nope, I had been planning it with Mum and Dad for a few weeks now. I promise I’m not joking! I’ll talk to you tomorrow about the details.’

And surely enough, when I turned to my Dad in the car and gave him the ‘Is this for real? Pinch me,’ moment glare, he gave me a huge smile and said - ‘America, here you come, girl!’

‘1180...1200...1220...Yep, it’s all here,’ I said excitedly, as I held the dollar bills in my hand. ‘This is all mine.’ I safely handed it to my brother’s girlfriend, Siobhan, to mind. She was a more reliable source of minding money than me.

Out of the house we went, my suitcase in hand, which was ever so light as all I needed for my trip was a spare pair of trousers. I planned on filling it with new clothes when I got to America, obviously.

After what seemed like a month, we finally arrived at Dublin airport and were checked in before I knew it. Breakfast was definitely in order as I was too excited to eat earlier on, back at the house. Juicy scrambled eggs and toast with melted butter? Yes! Please!

Then came the scariest part of my adventure. The U.S. customs. Naturally the 'What if's crept into my mind. What if I don't get accepted in? What if I start acting nervous and they think I'm dodgy? What if someone put a bomb in my bag? What if I get so nervous I admit I have a bomb in my bag, even if I don't? Then suddenly, 'Here it goes,' I thought.

'Hello, ma'am. Step forward, please.'

'Hey,' I said a bit too casually. '*Hey, Leah! Really?*' I thought to myself. I couldn't have been a bit more formal, no?

'What is your purpose for travelling to the United States and how long will you be staying?'

'A holiday. And, eh, six days. Wait...no...seven days. No, sorry – six nights!'

'Brilliant,' I thought. 'Couldn't have stumbled more if I tried.'

But all went well and I got accepted into the U.S.

'Let the fun commence,' I said.

'Calling all flight passengers for E7512 to Chicago, Illinois, to Gate 15, please. That's all flight passengers to Chicago to Gate 15, please,' repeated the public announcer.

This was it - America was one step closer. I could almost smell it. Passport - check. Magazine - check. iPhone and earphones - check. Boarding Pass...Oh no! Where did I put my boarding pass?

But before I had even time to panic my brother sniggered, 'Missing something?' and handed me my pass. Now that wouldn't have been funny.

‘Tea or Coffee? ‘ Tea or Coffee anybody?’

I opened up each eye, one by one, took one earphone out and turned over in the comfortable seat. ‘I’ll have a cup of tea, please.’ My parched mouth got excited as I said that. My body felt very refreshed after the sleep. I wondered how long I dozed off for.

I checked the time on my phone and it turned out I had been asleep for nearly two hours. ‘So two hours down, six more to go,’ I thought. This was going to be hard, entertaining myself.

I carefully took the boiling cup of tea from the air hostess and placed it on my own mini table. I turned on my personal TV in front of me and began to flick through the many new movies they had on offer to watch. I decided to start from the first movie, *What Richard Did*, and work my way down. I had the time to kill.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, the fasten your seatbelt sign has been switched on, so for your safety and comfort, please fasten your seatbelts,’ announced the tired airhostess.

I could tell from her voice that she was exhausted and was as ready to get out of this plane as I was. I glared out the window on my right hand side and saw land for the first time in eight hours; many tall buildings stood below me, the lights of cars were travelling on the busy highway, and I could just about make out the big green signpost on the road. My first time witnessing American soil and I would be walking on it before too long.

Typically my suitcase was the last out and I had just spent twenty minutes worrying that it had been lost, or that somebody had taken it. But after that ordeal I was out in no time, and on the train to Monroe, which was where my hotel was situated.

I sat in the train and gazed out the window for the whole journey. It had been snowing earlier that day and a white sheet had covered most of Chicago. The tips of the trees were just about visible and people were standing shivering at the platforms, regardless of being wrapped up in fur coats and snow boots. The snow didn't seem to faze them; this must have been a normal thing for them. In Ireland I could only imagine how everybody would be screaming and laughing and throwing lumps of snow at each other in that weather, while being squished into wellies from when they were five years old, that their Mum made them wear. Regardless of the unenthusiastic reactions of the Americans to the snow, this place still was a winter wonderland to me.

Next, there I was, shivering and wheeling my suitcase down the street to where my hotel was. I took every second to absorb my surroundings. The bright lights in every direction I turned, the high buildings that felt as if they were going to fall on top of me. If I looked up for too long, the pretty fairy-lights that had been carefully scattered on each tree on the street, and the Christmas music that was playing all around. The Christmas spirit was still there and each minute made me more excited to be there. It felt surreal.

I then saw in huge bright lights - The Hampton Inn. My hotel. To say it looked fancy was an understatement. I was greeted by two men dressed in black who kindly held the door open for the three of us.

‘Good afternoon, folks. It sure is cold outside! Please come in and take the lift to the first floor to sign in to reception, thank you!’

I got the butterfly feeling again; just hearing the American accents made me excited. As soon as I got in the lift I began to sweat buckets. It was so warm in comparison to the -5 degrees outside. Off came the snow hat and heavy jacket.

We were greeted by a lovely lady at the reception desk. She took our details and gave us all a hotel key. ‘Complimentary hot chocolate and marshmallows are on us. Take one whenever you feel like it’ she said.

I had a feeling I was going to enjoy this hotel.

I was the first to fling open our hotel door and my aim was to do what they do in the movies; drop the case and leap onto the bed with great force. And that’s exactly what I did. My head sunk into the feather pillow that awaited my arrival. The mattress felt like I was lying on a cloud - it was the definition of perfection!

I looked to my left and saw plenty of space where I was planning to disperse all my shopping bags. There was also a big mirror with lights around it where I could look at myself in all my new clothes and test out my new makeup. A flat screen TV was in perfect view for when I would be all cosy in bed at night.

I couldn't stop myself from grinning. A quick pinch was in order to make sure this wasn't all a dream; well, more of a nightmare, if I was to wake up.

'Leah, me and Siobhan are going to get a hot chocolate. Do you want to come?'

'I'll follow you down in a minute.'

I strolled over to the window in my room and began to gaze out the window. It was snowing lightly, the view was amazing from the 18th floor; tall buildings in every direction, and a few American flags, and down below all the shops I was about to splash my cash in, such as Victoria's Secret, Abercrombie and Hollister. I think that moment has been the best moment of my life so far. I could absorb just how lucky and thankful I was to be there. I already knew from that moment that this trip was going to be one of the best of many to come.

SPORT

An Autumn Game

Cian Boylan

It was late October, when I was given my chance to break back into the starting eleven, after being missing for ten weeks. I was just getting ready to leave the training ground, after a session, when the manager approached me.

‘Thomas! he called. ‘Thomas, you’re getting the start against Confey at the weekend.’

‘No problem boss,’ I replied, chuffed at my selection.

I climbed into my dad’s car.

It was Saturday morning; the match was in an hour. I ate a hearty breakfast and set out for Killbogget. It was approaching half twelve when my dad pulled into the car park. I stepped out of the car and walked into the building, down a hall, and into the changing rooms. My Jersey was waiting for me.

It was five minutes before anyone else was expected to arrive.

‘Afternoon, Thomas. You’re here early,’ the Manager said.

‘Well, my first start in a while,’ I replied. ‘I thought I would come early.’

The rest of the team arrived and our manager sent us out to warm up. When we returned the match and jerseys had been put out, along with my gloves and snood. I got butterflies

as I pulled the Jersey over my head. With our two strikers injured it was my chance to get back to playing.

The keeper patted me on the back and wished me luck.

I took the tip with Phil and the crowd cheered as the game begun. I started sharply, picking up the ball on the edge of the eighteen yard box, before turning and rifling a shot towards the top corner. It swerved last second and smacked into the post. The game was ours from the minute it began, although Confey did threaten. I had a few more chances but the ball just wouldn't go in.

My frustration showed as shortly before half time I flung myself into a challenge, succeeding in getting nothing but ankle. The ref was quick to brandish a yellow, and I was relieved as it could easily have been red.

The ref blew his whistle to signal half-time.

The manager's half-time talk wasn't too bad. He knew it was only a matter of time before we scored and he encouraged everybody to have plenty of shots. We left the dressing room confident we could win.

As we re-emerged onto the pitch it began to rain. As the temperature dropped, the chill bit at your exposed skin. The autumn weather did nothing to hinder our spirits as Confey kicked off the half. We quickly regained possession and our left-mid played a long ball up to me. I turned my defender and smashed the ball past Confey's onrushing goalkeeper.

Finally, we had the lead! But it wouldn't stay one-nil for long. Phil picked up the ball, beat two men and hit a drive

from all of thirty yards out, and the net bulged. It was 2-0, and still time for one more.

Our centre-half picked up the ball in the defence before starting a trademark Arsenal passing sequence. This ended with me being played through on goal by Phil. I took it around the keeper, dribbling the ball into the net. The crowd erupted into cheers as I put the game well and truly beyond Confey's reach.

The ref blew the whistle and our team left the pitch to compliments from our manager. Back in the dressing room there was nothing but praise for me. 'Well done, Thomas!' said the manager.

I left the stadium chuffed with my match contribution. I climbed into the car with my dad, and sped out of the grounds. My mood was only helped by the array of colours displayed by the autumn leaves.

By the time we reached home a huge smile had broken out across my face. My dad was full of praise when my mother asked about the match, saying things such as 'Game of his life,' and 'Man of the Match.'

I was chuffed with myself for the rest of the day and was confident I had worked my way back into the team.

Dizzy Heights: The Beginning

Finn Ellard

My life really has just gotten worse and worse as this week has gone on. I don't know what I did to deserve this but everyone seems to be against me lately. Whether it's my girlfriend cheating on me with my best friend or finding out that the same best friend was the man who got me fired from my job and only source of income, I can't say. I can't bring myself to utter his name, but I've now made an enemy that I will never forget.

My story began on the day my life turned downhill. I was working in Dublin Port, moving containers on and off a cargo ship, when I was called by my boss. He told me to get my stuff and leave because I had apparently been accused of stealing from shipping containers. I was shocked but there was nothing I could do other than just pack up and leave.

So, I had lost my job for something that hadn't even happened and I simply thought that the day couldn't get any worse - I was wrong. After completing the short walk to the flat that I shared with my girlfriend, I opened the door to receive the second shot to my life, and complete the knockout.

My girlfriend was with another man! And this man was my so-called *best friend*.

I couldn't believe how bad the day had gone for me and stormed out of the apartment. The rest of the day is a bit of a blur but I remember confronting my friend and finding out it was him who had cost me my job.

I made the decision to leave Dublin and seek new pastures.

The following days consisted of me trying to book a flight to England, or anywhere, really, where I could get away from those two. Eventually the final decision was Port Ellesmere in Cheshire, England. The plan was to get a flight to Liverpool and then make my way to my new apartment in Port Ellesmere by bus, before going to the actual port in search of a job. But this was to turn out differently, different to how I had expected.

I arrived in Port Ellesmere and took a taxi to my new apartment near the local football ground, called Rivacre Park. I quickly dumped my bags in the apartment before setting out for the port to explore the local area. However, I noticed something else on the door at Rivacre Park - it was an advertisement; Vauxhall Motors FC were looking for a new manager.

I knew I wasn't going to get it, but for some insane reason I felt compelled to hand in an application. The application was written up on a computer in the local library and handed in that day. I decided to return home and was confronted by a man named Craig Mahon who filled me in on the information about the area.

‘Alright, mate? You new to the block?’ Craig made the first move in the conversation.

‘Yeah, I just moved here from Dublin. Took apartment 18. Name’s Finn Ellard. And you are?’

‘Craig Mahon, mate. Nice to meet ya. You any good at football? I play for the local team Vauxhall Motors FC and we’re looking for new players and a manager.’

‘I saw the ad at the club. I know a fair bit about football and decided to throw in an application for the laugh.’ I laughed at thought of me being a football manager but Craig didn’t seem to find it funny.

‘Well, mate, you just might get it. I heard there were no applications before today so maybe you’ll be getting a new job over here. Anyway, I gotta head to training. See you around, bud.’

I was shocked - no applications? What was wrong with the club that nobody wanted to manage them? Anyway, I thought, it was time to explore the area.

Port Ellesmere is an industrial town with around 64,000 people. I spent around three hours just exploring the majority of the area of which I was now a part.

My exploration was cut short however by a phone call. It was the chairman of Vauxhall Motors FC, Alan Bartlam. He offered me an interview at the club. I was stunned and couldn’t make a decision. Eventually I mumbled, ‘Yes,’ and Alan told me to meet him at Rivacre Park at 2:00pm the next day, before Vauxhall’s friendly game against Burscough. It was

already looking like I had made the right choice to leave Dublin.

The following day, I woke at around 11:00am. A ray of sunshine was penetrating the gap in the curtains and landing right in my eyes. I grabbed the pillow and used it as a shield from the light. Suddenly, I realised that I didn't have a suit and without one I would look highly unprofessional for my interview. I quickly jumped out of bed and pulled on the nearest clothes before setting out for the town to get myself a nice suit for the meeting with the chairman.

The sun was shining strong in the English summertime as I stepped out onto the streets and headed to the tailor. After a rather short period of time, much shorter than I had expected, my suit was purchased and I began home for a shower and a shave.

The nerves were beginning to build as the meeting fast approached. I stood, looking at myself in the mirror, wearing the brand new grey suit with a white shirt and black tie, thinking of how it had all come to this and just what it would be like to be a manager of a football team. The clock hit 1:20pm and I headed out the door to the potential beginning of my life in football.

It was 1:45pm when I arrived at Rivacre Park and there were a few local supporters wandering around, just waiting for the game which was to kick-off at 3:00pm. I headed towards the reception area at the office building behind the western terrace and made my way to the Chairman's office. After knocking on the door, I was welcomed inside. I entered

to see the chairman, Alan Bartlam. He ushered me in and told me to take a seat.

‘Good afternoon, Finn, and welcome to Rivacre Park. Firstly, I’d like to tell you that we would be happy to see you take control here at Vauxhall Motors Football Club, but first we would like to ask you a couple of questions.’

Alan started his speech and I nodded as he took breaks in between each point. ‘Do you have any official qualifications?’ Alan’s very first question had already beaten me.

‘Unfortunately, no, I’ve never done any sort of coaching before but I do have a good knowledge of football and a willingness to learn.’ I was not confident that this would be a good enough response.

‘Normally I wouldn’t be able to hire a coach with no qualifications but with the club in trouble and the season being so close to beginning, I’m left with no other option. Finn, I’m willing to offer you a one year contract on £200 a week. What do you say?’

I was flabbergasted; an offer to manage a football club for a year. I simply couldn’t say no. ‘I would be honoured to take charge of the team. Thank you so much,’ I said with a massive grin on my lips.

‘Just sign here and we can go see your new team play in the season’s first friendly game.’

I signed the contract and the deal was made official. I was now a football manager.

After the meeting, we headed out into the stand to watch the game between Vauxhall and Burscough. With fifteen

minutes to spend before kick-off, Alan filled me in on some of the information about the club. He informed me about my backroom staff, and in particular my assistant manager, Kyle Wilkes, who would be leading the team today.

The teams emerged from beneath the stand for the first game of the year in front of a crowd of around 650 people. This disappointed me but Alan assured me there would be at least 1,200 people at our league games.

I had to watch the team closely so I could make some decisions on positions, which areas should be strengthened and improved. Alan promised that he and Kyle would help to build the squad, given the lack of time available to me.

It was Burscough who won the game, with Curtis Jones narrowly heading one chance wide before scoring with a wonderful placed shot after just fourteen minutes. It was 2-0 not long after, when Zac Jones spilled a cross right at the feet of Jones again. The half-time whistle blew and the teams headed to the dressing-rooms.

I discussed with Alan what I would do in this situation and he seemed to like my tactical choices, however, there was nothing I could do for this game other than just sit back and watch.

The second half began differently from the first, with an early goal for Vauxhall courtesy of Tom Rutter, following an inch-perfect cross from Tom Grice. Rutter tucked it away from ten yards. However, that was to be the end of the excitement and the comeback was not to come. Burscough had won the game 2-1 but I had learned a lot about the team that I would

now be in charge of and knew some areas which needed to be improved upon.

The day ended with me heading back to my apartment after the game. I climbed into bed but couldn't sleep. All I could think of was the events that had taken place over the last few days. The problems in Dublin, moving to Port Ellesmere, and now joining the club. It finally sunk in that I was now a football manager.

POETRY

JAWS

There was an old shark named Gramps,
Whose jaws had once been like clamps,
But these days he hums
'Cause his jaws are just gums
And can only be used to lick stamps.

BUMBLE BEE!

There was a young girl named Jenny,
Who suddenly got stung by a bee,
She got in a fright
And held her nose tight
And covered it so no-one could see.

Ronan Dunne

THE LAKE ISLE OF CLONKEEN

I will arise and go now, and go to Clonkeen,
And a swimming pool in the field there, of mud and water
made;
Nine first years will I have drowned there, a court for the
basketball,
And live alone in the P.E hall.

And I shall play badminton there, for the shuttlecock comes
dropping slow,
Dropping from the rafters of the ceiling to where the intercom
rings;
There morning's all a blur, and lunchtime a blissful glow,
And hometime full of the first years.

I will arise and go now, for always dull and grey
I hear boys shouting with loud sounds more and more;
While I stand in the foyer, or in the schoolyard grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Ned Quirke
Kevin Nolan
Naoise Ó Conluain
Ronan Hayes

ESSAYS

The Future

Kate Doorly

The future is a place that we cannot know or comprehend. There are no guarantees as to what will happen. It's a roll of a dice in a board game, a spin of a wheel in a casino, the move of a pawn in chess. A place where we can both look forward to and dread. The future doesn't necessarily mean one hundred or two hundred years away, it could be what happens in the next second, minute or hour. However, thinking far into the future is what interests me most.

I look forward to the moons, stars, planets and galaxies that are waiting to be discovered, look forward to finding out whether there are other life forms out there. But I dread to think how we would treat them. Will we come in peace and respect these new species or will we conquer and control like the Conquistadors with the Incas and the Aztecs? Or will *they* be the ones to conquer and control?

And how we treat our own planet? Will we improve? Will we save the planet before it is too late? Or will we allow Global Warming to continue and all life to perish and become extinct? Will the Earth be inhabitable for the generations that follow us? Will they be able to have the same amount of opportunities that we have? Will they know what a polar bear looks like, apart from pictures in books and the sad, shattered ones in the zoo.

And if we do improve, will we make peace with each other? Will we be able to live side by side without jealousy, fear or war? And will we eradicate poverty and suffering?

What new inventions will be made and what new varieties of species will we discover, or even create? Will there be a cure for all life threatening diseases?

Who knows what machinery could be composed! Robots? Spaceships? Will technology take over our lives? In our future, will we need to do anything for ourselves?

There are so many questions concerning the future. We can never quite know what will happen until we get there. But I believe that by looking at the past we can have a better grasp of the future. *'Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.'*

But we *have* learnt from the past. We have learnt our history. So after World War I and World War II the United Nations was formed to protect human rights and work towards achieving peace and security in our world. So maybe we will be able to live side by side without jealousy, fear and war.

And we are trying to improve our environment by finding new, cleaner, better ways of harnessing energy like geothermal, wind and solar. We also recycle, reduce and reuse our waste. So maybe the Earth will be inhabitable for the generations that follow us and they may be able to see a polar bear in it's original habitat.

We are trying to end poverty and suffering. For example, the Millenium Development Goals in 2015 are there to

eradicate poverty and hunger, improve healthcare and give everyone an education. And maybe we will see the end of horrible diseases and illnesses as billions of dollars fund research to find cures.

What will life be like in this ideal future? Imagine this world, a place without suffering, without illness and disease, without poverty hunger or war, and an Earth that is no longer dying. A world that is so advanced that technology might have taken over. Robots may roam the streets, running errands like delivering the mail or going out shopping for groceries. We might become useless, robots could take over our jobs and do them a lot faster and much more efficiently. There would be no purpose to living on Earth because there would nothing left to do. And that is what I dread most.

In this world of wonder, a world that everyone wishes for, it is a world where human kind have nothing left to fight for. Once we have fulfilled our goals, fulfilled our purpose ,well...we may find that there is nothing left to do, nothing that we can aspire to. Our lives would become meaningless.

So be careful what you wish for because wishing for an ideal world, a perfect world might take away the struggle and hardship that makes us human and sometimes makes life worth living.

But until then the future can be a mystery, a place where we can both look forward to and dread. For tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare today. The future is beginning now.

The Adventures of Community Service

Sarah-Kate O'Connor

This was it, the moment I'd been looking forward to and dreading all week. I had mixed feelings about Community Service; they were mostly positive but, on the other hand, when you're having a bad day, it's the last thing you want to do.

When you think about it, Community Service seems like a pretty harmless, sweet and genuinely nice idea to force the youth of today to stop all their usual 'careless and menacing' teenage delinquent activities and give something back to local communities. In reality, however, it is very different.

In Transition Year we are required to complete ten weeks of community service, plus an added three weeks for those brave and naïve teenagers that undertake the torturous Gaisce President's Award. Unfortunately, I am one of these unlucky few, who back in September truly believed it was a goal well within reach, even for the laziest of adolescents. I, along with thousands of other students across the country, am re-thinking my overly optimistic decision.

So, now, here it is - again. Wednesday. Oh, how I used to love Wednesdays! Not much homework, double bill of *Criminal Minds* and the freedom of the weekend within reach - close

enough to touch. That's all different now...Community Service is on Wednesdays.

Every Wednesday, two classmates and I ventured down to Dalkey to visit a charming little nursing home overlooking Bulloch Harbor. The waves are always gentle, creating the calmest of sceneries. Don't let the sweet exterior fool you, because waiting just inside the nursing home doors are, - no exaggeration - the craziest, meanest, pickiest and most hurtful grannies and old gents I've ever had the...*pleasure* of meeting.

Now don't get me wrong, there are men and women who are so lovely I wish I could take them home with me and be my grannies and granddads. Sadly, this can't be said for all the residents. There is a scale of niceness which I used to rate all the residents on my allocated floor; the scale ranges from 'The lovely, kind and chatty ones,' (who are at the very top of the nice-o-meter) to 'The ones who don't talk to us but still might smile and be polite enough to let us help out with cleaning etc,' (who are the most common), and then there's the last category, at the very bottom of the scale (the ones who *made* my list), 'The grannies and granddads who call us names, yell at us for something we didn't even do, for what feels like forever.'

Other ways people have managed to be put on my list are by insulting or making fun of us, pushing us to the brink psychological counselling. There is one particular man who is on my list because he is so awfully frightening that it makes me feel awkward and uncomfortable even being around him, so much so that the hairs on the back of my neck start to

tingle and my face gets hot and flushed. Clearly, you can understand why we try to avoid these particular residents – we fear for our safety and mental well-being.

After our second visit to the nursing home, I made the list, containing only a handful of room numbers so I knew which ones to avoid. There is the hilariously awful excuse maker in 305, the short tempered 307, the super scary 319 and the hurtful, self-confidence destroyer in 320.

On our first walk down to Dalkey, on that first Wednesday, I was really excited and a little nervous. I was nervous because I didn't know what kind of work they would make us do. I was afraid it would be too unbearably awkward. It was, but you get used to it.

I was really looking forward the elderly people there. In my head I envisaged a little, kind, old lady who was beyond delighted to have some company and even have some substitute-like grandchildren for a day. I pictured the start of something new, a relationship with a sweet resident, like I was on my first day planting a seed that every Wednesday I would water, little by little, until the friendship blossomed into a flower. I was excited, I thought to myself that I could even end up having a *Tuesdays with Morrie* type of relationship, where they could pass on their wisdom and their memories and I could, maybe, in return make their day a little brighter and happier.

This perfect scenario didn't last long, however, because before I knew it I was walking through the lobby of the nursing home and it resembled a hotel rather than a nursing home. I'd

be pretty happy if my children abandoned me and put me in a nursing home as nice as this. I'd prefer it. It's like staying at a five-star hotel for the residents living there; at least, that's my impression. It could be a lot different for the people there but I wouldn't be complaining if I was made to go there - the nurses do everything for you, it's obsessively clean, teenagers coming in every week to talk to you. Who wouldn't like that?

Well if I'm being honest, I wouldn't enjoy the last part at all. I completely understand why some of the residents don't want us coming into their rooms and disturbing them. I'd be so grumpy yelling at them to get out! I don't mind admitting it because I think it's true for most people. I just wouldn't have the patience. When we entered the hotel-like lobby of the nursing home, I went up to the front desk and my friend Aoife and I were allocated the third floor for to work on.

'This is it,' I thought to myself on our way down to the nurses' station on floor three. I was excited to finally see what it would actually be like. Aoife and I were assigned a room to talk to one of the residents who needed some company. I was very optimistic and trying to push my nervousness aside for now while I met the woman. I thought to myself, before going into the room, 'Yeah, this is has to be a sign that I'm going to have that *Tuesdays with Morrie* relationship.' Oh, how naïve I was!

We ventured cautiously into room 320. An elderly lady looked flustered at these strangers seemingly barging into her room. We explained who we were and what we were here to do. She relaxed a little and rested her head against her pillow

looking out of her window at the harbor filled with boats and a calm sea. The sky was bright but was beginning to darken as the day reached its maturity. When she didn't say anything after our introductions are over, neither did we.

We had no idea what to do, the atmosphere in the room was unbearable. It was as if awkwardness and silence were being thrown out of the air at every corner of the room and spreading like wildfire until the room was almost full. It had reached the brink of silence, close to overflowing. I couldn't handle it anymore, I had to break it. I was racking my brains for what to say. I finally blurted out, 'So do you like it here?'

I felt so ridiculous that that was the best I could come up with, but at least I had said something.

The lady didn't seem bothered or effected by the previous atmosphere. She seemed at ease, looking at the view from her window. She appeared to be content in her own little world.

I began to think it was a bad idea to have said anything at all. While I gripped the edge of my seat in anticipation of her answer, or her wrath, as I was unsure if I had overstepped boundaries, or if interrupting her made her mad and vengeful (I was being stupid, over-thinking every aspect of this first meeting with someone from the nursing home), I was just so unbelievably nervous that I didn't know what to be doing with myself.

Eventually, she answered and I released my grip on the chair. The lady began to engage in a pleasant enough conversation. I asked her about her life and she then asked about mine. When a nurse then passed the door and the

woman shouted out for her to come in, I looked out at the nurse halting abruptly outside the doorway. We gestured for her to come in, as that's what the woman requested. The nurse quickly replied by shaking her head and hands wildly, clearly not wanting to see her and continued walking swiftly down the corridor, laughing to another nurse about how we had to stay with her. They were having a good, loud giggle about our misfortune.

The old lady continued to talk to the nurse that she thought was still outside her door. We tried to tell her that the nurse had long gone but she wouldn't listen and kept talking. The talking then turned to shouting, the shouting then turned to pure rage pouring out of this fragile woman's mouth, followed by vicious hand gestures, and we didn't know what to do.

Soon after this the woman started ranting uncontrollably. However, our classmate, Alanna, came in looking for us. That stopped the woman's ranting and raging momentarily because the lady began asking Alanna the same questions she had asked us. 'Who are you?' 'What school do you go to?' 'How many siblings?' and so on.

This kept her calm and busy for a bit. Then there was another short silence when the woman ran out of questions, but Alanna broke it by admiring her photographs on the walls. The woman couldn't see which photograph Alanna was admiring so she asked her who was in them. Alanna replied, 'You and a younger man.'

The woman looked puzzled. She squinted and screamed. 'A man?! Is it a man or a woman?'

The three of us all looked at each other. Oh-my-God! Disaster! The person looked like a man but it could've been a woman too. Nobody knew what to say because if any of us got it wrong we would be insulting someone, probably someone in her family, and then she'd really start screaming.

I cringed in my seat because there was no way I'd answer her after her last little tantrum. The tension in the room was building as Alanna was deciding what she would say. Eventually Alanna just said she didn't know which, the best answer possible, I think, because I know I wouldn't risk it with that crazy lady.

She is lovely, really. At least she talked to us, unlike so many other residents. But she did have her bizarre and wacky moments of fury too.

We managed to ignore the topic of who was in her photograph by politely excusing ourselves from her room before she could ask again.

With a sigh of relief we realised our hour was up and we could now go home. The nurses passed us on our way out and couldn't help but giggle as they probably heard the whole thing. It was hard not to - she probably woke up the whole floor. Feeling embarrassed for probably causing more harm than good on our first day of Community Service, we quickly got our Gaisce forms signed at the front desk. It was the end of my first day of Community Service. It was more eventful

than I'd hoped for but I still mainly looked forward to it every week after that.

Regardless of whether I have a continuous friendship with a resident, regardless of whether we're making a small difference to people's lives or not (we realize we're hardly *giving back* to our community), the best thing we can really strive for is to amuse the residents at the nursing home by taking a little time out of our day to pay attention to them.

