

ANTHOLOGY 2021

THE ANTHOLOGY

2021

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FOREWORD

This is the 10th edition of The Anthology. This is a great achievement for all of us at Clonkeen. To celebrate this anniversary, this edition of the Anthology includes the greatest hits from previous editions of The Anthology. With more writing than ever, we are proud to present to you this edition. Reading is slowly becoming less of a hobby and we hope to change that. Movies and TV series are often derived from books. The harsh truth is the book is usually the best form of the story and a lot of people will not get to experience that.

One of my favourite things about the Anthology is the originality of the writing. The Anthology is not just a collection of stories but a combination of unique pieces of writing ranging from carefully crafted poems to creative stories. There is something for everyone in the Anthology especially with the addition of the greatest hits.

Each year the Creative Writing class come together to create The Anthology. We can proudly say that we have put our best effort into ensuring this book can be the best it can be. The real magic of The Anthology lies within the writers.

With that being said, we hope you enjoy!

Stephen Harpur
April 2021

ANTHOLOGY 2021

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CONTENTS

PART I:
Stories & Essays

LOWLIFE

Shane O'Sullivan

17

THE UNDERGROUND

Oscar Lewins

25

FOG

Manas Chedimala

37

BLOSSOMING IN WINTER

Adrian Matthews

45

SLENDER

Mark McMorrow

55

A QUIET LIFE

Eoin Farrelly

63

CONTENTS

THE VIKING

Shane O'Sullivan

81

THE DREADNOUGHT HOAX

Daniel Wallace

87

THE INNER BEING

Ryan Higgins

95

LIGHTS ALL FADED

Kenneth Lee

111

MOROCUT

J Murray

123

NEW BEGINNINGS

Mukilson Dheepson

131

CONTENTS

WHO ARE YOU

Owen Bilag

133

REPAYMENT

Dáire O'Neill

143

ANONYMOUS

Joe Clarke

163

A BATTLE FOR THE GODS

Oscar Lewins

171

CHOICES

Mukilson Dheepson

181

THE SUPPRESSION OF THE PUSHER

J Murray

185

CONTENTS

SECTION SIX

Tom Wallace

193

THE WISHING WELL

Seán Nolan

205

THE HIDDEN TRUTH

Nathan Ryan McKeever

221

ONE SHOT

Sam O'Brien

223

THE ALIEN, THE ENEMY AND THE ALLY

John Murray

241

THE STORM

Stephen Harpur

265

CONTENTS

ICES OF BATTLE: HARD LUCK, CHARLIE

Ire Guidoriagao

281

LEAVING CLONKEEN COLLEGE

Mark Sullivan

291

PART II:

Poetry

HEUSTON 2015

Conor Spain

294

8

Conor McLoughlin

296

JAWS

Ronan Dunne

297

CONTENTS

LIKE A FOX

Shane O'Sullivan

298

DREAMLAND FANTASY

Eoghan Echivarre

299

DEATH OF RADIO

Robert O' Gorman

300

THE LAKE ISLE OF CLONKEEN

Ned_Quirke

Kevin Nolan

Naoise Ó Conluain

Ronan Hayes

302

ANTHOLOGY 2021

PART I:
Stories & Essays

LOWLIFE

Shane O'Sullivan

I awoke to a hammering on my door. I stretched, arching my back, like a hesitant cat. A glance out of the window told me it was late into the afternoon. Last night's takeaway was spilled sloppily over my once white top, gathering at my shorts to form gloppy piles of rice and chicken. Even the flies avoided the rancid remains, instead they buzzed around the light of the muted TV.

Groaning, I pulled myself out of the armchair and trudged towards the banging at the door. The walk was short, but I was groggy and disoriented and took my time to answer it. Opening the door, I revealed Johnnie, my bookie. He was sporting a leather jacket and had greasy jet-black hair as well as a wiry moustache. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of aviator Ray Bans. He was a short man with an even shorter temper and was used to getting his way.

'Your payment is due,' he announced in his thick Brooklyn accent. He pronounced each word with relish as if he enjoyed watching people squirm when they couldn't pay. I knew there was no money, any spare cash that I did have was sucked up in the bar on Friday.

'I haven't got the money,' I mumbled.

His ratty features formed a grimace.

'Well!' he exclaimed, 'If you don't have the money,' he cracked his knuckles and removed his shades.

I backed up, raising my hands in surrender.

'I'll get you the money,' I pleaded, 'Give me a bit of time and you will get what I owe you.'

He glanced me down from head to foot. 'You have until this evening to give me what you owe, otherwise' he opened his jacket revealing a pistol tucked into his waistband.

'Meet me at the back of O'Malleys, eleven, don't be late, or else.' He walked out of the room, leaving me stunned.

What was I going to do?

I paced back and forth in my living room, racking my brain, trying to think of a way to get the \$2,000 I owed him. Johnnie was known for being ruthless, often beating his victims to a pulp, but he wasn't that good with money and offered some of the cheapest rates in Manhattan. He ran his business out of the back of O'Malleys, the local Irish bar. It was a tough place, full of the local crews, but it was still a busy hangout.

I tried to consider my options, I could face Johnnie and get my teeth knocked out or I could try find the money. I had a bad reputation for going behind on payments, but I was good at cards and could normally weasel my way out. I had lost it all to bad play. I had been drunk and out of my range, not a good combination. I was sure there was some way I could make quick money, but how?

I decided to leave my apartment, fresh air would help clear my head. I slipped on my sneakers and went out onto the bustling street. It was rush hour. Taxis and cars were bumper to bumper, honking and revving at each other. The sidewalk was full of people going about their business. Suits cradled their phones while vendors yelled and advertised their fake Rolexes and street meat.

Everyone knew Tony. He had a hotdog stand on the corner of 9th Street. He sold a lot of things from that stand, but only the hot dogs were legal. As I approached, he got up, straightened out his tracksuit and pulled me into a warm embrace so close that I could almost taste his aftershave.

‘Ah, my friend,’ he exclaimed. ‘How you been, how can Tony sort you out?’

‘Hey Tony,’ I replied. ‘I ain’t good. Johnnie on my ass over money.’

‘Why’d you go to him, you know Tony can sort you out.’ He grinned showing his gold tooth. Tony was a friendly guy if you were on his good side. If not, you would find yourself in an alley getting your head kicked in by one of his goons.

‘Look Tony, you heard of any jobs around the place. I need something man, please.’

He pulled me in, ‘There is one thing I’ve heard of. Mind you these some shady guys, I’m not so sure about it.’

‘I’ll take anything. I’m desperate man.’

‘Okay then, but I don’t want none of this linking back to me, you get me.’

I nodded.

‘It’s just off the Columbus Park, Won’s Kitchen Wonders. Tell them Tony sent you.’

‘Thanks Tony. I owe you one.’

‘Forget about it. Just remember who got your back.’

The building was old with dirty French windows and crumbling brick walls. I parted the beaded string door and walked in. Ancient freezer units marked with extortionate prices collected dust against the white panelled walls. An elderly Chinese woman sat at the register.

‘Hey,’ I said politely, ‘I’m looking for someone. Is there a job here?’ She got up and gestured for me to follow her into the back. In the storage room there were three young men sitting around the table, smoking.

They were all Asian with spikey black hair and neck tattoos. One was fidgeting with a zippo, flicking it, and holding the flame against his palm. As I entered, they stubbed their cigarettes and looked up. The elderly women muttered something inaudible to them. The tallest got up and started to pat me down. He pulled out my phone and tucked it into his own pocket. He nodded to the others and sat back down.

‘So, you want work?’ the one with the lighter asked.

'Yeh Tony sent me. I'll do anything you need.' He eyed his associate and nodded.

'Well, there is one thing you could help me with. I have a shipment coming in at seven tonight, the foreman, has a package for me, if you collect it and bring it to me, I'll give you some money, you understand?'

He scratched his neck lazily, rubbing a tattoo of a red dragon. I now understood who they were. They were part of the Scarlet Dragons, a ruthless gang. Maybe this wasn't a good idea.

I backed up slightly, 'I don't want to be involved too much in anything.'

'Relax, it's just a small job, no one will ever know.'

'What's the package?' I questioned.

'Never you mind, just bring it to me. When you arrive at the docks tell the gatekeeper that Pitbull sent you, he'll understand.'

'What's in it for me?'

He stretched out in his chair. 'How does two bands sound?'

'Sounds good,' I answered.

'Great, and don't be late 'cos TJ doesn't like when people are late,' He gestured to his other associate who grinned bearing silver clad teeth.

'Can I have my phone back' I asked,

'Oh no,' he replied smiling. 'Wouldn't want you calling anyone now would we.'

I walked out on to the street. A cold front was coming in. The harbor was a twenty-minute walk away and it had just gone six. I had time but didn't want to push my luck. I knew I had wrapped myself up in some dodgy business. Maybe I would have been better facing Johnnie rather than this gang, but I didn't have much choice now. I filled my lungs with the evening air and went on my way.

It was getting darker now, the autumn-colored leaves dotted the ground, becoming mush underfoot. Streetlamps illuminated the path. Shopkeepers were pulling down their shutters. The homeless huddled around trashcan fires, protecting themselves from the night's chill. My breath curled in spirals before disappearing into the night. The Hudson river was dark and murky, the icy water lapped against the sea wall rippling as ferries passed.

The harbor was deserted. A couple of moored boats swayed slowly with the current. The only light was coming from inside a porta cabin, I decided to head over. Inside a burly man sat behind a desk. I knocked on the open door, he looked up. 'Who are you?' he asked aggressively.

'I am here to collect something,' I replied nervously. 'Pitbull sent me.'

He relaxed at this, sinking back into his chair. 'Good, good. Yes, I do have something for you.' With that he reached under his desk and pulled out a black leather briefcase. 'Tell your boss I'll be expecting my payment

soon.' With that he handed me the briefcase. 'Now get outta here.'

The case was heavy, requiring a firm grip. Now all I needed was to return this and collect my money. I smiled, taking in the beauty of the evening lights. Suddenly, I heard a crack behind me. I turned around to see what it was; But the harbor was empty, nothing was there except a nest of cooing pigeons.

I stopped to look closer, maybe there was something?

'Move, move, move!' A dozen men in full black tactical gear ran out of the shadows, aiming at me. I wanted to run but my feet were rooted to the ground. 'Stay where you are!' they yelled. 'Drop the package and get down.'

Flashlights blinded me as they advanced. 'Suspect is not co-operating. Get down now!' The briefcase popped open as it hit the ground. Vacuum sealed packs and a handgun spilled onto the floor My stomach dropped, 'Suspect is armed, engaging in combat.' He raised his rifle, took aim, and fired.

THE UNDERGROUND

Oscar Lewins

Crimes happen every day, you know that, whether that be small Cornershop robberies, house robberies in the middle of the night, muggings in street alleys, or even massive bank heists, they happen all the time. But what you don't know, is that every single crime, or well in Ireland at least, are all sanctioned by a criminal organisation.

They're called The Underground.

‘Four months ago, me ma and da were killed because of ‘an old friend’ my da had, and my brother and I were next on the list. Somehow we managed to get away. We couldn’t go to any family or friends, so we resorted to the streets, sleeping in some of the roughest areas of Dublin city for weeks. We turned to pick-pocketing, shop lifting, talking ourselves out of very intense situations. You’d be surprised how fast somebody could resort to crime, even though they used to live a life of kindness and peace.

It was hard at the start, losing our parents and living on the streets. But after about a month, we started to enjoy it! But as I said earlier, all crimes must be sanctioned, and even though we were making a good profit, we were

sloppy, made mistakes and worst of all, we were noticed. Little did we know, that since even the first day we resorted to the new life of luxurious floor sleeping, we were being watched. They have eyes everywhere.

But it was something like the 22nd of October 1976, the height of 'The Troubles', that everything changed even more. I woke up in an alleyway of O'Connell street, about half ten in the morning. Another regular day in paradise, pick-pocketing the regular folk. But not everybody. Even though my brother and I weren't very nice people, we had some morals. Only robbing men in nice suits, although everyone wore a suit, we could tell which were good ones, we had good eyes. But we didn't pick-pocket women, or poor looking men.

The two of us saw a quite exquisitely rich man walking somehow up the road. I told my brother Tom to creep up the left side of him, and I'll creep to the right. We had a sort of routine that we done; pretty good it was. I'd bump into the 'victim' and my brother would pocket him from behind, that was until today. So, we continued up to our next victim. I played my part (the street was absolutely crowded mind you) and bumped into him. Obviously, he threw a complete 'hissy fit' and shouted at me, telling me all about how important he is and that he has places to be bla bla bla. It was normally 'round this part that Tom would pocket him, but he didn't! So I kinda zone out to whatever yer man was goin on about and looked behind him for Tom, but that's when I saw you standing behind

him, staring at him, and then...' Colm turns to his left 'Then you must have been standing behind me, 'cuz I didn't see you. Then the other guy must of got me at the same time, and now we're here!' Colm pauses for a moment and looks around, 'So who are you by the way?'

Both men look at each other for a moment and look back at Colm. The one on the left says

'We're a hidden criminal organisation who control all of crime in and out of Dublin. We've been around since the British first invaded Ireland. It was initially created as a group who secretly tried to take out the British, but that sector later branched off into the IRA. What we do, is another sector. We control the crime. It was a sort of counter-attack to the British robbing our people. So now we rob them. We make sure the only people getting robbed are British, or people who work for the British. We're called the Underground.

This is where you come in. We know about your recent loss. Your father, he was an Irish spy. Only when his British friend found out, he killed both your parents. We sent some of our men to come and save you before the hit, but we we're too late. We thought you were dead too, but your bodies weren't there. It was only when you started stealing, we realised you were alive.

But this is where things get serious, usually if any unwanted crimes went on we'd 'sort them out as soon as possible' but because of your father, we're gonna cut some slack because, to be fair, we all have been in the same

position as you right now. So, you and your brother can leave right now and we'll let you continue your lives of pickpocketing, and we'll collect our fee every week. Or, you and your brother can join us. We'll give you a home and feed you of course, and you can help us rid this country from the British once and for all.

Whatcha say?'

Colm takes a moment to think. He doesn't just think of regaining his father's revenge, but what's best for his younger brother Tom.

'Gwan. Yeah. Let's do it' Says Colm with pride and excitement.

TWO MONTHS LATER

Tom and Colm have settled into their new life in 'The Underground'. Colm has just been ordered by General Micheál O'Toole to wait outside the main house at 4.30 am sharp. Colm thinks this is just another roll call. For the last two months he's been pickpocketing British soldiers, a dangerous job but he's good at it. He's not a very violent person so it suits him well. He's been called to a few of these roll calls, but that's just like a fire alarm in a school so it was never anything much. Just stand there and look all hard.

But little did Colm know this wasn't a regular roll call. He wakes a few minutes early and makes his way to the front of the main house. It's still pitch black out so he can't see much but what he can see is faint figures just a few

dozen meters in front of him. He doesn't know why they're so dark until he nearly bumps into one. He sees a line of IRA soldier all dressed in completely black, camouflage style clothes. Holding some of the biggest rifles and machine guns he's ever seen. Well, that's not hard to do because he's never seen a gun before.

He thinks to himself 'Maybe my roll calls the other side of the building', but just as he walks past the 30 IRA soldiers in lines of ten, each line behind the other, he gets called from General O'Toole behind him.

'Where the f*** you going Colm, you're with us tonight'.

Colm's heart stops for a moment, a million horrific thoughts rush through his brain. In the short span of being called to turning around Colm has a full panic attack. But he doesn't show it on the outside. O'Toole calls him again.

'Colm, get yer ass down here!'

'Crap!' Colm thinks to himself.

Colm slowly walks to the General, standing in front of the soldiers. The snail-like walking pace of Colm causes all the soldiers to stop looking straight ahead, but to drift their attention to Colm, stressing him out even more. As he gets to the General, his heart begins to pound again, but at a worryingly fast rate.

'You're with the big boys on this one Colm' tells the General as he hands the recently turned 15-year-old Colm

a uniform just like the other men but just a couple sizes smaller.

‘Gwan. Quickly, get changed’ rushes the General.

While Colm is changing, the General gives the IRA men a pep-talk.

‘Right lads!’

All the men stand straight and look forward.

‘This is a big one tonight. There’s a bank in O’Connell street. Ran by the Brits, full of the Brits’ money, built by the Irish, who also were paid not even the smallest fraction of the smallest account in it. Tonight, were gonna petrol bomb it. We’re gonna drown it with the British petrol Mr. Murphy and his men stole last week. We’re gonna kill ANY Brits we see, over or coming back from our mission. And we’re not even gonna take any of the money! Because it’s not about the money, it’s about sending a message. Am I clear men?’

All the men roar in unison ‘YES SIR’

‘Now ger yer asses down there and send those Brits a message!’

Colm tries to hide and possibly run away, but immediately after the men begin to enter the trucks, General O’Toole looks around, unfortunately for Colm, the General spots him.

‘Oi, Colm. Come here I wanna give you somthin’

Colm, who's heart rate is still constantly rising, unwillingly walks toward the General. As he edges closer, he sees the general turn around and search through a box.

As Colm reaches the General, he turns back around at Colm, with an M3 sub-machine in one hand and a pistol in the other with a belt of ammunition resting on his shoulder. Colm's heart begins to pound through his chest as he's handed the guns.

'Good man,' winks the General, 'Now get into the truck.'

Colm quickly paces to the truck which doors still open. He gets in and sits beside a soldier.

'Welcome to the initiation' Loudly tells the soldier to Colm to make sure everyone hears. All the rest of the soldiers laugh at the joke, besides Colm, who's scared to the brink of death right now. The trucks take off and make their way to the bank.

The truck double doors burst open upon reaching the bank. All the men rush out the door so fast and with such velocity it's almost like they we're running out from the boats onto the beaches in Normandy, praying that they're not shot dead by a German sniper. Colm doesn't take a moment to listen to anything, he just follows the soldiers into what could be battle. But there isn't. The street is dead quiet. It sends quite an eerie feeling through Colm as he's never seen O'Connell street so empty and quiet before. The road was completely dark too, with nothing but a poorly lit streetlamp placed every few buildings or so.

Some of the men rush up to the bank door with dynamite, a spool and matches, while others stayed at the

truck, keeping an eye out. One of the soldiers notices how scared and confused Colm was and decides to help out.

‘Here, son.’

He walks over to Colm

‘Ye alright there pal?’ asks the soldier

He can clearly see how terrified Colm is and attempts to help.

‘Listen, you got one shot at this, bud. They’re judging off of what you do tonight. You gotta show them who’s the boss. Put your gun in your hand. Follow me and you’ll be ok. My name’s Cathal.’

Colm nods and sticks to Cathal like glue, holding his M3 tight. The two make their way up to the door of the bank. The other men plant dynamite all over the big and heavy double doors. One-man lights the match and everyone takes a couple steps back. Colm stares at the shortening fuse like an eagle as his heart is now pumping so hard, he can feel the blood pumping through his main arteries. He’s sweating to bits underneath his mask and is praying to God that the fuse breaks and they all have to go home. But that doesn’t happen.

A massive bang pops the ears of all the men and Colm is blown over completely knocking the wind out of him. To Colm, everything is in slow motion as his vision is hazy due to the smoke, he’s gone deaf for a couple seconds because the loud bang and suddenly he has no idea where he is. He faintly sees the soldiers rush into the building, but doesn’t move, he’s frozen and doesn’t want to fight it.

Cathal grabs Colm by the shoulder and pulls him up to his feet.

'Let's go kid!!'

Colm snaps out of his daze and kicks right into action, he runs into the bank (still quite dusty), there's rubble everywhere. Some soldiers are trying to open the vault door with even more dynamite, others are opening all the registers and dumping the cash onto the ground and the rest are unloading petrol everywhere. While Colm stands in the middle watching it all.

After only 45 seconds of breaking into the bank the British police are already on their way. Colm can hear the ring of the police cars just down the road, getting louder and louder. Colm runs outside to see six police cars zooming up the road, going so fast they're skidding all over the road, almost like it was covered in a thick sheet of ice. Colm then rushes back inside and begins to scream at Cathal and the other soldiers telling them the Police are coming. Cathal quickly turns and points out seven or eight men to follow him out the front of the bank.

Colm hides behind the men as he follows them outside. They hide behind a fallen pillar because of the explosion, and quickly stack some fallen signposts and other large objects to hide behind. Before the British soldiers could even stop the cars the soldiers pulled out their machine guns and rifles and started hammering down on the cars and the police inside. Colm didn't watch

any of it, he just hid behind the pillar. Sitting beside Cathal and another man ploughing down onto the police. Colm covers his head as what feels like millions of empty shells falling on him. Three of the six police cars we're destroyed in seconds and the police inside were dead before they could get out of the car. Only a few managed to get out and hide behind theirs.

Two of the soldiers were shot and killed. One of them being the one beside Colm. The body fell on top of Colm, nearly crushed him. After some time he managed to push the body off. Although all the soldiers were wearing black clothes, Colm could still see the blood stains completely covering his uniform. More police come in a massive wave, and Colm sprints inside to get more men. The soldiers all listen to Colm and finish what they're doing before running outside. They finish opening the vault and douse it in petrol, as well as the rest of the building. Most of the men rush outside to find cover and fight the British police, while three other men stay back to light all the petrol.

Colm just about manages to jump outside right as he spots some dynamite that someone left behind, completely blowing up the interior of the building, killing the three men inside and even destroys some of the outside. A gigantic blaze of fire bleeds out of the building, completely lighting the entire street. The closest thing we'll ever get to a sun on earth. One of the men throws a ball of green dye into the building. Turning

the destroyed British building into a massive symbol of Ireland.

This must have intimidated the British because even though there were only less than 30 Irish soldiers, there were many more of the British police, because the Irish were winning. But it didn't matter who was winning, Colm was still completely shellshocked at what was happening, he was positive he was going to die.

After about six full minutes of keeping his eyes shut and holding his head in his hands, Cathal grabs Colm again. Colm jumps and turns around to him

'Colm, take this..' Cathal gives Colm a belt of bullets '.. and give it to David down there'

Colm turns to see that David is completely the other side of the battlefield, waving his hands to Colm, looking for ammo.

'This is your chance Colm' shouts Cathal as he pushes Colm. Colm stumbles a bit but manages to find his footing as he starts to run across the warzone, bullets, Molotov's and grenades whizzing past his head as he ran to David. He was positive those bullets were trying to shoot him, but he didn't think of that. He just focused on David and prayed to God above that he'd make it.

Finally, he did and gave the bullets to David.

'Good man' says David, he winks to Colm. He then reloaded his gun and shot the remaining police to pieces. At last, the shooting stopped, and Colm took a deep breath, thinking to himself that it's over. But it wasn't,

there was one British soldier left. Both his legs were shot, and he was trying to crawl away, but the Irish didn't let him. Instead, they pulled him back in and dragged him to Colm's feet and dropped him on the floor. Then Cathal took Colm's handgun from its holster and handed it to Colm.

'Shoot him' says Cathal sternly, but Colm panics.

'What?!' says Colm in complete shock.

'Shoot yer man or you're gone. Do you wanna stay here with us? Well, this is your test'

Colm begins to well up as he looks into the eyes of the dying British soldier.

'He's dying anyway Cathal, just leave him alone. Please' begs Colm as he points the gun toward the ground and not at the Policeman.

'This is your last chance Colm, or yer gone. Put back into the world of poverty. Shoot him, and you can stay with us, we can free this country from the British' Cathal calmly says. He then takes Colm's hand which has the gun in and points it upward to the policeman.

Colm takes a moment to say a prayer for the man. Then, still crying, cocks back the gun and shoots him in the head. Colm then drops his head and gun in sorrow.

'Welcome to The Underground!' Says Cathal.

FOG (extract)

Manas Chedimala

‘Got the sleeping bags?’ asked Nick.

‘Yeah, I’m getting them now’ replied Jack.

It was evening. They had to find a spot to pitch the tents and start a fire before it became too dark. Jack and his brother Nick started to walk down the pathway leading into the forest. Their rucksacks heavy, you could hear the cutlery rubbing off the pot they had brought to make dinner. The forest was never-ending, tall, thick-trunked trees. You could just about see the sun through the gaps between the branches.

‘Right here!’ Nick had found the perfect spot.

Jack started unpacking his bag which contained the foldable tent while Nick brushed the twigs on the floor aside. The tent popped out of the bag. Nick got down onto the floor to start hammering in the sides of the tent into the floor. ‘I’ll go look for some firewood.’

‘Alright, be back soon.’

‘Yeah. Shouldn’t be long. We’re in a forest after all.’

‘I’ll join you once I finish up with the tents.’

Jack started walking away from the campsite. There was a bright light shining on his face, which sort of aggravated him. It was the reflection of the sun shining

off the lake. He started to pick up unused sticks from previous campers, he placed them on a tarp so he could carry them back all-together. Nick had finished off with the tents. He started getting some smaller sticks to help ignite the fire.

It was getting darker. They started to head back to their camp. They walked by the lake as it started to get cold and a bit foggy, you could still see the sun though, it was just starting to set. Jack heard something, in the distance, a screech, but it was low pitched. It sounded like an echo as the sound continued to rebound off the trees.

‘What was that?’ asked Jack.

‘What was what?’

‘You heard that right?’

‘Heard what?’

‘How did you not hear it? It was pretty loud.’

‘I have no clue what you’re talking about.’

‘Seriously? It was like an echo. Like a jet engine almost, it was far away, but I feel like the sound kept travelling closer and closer until it went silent. Maybe I’m just imagining things.’

‘Yeah. Yeah, you are, I didn’t hear a single thing. You’re probably just so hungry that you’re just losing your mind. Now let’s get this fire started so you don’t start hearing things again.’

Nick blew the blaze a little bit so that it would spread through the surrounding twigs. The sparks spread out

over the small pieces of wood. Within a few minutes they had put together a burning fire.

‘I’ll go get the pot to boil the water,’ said Jack.

Jack entered his tent to open his rucksack to get the pot out from the bottom of the bag.

‘What? I remember putting the pot in here. Surely it’s here somewhere...’ The pot was gone. ‘Hey Nick! Did you take the pot out my bag?’

‘No. No, I didn’t. Don’t tell me you left it at home...’

‘No! I didn’t I swear! I must’ve left it back in the boot of the car then.’

‘Well, you better go get it then. I’m starving!’

‘Yeah, yeah I’m going now.’

‘Be quick!’

Jack left the site. The leaves crunched underneath his boots. It was dark by now and a bit chilly, there was a bit of fog around. He continued walking. *Crunch*, there was a sound. The leaves were crunching a few meters behind Jack. He turned around swiftly only to see pure darkness. It was eerie. Jack has a sickening feeling in his stomach. ‘Hello?’ Jack quietly mumbled. He continued walking, but a bit faster. He couldn’t find the car. It was just too dark now and every corner looked the same with the thick blanket of fog. *Click*, the light from the torch faded. Jack hit the torchlight against his palm hoping it would turn on again. Jack was scared. The same echoes from earlier travelled around his head now. It felt as if he was in sleep

paralysis as he didn't recognise his surroundings and his body was just moving by itself.

The fire grew larger now. Nick sat on a piece of wood next to the fire warming up his hands.

'Where is this guy?' Nick questioned. 'Maybe I should go help him. I'll wait a few minutes, maybe he'll come back.'

It was late, and Nick was worried about where his brother was. The dinner didn't matter anymore. Jack had not been back for an hour.

'Alright that's it. I'm going to go after him. I'm going to leave a note behind in case he comes back.' Nick left with a flashlight and his phone. He had already tried to make multiple phone calls to Jack only to realize that Jack had left his phone behind at the camp. He knew this since he had heard it in the tent while he was getting the fire ready.

Jack was cold. He sat there on the damp, frosted, dirt path in fear. He was paranoid. He had been looking for the car for so long by now. The fog was so thick that the light from the flashlight couldn't suppress it. Jack was defeated, he didn't want to look for the car anymore. He turned around and started tracing back his footprints.

'Nick!' he tried shouting for help, but there was nothing but silence.

Suddenly, Jack felt a cold breeze run along his neck, but there were footsteps too, someone was there. He swiftly turned around. He saw something, a shadow, it was

behind a tree around twenty feet high. The shadow outline looked like a small human, a child, he could see the long hair of the person.

‘Hello? Who’s there?’ he muttered.

‘Please help me...’ the strange figure spoke.

‘Are you lost?’ Jack asked.

‘Yes. Can you help me find my way home?’ the voice pleaded. It was definitely a girl’s voice.

‘Where do you live?’ asked Jack. She started to cry. The shadow moved away.

‘Hello?’ she was gone. ‘I must be dreaming. That did not just happen. Did it? It was so real... where even am I?’

Nick looked down at the path trying to follow each footprint. He could tell that it was Jack’s since he could make out the familiar imprint of his boots. The torch was flickering, and the light started to fade away. Nick was nothing but nervous. What had happened to his brother? Why has he not come back? Is he ok? Did he fall asleep in the car? He started to run. The footsteps led Nick straight to the car park. The car was right there. He would sprint towards the car. It was open but Jack wasn’t there. Nick opened the boot of the car to see if Jack had even gotten the pot. The pot was right there. Nick panicked. His brother was lost. Nick took out his phone to call the emergency services. On his phone he dialed 911.

‘Hello?!’

‘911 emergency services, how may I assist you?’

'This is urgent! My brother is lost somewhere out in these woods, I've been looking for him for hours but it's way too dark and there has been no sign of him for hours now! I'm worried, what do I do?!'

'Sir calm down, what is your current location?'

'I'm in the woods near Ashtown. I'm at the carpark'

'Alright sir, don't panic, we are sending out some police officers to you right now'

'Thank you! But what do I do now?'

'Can you just give me a little bit of backstory and any information you might know?'

'Yes. My brother Jack left the campsite so he could bring a pot back to the camp from the car. After that there was no sign of him for hours...'

'Alright, thanks, I'll pass that information down to the officers right now. Don't move from the car park the officers will be there shortly.'

'Alright. Please come quick...'

Nick sat in his car for the next ten minutes waiting for the officers. They finally arrived. Nick dashed out of the car swinging his arms in the air to alert the cops that he was there. The police officers ran over to him.

'Alright bud. Which way was the last direction you saw him go?'

'Well, he left from camp to come to this exact location, the car. And I got here following his footprints.'

'Alright, so where are his footprints?'

'You see, that's the thing. There are footprints right until that point,' Nick pointed back at the path he had previously come from. 'That's where they stopped,' explained Nick. The officers were confused. How had the footprints just *stopped*? Why was Jack not there? It's like he just disappeared.

'Son, you're not playing a sick joke on us, are you?'

'No! No, I'm not joking at all! I know it seems so surreal, but please, I beg, I need your help!'

The officers looked at each other.

'We'll try the best we can kid,' they said. The officers started walking towards the forest entrance. A thick blanket of fog lay over the pathway leading towards the centre of the forest. One of the officers shook his leg over the fog to see if he could relocate the footprints. They were gone. Small dents in the ground started to form, new footprints. But there was nobody else there.

ANTHOLOGY 2021

2012

BLOSSOMING IN WINTER

Adrian Matthews

My Senior Year was ravaged by a battle so potent it was comparable to that of the Riders of Rohan riding to the world's ending to relieve a besieged Minas Tirith from the black forces of Mordor.

Then again, I'd be lying if I said that the Leaving was the only thing that occurred in my Senior Year. Ha...Oh, yes...Something even more important than the greatest memory test known to man happened in my final year of High School.

On a day bearing great similarity to a Serbian prison camp, I realised something...something that, even to this day, confounds me in even trying to explain and hurts to comprehend.

The day was ice cold. So cold, it bordered on the point of absolute zero. My school, however, appeared to be shattering all the laws of thermodynamics. The memory of the mucus freezing as it dribbled down from my nose in class that day, still rings in my memory like the events of that fateful afternoon.

After watching the clock slowly tick by from my classroom seat, I leaned forward to engage in a hushed conversation with my friend, Kin.

‘Christ-sake...What’s with this school?...Brr...Ten more minutes of this, Kin, and I swear I will reopen that indoor bonfire idea.’

‘That would be unwise, Aya,’ Kin murmured, his sleeves pulled up in their usual position around his elbows. How he survived in that ice-box, god only knows. Most likely it was the antifreeze-infused nanities coursing through his blood, or something.

‘Why, I have matches!’

‘Fine...Fine...Go ahead and burn the school down, but I’m not paying your bail.’

‘Why not...I’m your best friend. If I say lick my feet, you drop on all fours and start licking.’

Kin sighed, facing forward as our teacher’s eyes started wandering over to our hushed conversation. I, who had as much desire to listen to that old hag as drinking my own bile, nodded off against the window pane.

Once the witch had signed off, and Kin had kicked me awake, we started packing our frostbitten things. Kin ignored me, making a great deal of fixing up his bag, so I vented my anger at my jacket zip, which seemed to have frozen in place, midway up my navel. Our eyes met and the non-verbal message of, ‘Wanna walk home together?’ reached into our minds

simultaneously. We both nodded in agreement and took to the hormone-infused hallway, walking onwards to the student exit.

Well, I jogged, to keep up with Kin's giant-sized footsteps. Unlike my five-foot, two-inch self, who was sparsely built for athletic purposes, Kin towered over me. His close-cut hair and the abundance of muscle from his neck down, cast a significant shadow over the grey-sweatered First Years.

The Irish Dragon and the Pocket Lioness. These were our nicknames. 'If only Kin could encase me in a wall of flame so I wouldn't experience cryopreservation every time I step into this place,' I thought, drawing my arms over my chest as the sudden chill outside hit me.

'How's judo?' I asked conversationally, trying to tear my mind away from just how cold I was.

'Fine.'

'Ok...How's the family?'

'Fine.'

'I'll just keep talking then, till it bugs the hell out of you.'

He looked at me through his black, beetle eyes. 'Fine by me.'

'AHH...Ha...Hmmp...You're no fun...Ahh, look at the courtyard. The council **sure** has been busy!'

We were out into the frosty courtyard. It sparkled and glimmered with the Student Council's noble but failed effort at Christmas decoration, the electronics having

died the night before. But the tinsel and baubles, hanging from the sleeping cherry blossoms, glittered with a thin covering of silver ice that radiated a sort of eerie beauty.

'Mistletoe!' Kin grunted, nodding over towards a courtyard lamppost that was endowed with a floating bundle of the dreaded shrub and a murder of girls flocking beneath it.

'Man, I swear, if any guy ventures inside that orgy in the making, he ain't coming out.'

'Hmm...'

'Don't you even dare think about it,' I snap, kicking his tree-trunk-like leg. Pain instantly formed, causing me to start hopping about, gritting my teeth.

'I wasn't thinking about that.'

'Oh, **come on**...All boys think like that. It's a man's nature to be perverted.' I pulled at his red school blazer, trying and failing to uproot him. 'Man...Come **on**...I'm **hungry**. That's...more important than your sexual desires.'

He pivoted on his heels, almost like one of those androids out of Doctor Who...or my art teacher on a bad day. 'You've never had a problem with me eyeing-up girls before.'

'It's a new year's resolution and I'm starting early. **MOVE**.'

Sighing, he let me drag him along, his eyes wandering back now and again as we bisected the gap

between the girls' football match and the hockey team's practice.

We crossed out of the cold prison freezer and, following a road lined with blue LED lights, we headed up Main Street. It was Christmas and I could already feel the sense of joy and uttermost wonder of the pagan festival erasing the negative vibes that school had been radiating on me.

'I should really start to study,' I thought, out loud, trying to evoke a response from my typically pseudo-alien friend. 'I'm **screwed** for the mocks. Screwed with a capital **SC**....'

'I see an A1 in English flying your way.'

'It's not my damned fault I'm in pass. This insane language and its nonsensical spelling and grammar is just **SO** infuriating....**Grr**...I **Hate** it.'

'Yeah...,' Kin stopped outside a café as I continued to lament my misfortunes. He turned when I'd hit the line.

'And don't get me started on Maths...**WHY**...**WHY**!...did they need to replace numbers with letters? Wasn't ten enough? God damn you, Newton.'

'If I buy you dinner would you keep quiet?'

I clench up mid-vowel, '..inner?'

'Yes, as in the noun...a meal that is usually taken in the latter part of the day.'

'I know what dinner is, idiot! But why? You've never offered it before.'

'Heh,' he reached out and rubbed the crown of my head, ruffling my long blonde hair. 'It's my new year's resolution,' and he forced open the heavy glass door with his iron-like foot.

The café's toasty aroma hit my nostrils like fireworks.

I sucked in massive heap-fulls of smooth, coffee-filled air as we were directed towards a seat by the window and had menus placed in front of us. Kin ordered for us, mainly because I was taking forever to decide between a curry and a fish deal.

'I was about to order,' I pouted, pursing my lips and throwing my eyes skyward.

I glared around as Kin shrugged and adopted his usual cool, quiet stance, hands behind his head. The Café hummed with chatter. I recognised a few Juniors in a corner having the time of their lives, tucking into a plateful of cheesy tacos. 'How simplistic of them.' Little did they know of the sheer torrent of work waiting for them just around the bend. 'Well, I'm one to talk; never do anything in class but sleep and draw cartoons.'

I couldn't say that I'd been an enemy of school my whole life, though. Back in my hometown, I had a blast in Middle School but... My move for the Leaving Cert was, well, looking like Italy during the war. Idiotic and ill-informed.

Kin, thankfully, had been there since I first stepped into that deep freezer in Fourth Year. Just by chance,

Seth had placed Kin sitting in front of me, back on that wondrous first day and...well, you know...we clicked.

<Heh!>

Funny...if it hadn't been for Kin and his quiet yet resolute support, I don't think I would've withstood that blizzard they call the Leaving...and for that I am grateful.

The waitress swooped back, seeming more like a blonde-haired, dumb fashion-model than anything. She gracefully placed Kin's coffee before him, while giving him a face full of her cleavage. She threw my coke in front of me, letting some of the black mixture spill over the lip of the glass, and pranced away looking very pleased with herself.

Snarling, I picked up my knife and aimed for the back of her head, but Kin quickly disarmed me and forced me back in my seat.

He slumped back and resumed his relaxed position with his hands behind his head again. 'You're definitely an interesting friend...willing to defend me from all chances of perversion. You'd think you were in love with me.'

'Ha!'

'... or you see me as a God. The latter would be preferable.'

That comment should have been enough for me to spear him with my fork. But as the thought dwelled in my head, something else came to mind, something contrastive to causing him sheer bodily harm.

Our curvy waitress arrived with our food while I was still in contemplation of my inaction. Kin nodded at her in dismissal, and watched her slump away, deprived of her the chance to commence flirting.

He picked up his spoon. 'There. Eat.'

'...'

'Aya...'

'Hmm...'

'I'm paying but you're going to have to have feed yourself.'

The low buzzing of the restaurant took over as we eye-balled each other in a tense stand-off.

'Aya! Eat!,' his deep gravelly voice broke out like a shotgun. For some reason, I blushed. Only slightly, mind, but still. My cold, brazen mask had slipped for just one accursed moment. 'Aya, are you blushing?'

'No...'

'You **are** sure?'

'Drink your coffee.'

Thirty minutes passed in which I ranted on about meaningless things. Kin inclined his head at the right intervals while maintaining a strained, interested demeanour. Kin, the tall muscular guy I called my friend. I wondered if it could ever work. I'd dated in the past and never liked it that much, always having guys hanging over the phone, saying you're everything and promising the world when all they cared about was their carrot in my shopping basket, to put it delicately.

'Does he love me or have I already warmed to him in such a way that he sees me like a sister and that dating would just be too weird?' I wondered. <Sigh> 'God knows.' I was a hard person to love, I knew that. Boys tended to treat me like a lioness, a beauty to date but a vengeful goddess to piss-off.

'Oh....' Kin grunts.

'What's wrong?' I jumped, a ruby-red glow beginning to dance around my ears

'Hmm...oh. It's snowing.'

He was right. Even in that backwards coastal town it was snowing. It was falling in great spiralling sheets. I watched the people outside being mystified by this unknown force.

'They're saying 2011 is going to be a bad year,' Kin grumbled.

'Oh...Do you hate snow then?'

'No.' He chuckled as he grinned at me. 'But you do.'

When does a friend become a friend? To be honest with you, I can't remember the first time I met Kin, the first time we spoke, the first time I complained about the heating in the school. It's strange how things suddenly just appear in your life, like snow on a brisk Irish day. It seems so insignificant and fragile, snow, but given time it builds until it transforms a country into a crystallised wonderland.

Maybe some things take time. Maybe life doesn't have fixed points of definite change, but rather moments when

you look at yourself and say, 'Holy crap...how did that happen?'

The walk home was, yes, cold. I shivered as the night gathered darkness. I chanced a glance at Kin who seemed to be oblivious to the snow building on his hatless head, his figure composed and relaxed as it always was and always would be. 'I could say it now,' I thought, but I could feel the call of cliché floating in the wind, and I let the moment pass.

Kin once said that only at the apex do we change; but how can we change when we can't perceive the point of transfiguration? I have no idea when these feelings for Kin flowered or why they grew at all. All I know is that my love blossomed that winter. That's when it finally emerged from the earth. But could it have been that it was there all along, hidden under the cold, cold snow?

2013

SLENDER

Mark McMorrow

'...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 rags 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.

A QUIET LIFE

Eoin Farrelly

Sometimes you can hear silence. Mrs. Chatham could hear it now, louder than the chime of cutlery scraping against china plates, louder than the methodical ticking of the old grandfather clock. It was ringing in her ears. If it carried on any longer it would drive her insane.

‘So dear, are you enjoying your food?’

Phillip offered no response.

‘I made chicken pie. That’s your favourite.’

This time he nodded.

‘Make sure you eat it all. Your growing bones need it.’

He nodded again, but his half-picked-at plate told a different story. He seemed more interested in studying the floral design of the tablecloth than the food that Mrs. Chatham had spent hours making. Mr. Chatham chose this moment to enter, his untucked shirt and unkept hair bouncing as he limped in. A bleak reminder of his days at war. He sat down at the table, letting out a deep breath. As he pulled in his chair, Phillip pulled out his chair and stood up, retreating to his room.

‘That dumb boy speak today?’ Mr. Chatham asked through a mouthful of chicken.

‘Not yet.’ And he’s not dumb, Mrs. Chatham thought.

Mr. Chatham suddenly stopped chewing and spat some food back onto his plate. 'This is cold!' he cried in outrage.

Mrs. Chatham wanted to say, 'Well maybe if you came in when I told you it was ready it wouldn't be cold,' but she held her tongue.

Her husband stood up. Taking his full plate he deposited it straight in the bin. 'I'm going out,' he muttered under his breath. He didn't bother saying where he was going. She didn't bother asking. He grabbed his coat and with a slam of the front door he was gone, leaving Mrs. Chatham alone in the silence.

Ever since she gave birth to her only son, Mrs. Chatham always knew that he was different. As she lay on the hospital bed, clutching his new-born body with a mixture of sweat and tears of joy drenching her face, all he did was stare up at her silently. He didn't even cry. In that moment, staring into her minutes-old son's eyes, Mrs Chatham had the strangest of thoughts. She thought that these were not the eyes of a new-born baby gazing at the wonders of life for the first time, but the eyes of a weary old man who had lived through life two times over. She dispelled this thought, putting it down to an obscenity of her imagination.

Phillip didn't speak until he was four. When he was two Mrs. and Mr. Chatham began to worry about his lack of speech. They would stay up late at night, Mr. Chatham

voicing aloud his dreary thoughts, coming up with awful ideas of everything wrong with their child and their parenting. Mrs. Chatham would tell him everything's okay, that he was just a late learner. She said this not just to reassure her worrisome husband, but mainly to reassure herself. It wasn't that Phillip could not understand words, he understood everything his parents said. In fact, his grasp of the English language was extraordinary for his young age, reading Roald Dahl and Enid Blyton books by himself before his fourth birthday. Mrs Chatham was amazed by this, while Mr Chatham said he was only looking at the pictures. When Phillip finally did say his first word, his parents were relieved beyond measure.

However, their joy was only short lived. His first word was followed by a three-week silence. Phillip showed a great reluctance to speak. He would never start a conversation. Whenever he would be asked a question he would nod or shake his head, but every so often he would respond, giving quick one- or two-word answers. Overtime these three-week silences turned into two-weeks, then one-week, then only days, until Phillip was speaking every couple of hours.

Mrs. and Mr. Chatham were so encouraged by this that they sent him off to primary school when he was five. Phillip's school report always came back the same. 'Phillip's work is always of a very high quality, but he needs to pay attention and get involved more in class. He

also should try build better relationships with his classmates.' Now this was true. Phillip was a loner in school. His lack of speech and poor social skills accounted for this. One day Mr. Chatham decided to bring him along to the local football club, telling Mrs. Chatham, 'football's how every young lad makes friends. It's how I made friends. He'll love it and make lots of friends, mark my words.' After watching a couple of training sessions of his son standing on the pitch not even paying attention as the ball flew past him, Mr. Chatham bewilderedly decided that football wasn't for Phillip. He didn't bring Phillip to the football club again.

As he grew older and got to the age where kids forgot their innocence and instead were taught meanness, Phillip became lonelier and lonelier. The other kids saw him as different, so they picked on him, calling him names and excluding him from their games. When Phillip was in third class, he arrived home with a black eye and a cut lip. After he showed up on the doorstep a few days later with more bruises on his face, Mrs. Chatham decided to pull him out of school, instead opting for the course of home-schooling.

A local out of work teacher by the name of Gareth Thompson came around to teach Phillip. He gave Phillip English and Maths worksheets to work through. Phillip would silently work through them, but then halfway through he would lose interest, and instead start looking out the window, moving his head in time with the sway of

the trees outside. Mr. Thompson would have to shake Phillip to get his attention again. Mr. Thompson would then ask him questions. Phillip would just look back at him. Sometimes he would nod or shake his head.

Within only three weeks the exasperated Mr. Thompson gave up, trying his best to politely explain to Mrs. Chatham that Phillip's lack of attention and communication difficulties made him impossible to teach. Mrs. Chatham impolitely told Mr Thompson that he was a selfish excuse for a teacher, and she made sure that the whole street knew it as well. But that night she cried in the arms of her husband.

'What on Earth are we going to do?' she wailed to him.

'We could send him back to school,' he replied, but Mrs. Chatham shot down this suggestion, images of Phillip's bruised and tear-stained face appearing in her mind.

And so, Mrs. Chatham did the only thing she saw as a possible option. Quitting her job at the local bank, she became a full-time mother, staying at home and taking it upon herself to educate Phillip and to get him talking more. Mr. Chatham started working extra hours at the same bank to accommodate this. Mrs. Chatham bought schoolbooks for Phillip and made him work through them, and even gave him tests on what he had learnt. Yet while his academic knowledge flourished, his social skills plummeted. His small bursts of speech got longer and longer in-between each other, sometimes he didn't even speak for a whole day. And while all the other kids his age

started heading outside with their friends, Phillip started sinking into the abyss of his own head, growing more and more distant with the world around him. Sometimes it would take Mrs Chatham numerous tries to even get his attention. She became increasingly worried about her son. He seemed to be staring off into space, lost in his own imagination, or have his head stuck in a book the whole day long.

The rare occasion that Phillip would leave the house would be to visit the library a street away. So Mrs. Chatham started taking Phillip on walks. They would walk around the block, Phillip was small for his age, and his small steps struggled to keep up with his mother's long strides. However, Mrs. Chatham began to notice unusual moments on their walks. People tended to step off the path before them, mothers grabbed their children's hands extra tightly when they passed. Neighbours who used to stop with her for a chat now didn't even make eye-contact with her. She became increasingly aware of all the over-the-shoulder glances that came their way. Word spread around quickly in this town and she could only guess what was being said about them. They soon stopped going on the walks.

She was now on a mission to get Phillip speaking. She tried everything. She brought him to speech therapy classes twice a week. That didn't help. Mrs. Chatham also took him to the local doctor's multiple times to get a check-up to see if the doctor could find anything wrong

with him. The doctor never found anything wrong. After the fifth time she arrived with Phillip at the clinic, they were turned away. At one desperate point Mrs Chatham even approached a local spiritual lady who claimed to have the divine power of God in her. In a freezing, stone dungeon she covered Phillip's head in an assortment of oils. With numerous bead necklaces clattering around her neck, she raised her scrawny arms and started screaming in Latin in order to, as she put it, 'rid this cursed boy of the vice grip Satan has a hold upon'. Phillip was so frightened by this that he didn't utter a sound for a whole week.

Mrs. Chatham found herself becoming increasingly frustrated. Often after a fruitless attempt to start a conversation with Phillip she would storm out of the room, barely holding herself together, or she might cry out in despair, often along the lines of 'Why won't you speak? What more do I have to do?!' Sometimes this would startle Phillip, and she would always apologise for the outburst.

Throughout the day she could be heard blaring music from the record player they owned, trying to fill the gnawing silences that inhabited her life.

As his speech was slipping, Mrs. Chatham felt that her relationship with her son was slipping with it. She couldn't remember the last time that Phillip had called her 'mum'. So, she started spoiling her son and buying lots of presents for him, every week coming home with piles

upon piles of new toys and games. Phillip barely batted an eyelid at them, much more interested in gazing at a book or out the window and encasing himself in his own little world. Mr. Chatham gave out to her one day after coming home from his extra hours spent trying to support the family to find a new board game lying in the living room.

‘What are you doing spending all my hard-earned money on a stupid game the boy will never even use!’

Yet his wife refused to listen. She kept on coming home with gifts for Phillip. She knew it wasn’t working but she couldn’t stop. Overtime, she had come to blame herself for Phillip’s muteness, and the hope that each present held was the only thing keeping her sane.

Mr. Chatham also started to blame Mrs. Chatham for their son. As he saw it, his whole life was falling to pieces. He couldn’t bear to even be in the house anymore. The only thing he had in common with his wife now was the distance they were drifting apart. He started coming home late at night. Most of the time coming in full of drink, which he would puke up in the morning. His place of solace was the local pub, where he was a regular. He drank to drown out all the sorrow in him. He liked how it made him feel numb. Numbness meant safety. Mrs. Chatham soon learnt not to stay up for when he came home. She would lie in bed, pretending to be asleep.

Then, just as she was about to give up on the presents idea, a breakthrough came. It was a bitter winter’s

morning, and Mrs. Chatham was walking briskly home with Phillip from Sunday Mass. The remnants of the previous night's snowfall had left frosty tips on everything in sight. Phillip was blowing out deep breaths of air and was fascinated at how it formed and floated in front of him. Then without warning, Phillip stopped. Mrs Chatham turned to find Phillip staring up into the window of a small shop. In the window stood a gleaming keyboard. Looking at it, Phillip's eyes lit up in a way that Mrs Chatham had never seen before. She took Phillip and led him into the shop, a small bell sounding on their entrance. He immediately bounded over to the keyboard and tentatively touched one of the keys. A high-pitched note rang out. He looked at his mother, a pleading look on his face. 'Please?' he said. And that was all he had to say.

Phillip spent hours every day at that keyboard. In two days he knew all the notes. In two weeks he could play all the scales. Within six months he was playing Bach and Beethoven with a fluency and rhythm that would take other pianists years to master. It was as if all his years of silence were finally being filled with the voice of his music. He shouted from the top of his lungs with each forte and you could barely hear the whisper of his pianissimos. Each expressive note was a word, each powerful phrase a sentence. He wrote stories with sonatas and poetry with preludes. Mrs. Chatham would sit beside him as he played, drinking in each note. She had never

been prouder of, or felt closer to her son. On his 12th birthday she fitted a piano into the house. Phillip had never felt happier in his life. He even hugged his mother.

Mr. Chatham was happy at first to see Phillip playing the piano. He would mutter to himself, 'About time that boy found something to do.' But as the weeks passed by, he became irritated by the endless sound of music in the house, arguing with his wife that it was giving him a headache. He would become especially irritated whenever he was trying to watch the black and white pictures on TV while Phillip was playing. These encounters would always play out like this:

Mr. Chatham would turn up the volume on the TV. Phillip would keep on playing. Mr. Chatham would increase the volume some more. Phillip would keep on playing. 'Can't you see I'm watching television?' Mr. Chatham would shout, 'Leave it alone for just one goddamn minute!' And Phillip would always stop playing.

Mrs. Chatham would hear this, sometimes she would even be in the room when it would happen. She would purse her lips together, and be tempted to tell Phillip to keep playing, but she never would. Often in these moments, she would look at her husband and try to imagine him as the man she had married all those years ago, but she never could. She didn't even recognise him anymore.

After he heard the door slamming and his father's car leaving the driveway, Phillip returned from his room and went to the living room, where Mrs Chatham had just settled down in front of the TV. Phillip made his way over to the piano on the other side of the room, and took his place on the piano stool. He started playing scales to warm up his hands. Smiling, Mrs. Chatham turned off the TV and listened to him play.

Long after Phillip had gone to bed, Mrs. Chatham got up from her spot in front of the TV and dragged her feet into the kitchen. She glanced at the grandfather clock that stood against the wall. Ten minutes to midnight. Phillip was fast asleep by now and she was about to follow suit. Her thoughts of sleep however were ruined with the opening of the front door. She heard Mr. Chatham as he stumbled in and haphazardly made his way through the hallway, banging into everything on his way through. A long-held anger and frustration suddenly boiled up inside of her and began to burn through her body. She spun around to confront him as he arrived in the kitchen.

'You were out late.'

'Not late enough it seems,' he slurred back. Mrs Chatham could nearly taste the alcohol reeking from his breath.

'You were drinking again, weren't you?' she asked.

'Shut up,' he muttered back under his breath.

She repeated her question, raising her voice.

‘SHUT UP!’ he roared back.

‘Think of the example you’re setting,’ she screamed, ‘You’re a disgrace of a father!’

‘I couldn’t care what example I’m setting, it’s not as if the boy will ever do anything with his life!’

‘Don’t say that about your son.’

With each sentence their voices were increasing in volume, as if they were competing to drown each other out with their noise.

‘But it’s true!’ Mr Chatham’s face had turned fully red now. The veins on the side of his neck were bulging from all the shouting. ‘The boy can’t even speak. He’ll never be a man. And it’s all your fault!’

Even though his room was the furthest down the hall, Phillip was awoken by their shouting. Dressed in pyjamas, he tip-toed his way through the house and came to a stop at the doorway into the kitchen. Mr. and Mrs. Chatham didn’t see him. They obviously continued their shouting match. Or maybe they knew that Phillip was there and they just didn’t care.

Mrs. Chatham had heard enough. ‘Get out of this house.’

Mr. Chatham let out a laugh, ‘You can’t tell me to get out of my own house.’

‘You don’t deserve to be under this roof. Get. Out.’ Each word that came out of her mouth was like a bullet, spat out wrapped in a shell of venomous detest. With that she

picked up a glass from the countertop beside her, and in a moment of blind pain and rage she hurled it at him.

Mr. Chatham just about ducked his head in time, and the glass smashed against the wall behind him. He looked up, and Mrs. Chatham saw a burning fury in his eyes that she had never seen before. It terrified her. In a quietened voice he said.

‘You shouldn’t have done that.’ In one lurching movement Mr. Chatham struck out at his wife, slapping her across the face. Mrs. Chatham was sent flying back into the counter behind her. Mr Chatham approached her, an inferno still raging in his eyes. He drew back his arm. She started begging him to stop. He closed his fist and brought his arm down in a thunderous arc towards her and-

Mr. Chatham’s fist connected with the side of Phillip’s head. Phillip fell in a heap on the floor. He wasn’t moving. There was a moment of silence.

Mrs. Chatham started crying out. She clung onto Phillip’s body, horrible thoughts running through her mind. A large bruise was forming on the side of his head.

‘Call an ambulance!’ she wailed, ‘quickly!’

But Mr. Chatham just stood there, motionless. He looked down at Phillip, then down at his red knuckles. He suddenly realised what he had just done. Slowly, he turned, and as if in a daze, he walked out of the house and started his car. Nobody ever saw Mr. Chatham again.

Mrs. Chatham didn't move from Phillip's side for the following seven days. Her chair was pulled up as close to his hospital bed as she could manage, and his small pale hand was permanently being held in hers. She had been in this state ever since the doctor had told her solemnly 'I'm sorry, but your son is in a coma. We don't know when or if he is going to wake up.' As she sat next to him, all Mrs. Chatham could feel was the gaping void of loss inside of her. She would give anything just to have Phillip's large chestnut eyes staring up at her again. He had jumped in front of her on that dreadful night, protecting her from her husband. Phillip had saved her. She put her head down to his chest and began to sob. She felt his raspy breath as it tickled the top of her head. She clung onto each exhale, the time between each breath seeming like an eternity to her. She could hear his heart beating beneath her. It reminded her of the beat of the metronome that he would play piano along to. Now Mrs Chatham. feared that she would never get to hear him play it again. She looked at his hands. She remembered how they used to look, dancing over the keys of the piano, moving with a magical purpose and poise that was too quick to take in. Now they looked pale. They looked lifeless. She took his hand and squeezed it, as if to squeeze life itself back into them. His hand squeezed back.

She froze.

Her tears paused. She looked at the face of her son and wondered if she had really felt that. Suddenly his eyes

snapped open, making Mrs. Chatham jump slightly. He looked up at her, a look of confusion on his face. She was so shocked that for once in her life she couldn't think of anything to say. All she did was gaze into his eyes. Looking back at her she saw the eyes of her twelve-year-old son, the eyes that she realised she could never live without.

EIGHT WEEKS LATER

Mrs Chatham held Phillip's hand as they walked slowly down the street. They may not have been speaking but it wasn't silent. They listened. They heard each foot as it fell on the paved pathway. They eavesdropped on the robins and sparrows conversing above, overheard dogs as they laid down the laws of their lawn. People gossiped as they walked past. Mothers pulled their children in close. Other walkers stepped off the path in front of them to cross to the other side. Quick, furtive glances came their way. But the pair didn't notice. Or maybe they did, and they just didn't care.

They passed under a low hanging cherry blossom tree. The buds of new blossoms were only starting to appear on its long-barren branches, like promises of new beginnings blooming over old scars. Mrs Chatham reached up and gently snapped off a twig from the tree. One of the buds on this branch had already blossomed. She handed it to Phillip, who took it happily. His eyes ran over the twig in

fascination, and he marvelled at it for the whole walk back to their house.

They soon arrived back to the house. Phillip headed straight into the living room as Mrs Chatham hung up their coats. She then followed him into the living room. He was already sitting at the piano, his hands hovering an inch above the keys, as if looking for permission before he began playing. Mrs Chatham came over and sat on the piano stool beside him. Philip began to play. She had never heard this song before. It was a slow piece, the melancholic notes of the bass pulling at the strings of her soul, while the fingers of his right hand sang out the melody in the treble, every so often ornamenting the piece with thrills and flourishes before settling back into a wistful rhythm. She looked at Phillip. His eyes were closed, his head was slightly tilted, and his brows kept converging in concentration. His whole body was moving with the music, as if it was controlling him. As if he was the music and the music was him. Mrs Chatham gently let her eyelids close, she tilted her head slightly, and she listened to him.

Phillip's playing faded away, and after the final note he slumped down, exhausted. He got up and left to go to his room, leaving Mrs Chatham alone in silence. But it was a warm silence. A silence that invited her in, like a friend welcoming her home. Indeed, silence had become somewhat of a friend to Mrs Chatham. An old friend that had been with her for her whole life. Silence was with her

in moments of loneliness, and in moments of hopefulness. Silence lay with her at night when she couldn't get to sleep. Silence was there to comfort her when she didn't have the energy to cry. Yes, Silence could be awkward. At times Silence could even be painful to be with. But recently Mrs Chatham had discovered that Silence could be thoughtful. She found that when she was with Silence her head and heart were given space to grow and fill the room. She realised that Silence could be astounding, sometimes so powerful that sound couldn't puncture it so it didn't even dare to try. That Silence could be the best listener, full of answers just waiting to be heard. Overtime she had realised that she couldn't escape Silence; she had to learn to live with it instead. When Phillip disappeared into his room, he may have been leaving her in silence, but he wasn't leaving her alone.

THE VIKING

Shane O'Sullivan

Bjørn smacked his lips, wetting the chapped groves. The cool sea breeze ruffled his matted hair, he tucked it back behind his ears. His pale blue eyes darted around, taking in the surroundings. He was ready. His sword hilt poked out from its leather scabbard. Swirling clouds filled the sky, creating a stormy grey canvas. He hoped the gods would bless them with a safe return voyage.

The sails were full, coaxing the boat towards land. The bow glided over the waves, whitewash spray saturated all it touched, creating a coating of salt on their skin. His brothers surrounded him. They had fought alongside him their whole lives, and were tightly bound together, as people normally are when they have blood on their hands. Thick furs shielded them from the harsh north winds. Bjørn himself wore chain mail. As their hersir, he had first pick of the bounty and they had graciously presented it to him after their previous excursion. They were hardened fighters, known throughout the North Sea for their ruthlessness. They patrolled the coasts pillaging local tribes before returning to their homeland.

'Friends,' announced Bjørn. 'Our journey is nearly complete. I want to let it be known that all our lost

brothers are here with us now, fighting alongside us. They have not gone, and we shall never lose them.'

His followers bowed their heads in silence.

'However, let us not forget who we are. We are Vikings! We are strong and fearless, and we shall avenge their lives by killing every last Celt that lives on this island!'

They began to bang their weapons off their shields, hooting and cheering in celebration. Bjørn smiled, bearing yellowed teeth.

'Now let's do this.'

They began to chant as land came into view. Weapons were prepared and checked for battle. Wild uncut hair flailed in the wind as they approached. They threw anchor and waded ashore, Bjørn leading the group.

The monastery was in a strategic location, placed precariously on the high sea cliffs. Below, swirling seas washed over sharpened rocks, a fatal fall. The surrounding village lived off the charitable donations of the Christian monks, without it they would starve in the harsh winter months. In return they offered the monks protection against raiders. However, sickness had bled the land of many lives and now only the strong remained. Smoke curled out of chimneys, fading slowly into the grey sky. The monastery was made up of low-lying buildings and chapels. A round tower dominated the courtyard, giving a view of the beach where the invaders had landed. Warning horns had already started as the Vikings approached the monastery.

Bjørn's group were close now. The smell of cooking meat and urine hung in the air. By now the locals were prepared for battle, gathering the weapons they had and waiting nervously. They were brave, Bjørn thought to himself. Few people stood in the way of Vikings, those who did paid for their decision.

Bjørn's second in command approached him. Arne was unusual for a Dane, slender in frame and little hair, making him appear younger than he was, but he had a cunning mind and eyes like a hawk. There was no man braver, he was respected by all.

'How do you want to do this, Bjørn?' questioned Arne, 'I'll take the west wing if you want and attack with Halfdan and Torsten. We can wait until you advance and then help clean up.'

'No,' replied Bjørn. 'I think for this one we must attack as one, show the true force of the Vikings.'

'As you wish. We will follow your judgment.'

They all nodded in agreement. More reinforcements had now arrived at the top of the hill, matching their numbers. Bjørn spotted the bald heads of a few monks alongside the warriors. He smiled; they must be desperate if the monks had to fight.

'Advance,' yelled Bjørn. His followers began chanting ancient Norse prayers. The gods would watch over them in battle. Bjørn grinned as he saw the discipline that had developed in his warriors over the past few years.

'Warriors,' he yelled. 'Charge!'

Steel clashed with steel as the opponents met. The brute strength and aggression gave the Vikings an instant advantage, with the Celts being taken down with single swings.

‘Look out Bjørn!’ yelled Arne. Bjørn turned around to face a celt. His enemy was enraged, wildly waving a club. Bjørn ducked his blow and clenched his sword. How dare an enemy strike him when his back was turned, he would punish him for it. Bjørn kicked his knee, his leather boots striking the joint with force. The celt winced but quickly regained his position, he retaliated with a swing to Bjørn rib. However, Bjørn was prepared, side stepping him before burying his sword in his victim's neck. The celt fell to his knees, guttering and spluttering his final breaths. He fell the floor as Bjørn removed his blade, twitching like a flea ridden dog. Bjørn rubbed his blade on his victim's tunic, cleaning away the smears of blood. He trudged over to Arne,

‘Thanks for that brother, I owe you.’

‘No need,’ smiled Arne. ‘Now let us catch up with the others before they take all the reward.’

As he turned, an arrow struck Arne in the back. He fell to the ground, his grin remaining on his lifeless face. Bjørn watched dumbstruck as his friend gasped out his last breath. Enraged, he ran at the Celt with the bow taking him down in a single blow.

'Burn it,' he cried. 'Burn it all!'

The boat rocked gently to the current, as others sang and danced, celebrating their victory. Bjørn sat alone, slowly sipping his mead as he looked back at the land they were leaving. Smoke polluted the evening sky, creating a hazy glow on the horizon. A hawk landed on the bow staring at him with curious eyes. Bjørn smiled and drifted off to sleep.

THE DREADNOUGHT HOAX AND ITS ENSUING REACTION IN 1910

Daniel Wallace

The Dreadnought Hoax occurred on the 10 February 1910. A group of upper-class pranksters, disguised as Abyssinian royalty, managed to sneak onto the symbol of British naval might, the symbol of British might, HMS Dreadnought.

The mastermind of the hoax was an Anglo-Irishman by the name of Horace de Vere Cole. An experienced prankster, in 1905 he pulled off the Zanzibar Hoax, along with Adrian Stephen (who would participate in the Dreadnought Hoax), where they impersonated the Sultan of Zanzibar's uncle and visited the Mayor of Cambridge. He enjoyed the publicity that came along with it, with evidence pointing strongly to him leaking the details of both hoaxes to the press. Five years later, Cole, suffering from boredom, wanted to do another big hoax. Initially suggesting crossing the Franco-German border with a band of German troops, this was rejected by friends. Stephen happened to have a cousin who was a naval officer on the Dreadnought and wanted to "pull his leg". It was decided that they would impersonate the heir to the throne of Abyssinia and his royal suite. A group was

assembled: Cole would impersonate a representative from the British Foreign Office, Stephen would be the “interpreter”, the royal suite was made up of Guy Ridley, Duncan Grant (both were friends of Cole) and Virginia Stephen (Adrian’s sister, later to be known as Virginia Woolf), and a friend named Anthony Buxton would impersonate the prince. The group met at the Stephen’s family home and put on their disguises, with the royal suite sporting “elaborate eastern robes” with fake beards and moustaches, and also blackface. During the train ride, Cole and Stephen spent their time trying to learn Swahili with a grammar book they bought, to no avail. They also on their journey sent out a telegram that read “C in C Home Fleet Portland, Prince Makalen of Abyssinia; and suite arrive 4:20 today Weymouth he wishes to see dreadnought, kindly arrange meet them on arrival regret short notice forgot wire before interpreter accompanies them Harding Foreign Office.” During the period of time that stretched from the sending of the telegram to their destination, they pondered that perhaps the telegram had to be sent in a certain code or have confirmation from the admiral. The hoax may have been dead in the water before it even started. As they stepped out onto the platform, they were greeted by a naval officer in full uniform, saluting.

Despite short notice, the navy prepared a welcome fit for royalty, with a red carpet and a marching band playing as they got off the ship. There were some initial

scares as they begun the tour. Cole introduced the “interpreter” as “Kauffman”, a German sounding name that Stephens feared would put him under closer scrutiny as German spy scares were going around the country at the time. The captain of the ship turned out to be someone Stephen was acquainted with through his country walking club. It was at this stage the hoaxers truly realised what they had gotten themselves into. Adrian Stephen would later write that now they couldn’t tell the truth of who they were as they were “deep in the hoax ourselves”. However, the hoaxers did well to improvise when situations arose. When a naval officer wished to explain to the Royal how the different coloured uniforms represented different branches of the military, the translator couldn’t think of anything to say. He said to the officer that such concepts were hard to translate into the Abyssinian language. In further similar situations, Stephen used his own version of Abyssinian, composed of lines from the Aeneid he had by forced to learn by repetition in school, which provided him “with a fine repertoire of gibberish”. He broke up words and mispronounced them to ensure the lines wouldn’t be recognised. Two naval officers were overheard commenting on the strangeness of this language. When it seemed that it was about to rain, they feared that the rain would help peel off their fake facial hair. Stephen then spoke to the captain requesting the group to be moved indoors as the suite wasn’t used to English

weather. More quick thinking was applied when the group was offered food and drink. The affect the invitation would have on their makeup was recognised, and an excuse was made up claiming that Abyssinians could only eat food prepared in a specific way due to religious reasons. There were some lucky breaks, such as how there was one person on the ship which who was fluent in “Abyssinian”, but he happened to be on leave. As their tour wrapped up, a 21-gun salute was to be expected for visiting royalty along with the appropriate national anthem. However the group felt guilty as this would mean the massive guns would have to be cleaned, a laborious process. As well as this, the Abyssinian flag and sheet music for the national anthem weren’t on hand. So, the visit did without the salute and the band, funny enough, instead played the national anthem of Zanzibar. As they took a boat back to land another boat crossed their bow, a big breach of etiquette as the ship had “royalty” on board. That ship received a scolding afterwards, however that ship happened to contain actual royalty on board., the son of Prince Louis of Battenberg (yes, I did check, there is a connection with the cake). The hoaxers kept up the ruse on the train ride home, with waiters serving food with white gloves, fulfilling their food preparation requirements. Before going their separate ways, the hoaxers stood together in full uniform for a picture they would keep to themselves to remember the day.

The hoaxers had agreed not to tell the press, but unsurprisingly, Cole is said to have boasted about it to his friends as soon as he got home. Five days later the story was on the front page of newspapers across Britain, with headlines such as “AMAZING NAVAL HOAX, Sham Abyssinian Princes Visit the Dreadnought” and “BOGUS “PRINCES” ON THE “DREADNOUGHT”, An Amazing Story.”. A week after the hoax the Daily Mirror ran a story titled “How the Officers of the H.M.S. Dreadnought Were Hoaxed: Photographs of the “Abyssinian Princes” Who Have Made All England Laugh.” accompanied with the picture the hoaxers had taken for themselves and within it an interview with Virginia. The newspaper reports seem most interested in reporting on the inherent comedy of the hoax itself and not with raising concerns of how a group managed to essentially infiltrate a Royal Navy battleship. It must have been clear to newspaper editors around the world how well such a story would sell. Women in particular seemed interested in the involvement of the cross-dressing woman, with reports of women all over England writing to Cole begging to let them participate in whatever his next adventure may be.⁷ The newspapers also gave exaggerated and inaccurate descriptions of the hoaxer’s costumes that matched contemporary stereotypes and racist views of Africans. The Daily Mirror interviewed an assistant from the costume shop where the hoaxers got their attire, someone who Stephen says, “professed to know a great deal more

than he did”, who claimed that the hoaxers often exclaimed the phrase “Bunga-Bunga”. The phrase became a joke around the country. It was incorporated into dance hall songs and the Admiral of the Dreadnought supposedly unable to walk on the street without the phrase being shouted at him from every angle. Some though were critical that the hoaxers targeted an institution as prestigious as the navy. An older member of the Stephen’s family was upset that Virginia was caught up in the escapade,

“On Saturday morning, when the mail came on board, everyone was astounded to hear the Abyssinian princes who visited the ship on Monday were merely practical jokers. Although one feels rather silly when a joke like that has been played upon them, we can but congratulate the culprits on the splendid & most successful way in which the joke was carried out”, writes John St. Erme Cardew a midshipman on the Dreadnought in his naval log. Adrian Stephen at the end of his account of the hoax published in 1936 expresses some guilt in pulling off the hoax, saying that “I, for one, felt very uncomfortable at mocking, even in the friendliest spirit, such charming people.” The Mirror reported that the rest of the Channel Fleet were pleased “at the idea of the Dreadnought crew being turned out to salute black princes”. The mutual respect that the hoaxers and the lower ranks of the navy had is something the upper brass didn’t have for the hoaxers. The navy understood how such a stunt made a

mockery to the image they had carefully constructed of themselves. Cole went to the admiralty the morning after the hoax to explain the story to them but wasn't believed. However, as the days went by the Admiralty realised that the hoax was true. Outraged, the navy wanted to pursue legal action against the hoaxers with the guarantee of jail time for them and wished for Foreign Office Under-Secretary Sir Charles Hardinge to pursue the case given that his name was forged (and misspelt) in the telegram the hoaxers sent (forgery happened to be the only actual crime the hoaxers committed). Hardinge however realised that pursuing the hoaxers would "do more harm than good" and knew it would be best to simply let the affair be forgotten by the public. A group composed of the Stephen's cousin and other officers did go out to seek their own personal revenge against the hoaxers, with their first target being Cole, However Cole was recovering from a bad illness at the time and beating a man in that state would only make the navy look worse. The "punishment" only amounted to several ceremonial taps of a cane by both parties. It would appear that Duncan didn't get off as lightly. He was taken from his home and brought to a field. The punishment, more taps from a cane. Feeling guilty about the humiliation that the Admiral had endured, Grant and Stephen went to the Admiral to apologise and to try to ensure that the Admiral himself received no punishment due to the hoax. The Admiral expected the purpose of their visit to be an

appeal for mercy. When this wasn't the case, he threw them out of his house.

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2014

THE INNER BEING

Ryan Higgins

1. The Beginning

The year is 2056. The human race has excelled beyond expectations and has reached the outer corners of the Milky Way Galaxy. The Space Star Corporation is the most renowned in space exploration and defence of Earth colonies.

The founder of this company, James Hackre, was a father, an explorer and an entrepreneur. This man was the first to venture into the final frontier. Discovering other beings, planets and galaxies; boosting the reputation and the funding of his company. He is a national hero, known and loved by everyone...except one.

Tiberious Hackre, his short black hair matching the younger image of his father and his hazel eyes matching his mother's, was built like a man, with wide shoulders and stocky. Sadly he was a slacker, a pessimist and a huge pain in the ass, but he is also the heir to one of the most successful companies since Microsoft back in the 2000s. He is one of the only people to hate the national hero; this is because his father isn't all he is made out to be. Tiberious went through the harsh childhood of a

billionaire; kids clawed their way to his feet, trying to be his friend, but this was because of money and fame. People wondered how he could be so lazy and have a father like his. When his mother died, his father threw himself into his work and also into whisky. People didn't see James behind closed doors; there, he was a drunken self-pitying fool who had women throwing themselves at him morning, noon and night. He effectively ruined Tiberious' childhood.

This was until the untimely passing of James. Dying at the young age of 73. Surprisingly, Tiberious wept all night over his father. This was mainly because he now had to run the Space Star Corporation, a corporation that was now without its CEO. James left his legacy behind as well as a last request to his son; to jettison his ashes onto the first planet he ever explored; Planet K. After the reading of the will, Tiberious was furious. How could his father ask that of him? He knew that he hated space travel. Sadly, Tiberious was a guilty person by nature and so he was left to venture out into the furthest region of the Milky Way to fulfil his father's last dream.

This brings us to Co. Meath space port.

Stepping into the bridge of a Class 3 Dreadnaught cruiser felt empowering to say the least. But Tiberious Hackre hardly paid attention, as it was a child's tinker toy compared to the Class 7 Battleships he had served on during the war. He had seen his fair share of battle and he was still only a child at the age of 24. The Captain-on-Deck

whistle sounded as he sat into the Captain's chair. This was his first venture as Captain and it would probably be his last due to his dislike of space, and the powerful forces working behind the scenes to make sure it was his last space travel.

2. Space: the final frontier

Tiberious was hit with the familiar smell of rocket fuel and the feeling of G-force as his head was pushed into the back of the seat, due to the amount of acceleration put out by the engines. He gave the nod to the pilot to activate the Slip Space Drive as soon as they were clear of the atmosphere. A Slip Space Drive is a truly wonderful thing, as it basically allows ships to bend the universe in order to make journeys shorter. Unfortunately, Tiberious had never experienced this first hand as it was introduced the year after he left the war. As soon as the drive kicked in, he hit the floor in a heap and everything suddenly went black.

He awoke to the sounds of space which is well...nothing. But it has an eerie noise with all the subtle beeps, whistles and groans coming from random instruments in the medical bay.

MEDICAL BAY! Tiberious thought to himself. What the hell am I doing here?

The nurse, who seemed to be a cat humanoid, answered his quizzical look with, 'You passed out from the

Slip Space Drive; you should be fine within the next few minutes Captain.'

Regaining his balance and dignity, Tiberious strode to the bridge to assess their journey.

Once again entering the bridge to the sound of the Captain's whistle, he was greeted by the bright shine off the nearby sun to their right; he worried about it but soon pushed it to the back of his mind, returning to his chair and observing the bridge's proceedings. It was a silent few hours of small problems with the engine's fuel and weight and one problem with a missing crew member. He concluded that they would turn up soon enough and he appeared to be right, until the ship shook viciously and started to career towards the sun.

The groans of the hull echoed in his ears as he ordered people to direct everything to the engines and get them out of there...but nothing happened. This was when Tiberious ordered a full scale evacuation. Him being the captain, he decided to go down with the ship. It was a stupid decision but he stuck by it. Announcing that they have all served him well over the intercom, then taking manual control of the ship and pulling against gravity itself. He heard the tear of metal, felt the heat of the ever growing sun and finally felt the last breath leave his body as the oxygen was flushed into space. Screams...screams were the last sounds Tiberious Hackre would ever hear.

3. This ain't no place for a hero

Light...Light? Air...Air?

These were the thoughts that ran through Tiberious' head as he lay there in sand, on a planet, alive. He jolted up and gulped in the air. Checking his body parts and his various features, there was a large gash from ear to chin. Another scar threatening to compromise his image. Although being part of the land of the living again, Tiberious still worried about where he was. It was barren, desolate and too hot. Rising from his once sandy grave, he began to feel the thirst that was now present in the back of his throat and began walking in, what he hoped, was the direction of water.

His walk was long, tedious and somewhat intensive due to thirst. But Tiberious soon sighted what seemed to be a floating city. He was convinced it was a mirage but hiked towards it anyway. A sudden shade swept over him and he was grateful for the relief from the sun, but soon he started wondering what had caused that shade and regretfully looked up. What stood there was a large floating rock with bits of pipe and tree roots sticking out in various places. It was as if the rock was suddenly ripped from its original resting place. He wasn't left wondering for long as soon he felt a presence right behind him and whipped round to see *him*.

He was about Tiberious' height, at six foot, but less stocky. He brandished some sort of gas canister on his left hip and bore a helmet which completely covered his face

but had a tinted glass screen along his eyes to allow vision. He was draped in a white jumpsuit with scorch marks all over and hints of red streaking through his clothes. The aura that pulsed from him sent shivers down Tiberious.

‘H-Hello?’ Tiberious uttered, trying to hide his terror.

No response. ‘Who are you?’ said Tiberious, while taking a step back.

The man literally vanished from in front of him.

Utterly stunned by what had just happened, Tiberious just...sat down. He honestly couldn’t manage to do anything else. He was grateful of the hit to the back of his head and the blackness that followed.

Tiberious awoke to the smell of burned toast, sea water and a strange man’s face staring at him. He stood just a bit taller than Tiberious with red hair, glasses and stubble running along his chin. He sat there, fully aware of Tiberious being awake but didn’t say a word.

This endured for several minutes.

‘I guess I better explain where the hell you are.’ The strange man addressed Tiberious as an equal, which in the current predicament, he did not seem to be.

Tiberious was silent.

‘Ah, another mute?’ the man said.

Tiberious assumed he was referring to the other vanishing man from earlier. Tiberious responded with a shake of his head and uttered a small ‘Where?’ before staring at his kidnapper intensely.

He began with a single word, ‘Sanctuary,’ and then continued with, ‘That’s where you are. A floating fortress in the sky. A refuge for bandits and mercenaries alike, but we keep civil...well, some of us do.’

He took a second to let Tiberious absorb the information before continuing. ‘More generally, you are on the planet of Pandora, a dumping ground for adventurers, scum and crazies...and people like you, of course.’

A lot of it didn’t register for Tiberious as he froze in shock at the casual attitude the man took to the situation.

4. We’re not all bandits

‘P-Pandora?’ muttered Tiberious, more to himself than to the man now standing over him. Tiberious felt as if there was more than met the eye, as if that small glint in the man’s eye was saying something different than what was coming out of his mouth. ‘Who are you? Are you a bandit?’ Tiberious was slowly recovering his ability of speech.

‘Flynn. Koen Flynn. Pleased to make your acquaintance. No, I’m not a bandit. Yes, I’m one of the civilised people on this godforsaken world,’ he continued. ‘Some of us kill the bandits of this world for people like you...we call you *softies*.’

Koen had proceeded to use air quotes to emphasise this.

Tiberious offered his hand and simply uttered his full name and then returned his hand to his side, nervous and shaking slightly. Was he really stranded on this godforsaken place forever or until he dies? He couldn't deal with that. His thought train was interrupted when Koen drew a pistol from one of his many cabinets.

Tiberious scrambled to his feet in terror but soon realised that Koen was handing it to him. 'If you're going to survive here you're going to have to keep something like this handy. Have you ever fired one?'

'Yeah, I have shooting experience,' was Tiberious' simple reply.

Koen sighed. 'Well I guess I better show you around, tell you where to avoid and all that boring stuff.'

The door was opened for Tiberious and he stepped out into the night.

Quite a bit of time had passed since Tiberious had been knocked out by Koen. Turns out Tiberious had been out for nearly a whole day.

Night had fallen while they talked and they slowly made their way towards a large pillar-like machine.

'This is your best friend on Pandora, next to your gun.

This will bring you to any other of these stations placed throughout Pandora. All you have to do is touch where you want to go and you're there,' Koen explained.

Tiberious curiously touched one and he was gone in the blink of an eye. Koen sighed and pressed the same button as the previous customer.

The Dust, a barren wasteland full of wrecked metal and bandits, of course. Sadly this was where Tiberious had chosen to go. He was unaware of the nausea that followed your first *fast travel* as they had called it. He was lying in the sand heaving up his earlier snack when another flash of light delivered Koen to his side.

Koen waited for Tiberious to finish and stand up and then began leading him into the desert that faced them.

The heat was unbearable, mirages appearing left and right, heat reflecting off scrap metal into their path and the distant sound of engines...the closer sound of engines...the imminent sound of engines. Cars circled them and firing off shots into the sand at their feet. Koen rolled behind scrap and fired shots in the general direction of cars. Tiberious dived after Koen, sand got in his eyes and all his clothes. Adrenaline kicked in and Tiberious was staring at his gun, firing shots and hitting the gunners on the cars.

5. Awakening

Tiberious couldn't understand what was happening and frankly neither could Koen. A man barely on Pandora a day was firing, with perfect aim at fast moving cars. Deciding it was better to shoot first, ask questions later, Koen continued shooting alongside Tiberious. Bullets flying from all around, through skulls, through tyres and ricocheting off all the scrap to create a stereotypical

standoff between what seemed to be the bandit leader and Tiberious.

The bandit was faster, pulling his revolver and firing at Tiberious. But Tiberious wasn't where he once stood.

He now stood a foot to the right, pistol drawn and his finger on the trigger. Bang!

The bandit leader's body slumped to the ground, blood pouring from a very noticeable hole in his forehead.

The sand under Tiberious' feet was now soaked red. Koen stood there, mouth agape, eyes wide with fear. In shock and awe at what Tiberious had just done. Pandora had awoken something deep within Tiberious. Tiberious was panting heavily as Koen continued to stare.

'Something wrong?' Tiberious inquired.

'Um no, nah, nope, not a thing,' was Koen's slightly fearful answer.

Tiberious had moved faster with that gun than Koen had ever seen on Pandora before, and he had lived a long time on Pandora. It scared him, to have only met this man and already be aware that he was outmatched in almost every way. The rifle on Koen's back suddenly didn't feel so deadly compared to Tiberious' supposedly flimsy pistol.

Tiberious stood over the body alongside Koen.

'You may want to scavenge anything he had' was Koen's simple direction.

Tiberious looked at the dead man at his feet, the man he had killed. A man who not a minute ago was trying to

kill him. A strange array of feelings ran through him; guilt, nausea, sadness. But most of all, he wanted to do it again. Was he a psychopath? Did he enjoy murdering? Whatever the case, Tiberious knelt down beside the now rigid body, took a calming breath and began looting whatever he could. He allocated special attention to the revolver which seemed to fit in his hand like an old friend he had been missing his whole life.

Tiberious rose to stand beside Koen. A moment of awkwardness fell upon the two. Tiberious ended it.

‘I served in the army in my younger years, okay!’

‘Then why did it look like that was the first time you killed?’

‘War’s different to this.’ The look in Tiberious’ eyes answered all of Koen’s questions. The silence fell again as they moved on back to Sanctuary via the fast travel.

6. The reign of fire

The duo didn’t arrive in the fast travel in Sanctuary; they arrived on the outskirts of the city near the mechanic’s place. Their confusion was soon answered by the massive plume of smoke drifting sluggishly from the centre of town. The smell soon reached their noses and screams reached their ears. Koen’s eyes reflected fear as well as the now fast approaching flames; they seemed to be being pushed along by an invisible force.

Gunfire...gunfire towards them. Someone was shooting at them. Tiberious seemed to push his normal

self behind his newly awakened self. Instinct took over and he began sprinting for cover, dragging the traumatised Koen behind him.

Koen only seemed to stutter out the words, 'M-my h-home'. He retained the glazed look in his eye until

Tiberious shook him.

'Koen, Koen! You have to snap out of it.'

Koen blinked twice and then anger filled his eyes.

'He'll pay for this...I'll make him pay.'

Tiberious didn't question it any more he just handed Koen his gun and pointed in the general direction of the gunfire. 'We have to shoot that way Koen, towards the centre of town.'

Koen nodded and the two began diving and rolling through the debris and the flames. Smoke slowly folding around them, clouding their vision, constricting their lungs and making it difficult to get any sense of direction.

The gunfire ceased suddenly and was replaced with feet on concrete. The feet were running but not from them. The duo took the chance and sprinted through the smoke to an area totally engulfed in flames but not much smoke, the smoke was surrounding them from every side, blocking their vision from around. There was a body lying in the centre of the flames, there was writing on it, one word... 'Koen.'

There was silence in Koen's ears. Darkness in his eyes and emptiness inside him. When light returned he was greeted by an aghast Tiberious staring blankly at him, his

eyes flicked to the body and then to the flames around them. They parted and a man stepped forward. Covered in scorch marks and a white jumpsuit, both men had seen him before and they both said, 'That's him,' at the exact same time.

The man was known on Pandora as The Real Firehawk and had a reputation for burning down the lives and homes of anyone and everyone. One of these turned out to be Koen Flynn's father; killed when Koen was just a boy, in the comfort of his own home, by an 'accidental' fire which everyone knew was a blatant lie told by the authorities on Koen's home planet. Koen swore to have revenge on the man that killed his father and today he would have it.

7. Penance for a black soul

The man raised a round nozzle towards the two and the smell of gasoline filled the air, Koen dived to one side and Tiberious to the other, flames filled the space they had just left and the air became unbearably hot. Tiberious tried to catch Koen's eyes but they were locked on the man and rage had overtaken him. When the flame stopped, Koen vaulted the crate and sprinted towards the man. Tiberious followed suit.

As Koen reached the man he loaded a punch as the man did the same, Tiberious saw the man was going to strike first, so he intervened. Spring-boarding off a small crate, he kicked the man square in the chest, knocking

him back and letting Koen start his barrage of well-aimed punches. Left-right, left-right! All aimed at weak points around his helmet. Then as Tiberious raised himself off the ground he witnessed the man catch Koen's fist and in the blink of an eye he had pushed Koen's wrist beyond human limits. The crack was sickening.

Things went in slow motion for Tiberious, as they had seemed to do a lot when he let his 'other self' take over.

He first grabbed the wrist of the man and bent it away from Koen. Koen fell to the ground holding his now broken wrist. Tiberious then took his other hand and shattered the man's helmet with one powerful punch. Behind it lay black, scorched skin.

The man let out a gasp as Koen shattered his kneecap with the heel of his right foot. With the man on the ground Tiberious bent his arm into an arm bar and with one quick lift and a pop, dislocated the man's shoulder.

The man fell in front of a now gun-wielding and vengeful Koen.

Gun raised, aimed and cocked, Koen took a shaky breath and closed his eyes.

Tiberious prepared for the bang and splatter of blood...but it never came. Tiberious opened his eyes and saw that Koen had dropped the gun, and was now staring at the blood pooling around the man's shattered kneecap.

Koen was muttering profanities under his breath and his eyes were glassed over.

Tiberious, still in his other-self had no hesitation. He shot the man point blank. Tiberious then turned to Koen, returning to his normal self and gave him a questioning look.

Koen answered any questions Tiberious had with, 'He needed punishment but not from the man he had sinned against.'

Koen then turned and walked towards his probably, by now, fire-damaged house. Tiberious followed Koen, unquestioning of his strange behaviour. Koen was still the only person who hadn't tried to shoot at Tiberious, and on Pandora, that was the closest thing he had to a friend.

Tiberious stood tall next to Koen and wondered: 'What other danger will I run head first into to trying to get back home?'

2015

LIGHTS ALL FADED

Kenneth Lee

‘Have you read the new book by John Maroone?’

‘I got it the other day. I don’t know why though. He’s been rehashing the same pretentious story for about thirty years now.’

‘You could give it to me.’

‘I think it would be a mistake’

‘Have faith in me.’

The two men sat opposite each other at a table. The man on the right was unassuming. His glasses bore a teal tint from the light racing through the window. Outside the countryside and dull grey sky appeared as a blur. The man on the left glanced outside. His face had been eroded by time leaving deep ravines on his forehead. He let out an audible sigh.

The younger man retrieved a small envelope from his briefcase and leaned his hand across the table. In an instant the deal was done. The younger man slid his new envelope into his jacket pocket. Both men stood up and went into opposite directions along the aisle. For a moment their eyes caught each other for perhaps the final time. ‘Good luck, Grayson,’ whispered the older man.

The train ground to a halt outside Victory Station, ten kilometres from the Oristovkan border. People scrambled wildly trying to push their way through various hawkers and beggars in order to get to the other platform. Grayson observed the pandemonium from the slitted windows of the train. He gripped his case with one hand and his pocket with his other. The air grew heavier second by second. The doors creaked open. A frenzy engulfed Grayson.

Two masses collided causing each to instantly disintegrate. No prior experience could have prepared Grayson for the deafening drone of a thousand people, the barrage of shoulders and or bags, and the sudden breeze of humidity. Grayson shuffled along with the crowd as his vision exploded into a misty daze. He would have to trust in the masses.

The shuffle through the station was arduous and claustrophobic to put it mildly. Hawkers thrust flyers, leaflets and the like haphazardly in the crowd. The scarce spaces between the travellers served only to trap heat similar to the knitting of a sweater. The cacophony of voices echoed within the confines of the station and simply suppressed one's ability to think. Grayson kept his eyes down. The last thing he would want would be to be recognised.

Unfortunately for Grayson, his copper watch caught the attention of a resident beggar.

'Got any change boy?' she asked.

Grayson peeked upwards and immediately regretted it. Their eyes had met. The woman was haggardly, her hair resembling sticks and twigs. She was completely caked in a ash-like filth. Her whole body contorted as she staggered towards him.

‘W..W..Where are you going..g boy?’ she stammered. Her voice was rising. ‘I s..see that watch on your hand. Can’t you spare anything for the poor!’

Grayson continued on walking and kept his gaze downwards.

‘Look at me!’ screeched the woman. She threw herself headfirst into Grayson. Her nails etched themselves into Grayson’s temples. The sheer surprise of the force knocked him down. For a heartbeat he was immobilised. Then a shot of adrenaline careened through his body. With his left arm, he slammed it straight into her chest. Grayson could feel a slight give in the ribs before they gave way, splintering into two.

The strike launched the woman into a coughing fit. An eruption of blood and phlegm spewed onto Grayson’s face. Grayson heaved himself upwards smashing into several onlookers. He proceeded to vomit.

The ground felt coarse beneath his fingers. He noticed two uniformed men walking towards him. For a moment he could see Samuel and himself walking home together, the howl of the bombers flying overhead. They were going to have a cup of coffee at Marmostein’s. Suddenly

he awoke from his reverie. The image burned itself into his mind. He now knew what to do.

The border was the epitome of dreary. A chain linked fence stretched towards the horizon leaving only a tiny gap in the middle. This was the entrance into...To the right of the gap lay a small booth for the customs inspector and to the left was a dull grey wall with increments of fifty centimetres painted hastily with paint. The inspector today was a man by the name of Karl. He despised every aspect of his occupation from checking passports, to asking 'business or pleasure', and to receiving a subsistence pay.

'Next please,' said Karl into the intercom, 'Have your papers ready.'

The next traveller was a thin man. His movements appeared jagged as if he was in pain.

'Papers please,' Karl couldn't help but let a tone of annoyance seep into his voice. How inconsiderate were people that they couldn't understand how stressful this job was? Surely they could imagine that he was paid for every person processed and that if he was unable to pay his rent at the end of the week the consequences would be severe.

'Sorry for the trouble,' the man reached into a paper envelope and fished out a passport. Karl noticed the man's copper watch as he was handed the documents.

'Mr. William Gutsayev?'

'That's me.'

‘What is the purpose of your trip?’

‘I’m visiting friends.’

Karl examined the passport. There were no discrepancies. Correct dates, names and issuing cities. Never the less he could feel that something was off. Firstly, the man emitted a waft of wrongful aromas that curdled his stomach. Secondly, he exhibited an unusual amount of suspiciousness. He was clearly disgruntled and his hair unkempt. Karl groped for the Security button underneath his desk with his right hand.

‘Stop,’ murmured the man.

Karl paused for a moment in disbelief. How did he know about the button? ‘No matter,’ Karl reasoned.

‘Mr. Gutsayev or whatever your name is, why should I?’

The man sighed for a second before replying. ‘I’ve got friends across this border. Friends I haven’t seen or spoken to in years. Do you know..’

‘Just who are you?’ snapped Karl, ‘Tell me in ten seconds or I’ll have a guard break your face in five!’

‘My name is Grayson. Anything you’ve heard about me is lies’.

‘Grayson. I’ve heard of that name.’ Karl gave him a condescending smirk. He had caught Oristovka’s public enemy.

A million thoughts were screaming in Grayson’s mind. Perhaps he should plead for mercy or attack the nearest guard and hope that the encounter killed him so that the

regime couldn't extract any Intel using their macabre techniques. The inspector had caught him in the act. No act of deception or cunning could save him now. His skin was already saturated with sweat but his mouth was searing dry. His heart pounded wildly. Then in a tidal wave of hysteria, Grayson heard a single voice of reason.

'Mr. Grayson, you are under arrest for acts of treason, including sedition, desertion and espionage.' The inspector spoke the words slowly. An air of smugness was present between each syllable.

'Inspector, I would suggest that you refrain from arresting me.'

The criminal's confidence surprised Karl.

'Would I be correct in believing that you have a family and friends? Do you know what the investigative unit would do to them and yourself if you were knew anything the government didn't want you to know? You should know,' retorted Karl.

'If you arrest me,' Grayson snapped, 'I will proclaim every state secret I know into your ear. And let me warn you that you will not forget.'

Karl sat flabbergasted for a few seconds. His right hand returned itself onto the desk.

'Unbelievable,' uttered Karl as he hand back the man his passport.

An overwhelming urge seized Grayson. He wanted to yell into the wind. However the voice of logic restrained

him. The feeling dissipated and once more Grayson felt incredibly insignificant and vulnerable.

The memories returned to Grayson as he began his trek through downtown Amblegrad. The city had been constructed in the mid-1960s to serve as housing for workers. As such the town featured a tired design of straight roads which criss-crossed to form various grids. The towering apartment blocks were as grey as ever. The streets were deserted as usual. Loitering was considered very suspicious. The only noise to be heard was the wind which provided a howling ambience. Suddenly Grayson spotted it. Without a doubt the experience was déjà vu. A memory from a lifetime ago.

Marmostein's coffee shop was the only luxury offered in Amblegrad. The grandeur was fresh in Grayson's mind. The sweet aromatic taste that lingered in his mouth after his first cup of coffee and the warmth of Marmostein, the local barista. The shop itself was modestly small grey shop with a vibrant red sign. Inside there were several stools and a countertop. Thoughts of hanging out with Samuel there after a day's work brought a tsunami of nostalgia over Grayson. However, the building was long abandoned now. Marmostein's appeared somewhat dimmer as if its lights had been extinguished. The red sign had faded into a ageing wood. The building was now encroached by nature on all sides, which was now determined to reclaim its rightful land. Long vines crept along the walls, creating a spider web.

Morosely, Grayson entered the shell of the building. All the floorboards, furniture and tchotchkes had been stripped presumably by the Investigative Unit. Grayson stood before the small hollow in the ground where the counter would have been and whispered a prayer for Marmostein. Tears burst from his eyes. His choice twenty years ago had doomed them all.

Samuel had been working overtime for the past week. His body ached throughout and the long hours spent outside patrolling the border station had taken their toll. More worrying was the fact that he hadn't seen Grayson in the past two weeks. Absenteeism was not something tolerated by the regime. Samuel still hadn't adjusted to seeing a different face in the inspector's booth. Luckily his shift was over and he could enjoy some coffee. Samuel paused before entering Marmostein's. He could almost sense that he was being watched.

Marmostein gave a welcoming smile to Samuel. His beard shook as he leapt forward to greet him.

'Evening, Samy. How's work?'

'Evening, Marmostein. Cold. By the way, have you seen Grayson around.'

'Sorry, haven't seen him.'

Samuel ordered a black coffee before sitting down. The two spoke for five minutes but Samuel's mind was elsewhere. Idly, he began scribbling into his notepad.

‘Marmostein, could I ask you for a favour?’ requested Samuel sheepily. He was shocked by how his voice sounded.

‘Anything for you, Samuel?’ responded Marmostein. ‘What do you need?’

‘Just hand this to Grayson when you see him,’ he replied. ‘Thanks!’

Samuel tore the page out of his notebook and folded it neatly in half twice. He handed it to Marmostein who promptly pocketed it in his apron pocket. With one gulp of the drink, Samuel’s innards lit up and a soothing warmth spread throughout his body. The scene seemed to last for a while in a trance-like state.

Without warning, the doors burst in. A woman and two men strode in, their footsteps akin to staccato rhythm. The disquieting aura from them was almost palpable. They were all dressed in the green garb of the Investigative Unit. The woman stepped forward. She motioned first towards to Samuel, then to Marmostein.

‘Evening Officer, comrade.’ Her voice was straining to sound friendly.

‘How may I help you, Supervisor?’ Samuel reluctantly asked.

‘I have just a few questions to ask, if you please,’ she requested.

‘Of course, Supervisor,’ Samuel responded.

‘Would you two comrades consider yourself friends with inspector Grayson?’ her stare zoned in on Samuel.

Samuel contemplated his answer for a few fleeting seconds. Marmostein glanced at Samuel in hope for an acceptable answer. Images of Grayson flashed through Samuel's mind. Five seconds had elapsed. Any longer would appear too suspicious.

'Yes,' said Samuel.

'Yes,' said Marmostein.

The answer hung in the air. The silence seemed to last an eternity.

'Very well. Thank you for your cooperation comrades.' She flashed a smile before leaving along with the two men.

Grayson breathed deeply trying to recapture the scent. But he knew it was an act of pure desperation. He could only smell mold and mildew. Grayson prided himself on being a logical person, always listening to the right voice in his mind. From his birth he had been taught to show completely loyalty to the regime. Perhaps he was defective, with an insatiable urge to defy what was logical. This entire journey was an act of rebellion against his better judgement, a pilgrimage of defiance.

Grayson woke up. His vision was muddy. All of his sense of time seemed to have disappeared. He surveyed his surroundings. The environment was still the same as yesterday and the day before that. An old dilapidated shop that could have once been a coffee shop. Grayson mulled before realising the obvious. He was missing his glasses. Did he leave them in the backroom?

Grayson stumbled into the backroom, pushing a door out of his way. It was pitch-dark. He laid one foot in. An audible creak echoed throughout the room. Grayson put his second foot in. A second creak sounded. The floorboard bent precariously before snapping in two. His foot plunged into an abyss. Likewise his body followed.

The world seemed to be spinning. The world also was apparently very dark. Grayson reached out trying to re-orient himself and rediscover what direction up was. Then his hand felt something. It was smooth and quite soft.

Grayson hauled himself up. For whatever reason it was much brighter now and Grayson could see that his foot had gotten caught in a hollow underneath the floorboard. Squinting, he examined the object. Instantly he recognised it. Pressing his nose into it, Grayson found the sought after scent. Marmostein and his sweet aromatic coffee.

Grayson ran his hand across the apron. A small bump in the pocket caught his attention. Quickly, he removed the object. It was a neatly folded sheet of paper. A fresh sense of determination caught a hold of him. He was a child at Christmas unwrapping his first gift. He unfolded as fast as he could without ripping it. As soon as his eyes met the handwriting, he could only experience pure ecstatic fervour:

ANTHOLOGY 2021

My dear friend,

I wish I could see you now. I have not seen you in a few days but that has even felt like a lifetime. I hope that you are going to return but I already know that something has gone awry.

If you ever read this note, I would like you to acknowledge this. I am lucky. Even though I am starving in a third world country, working for a corrupt, oppressive regime, I know that I am fortunate. Fortunate to have a friend that makes letting go so difficult...

MOROCUT

J Murray

The sand whispered as the nomad slid down the dune. The nomad maintained their momentum, bounding effortlessly. While on the ground they slid down the dunes then flicking themselves up the slope of the next one. It was fair to say they were floating a third of the time. The nomad was too quick and supple to be seen clearly. This was a good thing. They could not afford to be identified. Their shawls drifted behind them, in the wind's arms. Like thin tails made of paper, moving so quickly they had only two dimensions. With all this speed they were still too slow. Time was of the essence. It always was. The sand the nomad traversed on was in the top half of the hourglass. Prone, the nomad glid down another crease in the desert. They had reached the mouth of the desert's ascent. It would be an askew series of obstacles from here on. Until the end. The next umbra the nomad could find himself beneath would not be in the trenches of the desert, but the daylight of death. The nomad hurried, rickashaying, he calmy maintained his balance, skating upwards on the ground. They looked back out into the offing of the vast sandbox. The deserts semblance was a rose, with deep ornate petals above. Below, suffering

was intertwined. The nomad was deep within an uroboros. The monochrome sky always lurking behind the land. Oxymoronically, they were not alone: the wind was their ally, The Nomad flicked their head back to see the wind sweeping away their footprints. The evidence. The crime. Chipping away at the disliked ore until the desert restored its hegemony over life. The nomad shook the sand down off their neutral swarthy, shawled visage with a jerk. The wind beckoned them, it was a time of peace and a time of fear.

“They’re coming” the wind portended through its breath. The nomad yawed cleanly, slinking back on their journey. The smog-like sky vied for still sanctuary but the wind adjected, ushering it through the dunes, the wind aiding them. Gently pushing the nomad forward... The wind died; the nomad slowed. The dark plague within the sky grinned. Menacingly declaring that all was theirs. The evils teeth began to *slowly rip* open the sky. The nomad persevered. Ignoring the menacing countenance above them. They had too many of those behind them to be plussed.

The desert began to seizure. Like a captor of water above a flame, screeching, trying to escape as it corrupted to steam, the nomad jerked himself still. The rumbling worsened; with a deep breath in which the exhalation cemented the nomad into a statue. Their mind not nearly as still as their stance. The nomad pirouetted backwards with seamlessness and supple, performing a leap of faith

into the earth's hands of hay. The nomad sank in the sand, just before its gaze caught the slightest glance of the profane vociferous organism piercing out of the earth. Just as the sand shut off the nomad's vision. The earth's hands of sand shielded their sight. She did not want them to see one of her many mistakes. The nomad's lungs were a vase of china, full of inert air. He was pincer away from the wind. The nomad felt the earth's pain instead of the wind's lightness. The Earth was denser. Now inside of it, the nomad could feel the cancer careening about. Electrifying her ethereally. The earth was too big to die from such a flawed but potent disease. The disease would die from its own kind before she did. This Darwinism only coated the earth's cross in Iron each time. The cycle would revolve it would be sempiternal. Before the mantle imploded: and there would be no more iron left to coat the cross, only tears.

A geyser. Her pet had emerged. Its circumference was that of a bolder, the length, of this one, judging by the strength of the tremors and the split second of sight the nomad received... They guessed about the same amount of distance that lightning connected the clouds and land with. This all depended on how exposed it was willing to be above the sand. How strong its valour was to vociferate value. The worm was blacker than the sky. It's gyres of teeth pern within more gyres of teeth shredding through the earth. It was looking for prey. The desert tried to assure the parasite that there was none. The worm

shrieked at the desert. IT WAS TIRED OF SAND. The worm shrilled loudly. The rupturing of the earth slowed and then stopped. The nomad would not be prey for much longer. They would be food. The worm then began slinking around in a spire. This was a dangerous game. Especially so close to below. The worm accelerated and the desert gave way. The worm began to create a vortex of sand. Anything that was not the soil of the desert would be thrust to the bottom. The nomad was being pulled bit by bit, swirl by swirl out of the sand. The worm stopped right before their shawls should have shown. The worm slid down to its cone shaped plate. Dangerous things slid. It was disgusted at the assortment of ginormous inedible rocks it had gathered. It hissed with disgust at the inedible dregs the desert tried to appease it with. The worm then heard the sleds, far away in the distance as they came into range of its hearing. The worm was not having a good night. It hissed shrieked and pulled a tantrum. It looked back and forth like an indecisive door. The worm rappelled its tail from the ground, it was now bisected by the earth. The worm focused, with its tail it picked up the huge rocks that were no use to its entrails and launched them high above the clouds in the direction of the noise. The earth cried again as it was stabbed twice and soon the air could no longer try to slice at the worm's skin.

The nomad remained still and felt the ding taper away. Emerging through the sand they could make out two more dark adversities opposite his destination. The wind

had recuperated, vanquishing the smug smoke. The moon was howling. The nomad, the earth and the wind paid him his desired attention. It was lethargic, warning the nomad that it could not cease his light. He could not hide in the darkness. The nomad resumed his pace. The earth and the moon exchanged their respective looks, each a solemn glance. The nomad hurried, again. They could not return, and they did not want to meet the winds chthonic counterpart.

The nomad took in his fresh approaching environment. There were two houses, that's where everything went wrong. The nomad had to succeed. The nomad no longer wished being forced to conform. They wanted to grasp the pen to write his own story. They never wanted to be a peaceful dragon amongst sheep. A misunderstood menace. To their distaste, the weak thread of air between the nomad and their pursuers was dwindling, the wind could not stave them back. The nomad's entire form capsized off and into the sand, they began sliding down the unforeseen fake drop. The nomad's body turned into a sled. This sled was approaching the two dilapidated dwellings much sooner than expected. Perturbation drenched the nomad. The wind could not rinse it all off for them. Too many factors on the abacus had been cast. The nomad tried to stay his descent, but the perturbation lubricated the slope. The nomad was going to crash right through the entrance of the quainter house of the pair, the earth shuddered and

wailed as the doors of the house flung open. The underworld exhaled into the desert, feeding off the Earth and Suns unnerve. Its breath was so cold it was burning. The nomad was headed so much deeper than expected. The caustic air clamoured up from the pit behind the doorway, squeezing by the peripheral skin of the underworlds gaseous face. This galvanised the air. It thrust forward clashing with its estranged sister. They faked each other out, wrestling with tens of limbs of thick gas. Wrestling, amputating each other softly. Their shared blood spewed. The nomad did not resist. They were weightless. With all their force the nomad banked on their momentum springing up onto the roof of the doors. Being denied his bounty the underworld filled with more ire. The underworld whistled and all those accompanied with him warped back through the door. The wind hugged to the nomad, solitary in thought. A match summoned a flame. A plan had struck them.

The nomad mediated on the roof. The wind alerted them, now all it could do was watch; as always. The earth and moon wished them luck before turning the other cheek. The nomad turned and pretended to slide off the roof. His pursuers came into sight atop the rim of the crater of dust. Upon seeing the nomad's apparent plight, their avarice possessed faces beamed with delight. They embarked on their sleds down the curve with enthusiastic speed. The nomad took a deep breath and hung themselves by the arms. Hanging before the doors,

fingers clinched to the roofs edge. The nomad kicked the evil that laid beneath awake. The doors flung open scaring the wind with its grand tumult. The nomad met a door when they descended, nearly to their death or their entrance. The pursuers were to meet a mirror. The wind stood witness. The underworld guffawed. The caustic air allayed. The nomad breathed. The earth squealed. The moon nodded. The parasite ate. The King clenched. The slave died. The pursuers bellowed. Suffocating with fear, they were going to meet their blessed mother. The underworld chuckled loudly; the chuckle manifested into a cackle. Two hands at wrist length erected through the sand. They undulated rapidly as the underworld expressed his sick hegemony with an equal amount of humour. Then, with a wink and a grin the underworld slunk back behind the doors with a grin. The doors flung shut, as loudly as before. The nomad relaxed. The concerned earth and moon revolved back swiftly to see if all was well: for now. More would come. The desert was quiet, but not for long. The sound of sliding. Then the sound of climbing. Then more sliding, through hasty footsteps, filled the colourless world faintly once again.

The man looked upon the scene from afar, from another world. This new unknown person nodded with interest. The traveller had harnessed hell as their weapon while rejecting the other house. The observer looked beneath and then above the hourglass. The observer fetched

ANTHOLOGY 2021

another hourglass, He spun the two compressed cones and let it set. The traveller had gained some more safety sand at the top, but it would deplete soon. The observer would observe the traveller for the next while....

Inspired by the song Moro Cut by Mad Zach x yunis

NEW BEGINNINGS

Mukilson Dheepson

I checked over my belongings for the last time before letting out a weary sigh. Today was the day, the day I left everything behind. I slipped on my bright orange hazmat suit before stepping out of the front door. I looked back at my house, one that held so many bittersweet memories. It used to be so much more than a block of concrete. Now that's all it was. Despite its state, I felt reluctant to leave. I stood there for a little longer, taking it all in one last time. Finally, I lifted my hand and did a small wave, feeling silly. I could forgive myself just this once, however. I was never coming back after all. I got into my solar-powered hovercar, enjoying the feeling of the faux leather seats. I would never feel them again. I pulled out of the driveway, glancing at my house one last time before joining the hover-way a little bit outside my estate. This felt strange, the feeling in my gut. I wasn't quite sure what this was, but it was weird, nonetheless. Was it nostalgia? Excitement? Fear or just the general feeling of change? That was probably it. My life had been monotonous for a long time, ever since I lost them. I idly looked out the window at the barren landscape that passed by, remembering a time when it would've been full of people

driving down to get to work or school. Another strange feeling. It hadn't been too long ago when everything was fine. When the world had spun in the direction it was supposed to. There had been a time when the empty, tattered city I was about to enter was full of life. I pushed down the emotions churning in my stomach and focused on the now. I couldn't afford to dwell on the past. I had a new beginning.

WHO ARE YOU

Owen Bilag

The boredom of a casual school day swept over Eli as they listened to the teacher's lecture on algebra. What felt like centuries passed by, whilst in reality it was only ten minutes until the bell suddenly chimed its classical dull chime, which bounced through the school's grey walls. The halls quickly filled with tired students bumping into each other as they walked to their next class. The halls were loud as everyone passed the empty classrooms that soon filled up like a bucket beneath Spring rain. The bright sun shone down its rays of light through the unnaturally clean windows in the classrooms due to the spiteful teachers keeping them open. Eli entered their next class and the smell of a new house hit them all of a sudden. They strolled to the back of the class where the winds struck them through the open windows. The desks were arranged into an L shape on its side facing the white board. Random stars and moons hung from the ceiling. The students in their dark and bright clothes took their unassigned seats and waited for the teacher to arrive into the now noise filled room.

Eli sat in the back drawing like they usually did every time the teacher was out of the class. They were always

the quiet one and didn't talk too much, whilst everyone else in the class was as loud as a football game. "YO ELLIOT!" screamed one of the kids in the class as Eli looked up as a response. "I IDENTIFY AS A HELICOPTER!" he yelled as everyone in the class laughed as a response but Eli just looked down and ignored the smugness of their unfunny classmate.

This unwanted attention has been going on for a while now. Eli recently started to identify as non-binary because they didn't agree with the identity of a guy. Everyone called them a sissy girl after that which did make them feel uncomfortable so they had to correct their classmates which didn't go so well. They started blurting comments such as "What's in your pants then!", "I identify as a helicopter!" or "There's only two genders!".

Suddenly the class falls to silence as the teacher knocked on the door. "Hello class, sorry about the long wait but I was printing out some posters, I encourage you to join this year" spoke the teacher as he placed a black paperclip connecting the sheets of posters together. "It's the annual poem booklet which I would ask if you are writing a poem for the booklet this year can you read it out to the class," announced Mr Orionn to his class. A loud whisper flew around the class as everyone giggled at each other's comments.

Eli was paying a lot more attention this time than usual. Eli started to pick up a new hobby of writing poems and songs. "Hey Mr Orionn! I think Eliot would love to

read out a gay poem!” again shouted the smug classmate. Eli knew what he was getting at, Eli is scared of embarrassing themselves again in front of the class, anxiety was always his worse feature. “Lucca there is no need for that kind of nomination, but Eli I think it would be excellent if you entered the booklet this year” smiled Mr Orionn in a strict way. “Ok now let’s continue on with the book we’ve been studying!” happily boomed Mr Orionn as a loud groan waved over the class.

A shadowed grey figure lingered over Eli as Mr Orionn gave his long speech about the way the class must study the book. “Don’t even bother entering your poem,” whispered the distorted sounding figment. “No-one will even understand what your rubbish means anyways,” it kept booming as Eli tried to stay concentrated on Mr Orionn’s eye drooping speech on studying. “Don’t bother ignoring me, whatever you do I will always be here telling you the truth,” it hissed as it disappearing into the shadows. Eli clenched their fists together holding on to their pencil like they’re falling from the roof of a building.

The school day ended with the chime of the last bell followed with a lot of shouts from the corridors wheeping out of the school. Eli finished grabbing their homework books from their locker and started to wander down the stairs off of the school’s property. Suddenly a new black figure appeared behind Eli grabbing them by the shoulder and slamming them against a lush green tree

with golden dandelions dancing around it. The shadow figure with a scarecrow smile stared into Eli's hazelnut eyes. Slowly the black figure adjusted into Lucca from Eli's classroom. His scruffy blonde hair blew furiously in the wind with two other shadowy figures behind him, that Eli could not adjust their eyes too. "Let go of me!" stuttered Eli trying to break free from Lucca's grasp. "Tell me then who are you?!" shouted Lucca making Eli scared slapping his hand away and running away looking at Lucca turn back into an eery smiling black shadow.

Eli rushed into their room throwing their bag beside their desk and jumped into bed blowing an entire week worth of rants into one big scream into their pillow. Small tears slipped out of their eyes and onto their pillow forming dark circles. The grey shadow from the classroom appeared again in their room lurking over Eli and whispering in their ear "who are you then? Who are you?". Eli gave a silent response ignoring the figure. The lean monster grinded his teeth and growled "Or should I say what are you? What's your gender, you can only have one u know," with a slight mumble coming from Eli. "What was that, freak," boomed the growing figure. Eli furiously looked at it and screamed "GO AWAY!". The shadow looked shocked at Eli and slowly shrunk into a grey liquid disappearing into the beige carpet leaving no trace.

Eli cried into their pillow sobbing and thinking about the words both Lucca and the shadow had said. "Who.

What am I?!” whispered Eli to themselves as they wrapped themselves around their duvet blanket. “Well, I don’t think you know who you are, but I defiantly do,” said a familiar voice to Eli from the doorway. “Hello?” stuttered Eli as they wiped their eyes trying to make out the figure in the door.

A white figure with green eyes and a scarecrow smile leaned in the door way. The figure had a broken halo and two ram horns either side of its head. It also wore a spiked leather jacket on and matching leather boots that made the being almost two inches taller. Eli rubbed their eyes and blinked trying to figure out what or who the figure is. The figure smirked and giggled quirkily getting up from the door frame and walked towards Eli’s bed. Every step the punk figure took a new form emerged. It lost its horns and halo making it look more human. The figure then lost their white shimmer revealing their oil skin.

“Hello there my little non-binary pal, how have you been?” asked the figure as Eli kept trying to make out who it was. The now clear figure had green and black spiked hair drooping over their face. They had green cat eyes with a chiselled face and a small nose piercing that made their face almost unforgettable. Their clothes matched what they had been wearing earlier with cuffed and ripped jeans matching their emo styled clothes.

Suddenly Eli’s eyes stretched open gleaming at the person, “Auncle Wolf! Why are you here?” questionably boomed Eli rubbing their eyes and hiding the tear-soaked

part of the blanket. Wolf rubbed the back of Eli's head "I heard a loud scream and thought you were getting robbed, listen kid I remember being in the same position as you," comfortably sighed Wolf towards Eli. "How? Mom always said you were so comfortable with who you were," questioned Eli. "Well yes, I was always knew who I was but before I came to terms with that I was a scared lost girl with massive gender dysphoria. I remember coming home from school and I was crying in bed cuddled towards my cold wall. The teacher had held me back that day and pointed towards my identity card we made in class, I put down that I was neither a boy or a girl and she just started to scream at me about how I am a girl. My mother comforted me after she saw how distressed I was. The worst part was the teacher had shouted at many of the students about gender and they decided to put me in a different class with a lot of others who were like us," told Wolf.

"Auncle wolf I understand your story but what's your point?" asked Eli. Wolf laughed and petted the back of Eli's head. "My point is that people will tell you your someone else but deep down in your heart you know who you are," stated Wolf as Eli teared up again and cried into Wolf's chest. "Thank you auncle, you're the best," sobbed Eli as they slowly stopped crying. "I know I am" chuckled Wolf.

Eli stopped crying and looked upwards trying to change the mood of the room. They looked around and

saw their bag with their monster styled notebook sticking out. Eli ran over to get it and brought it back to uncle Wolf. Wolf opened it and read through Eli's poem and story notes. "There's a poem booklet that's going to be sold in the school I was wondering if possibly you could help me?" asked Eli hoping to spend more time with their Uncle. "I think I already have an idea for your poem, well let's get started shall we," smiled wolf to their now very excited nephew.

The next day rolled around and the glimmer of sun rays peered through the curtains of Eli's room. Eli yawned, rubbed their eyes and stretched as far as their limbs allowed them too. A wide smile appeared on Eli's face as they got out of bed. They opened their closet and knew exactly what to put on. They laid out a short black skirt with matching ripped jeans and a black shirt with "who are you" written on the back. Eli ran down the stairs feeling the most confident they ever had in a long time.

Auntle wolf and Eli's mom were having a chat in the kitchen when they both saw Eli's new outfit style. A large sea of silence fell over the room until both uncle Wolf and Eli's mom came running towards Eli giving them a big hug. "Are you ready?" asked Eli's mom with Eli giving a reassuring nod as a response.

The new school day was as long and boring as it ever was, and the loud noises from the corridors were the same as yesterday. Eli had gotten a lot of stares with their outfit

choice but Eli didn't care they were confident and ready to face criticism. They opened the doors to Mr Orionn's class glancing at Lucca with a glare that showed dominance and pride. Mr Orionn entered the classroom and walked over to his desk. "So," started off Mr Orionn, "Which one of you has a poem for me?". Eli shot up their hand as Mr Orionn looked at him with a smile, fixing his posture. "Well, if you don't mind Eli can you read it out?" asked Mr Orionn. Eli nodded with a confident smirk and walked up to the front of the classroom.

"This is called 'Who Are You' I hope you enjoy," Spoke out Eli.

*"Who are you? I question in the mirror,
Are you two people or are you one?
All these questions I answer nearer,
But they come just as fast at me as they run and run.*

*I am a boy, says biology
But I refuse to believe I need a gender.
So instead, I battle science and chemistry
To return each hate bomb back to sender*

*I am a girl says bullies and haters,
But I know better than that.
They try to hurt me and form hate craters
But I run away from them like a skilled rat*

So, who are you? Is still the question.

*I am me and me is good
So, don't bother forming that hateful tension
For you see I'm non-binary and no longer will hide
under my hood"*

The class was in silence and Eli stood there looking at the class waiting for a reaction. Mr Orionn suddenly stood up and started clapping which was then followed by the rest of the class, well mostly all of them. "Well done, I'll make it sure your poem is in this year's booklet," smiles Mr Orionn. Eli takes a deep breath without muttering a word and goes back to take their seat feeling finally free with all the dark shadows slowly disappearing. For once in a life time Eli was finally comfortable with who they are and nothing could get in the way of that.

2016

REPAYMENT

Dáire O'Neill

Chapter 1 - Thursday

Tommy sat at his desk, deep in thought. Recently he had set his hopes and dreams on buying a van, but he didn't have nearly enough money and he had no way of earning it. He had had a job in a local shop, but he got bored of it, stopped doing work and was promptly fired. When he had approached his dad about borrowing two grand to buy a van he found cheap on the internet, his dad laughed in his face. So, he decided to take matters into his own hands.

He remembered a few years back his dad had helped out some guy named Michael who ran some sort of gang, so he decided to sneak into his dad's study to try and find some way of contacting this Michael. When he found nothing, he waited for his dad to fall asleep so he could look through the contacts on his phone.

He took his dad's phone and unlocked it. His heart was beating fast as he scrolled down the list of his dad's contacts, worried that he would be caught. When he found all the Michaels he wrote down their numbers.

Tommy was extremely nervous the next day in school. He was going to ditch school after lunch, which was

nothing new, because he ditched all the time. But calling the possible leader of a criminal organization...well, that was new.

'Hey man, you alright? You seem on edge.' asked Tommy's best friend, Joey, as they walked towards their lockers.

'Yeah I'm good.'

'You're not ditching this afternoon again are you?' asked Joey in a concerned tone.

'Yeah. Why? You finally gonna join me?' retorted Tommy.

'No way. you got me into smoking already, and you are not going to ruin my education.'

'How is ditching school ruining your education? We don't even have any important classes after lunch,' asked Tommy, opening his locker.

'Do you even know how far you are behind in all of your subjects? I'd be surprised if you knew what subjects we did, let alone where we are on the curriculum.'

'Hey, that's harsh,' exclaimed Tommy as he slammed his locker shut. 'Well I gotta run, talk to you later?'

'Yeah, whatever,' replied Joey, shaking his head. Tommy raced out of school and back home. He rushed into his room and grabbed the list of numbers. He decided to start with the Michaels that didn't have surnames. Picking the first one, he came across he dialled the number.

'Hello, Michael here.' came a slightly scruffy voice from the other end of the line.

'Hi my name is Tommy, and I'm looking to-'

'Damn-it Sam what is it now...okay, just- agh, just tell Dom to look after it...' Tommy waited in awkward silence with bated breath. He had a feeling his first pick was correct. 'Okay, you can use John as well then. Sorry about that...Tommy was it?'

'Yes...sir.' replied Tommy nervously.

'No need for formality kid, now what is it that I can help you with?'

'Well, I was looking to borrow two grand so I could buy a van.'

'...Right-, and what makes you think I can help you with that?'

'Well I think my dad helped you out a few years ago and-'

'OH! You're Damien's son.'

'Yes.'

'Sure, I'll help you out. I presume you want to keep this just between us right?'

'Yeah, if possible.'

'Ok, meet me at the warehouse on Baleins street on Saturday at...let's say five o'clock.'

'Really? Cool, I'll see you then,' exclaimed Tommy as he hung up. He ripped the list he had created, and went downstairs to take a beer in celebration. He tried to call Joey but his calls went straight to voicemail, so he spent

the rest of his day sitting around the house doing nothing. His dad came home around ten and went straight to sleep.

Chapter 2 - Friday

Tommy groaned as he woke up at eight in the morning to go to another day of, what he viewed as worthless, school. However, when he remembered he was finally going to get the van he'd wanted for months, he cheered up. When he made it down to the lobby of the building about a half hour later, Joey was there waiting for him.

'Why are you in such a good mood?' inquired Joey when he saw Tommy.

'I'm finally getting that van I've wanted for ages,' explained Tommy.

'Really? How? I thought your dad wouldn't give you money, and I can't imagine you getting a job.'

'Hey! I could get a job.'

'Really? After the last one you had?'

'Well, I probably could, but in answer to your question, I am borrowing the money from an old friend of my dad's. At least, I think they are friends.'

'That sounds a bit dodgy...' said Joey cautiously.

'Ah, it'll be fine. Come on, let's get to school,' replied Tommy as he grabbed Joey and pulled him towards the door.

'When are you getting the money?' asked Joey stubbornly.

'Tomorrow, why?'

'Well how long do you have to repay the loan, and how are you going to get the money to repay the loan?'

'Stop worrying about me Joey. Let's get to school before we're late.'

'Fine,' said Joey as he gave up in trying to make Tommy see how dodgy and dangerous this loan sounded. 'But I don't think you should go through with this.'

As the two made their way to school, a car pulled up across the road from the apartments. After a few minutes, a tall man exited the car from the passenger side, and walked across the road into the apartment block.

After what could only be described as an extremely boring morning by Tommy, he realised he didn't want to stick around in school for the entire afternoon. He decided he would leave after lunch and started talking to Joey on his way to his locker.

'So, you wanna come along tomorrow?' asked Tommy

'No. I really don't think you should do this Tommy,' replied Joey.

'Would you ever give up, Joey! I'll be fine.'

'Okay, suit yourself.'

'See you over the weekend maybe?'

'Yeah, bye.'

Tommy rushed home from school and had some lunch. Afterwards he decided he would go around to the game shop around the corner. As he left the apartment

building and went around the corner, two men exited a car, one tall one short, and began to follow him.

Tommy entered the shop and looked around for about fifteen minutes trying to find something that he would enjoy. He could've sworn some guy was following him, but he ignored it. When he started to get bored he went home.

He texted Joey on his way home asking him if he wanted to hang out, and then entered his apartment, went to his television and watched some random program that was on. As the hours dragged on and night fell, he became more and more annoyed at Joey who seemed to be ignoring him.

He went out onto the balcony to have a smoke before he went to bed. He took cover from the rain under the balcony of the apartment above his. Sighing as he flicked the end of his cigarette onto the street below, he went back inside and went to sleep.

Chapter 3 - The Weekend

Tommy woke up late on Saturday, half two in the afternoon by his clock. He groaned as he woke up in his messy, personalised room that was littered by his worn-in, unwashed clothes. He looked at his phone and saw Joey had texted back, saying that he had been busy.

Tommy sighed. He didn't believe Joey's excuse, but he replied that there was no harm done. He put his phone

down and had a rejuvenating shower, and then got changed.

As he returned to his room he realised that he had no idea how to get to Baleins street. He sent a hopeful text to Joey asking for a lift, though he was doubtful that he would receive one.

He sat down at his desk and attempted for a few minutes to catch up on schoolwork, but he couldn't concentrate so he shuffled out to the balcony to have a smoke. After a few puffs his phone buzzed, and he exhaled as he looked at the message on his phone.

He laughed when he saw that Joey had agreed to give him a lift to Baleins street, but he wouldn't go in with Tommy. Tommy replied saying thanks, and went back inside.

Tommy left the apartment building about half an hour later and ran across the road. He hopped into Joey's car and they drove off.

'Hey, thanks so much for this, man,' said Tommy

'Yeah, no bother. But this doesn't mean I want you to go through with this.'

'Yeah I know, but thanks.'

The two remained in an awkward silence for the rest of the trip. Tommy felt a little guilty as it was his fault this void between them had occurred. Tommy was about to say something when Joey brought the car to a stop.

'Well there you go. Hope you don't get the money,' said Joey.

'Thanks,' replied Tommy laughing, 'I'll see you in a bit.'

Tommy walked down the road looking for the warehouse where he would be meeting Michael. He saw an old dilapidated building. It had broken windows littering the side wall like freckles. The paint of the wall looked like it was damaged, Tommy guessed from exposure to acid rain and sunlight.

Tommy assumed that this was the warehouse he was meeting Michael in, so he crossed the road and walked into the car park. It was littered with beer bottles and glass shards from the windows. The surface was plagued with gaps and potholes, which were full of water and waste.

Tommy approached the front door. He went to knock but found the lock was broken. The door creaked as he pushed it open. He peered inside, and saw a rundown building that must have been abandoned many years ago.

'Hello?'

'Ah! Tommy is it? In here.' replied an unknown voice. Tommy followed it to the left of the door and saw a large empty room. There were three men standing in the middle. Two of them were standing about a step behind the man in the centre, so Tommy guessed he was Michael. The man behind Michael on Tommy's left was a tall man and the other man was short enough.

'Tommy, come here.' said the man in the middle.

'Michael, I presume?'

'Yes.'

'So...the money?'

'Ha! No formality, just straight down to it, eh?'

'I-well-'

'It's fine, don't worry about it. So you want to borrow two thousand, correct?' asked Michael.

'Yes, I-'

'So when will we say you have to repay the money by, three weeks?' interrupted Michael.

'I guess yeah, I hadn't really thought about-'

'Great. Now what do we get if your fail to repay the full sum of money?'

'I don't know... maybe-'

'How about the van?'

'What?'

'If you fail to repay the loan, we take the van which you are going to buy with the money.'

'I guess that's fair,' said Tommy slowly.

'And you will have to repay two thousand five hundred.'

'Okay,' replied Tommy nervously.

'Perfect. Seán get the money.'

The shorter man left- he had seemed a bit agitated. 'Dom, get the documents.' The taller man also left. They both returned after about two or three minutes. The shorter man was still acting nervously.

'Here you are, Michael.' said Dom as he passed Michael a pile of sheets, Seán silently laid the bag of money beside them.

'So, Tommy, sign here and the money is yours.'

'What is that? A contract or something?'

'Just a bit of security. It states that if you fail to repay me, I can take the van.'

'Ok... ' Tommy leant down and slowly, carefully, signed the paper.

'Great. Here is the money,' said Michael as he handed Tommy the bag of cash. Tommy took the bag gleefully.

'Thanks. I guess I'll see you when I have to repay you,' said Tommy as he started to leave.

'Unless we have to track you down when you fail to repay,' retorted Dom.

'Yeah... ' said Tommy nervously.

'Ha-ha, stop panicking the poor kid Dom. See you around Tommy,' said Michael.

'Bye,' replied Tommy, he backed out of the room nervously and slowly, when he neared the door he spun on his heels and walked briskly away from the warehouse and back to Joey's car.

'So, how did it go?' asked Joey.

'Great! I got the money, and there was no trouble at all,' said Tommy proudly.

'When do you have to repay the money?'

'In three weeks.'

'THREE WEEKS?' exclaimed Joey, keeping his eyes on the road, 'Is there much interest?'

'Five.'

'Five what?' Joey asked, Tommy sunk a little in his seat, Joey's eyes quickly strayed from the road and gave Tommy a stern look. 'Tommy?'

'Five hundred.'

'What? Come on man, how on earth are you supposed to buy your van and get two thousand five hundred to pay them off?'

'I haven't really thought about it yet.'

'Damn it, Tommy,' exclaimed Joey as he pounded the steering wheel with the palm of his hand. 'I told you it was a bad idea.'

'Relax Joey, I'll sort it out.'

'I hope so, because you can't not pay these sort of people.'

'Can we just drop it?'

'Whatever. Where do you want me to drop you off?'

'On Fitzgerald Drive, by the graveyard,' replied Tommy 'Thanks,' he added meekly.

After a short drive Joey pulled over to the side of the road. Tommy climbed out of the car onto the pavement. Joey drove off without saying goodbye.

Tommy looked around at the houses until he saw the house with the van he was about to buy parked outside. Grinning he walk over to the house and knocked on the

front door. Heavy footsteps approached and after what sounded like the fumbling of a chain, the door opened. An old scruffy man stood at the door.

'Are you the guy that wants the van?'

'Yeah, I've got the money here.' replied Tommy as he passed the man he bag with the money. The man opened the bag and looked inside. He nodded and went back inside, returning with a set of keys.

'Here's the keys, the tank's full. Well, I suppose that's it. Enjoy the van.'

'That's it?' asked Tommy hesitantly.

'I think so. Have a good day.' The man turned around and closed the door behind him. Tommy, felt a little confused, but he turned around and went to the van.

Chapter 4 - Three Weeks Later

Joey was smoking a cigarette in Tommy's van. He sighed as he exhaled. He didn't want to get tangled with Tommy's mess, but Tommy was his best friend. He was the one who got Joey into smoking, and Joey was worried that he would get dragged into Tommy's drug consumption too.

Joey saw Tommy come around the corner. He took one more drag, then threw the fag on the street. Tommy hopped into the driver's seat.

'Okay. You ready?' he asked.

'Yeah. But I'm only helping you this one time, and that's it,' Joey replied.

'Okay, let's go.'

Tommy pulled his hood up, and wrapped a scarf around his face. Joey copied him, then put on gloves and opened a bag that was on the floor. He pulled out two paintball pistols, painted black and handed one to Tommy. 'I brought my own.' said Tommy as he pulled out a pistol.

'What the- is that a real gun?'

'Yeah. I took it from my dad. Pretty cool isn't it?' said Tommy with pride in his tone.

'No! It's not,' replied Joey frankly in a frightened tone.

'Relax, I'm not going to shoot anyone.'

'It's loaded!' exclaimed Joey.

'Yep, now let's do this.'

Tommy burst out of the van, Joey followed suit. They ran around the corner into the newsagent.

'Everybody over to the counter!' Joey yelled as Tommy shot all of the cameras. Joey went to the till. 'Give me all the money and no-one gets hurt.'

'Yes sir, please don't shoot,' replied the cashier in a quavering voice, as he poured all of the money in the till into a bag.

'Don't forget the other till,' ordered Joey.

'Yes sir, sorry sir.'

Joey looked back at Tommy who was taking money from the customers. 'Here sir.'

'Did you get the safe?'

'No sir, sorry sir.'

'And twenty Marlboro red while you're at it,' shouted Tommy.

'Dude, we've got to hurry!' exclaimed Joey.

'I need a cigarette man,' Tommy replied.

'Tommy...is that you?' the cashier asked cautiously.

'Just give me the money,' said Joey as he ripped the bag from the cashier and they darted back to the van. Tommy started the van and drove off.

'Why on earth would you rob a shop that you used to work at?' roared Joey as soon as they got going.

'It felt like a smart idea, I mean I know all the codes, and where all the cameras are.'

'Yes but they know you! Now when the police get there, they'll know exactly who to look for. Ugh, you're such an idiot.'

'I'm sorry, but it seemed like a good idea at the time.'

'Yeah, well it wasn't,' replied Joey bitterly. They drove in silence for a few minutes before Tommy broke the silence.

'So, how much?' he asked. Joey glanced into the bag.

'I don't know, maybe three thousand.' Joey estimated.

'Sweet. Let's drop it off.'

'Can you drop me off first?'

'No, come on, it's just twenty minutes away.'

'Fine, whatever. I'm already going to jail.'

'No you're not. We'll be fine, trust me.'

'Trust you? You just robbed a shop to repay some criminal for money that you borrowed to buy this stupid van!'

'Maybe I've made some bad choices but you've nothing to worry about. No one knows that you were there.'

'Whatever, just drive.'

About Thirty Minutes Later...

After what seemed like a long twenty-minute drive, they pulled into a dilapidated warehouse. They got out of the van and went inside with the money.

'Ah! Tommy, do you have the money?' said a man, who was standing between a short man and a tall man.

'Yes Michael, it's right here,' explained Tommy, holding up the bag. 'Hi Dom, Seán,' said Tommy, acknowledging the tall and short man.

'Who's your friend?' Dom asked.

'This is Joey. He helped get the money.'

'Hm. Seán, take this and count it,' ordered Michael. The short man, Seán, obeyed. 'So Joey, why help Tommy here?'

'Well, we're friends. Friends help each other right?' Joey explained meekly.

'You seem nervous. Don't be. Tommy's the one who'll be in trouble if it's not all there,' remarked Michael. As he said this Seán returned.

'It's all here boss.'

'Good, how 'bout a few lines?' Joey was confused for a minute until he saw a table being brought out, and realised Michael meant cocaine.

'No, I'm-I'm okay-' Joey began to say.

'Are you refusing my hospitality?' Michael demanded.

'No I'

'Good. Go ahead, guests first.'

Joey stepped forward nervously, with Tommy egging him on. He lifted one of the straws to his nose and prepared himself, he leant down and-

'What was that?' asked Michael suddenly.

'What was what, boss?'

'I thought I heard a car outside,' replied Michael as he went to look out the boarded up window. Joey subtly dropped the straw as Michael was distracted. 'Is that a-'

'This is the police, we have you surrounded. Come out slowly, with your hands first.'

'Did you call the police?!' roared Michael as he drew his pistol and pointed it at Joey.

'No! No I didn't! Please, I-'

'Michael, calm down! Why would he call the cops?' reasoned Dom.

'It must have been one of them!' retorted Michael. He turned the barrel of the gun to Tommy. 'How did you get the money Tommy?'

Tommy began to mumble and stutter as he tried to cower from the gun.

'WELL?'

'I robbed a shop.'

'So that's how they found us,' said Michael as he pulled the trigger with no hesitation. Tommy's body fell limply to the ground. Michael turned to Dom and Sean. 'Grab the money, let's go.'

'Wh-What...Oh my god, Tommy!' cried Joey. Dom and Sean followed Michael out of the building.

'What was that Michael? You didn't have to kill him!' stated Dom.

'He was a liability and a snitch, he led the police straight to me,' replied Michael.

'He was just a kid!'

'That doesn't change anything. He had information about me that would lead the police straight to me. I couldn't let him live,' snapped Michael as he opened the door and stepped outside.

'Come on, we have to get out of here.' Dom and Sean hesitated to follow as the door closed behind him.

'I don't know how much longer I can do this Dom. He's crazy!' said Sean.

'I know, he's getting worse. Hopefully we won't be here much longer, but we'd better go before he starts to question our loyalty too.' replied Dom. 'and we don't want to be here when the police flood the building.' The two left, following Michael.

Outside

'Was that a gun?' asked Adam, the man in command.

'Yes sir'

'Right, that's it. We're going in. Let's go. Breach the door.'

A policeman went to the door with a shotgun, took aim and went to shoot out the hinges, before noticing the lock was broken.

'It's open sir.'

'Okay, let's go.' He led the team into the building. The team split up into three groups of three- one team went up the stairs, another right, and Adam's team went left.

'Clear!' reported one of the teams. Adam's team entered the main room. The air reeked of gunpowder. The team split into two lines and walked down the sides of the room. Adam saw Joey crouched on the ground and began to approach him.

'Sir, we're with- Oh god,' gasped Adam. He grabbed his radio and said 'We need an ambulance ASAP. Priority Two!' He continued to approach Joey who was weeping over Tommy's motionless body. 'Son, I'm sorry but you have to move, or I won't be able to help him.'

'No, just leave me alone.' moaned Joey.

'Simon take him away,' said Adam. Another member of the team took Joey away from Tommy's body. Adam then turned back and examined Tommy's body. The bullet had passed through his head. He realised that there was nothing that he could do for Tommy. He turned back to Joey, who was pale, red-eyed and sweaty. Adam knew that Joey knew Tommy was gone.

Simon stopped restraining Joey and he fell to his knees, dazed, confused. His world had just fallen apart. Simon tried to help him up but Adam raised a hand to tell him to leave Joey be. The other teams filed into the room and reported that there was no trace of Michael. They then sat aside in silence to show respect to Joey and Tommy.

The silence was pierced by the wailing of a siren that came from the ambulance that was pulling up to the building. Paramedics rushed from the ambulance into the warehouse. Adam pointed them towards Joey and Tommy.

The paramedics rushed over towards Joey. One looked over Tommy's body with a grave look on his face. He stood up and walked over to Adam.

'He's dead, nothing I can do. I need to go call for a Medical Examiner.' he explained. Adam nodded in approval. The other paramedic began to guide Joey to the ambulance.

'Ok guys, we're done in here for now. Let's set up a perimeter outside and wait for C.S.I.' announced Adam. His team moved outside the building, and began to set up a crime scene.

2017

ANONYMOUS

Joe Clarke

The warm rain fell on the tarmac, plastering Elliott Payne's hair to his head and running blood into the nearest gutters. Two lifeless forms lay sprawled in front of him - a man, whose age Payne couldn't estimate because he was face-down to the floor, and a young girl. Payne had been standing for quite a while, sometimes studying the bodies and their surrounding area, and sometimes just staring in their general direction deep in thought. There were no wounds or cuts other than obvious ones caused by the impact, but there were bruises in other places that could have, in all fairness, come from something entirely unrelated. Boston Police Department cars, ambulances and his own Private Investigation firm had men and women scattered around the melancholy crime scene, analysing things and doing their best not to think of what lay before them.

Payne's eyes slowly panned the front of the building, coming to rest on the balcony with CSI workers teeming on it. Seventeen floors up. Quite a fall for one man, but what didn't add up was why his daughter lay beside him. The analysts suspected a simple murder-suicide. The only

evidence of this, aside from the relative certainty that the girl didn't jump of her own volition, was the fact that neighbours heard a high-pitched scream around the time of the jump. Presumably the girl as she was carried over, say the PD. Payne had a hunch that it was something to the contrary. He glanced around to make sure he wasn't being watched too closely, and strode inside the building.

There seemed to be law enforcement staff everywhere he went. Workers with blue uniforms with "BPD" emblazoned across their backs in white spoke with receptionists, staff members, even bellhops. Payne subtly moved to the stairs - the lift was in use by the men in blue - and made his way up.

As he climbed, he further pondered the crime that had been committed, not an hour ago. There was a third person involved, Payne was sure of this. According to the police chief and the witnesses, nobody had left or entered the apartment between the time of the crime and when the police arrived. The only other way out was - all morbid jokes aside - the balcony. There was only one other explanation.

Payne was a trusted private investigator, recently working under a firm rather than freelance, who was known for having a 100% case-solving rate thus far. He had ensured this record by putting parameters in place for those who hired him - partly to keep his odds of maintaining his record reasonable, and partly to make pricing easier. Most of what made his success rate so

constant was his ability to think outside of what was happening, to look beyond the circumstances, the grieving family and the current evidence, and see a set of probabilities off of which to begin working. His objectivity was compromised this time, however. He had been married with one daughter of his own. He had lost his wife in an accident with a drunk driver ten years ago, and lost his daughter much more recently. He wasn't sure which of the PD's two outcomes angered him more; the one where a man took his daughter with him, or the one where someone killed a man and his daughter for reasons he was yet to find out.

Payne eventually reached the seventeenth floor and slipped inside without objection, presumably because those who were working there knew who he was and what he was there to do. He scanned the crime scene from where he stood and assessed the situation without approaching anyone who appeared overly busy. People only seemed to be conducting CSI work on the parts of the apartment that were obvious signs of evidence, and nobody was going near the rest of the place. The most pressing thought for Payne was that the killer hadn't been caught - either because the killer was the father or because the killer was still in the apartment. In an attempt to rule out the latter possibility he began to look around the apartment.

The flat was a tidy affair - two bedrooms, a lone bathroom and a living room with one tiled corner for a

kitchen consisting of a sink and an oven alongside numerous cupboards. One aggressively colourful bedroom, obviously that of young Chloe, was completely deserted. At least the father's room was being checked for some way to identify the man; this room was completely deserted of any workers. Something felt awry to Payne, something that stopped him from just turning on his heels once he saw it was empty. Faint noises, sensed more than heard due to the muted din of the sitting room next door, caused his head to turn. The door of the wardrobe shifted slightly, almost as though it was going to swing open and changed its mind. Payne thought to alert someone in the next room, but acted impulsively and stood to the side of the wardrobe before swinging the door open abruptly. He heard a scramble and a click, and then silence for a moment before the sound of scuffling as a man warily clambered out from behind the hanging clothes. He glanced around his field of view for the source of the noise with a silenced pistol pointed at eye level.

Payne quelled an urge to swing a punch at the killer, and instead whispered "Oi, this way."

The man whipped around and fired three shots at nearly point-blank range. Somehow, not one landed. "Scared?" Payne asked. The attacker was seemingly frozen by the numerous emotions he was feeling, but the most prominent must have been fear because of the way the gun that was pointed at Payne's head was shaking so

violently. “Should be,” was all Payne said before striding towards the killer.

“You-” he managed to stutter.

“Me.”

“How-”

“I was in the area, thought I’d stop by, maybe try and catch this excuse for a man that killed an entire bloody family.

The man obviously knew he was done for upon seeing the P.I. on the scene of the crime, and his fight-or-flight instincts kicked in. He began throwing several adrenaline-fueled punches at Payne, all obviously telegraphed and easily dodged. You didn’t get where Payne was in the business he was in without knowing how to defend yourself, but what he was doing was more along the lines of toying with the man. Driving him further and further from a calm mind, descending into panic. He got words out between ducks and weaves.

“Why them?” Payne prompted as he ducked.

“Do you know how old that girl was? She was nine. Nine years old.” Sidestep.

“They weren’t doing particularly well, either, from the looks of it. The man couldn’t be identified, so he’s no millionaire. Did you just feel like ruining a family?” Bob and weave.

“You’d think if you could kill two people you could throw a punch.” He laughed as he hopped back from a jab.

Payne and the killer wove their way around the relatively large bedroom, Payne's ease completely contrasted against the attacker's frenzy.

"Laughable."

"Pathetic."

"You're caught now. No amount of amateur Haymakers is changing that."

"Give. Up."

The man shouted with rage and shot at Payne in a rugby tackle. They barged through the door of the bedroom, into the living room teeming with police workers - or at least, the killer had thought it was "they". Payne was nowhere to be seen to him as he lay sprawled on the wooden floor surrounded by people in blue jumpsuits. However, he must have been close, as the killer heard one final insult from him as he was arrested.

"Idiot."

The following morning, people huddled in front of a stack of televisions in a shop window as morning frost crawled across the pavement, and listened to a news report of the previous night:

"Scottish P.I. Elliott Payne and his nine-year-old daughter Chloe were found dead at the base of their apartment building after falling seventeen floors from his balcony. While it was initially considered a murder-suicide, a man was discovered inside Payne's apartment who attempted to escape after being detected. He was arrested and has confessed to the crime, but he insisted

ANTHOLOGY 2021

that Elliott wasn't really dead. He will face life in prison without parole after pleading insanity. In related news, policemen from Boston PD have gathered..."

A BATTLE FOR THE GODS

Oscar Lewins

The mood is tense. All attention has fallen off Artemus, a spartan soldier, son of Hermes. As the crowd turn in unison toward the opening in the opposite side of the arena, waiting for King Achilles to call out the feared opponent's name. A cool breeze flows through the arena as the sun sits comfortably behind the Mount Olympus, not only is the arena full today with people, but even the Gods are watching from up above the high peak. Zeus, Hera and Poseidon gaze from the tall mountain peak.

As the gates behind Artemus shut, a peasant behind it, whispers Artemus' name. Instead of turning, Artemus just slowly steps backward to the gate. The peasant whispers, 'Does thy have anything he'd like for me to tell thy's family.'

Slight confusion and anger strike across Artemus.

'Excuse me?' he sternly asks.

'The male you are fighting is a god and has never left this great arena without gaining a killing for every male mortal he fights,' explains the peasant, hundreds of times more nervous than Artemus.

'Who is he?' grunts the Sparta.

‘Some say he’s the living embodiment of death! Wherever he travels, night follows. It could be the middle of the hottest summer’s day, and it’ll fall to night in an instant because he is arriving. Wherever he goes, the dry hot winds of the underworld follow, and all candles are blown out as fast as you can snap your fingers. Even the great blinding light of Olympus is powerless to the ferocious fires of the undead flaming chariot of death itself. Some say the last memory his opponents see is the eyes of the forsaken once God turned gladiator, rumours have it that in his eyes, they can see the souls of the men he killed. That’s what finishes some of them off. Seeing what death looks like on the inside! He doesn’t fight for what any mortal man would fight for, not land, not power, but for the satisfaction of dragging a soul back to the depths of the underworld, hoping to bring enough souls to impress Lord Hades himself and regain his title of a God.’

But it’s not the underworld where Artemus wants to spend his eternity, it’s Elysium, and Elysium is where the Gods shall grant him if he kills this ungodly monster.

‘What’s his name?’ asks Artemus, not at all phased by the peasant’s words.

‘He goes by many different names. Most are too afraid to give such an un-god-like specimen a name. But there are a few. The black death is a popular one, some would go as far as to call him the son of Hades, the god of death.’

But it wouldn't suite. He isn't the god of death, he is death.
So, I prefer the name Thanatos.'

'Thanatos?'

'Yes, the living embodiment of death.'

The Sparta smiles, as he eyes down the opening of the Arena. He looks to Mount Olympus above and quietly chants a prayer to the gods before nodding to the godlike statue of Athena.

'The mind of Zeus,

The hand of Hercules,

The health of Apollo,

And the bloodlust of Ares,

Give me all the strengths of the gods,

As I give my life for you' Artemus whispers, it was his Spartan code and hadn't failed him yet.

'Listen to me boy. Wherever he goes, death follows.'

Dark clouds suddenly cover up the sky, swallowing the sun and sending a cold shiver throughout the arena. Artemus takes a deep breath in, filling his lungs up of the hot, dry air and exhales a dry sand partial. The crowd eagerly, but silently await the arrival of Thanatos. The Sparta puts on his gold, red phoenix feathered helmet, tightens his shield, and holds his spear steady by his side.

Artemis looks around his possible grave. He sees nothing but the sand and dirt ground he stands on, and a few weapons stuck in the bodies of the fallen slaves. Artemis is a Sparta and has been trained since the early age of seven to be the best soldier in all the Greek lands.

His old teacher told him, by the time he becomes full Spartan, he'll be able to kill a God. An exaggeration, obviously, but Artemis prays this is true.

He was thought not to fear, not to feel emotion, and to die in battle with pride and honour for the Gods.

A soft sound of a rattles chain edges closer and closer to the opening. From the Sparta's point of view, the opening opposite him is pitch black, but suddenly becomes lighter and lighter as the Monster Thanatos limps toward the daylight.

After what felt like hours to the crowd, Thanatos reveals himself. A ten-foot tall, flaming horror of a false god. His peasant clothes nearly completely burned off and mainly armour melted into him protecting his Malton magma skin. His hands the size of watermelons, he wields a sword forged from the silver horns of a minotaur, his helmet made from the teeth of Cerberus, the three headed dog, and his shield weaved from the scale skin of Medusa herself. He was a horrific sight to see, how could such a horrifying creature be created. No wonder it was a god of the underworld.

The crowd lets out a cracking belt of a roar upon witnessing Thanatos. The fact that he is such a horrific creature doesn't bother the crowd, they just want to see him rip the Sparta apart and to douse himself in his blood. The gates behind Thanatos shut, and the crowd quiet down as they wait for either fighter to strike.

Thanatos looks Artemis dead in the eye and tilts his head, as if to say, 'Come to me.' But the Sparta does not, he stands his ground. He plants both feet firmly into the dirt. Thanatos seems confused about how fearless the Sparta seems. Thanatos grows impatient and begins to charge toward Artemus. The ground rattles with each massive footstep Thanatos takes. But Artemus still stands strong, without moving. Thanatos edges closer and closer until his entire body blocks out all vision in front of Artemus. The crowd gasp as they fear what will happen to Artemus. While running, Thanatos takes his sword out of its hilt on his hip and swings it above his head, a strip of fire ignites from his arm, traveling to the blade of his sword.

Although Thanatos is running, Artemus can see that he is a slow mover. In Artemus' mind, he figures his plan of action. He will use Thanatos' slow moving and counter it with the sleek agility of a smaller man. Upon reaching just a few feet from Artemus, Thanatos thrusts his sword from his head downward toward the top of the Sparta's head, hopefully splitting him into two even slices. But to the crowd's surprise, The Sparta rolls out of the swords range and behind Thanatos. The Sparta sticks his spear into the ground and pulls out a large knife from his ankle and slashes it multiple times, sticking it between two bits of rock-hard magma and popping one of them off.

This extremely hurts Thanatos, and he sends his hand to the ankle to comfort it. This is part of Artemus' plan

and takes another knife from his other ankle and uses them as picks as he begins to climb the arm of the mountain Thanatos. He quickly reaches the summit of the beast and stands on both shoulders, but not taking a moments rest as he leaps into the air, holding both knives above his head, about to implant them into the skull of Thanatos. But Thanatos foils Artemus' plan and grabs the Sparta by the neck. With his massively sizes hands he tried to grip Artemus' head to crush it with ease, just as he is about to crush the Sparta's head, Artemus slices one of his fingers off. A finger the size of a regular mortal hand falls to the floor and instantaneously disintegrates.

Thanatos instead throws Artemus across the arena. Artemus flies across it with great speed, but cushions his landing by hiding behind his shield. The crowd finally cheers, as it seems Thanatos has defeated the Sparta. But Artemus defies their expectations and gets up. Artemus is dazed but gets on with it as he is in the heat of battle. Both warriors take out their swords and charge towards each other, roaring like madmen. Both warriors crash into each other and begin to sword fight. Thanatos swings many hard shots as Artemus defends. He doesn't take any shots, but instead deflects them by using Thanatos' weight against him. Even with the Sparta's beautifully forged armour, any good swing by the Ex-God would completely slice him into two, so he makes sure they all lightly brush off either his sword or his shield.

Artemus deflects seven or eight shots before striking swift and hard with his sword. A sword made from the highest quality of silver in all the Greek lands, stronger than any other sword any mortal man should wield. A blow straight into Thanatos's neck should surely kill him, but to the surprise of Artemus and the crowd, upon stabbing him in the neck, the sword breaks. Shattering into a million pieces on the floor.

Thanatos smiles, and for the first time in his whole life, Artemus is scared. A sudden rush of fear poisons his blood, and his skin burns by being this close to the lava on Thanatos.

Thanatos swings his sword and out of fear, Artemus blocks with his shield. Sending Artemus halfway across the arena again, just this time, his shield is now broken into two and his helmet is cracked into two upon crashing into the wall. Artemus takes a moment to himself to breathe. This would usually be the moment when any man would give in and stay on the floor, while Thanatos slowly edges closer and closer to finish them off. But Artemus is no man, he is Sparta.

The crowd chant what could only be called 'a death chant' as Thanatos edges closer to Artemus, the crowd swaying to him to kill Artemus.

But to everyone's surprise, Artemus gets off the floor, takes his helmet off, tightens his shield and picks up his spear he left earlier. Thanatos is shocked and the crowd

takes a loud gasp. Artemus then looks to the clouded Mount Olympus and shouts

‘Gods above, give me the power to kill this monster. I pledge my allegiance to you!’

Suddenly, the clouds rush away and the Summit of Mount Olympus shines in the sunlight. The crowd is absolutely shocked - Artemus just made contact with the Gods, and they heard him. A lightning bolt strikes down from Zeus’ throne and strikes Artemus. The crowd are silent, and Thanatos is stunned. The bolt doesn’t seem to be affecting Artemus, no, it seems as that Artemus is absorbing it.

While the crowd lay in awe of what they’re seeing, Artemus is getting a message. He hears the great lightning God Zeus himself speaking to him.

‘I grant you the power of the Gods, and in return, your life.’

After absorbing the power of the gods, Artemus stands his ground and again aims his spear directly between the eyes of Thanatos, except this time he doesn’t back down. He throws the spear, with the strength of Hercules. The spear travels faster than Hermes, the God of speed. The spear lands right in the eye of Thanatos and even completely through the back of his skull, even breaking through the stone wall behind him. A wave of souls come swarming out of the eye of Thanatos, all screaming, and squinting at the brightness of the sun. After what seems like hundreds of souls worming out of the empty eye

socket. Thanatos re-stands his ground and both warriors charge at each-other again. Artemus jumps high enough to reach Thanatos' face and sends him crashing into the wall. Artemus sprints over the Thanatos who's leaning against the wall. Artemus sends him a flurry of punches, to both his head and body, blood, lava, and souls spewing everywhere. Thanatos falls to the ground with only his hand holding him up. Artemus kicks his hand off the floor and knees Thanatos in the face, sending him crashing into the wall.'

Artemus then beats Thanatos on the ground. His hands covered in lightning and the sizzling blood of Thanatos. Artemus then stands up from Thanatos, beat to a pulp and walks towards Thanatos' flaming sword. Upon picking up the massive god-like sword, it ignites both fire and electricity. The crowd go silent as they wait for Artemus to kill him. Artemus slowly walks to Thanatos, looking him dead in the eye and stands over him. Pointing the sword downward above his head, Artemus stabs Thanatos in the heart and twists the sword slightly ensuring the kill.

The crowd go crazy and cheer at the man who killed a god, 'The God killer' they chant, as Artemus stands and walks away from the body of a once God. The lightning orbs and bolts surrounding Artemus slowly fade away, as he goes from feeling like a God, to returning to a mortal man, where right now he is dying from his injuries from the battle. Artemus looks up at Mount Olympus and

drops to his knees. He looks up, his shield in his hand and thanks the Gods. He then drops to the floor, dead, to feast with the fallen Gods in Elysium.

CHOICES

Mukilson Dheepson

Noah made his way home, dragging his feet arduously as he went. He stopped suddenly as he heard a sound. The boy strained his ears, trying to pick up the noise. There it was again; it was coming from the alleyway to his right. Noah debated turning in to investigate before deciding it would be more trouble than it was worth. He was about to resume his journey when he heard the sound again. Young, urgent and in pain. It was a person. Noah's curiosity got the better of him, and he entered the alley.

Just as he made his way in, he was greeted with a gruesome sight. He stumbled back in shock at the display he was presented with. The producer of the noises was a semi-conscious young girl huddled into the side of a large bin. The sight was terrifying, and Noah had to bite his tongue to stop himself from yelling and stop the vomit that threatened to come spilling out. He took a few moments to calm as his blood pulse raged and, every nerve in his body screamed at him to run. Eventually, his breathing stabilized. He couldn't hear his heart in his ears anymore. After one last deep breath, he reanalyzed the situation.

The girl was young, maybe seven or eight years old. No, that was probably inaccurate with how malnourished she looked, she was possibly much younger. Long chestnut brown hair plastered itself to her face with a mixture of blood and sweat. Her arms and legs were bleeding profusely, covered in poorly applied bandages that did the bare minimum to help. Noah forced down another round of bile that once again tried to escape his mouth. What the hell was going on? Had she been kidnapped? If so, had she escaped her kidnappers? Or was this something else? An assault? Who would assault a seven-year-old? Many more questions and thoughts ran through his head. He took another breath and steadied himself. In the end, only one thing mattered.

'If I leave her, she'll die. What should I do?'

Despite the severity of the situation, this wasn't exactly an uncommon occurrence. Outwardly, the city looked calm, but it was just a façade for the unease festering within. Every day people would leave their houses, never to return. Naturally, these events were covered up, but no amount of deceit could hide the darkness that permeated the air. Everyone who had lived in the city for some time knew there something inherently wrong about it. Noah knew that the little girl that lay at his feet was just another victim. If he tried to save her, he would be one too. There was also his family to consider. He hauled in another deep breath, ignoring the pungent smell of semi-fresh blood, and hesitantly tore his eyes from the gruesome scene. He

began to make his way out of the dirty alley, ignoring the part of him that yelled at him to turn back. The part that told him he was only feeding the city's darkness. He blinked away the tears in his eyes as her pained cries reached his ears. They seemed to echo around him, drilling into him, accusing him of being a monster. His fear prevented him from doing anything but walk away. The voices he identified as his conscience intensified steadily. Unable to resist for any longer, he turned back to face her again. His breath hitched in his throat as he saw something that would change his life forever.

ANTHOLOGY 2021

THE SUPPRESSION OF THE PUSHER.

J Murray

The key turned. The door shut. Black jacket zipped. I left the house. Throat was moist from taking the pills. Should have taken them earlier. Forgot. 'Better late than never' I thought, reminding me of careers class earlier that day. 'You can always change your mind in what you want to do in life. You have loads of time to make up your mind!' The aches PE were responsible for; Arch Duke Ferdinand the driver of my train of thought. Why do I push myself so hard? The prosecutor paced back and forth scrutinising his own psych on the stand in the cerebral circuit court. Many mountains had been climbed. Being able to lift heavier stuff came to mind. It would be useful. You never know when you need more strength than expected; especially for when every adult around me would be dead. When my currently frivolous ilk and I would be senile and immobile. I thought about the stupid stuff that was supposed to make me smart: homework. All this work - some of it I enjoyed, don't get me wrong. But some of it, I'd rather do things to it best not said aloud. All for a letter and a number. Two measly characters begotten from thousands. Insert a character in a story. Use highfalutin words. Be clever with details. Rinse and repeat. That's a

short story. Here's a book. Be able to regurgitate it. It's all going to be destroyed in the end. All for what? So, you can get a respected position in a company whose actions could be considered unscrupulous to say the least? Or dissent, taking part in the tug of war between the alt-right, Marxists and the clueless studying arts in college. Among a herd of sanctimonious intellectuals. Wait! Use your creativity to entertain people with your tv or film adaptation! People who really should spend less time sitting on a couch, Rat poison in hand.

The doggo lifted his leg up with joy on what must have been the twentieth tree to receive some Club Lemon. I gazed around at the grey invisible suburban prison bars around me. I preferred it at night. The black. In black there was potential. Why are people afraid of the dark? People weren't afraid of chalkboards (Although I would understand if so.) People were afraid of the potential of the dark. Compared to the green and grey combination which was abhorrent to me. I was afraid of what people longed for and servile to what they feared. The night staved that away for me. At least there wasn't any broken glass anywhere. God forbid I could have been in a different post code! How dare those people be born into that environment! Off with their stems! I looked at all the houses, crammed with people distracted. By food, by clothes, by sex, by entertainment, by exercise, by love, and whatever else you could find to fight off your insecurities in this uroboros of humans screwing over each other. I

wonder where it happened. Where I saw it. The abduction (or according to the shrinks 'The hallucination.') I still saw it sometimes. Whenever things slid away from my sight. Dangerous things slid. Where others saw a cuckoo sliding back into its clock, I saw the body, parallel to the ground being dragged by the arms beneath the trees. The clothes, they were bleached white. A white I had never seen before. A shiny white that made the fabric look like ocean waves in a tempest. A white that did not look like it belonged in this world, but to everyone else: an imaginary white. There were no missing persons, no suspicious activity. The zealous neighbourhood watch assured it. King Arthur the 70-year-old and the knights of the round bridge table. The grass tethered. Just as it did when the guy was dragged across the floor. It had been eight months since it happened. Walking my dog just like this. Then I saw it. Something that if I didn't; would have saved me from a lot of pain and confusion. So much time decided by a few seconds. A door. Part of me was happy it happened; it opened my eyes. I was able to look in twenty directions. Live twenty different lives. All simultaneously, the number beside my front door changing each time.

I throttled down the steps to the path that trisected the green. Ripped apart. Daydreaming (or nightdreaming,) the dog darted off towards a covering, tailed by the lead and unfortunately not my arm. Thoughts were extinguished. I fell to my knees, static whispers, blurs, PAIN JUST SOLID PAIN FILLED MY BRAIN. Shrieking

in the foetal position amongst the society of grass that was murmuring. Some blades tried to escape me; I was pinning them down. Crushing their family. Others tried to soothe me. Caressing me. I couldn't think. 'Go.' 'Stay.' 'Play.' 'You can't do it.' 'Quitter.' 'What are you doing?!' 'Don't try to find us.' 'Find the item!' 'Spiridon.' Blips. 'Caaannot.' 'Car Radio.' 'AAAATITUDE.' I was shifting dimensions. from being in the grass to being on decayed ground. Ripped apart amongst planes of space. Loud as lifting off in three planes. Pain. Multiple jumps per second, Nothing. My heart pumped for a few seconds. Revived by the electrocution of adrenaline. Everything was normal. Transparent vision waning to my peripherals: in all directions. Suddenly, I saw red. When the snout ensnared my calve. I yelled. Its eyes writhing, bleeding navy tears, growling, hissing, I punched it. It yelped, I clasped my hands around its neck, it snarled and tried to maw my face, I could not squeeze hard enough. I put all my force in my left hand and pinned the thing down on the ground. My vacant hand crawled towards the lead, swirled it around and squeezed, it grew more vociferous. I punched, pulled, and squeezed until nothing. The breathes of death wandered out of its tightened neck. I got up and got down feeling the impact of a sledgehammer, breaching the hind of my skull. I crushed more grass. A sincere thank you to the keen nurses. They could tell it was fake. Dazed, I was dragged along the ground below the arms of the trees. The trees were

distraught, but they were also powerless. The only power they could command were with years. Trapped observers. On a sinking ship. My frame slumped over the rumples in the path caused by roots of the witnesses. Trapped observers. On a sinking ship. The trees averted their glance from me. They couldn't stomach what they saw first-hand. It was too much, too raw. They avoided looking at me to shield the pain. Tacit arrows from the archers of morality impaled them. The trees enemies punched their ceiling. The ground for the trees. A bellowing drawl of noise surrounded me. The trees shook their hands in fear, ululating.

I woke up. 'Don't freak out' the stranger ushered, padding his hands on my white shawl. Their voice reverberating a hint of rapport. I couldn't speak. I squirmed. Was I beneath the trees? I was in the dark. I was underground. I could feel gravity closer to me and the heavy load it held like Atlas above us. I *was* beneath the trees. Or so it appeared from the inside. My eyes focused back on the stranger. My captor. With their fingers over their lips. The stranger hushed. Lifting the cachet from their mouth. With a pronounced nod, they let gravity drift their hood off them and I stared back at my reflection. It was me. The palliative perturbation placated me. A sobering blow, 'I know we had a lot of questions the other me said to myself. I'm just gonna talk and you can ask what you will later, but I remember you didn't have any questions.'

‘All our lives we’ve felt out of place: now even more so. We don’t see the point in things. We’ve seen Oz behind the curtain, while the majority are not backstage. On the 8th of February you witnessed an abduction. Look at your clothes. Do you remember them?’ I did as ordered. I had a lot of training in that department. My face imploded with expression. Vaporising the cynicism that still lurked when life was on the line. Every possible emotion tried to claw its way out of my body. Each wielding an opinion trying to broach my skin. The resistance repelled, I thought for a long time. Felling my newest assailants with the telepathy that everyone has, but few used. I retreated. Into the labyrinth of my brain, where time slowed. Our assailant caught on, tapping my temple. Dragging me back to reality like they had dragged me to this place. ‘Look this seems crazy, because it is, but I- I mean we- we mean we once heard the words that you’re hearing, and you will soon say the words I’m saying.’

I can’t tell you much, you must figure it out yourself, you’ve got what you’ve wished for. I still haven’t even told myself everything yet. That moment, when you think about everything, and get angry, sad or just feel. We were able to use that to move, in a median where most do but only in one way. When you see yourself live all those lives that’s because you actually have as you have seen them: are. ‘Take this.’ I dropped the book on the floor towards my bewildered state, ‘This contains everything we’ve tried so far, every college course, every place to live, friends to

have, significant others, every choice. 'Your- our objective is to live out one of those lives and then record its details so that in time we may be able to reset ourselves to finally be happy. I do not have much left with you, for now. Listen closely. It's very important you avoid the red things, those are paths you can take to die early, land in prison, kill someone. These things can beseech anybody, it's just a question of co-ordinates. Where? When? and what feelings were present? Yet they are seen as having done wrong. Random things can happen to anyone that can screw their life up. I mean look at where you are now. I winked at myself. I have to send you back now otherwise I'll change everything.' I held my hands up to my temples and I followed. He then showed me how to do it and I heard the bellows once more.

The last stroke

It was eleven o'clock at night. The sun was beginning to set. I hated the summer. Too bright and too warm. It was time. I looked at the book I gave myself that first time we met, I was naïve, these past few months, our meetings. All this effort, what the hell was I thinking. Some dates in the book had changed. He told me not to look at any of them except my own. We knew it was over but persisted anyway. I wondered if there had been any other attempts, attempts to find the 'perfect life.' What's next after that? I'd throw the book away and later another version would tell myself to start anew? How did I know this was the first book?

That's all we do, once something is over, we start again. The reach of our greed always growing, until our life's need for death consumes us. There's always another mountain to climb once you've planted your flag. More food to eat when you've cleared your plate. An impassable record to break once you've done your best. I decided. I was going to break the cycle. Not join the body piles of myself dedicated to make myself better. I was going to find another way, a way to escape these planes of space.

I got ready, thought about everything, emotions and visions coalesced within me and then.

My room was empty.

2018

SECTION SIX

Tom Wallace

“I’ll tell you one thing Harry, when or if I get out of here, I’m moving somewhere warm, someplace where I don’t have to stand on guard in pools of filthy rainwater getting shot at for hours on end.”

Charlie smiled and imagined such a place, far from the bleak landscape and driving rain that surrounded him. “Yeah, that’d make me happy.”

“I know somewhere warm,” Harry smirked. “It’s called Hell.” Both of the soldiers began to laugh.

“We’re already there you daft sod!” They laughed again but as the joke wore on, their chuckles slowly died down into saddened sighs.

To almost all of the soldiers fighting in the war, the trenches of France were considered Hell. For three years now, the Allied forces and Central Powers were locked in place with nowhere to go but down into the thick mud. Months were spent fighting over mere acres of land that frankly, nobody in their right mind would die for. With hundreds getting slaughtered each day on both sides of the conflict, every living moment brought its own punishments to those still remaining.

“Any word on the supplies coming in?” asked Charlie, trying to change the topic of their grim conversation.

“Not yet, though I heard the horses couldn’t get through the mud. They drowned when they tried to cross.”

Harry became solemn, thinking of the hardships the horses faced on the frontlines. He’d never liked seeing animals get hurt. God only knows why he joined the army.

As a combat medic, Harry thought he’d be saving lives not taking them as well. How could he have been so naive? He was always one who’d lusted for adventure but he was in way over his head. He compared the life of a horse to the life in the infantry: worked to death by those above you with no way to escape. Harry looked over at Charlie failing to light his cigarette in the constant downpour.

His best friend Charlie was never far away. Wherever Harry went, Charlie was sure to follow. It was like that since their childhood, always roaming the English country side and getting into trouble in the process. It was a simpler time back then. A time when your worries never involved wondering if that day would be your last. When the chance to enlist came around, the friends naturally jumped at the chance to seek adventure and glory, like so many other innocent boys.

The rain fell down hard from the night sky, like bullets from a machine gun in both shape and impact. They knew

all about getting shot at. It was all part of the experience: enlist, train, travel, get shot and die. The life of a foot soldier. With barely anything to shelter the men from the rain, all they could do was stay put and hope it eased off soon. The water clogged the ground beneath them as it oozed and squelched under their leather boots, sucking them under with every move⁴ they made to combat the unescapable grip it had over them.

“Bloody heck, I haven’t seen rain like this since my holiday in Wales!” Charlie tried to cheer up his mate but to no avail. Harry was tired, wet and hungry: all the makings of a bad day (or in his case, a bad life).

A series of shells exploded in the distance with a loud boom, startling Charlie and Harry. A bright flash momentarily lit up the black sky, exposing the swampy marsh in front of them.

“How could anything possibly survive that?” Harry asked. “Passchendaele will be gone by the time we get there.”

“Shut up for a sec,” Charlie unslung his Lee-Enfield rifle and scanned the darkness in front of him. “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

Harry followed Charlie’s lead and readied his rifle.

Soft cries for help could be heard far out in no-man’s land, beyond the rusted barbed wire and the remains of bare trees that were still standing, like roots of hair.

“Oh Christ! Somebody’s out there!” Harry could hear the faint screams of a man wailing like a banshee.

“We have to do something!” Harry began to get his kit ready, Charlie looked on confused by his friend’s sudden urge to get himself killed.

“What the Hell do you think you’re doing?” Charlie grabbed Harry’s shoulder and spun it towards him. “Do you want to die now or something?”

“If you go out there, you’ll get killed.”

Harry was unaffected by this, still checking his medical sack, counting what little remained in it. One syrette of morphine and a handful of dirty bandages.

“If I’m going to die, I’m going to do it saving someone else,” Harry didn’t look up as he stuffed the meagre supplies back.

“It’s not your bloody fault that poor sod is out there, just be glad it’s not you.”

“And what if it was me? Would you want me to be trapped there and rot with nothing to comfort me?”

Charlie was becoming desperate, trying anything to stop his best friend from going over the top. “You’ll get court-martialed for leaving your post! Why are you doing this? Friends are supposed to stick together.”

Harry braced himself on the small makeshift wooden ladder and turned to Charlie. “Cover me.” He took a deep breath and scrambled up the slippery planks of wood before disappearing into the darkness.

“You bloody idiot Harry,” Charlie watched as his friend bobbed and weaved through barbed wire and shell holes following the cries of the unknown man. Charlie prayed, hoping it wouldn’t be the last time he saw his lifelong friend.

Harry was blinded by the heavy rain and muck that was being sprayed in his face. All he could feel was the pounding of his heart and a ringing in his ears. He kept falling, either tripping on decaying bodies swallowed by the ground or by the razor-sharp barbed wire that replaced the natural vegetation, a jungle of rusted metal.

“Keep going, keep pushing,” Harry repeated this mantra in his mind, not thinking of the death and destruction around him. He was deaf to the shells exploding behind him, throwing up mud in the air like a geyser. Despite all this, after around half an hour of searching, he managed to find the injured soldier taking shelter in a large shell-hole. The soldier’s voice was hoarse from his vain attempts at calling for rescue.

He looked like he’d just escaped from the jaws of a vicious bear. His face was battered and bloodied a dark crimson, one eye sealed shut from the dried blood coating his head. Strands of his blonde hair stuck to his side, turning a dark brown the lower they went. Lying there in the mud, it appeared he was on his final breaths.

Harry jumped into the hole and landed in front of the boy with a thud. As he caught his breath and began to

calm down, he noticed something was wrong. The boy's uniform. Underneath the blood and dirt was a dark grey coat with matching trousers that were ripped to shreds, very different from Harry's own khaki brown attire.

"Oh God, no!" Harry realized what had happened.

The young boy, no more than seventeen years of age, was German.

The boy feebly held out his left hand and Harry took it. His mind was racing. Did he really just risk his life for the enemy? Should he run back? Should he help him? What if they both die or what if he saves him but alerts the enemy to his position?

He remembered what he had told Charlie just before he left. "If I'm going to die, I'm going to do it saving someone else." After a few seconds of contemplation, he had made up his mind. This boy is still human, with a family back home, friends and dreams. Who was he to deny him a life? Harry was a medic and as a medic he wanted to save lives, no matter what side he was on.

Harry unslung his medical supplies and began to assess the boy's injuries. "You're going to be alright mate." The boy was clearly too tired to move but understood what was happening. With a very faint voice he whispered, "Danke Kamerad."

Harry was unsure whether or not the boy knew he was British, regardless he was going to help. The young German's right leg was badly cut presumably by barbed wire. Harry tried to move the leg causing the German to

let out a cry of pain. The leg was nearly shredded like it was hacked by a bayonet. A thousand cuts, each oozing a dark red, completely coated the German's trousers as it trickled into a dirty puddle, mixing together like a twisted Rorschach test.

“I'm going to give you some of this to ease the pain.”

Harry took the syrette of morphine out of his kit, amazed it was still intact after his ordeal. He flicked the small tube, just enough for one use. After sticking the needle into the German, almost instantly, he looked like he was just about to go to sleep. His eyes began to flicker as he leant back seemingly without a care in the world

Harry got to work patching him up, cleaning his wounds and trying to keep him alive for just a few minutes more. It seemed that it was only the boy's leg that was badly injured. The rest of his body was weak, but as intact that it could be in a battlefield. The boy had cut his head but it wasn't life threatening. There were bigger fish to fry.

He spent a few minutes tending to the boy's injuries. The German tried to talk in what little English he had. His name was Otto and lived in Hamburg. That was all Harry could gather from the broken English and frequent gasps for breath Otto took. Harry told him that he was from a small town in Sheffield and how he'd joined the army with his best friend Charlie. Otto let out a chuckle, he had no idea what was being said but went along with it.

Just as Harry began to wrap the last of his bandages around the cuts, Otto fell backwards, as if he'd been knocked out. Harry quickly checked for a pulse by pressing his two fingers against his neck. A slow but consistent thump. He will hopefully make it as long as help comes by the morning. Harry assumed he was in German territory, so it was likely that Otto would be found by a German scout or sniper hiding in No Man's Land.

"Good luck Otto. Maybe someday we'll meet again when this bloody war is over." Harry smiled and began to scramble out of the shell-hole.

Quickly sprinting back to his own lines, he followed the same path he took before. The adrenaline was furiously pumping through his body, fueling him to keep pushing on. In a split second, a flare lit up the dark clouds overhead and cast no-man's land in a bright white haze. It blinded Harry causing him to stop dead in his tracks and he realized what had happened.

Shots from behind him landed at his feet and bounded against the exposed bark of the trees around him, splintering into a thousand shattered fragments. This is when the whole sky began to fall on him.

A barrage of shells rained down from above, as if heaven had split in two. He kept sprinting since he knew if he stopped for just one moment, he was a dead man.

He could see his own lines in just front of him. This frantic race to safety reminded him of his schooldays

playing football, lining up a shot in front of the other team's goal, the responsibility of success and the adrenaline rush he loved.

As the explosions hit closer and closer, he ran harder and harder until he desperately launched himself into his own trench. Safety. He lay there feeling as if his heart was about to explode. Without any real reason he began to laugh. Lying in the filthy mud, a refreshing rain cooling him down. He realized how he should be dead right now.

"Maybe there is some truth to those angels and ghosts after all." He laughed at his own joke before painfully getting on to his feet.

"Ok, now I need to get back to..."

"HARRY! SOMEBODY HELP!" a voice screamed down the line.

"Jesus! Stay put I'm coming over!" Harry recognized the voice.

What he saw when he turned the corner made him freeze dead in his tracks. Sprawled out in front of him was Charlie, or at least, what remained of Charlie.

His right leg had been blown almost clean off just below the thigh. His left leg wasn't any better. It looked like a chicken bone that was gnawed at on Christmas. A young private was by his side, confused and dazed by what was happening.

"Harry.... Harry, mate." Charlie coughed up some blood and it drooled down his face just like the salty tears from his eyes.

“Help me.” Charlie stared straight into his friend’s eyes. “I have to see my family again; I need to tell them I love them.” His voice was hoarse and he kept stopping to rapidly breath in some air.

Harry didn’t know what to do, becoming more flustered as he felt his eyes well up with tears. He knew the last of the medical supplies had been used on a complete stranger, the enemy.

“I...I don’t...I...” He fell on his knees close to Charlie “I can’t...”

“I’m not ready to die,” Charlie croaked.

The lump in his throat felt like it was about to burst. Harry held onto Charlie’s hand, cold, pale and clammy. He realized his own was shaking uncontrollably.

“Officer!” The young private stood to attention whilst Harry remained on the ground. Officer Williams pushed his way past and began barking orders to the onlooking men.

“Don’t just stand there looking stupid! Get into your defensive positions in case of an attack!” He whirled around to Harry and Charlie.

“Dawson! Give Roberts some morphine and call for a stretcher bearer! MOVE!”

Harry felt like a schoolboy again, in trouble with the headmaster.

“Sir... I’ve none left. It’s all gone.”

Officer Williams was getting visibly annoyed. He had too much to worry about right now.

“We had a full count before your shift and all the men are accounted for. Who could you’ve possibly have used it on?”

Harry knew he was in for it. It was bad enough that his best friend since childhood lay dying beside him covered in filth, now he was facing the wrath of Officer Williams.

Harry took a breath. “I heard cries for help in no man’s land and needed to give first aid.”

Williams looked like Harry had just spat in his face.

“You’re telling me you deserted your post, endangering all of my men so you can waste all your supplies on a dead man?”

Harry began crying, he couldn’t remember the last time he cried as hard as he was now.

“No sir, I..”

“I don’t want to hear it Dawson! You’ve left me with no other choice.”

Officer Williams prepared himself and Harry knew what was coming. He’d heard it so many times before, but he’d never thought it’d be directed at him.

“Private Harry Dawson, I am court martialing you for abandoning your post whilst on guard duty under Section Six of the Manual of Military Law. There will be a full investigation into this incident, and if found guilty you may be punished severely.”

Harry couldn’t speak. He knew a full investigation could lead to him being caught assisting the enemy. If he

was charged with this, he would be tied to a wooden post and shot by his own side. By his friends.

Harry felt something tugging at his trousers. Charlie reached out and pulled Harry close with what little strength he had left, covering Harry in his blood as he did so.

“Friends... friends are supposed to stick together.”
With that, Charlie fell backwards and went limp.

Silence.

Harry closed his eyes and lay down in the mud beside Charlie.

Tired, wet, hungry and alone.

2019

THE WISHING WELL

Seán Nolan

Seaworth was small, even for the standards set by other hamlets. It had a butcher, one inn, a guard house, the town hall from which the mayor made his decrees, and enough farmers that nobody went hungry. By being situated in close proximity to the coast it also had access to a constant supply of fresh fish. However, Seaworth was not famous for the fish, but rather, the strange sight located about half a day's walk outside the town.

His father being ill, it was just Johan manning the butcher's on a relatively quiet day. Due to the lack of business he found himself peering out the window, drifting into daydreams. Through the grimy glass panes, Johan could just make out the tops of the hills where Seaworth's unique sight lay. He remembered in his earlier years when, along with a few other kids, he had visited it. They had all been so excited to see it that none of them had actually expected to find it so terrifying, leading them to leave as quickly as they arrived.

He was stirred from his thoughts by the shrill ring of the front door's chime and he turned to address his customer. He was mildly surprised when he saw Alice

walking through the door. Having never actually seen anyone in her family ever buying produce, Johan assumed they always got other people to do it for them.

“Good afternoon Alice. What can I get you?”

“I’m not here to buy any of your wares Johan.”

Surprise...

“But rather, I have something that I need your help with.”

Johan raised his eyebrow. He was well aware how Alice and her posse viewed him. After often seeing them drinking at the inn, he tried a few times to join in their revelry but after the third attempt, it was very clear they wanted nothing to do with him. He wasn’t sure if they looked down on him. It’s not like he cared anyway. Already reluctant, Johan decided to hear her out; without any real high hopes.

“Well what is it?”

“I have figured out the answer to the wishing well.”

No one actually knew who built the wishing well. An elderly traveller had wandered through Seaworth, an event not too unusual, but made a point of alerting everybody to the well that had seemingly manifested overnight in a forest glade on a nearby hill. Its random appearance would have sparked a couple conversations but it was when the man explained the well’s properties that people started visiting it. Upon arriving at the well, one would be offered a riddle. If answered successfully, you were rewarded with riches beyond your wildest

dreams but you had only one chance to answer. Or so the old man said.

It was this spectacle that caused Seaworth to receive an influx of travellers, aiming to make their way to the well and receive unimaginable riches. The only consequence was the punishment that accompanied an incorrect answer to the riddle. It varied from person to person but the effects were always permanent. You might have a cold for the rest of your life, you could go bald. Or you might never walk again.

When the range of punishments became apparent, it was widely viewed as having a risk that far outweighed the rewards and the amount of people visiting the well dwindled until only the extremely desperate were making the journey. Anyone who lived in Seaworth would see these people pass through looking for the well. They received their warnings but when their determination became apparent, they were given their directions and headed straight for the well. The following day they would be seen creeping back into town, always worse off than when they arrived. Sometimes they never came back at all.

Johan examined Alice and her oozing confidence as she stood straight, making an effort not to touch any of the grubby surfaces around the shop. It was obvious she thought she was right, but that was nothing new.

“You’ve gone up to the well yourself then have you?” Johan asked half-jokingly.

“Of course not. I’d have already left town if that were the case.”

“So then you don’t know if you have the right answer to the riddle.”

Alice scowled as an irritated look crossed her face.

“No, I haven’t tested my solution yet, but I’ve practically got it. You see unlike everyone else in this town I am not content to spend my entire life here doing absolutely nothing, so a while ago I set about changing that. I’ve been questioning everybody who has come back from the well, listening to their experiences and noting down every single answer. Based off of my report, I have shortlisted a select number of answers that have an extremely high likelihood of being correct.”

“Ah, I see.” John answered causing Alice’s face to perk up slightly. “You still don’t have the right answer then.”

She shot him a nasty glare and leaned over the counter into his face.

“Look Johan, you and I both know I’m the smartest person in Seaworth, and probably the county. If anyone is going to get it, it’s going to be me.” She seemed to remember herself and moved back from the counter while straightening her posture.

“It’s only a minimal risk really. What? A sore foot for the chance of more wealth than you’ll ever possess in your entire life? I can understand though if you don’t want to go, not everyone is brave enough.” Johan treated her to a cold stare. “But you should know that if you don’t,

someone else will, I only need one more person.” She turned her back on him and was making her way out.

“If you do decide to come, you can meet me at the signpost around midday tomorrow.” Alice stopped just before opening the door and looked around the small single room butcher shop, making no attempt to hide her disdain.

“The question you should really be asking yourself is can you afford not to?”

Johan had a long, contemplative night. Having still not come to a solid conclusion by the morning, he decided he would at least travel with them to the well, leaving plenty of time to make up his mind along the way. If he really decided he didn't want to do it, they couldn't force him.

The signpost Alice had been referring to was one that stood at the crossroads a short walk outside of town. Its frail wood pointed to the turn for Seaworth, continue straight on for Albrett, and a fresher wooden pallet leaned against its pole, stating in painted letters: wishing well past hill.

He had expected that Alice would have brought Horatio and Judd with her but it was when he heard Horatio's shrill pitch - long before he actually caught up with the group - that he immediately regretted his decision to come.

They saw him coming and Johan could just make out a discreet elbow from Alice, causing Horatio's speech to

drop into a murmur. By the time he was right up to them, the murmur had died completely but was shortly replaced by Horatio's regular tone.

"It's about time Johan. We've been waiting out here, I don't know how long." His blond quiff slightly out of place, Horatio took great care to reposition it before adding with a smirk, "We almost left without you."

"Regardless..." A cross glance shot from Alice's eyes. "You're here now, so we can set off."

And so they did. The day was cool and as they were in no particular rush, they moved with leisure. The four of them reached the large forest surrounding the well, a safe area but for the wolves that prowled at night. If they had been in any way quiet, the group would likely have noticed the odd lack of birdsong and other sounds of life that accompanied most forestry. Instead, their entire walk was filled with Horatio's incessant chatter.

"So what are you going to do with your riches Alice? Hmmmm?"

"I believe that is an entirely private matter that only I should be concerned with."

Horatio's attention quickly bounced to Judd.

"Well, what about you Judd?" He said this in such a mock-slow accent that it seemed as if Judd's name had gained another syllable.

"Hmmm..." The sizeable fellow grumbled for a couple of seconds to himself before answering.

"I don-

“You don’t know.” Horatio opened his mouth and addressed to group with exaggerated surprise. “Who could have possibly guessed?”

Johan didn’t see the wisdom in openly insulting who was most likely the strongest individual among the town guards but Horatio had been doing it without receiving any blows for the entire journey so far. Instead, Judd just released a grouchier grumble and when Horatio realised that conversation had ended, he sprung back to Alice, acting as though theirs had suffered no interruption.

“You Prenderghasts are always so private, aren’t you though? No one’s got a clue what actually goes on inside the walls of that big house. Or how in the world your mother became the mayor’s personal advisor.” He punctuated the occupation with a variety of lewd gestures.

“Could it be that we are just vastly more intelligent than the rest of the town?” Alice retorted in her own mocking tone. “It certainly seems extremely likely to me.”

“Smarter than I? Perhaps... But I know you cannot sing my songs so well!” As he ended the sentence, he took a deep breath and belted out a single, extended note.

“Well they aren’t really your songs, are they Ray? I mean, you certainly didn’t write them.” Horatio’s melody was cut short in an instant as his lips pressed into a tight line. Alice turned away from him with a knowing smirk but stopped shortly after.

“There it is.”

Just ahead of the group, the rows of trees were starting to become less frequent until a single stone monument stood in an empty clearing. It remained unchanged from when he had seen it as a child, not even moss or ivy had braved itself to crawl up the stony feature. Johan found the fear attached to the memory beginning to slowly form a knot in his stomach.

The well itself was no different than one found anywhere else. It was made of stone, with a circumference of about two metres. Clear water rested within arm's reach of its top but no one knew how deep it went. Just behind it stood a statue constructed of the same stone. The woman depicted was a complete mystery to everyone but her kind smile and formal habit led to the popular theory that she was an age-old saint of some long-forgotten religious order.

“Right then.” Alice turned to the group. “We all know what we should say so I see no reason to drag this out any longer than we had to. Judd, I believe we agreed that you would go first.” The towering man gave a slow nod before lumbering up to the well.

Johan was just about to inform everyone that he didn't actually know what he was supposed to say but found his voice cut short by another.

What is the single most important thing in this world?

The nonchalant tone of the mysterious voice was offset by its ominous echo that travelled around the silent glade. It was only a voice yet the air of anxiety and unease Johan

had felt when he first heard it was ever-present. He looked to Alice and Horatio, both of whom's eyes were glued to the spectacle, and then to Judd. His brow was furrowed low between his eyes and he was very slowly mouthing a sentence. The silence of anticipation was broken by the hesitant question.

“Alice, what am I supposed to say again?”

This caused both roaring laughter in Horatio, and a frustrated sigh from Alice who swiftly picked a small piece of parchment from her pocket and shoved it into Judd's hand. He unfurled it, peered very close, and then in an unsure voice read.

“Ultimate strength, so... you can protect those who need it the most.”

They waited with bated breath, the seconds seeming to drag on until finally they were given an answer.

Wrong.

There was a tense pause as the group stood still, waiting for the punishment to fall. Johan's gaze was locked on Judd when he noticed him starting to wobble and falter. In response, Alice strode up to his side and placed a hand on his shoulder, turning him to face her as she did so.

“Judd, how do-” Her voice hitched for but a moment. “How do you feel?”

He mumbled a hoarse whisper but despite being only a few paces away, Johan could not make it out. Horatio

breathed an exaggerated sigh of frustration and trotted up beside them.

“How much longer are you going to keep us waiting, hmm?”

When he reached Judd, Horatio gasped before turning to share a look of astonishment with both Alice as well as Johan who was now hurrying to join them. Upon seeing Judd clearly, it was Johan’s turn to stare.

The strongest and hardiest member of the town guard had disappeared and been replaced by some sickly doppelgänger. If he saw this man in the street, he would have assumed he was a poor vagrant with a terrible illness. If he saw him asleep, he would have presumed him a corpse. Where once a full, flushed face had stared back at him, Johan was now looking at a ghoul, with sunken eyes, pale complexion and skin that hung so tight it made his cheekbones look painfully pronounced. Judd had also seemed to half in stature, being at least several feet smaller than before with clothes that, while once fitted snug, now hung loose over his frail frame.

“I...feel...dizzy...” Judd started to mutter, barely audible even to the three standing over him. Alice caught his drooping shoulders and straightened him up.

“Judd, tell me exactly what happened, everything you felt, what kind-” She was cut short as his unconscious form collapsed forward and Alice was forced to catch Judd. Both Horatio and Johan moved to help, aiming to lay him down in the cover of a nearby tree. It was during this time

that the transformation was truly proved to Johan, as the weight of Judd's body seemed almost lighter than a child. After laying him down, Alice examined Judd closely, pulling up his sleeves to reveal twiggish arms wrapped in bulging veins, and laying her head against his chest.

"Well he's only unconscious. His heart is beating quite rapidly and his breathing is very uneven. I honestly don't know what to think but I'm inclined to say that it's some kind of shock, seeing as his body just underwent a drastic change."

Horatio squatted down beside Judd and gave him a few generous pokes.

"Drastic, indeed." He let out a small chuckle. "Judd is not going to be happy when he wakes up, not at all." Another smirk. "Neither will his dad." He whirled around to Alice. "How are you going to explain that one?"

Alice, with complete assuredness and neutrality replied. "Well we'll each be walking home with unfathomable riches, so somehow I think people are going to care more about that than they will about Judd."

Johan had always viewed the trio as being a close-knit group but the utter lack of sympathy Alice showed towards Judd's condition was nothing less than a total shock.

It was this such revelation that caused Johan to ask.

"So you don't have the right answer then?"

Alice tutted and gave a dismissive shake of her head.

“Like I said, I have a shortlist of answers, with one of them being the solution. I just have to figure out what the statue’s answer is by using a few final questions. I gave Judd the weakest question, for obvious reasons.” Her and Horatio shared a knowing glance. “And now I have more information to work with.”

The more Alice told Johan, the clearer the situation became. She needed test individuals. Alice would get as many fools as she could gather to ask her questions for her until she found the correct solution.

“Well I’ve definitely made up my mind now,” Johan exclaimed, drawing a quizzical look from Alice. “I’m not giving that thing,” he jabbed a finger at the well, “any answer of yours, Alice.”

They stood staring at each other for a long time, both waiting for the other to react. Alice broke the silence with a shrug.

“No riches for you then.”

This was followed by a smug grin and subsequent tittering from Horatio.

“So much drama, my goodness. How about we get this moving again?”

With more swagger than Johan thought possible, Horatio waltzed up to the statue where, once again, it asked.

What is the single most important thing in this world?

After a dramatic cough to clear his throat and with so much flourish he almost broke out into song, Horatio recited.

“To preserve the tales of heroes so their legacies may never diminish, and spread their stories to others, inspiring a new age of valiant souls in their stead.”

Horatio waited. The statue hadn’t answered incorrect, but in fact it hadn’t answered at all. Standing for a while, beginning to feel more awkward as time passed, Horatio looked back at Alice and Johan. The two were regarding him with worry. He shrugged his shoulders, seeing no cause for concern but frowned when they started mouthing at him. He asked them why they were acting so peculiar. Or at least, he tried to. Horatio found that no words were coming out of his mouth either. He spoke again and again but was making no sound.

It was then the horrid realisation struck.

In order to be sure, Horatio brought a trembling hand to his ear and snapped his fingers.

No sound.

He had gone deaf.

As a look of horror crawled across his face, Alice and Johan realised the punishment Horatio had received.

“So he is deaf then,” muttered Alice to Johan but never facing him; her eyes too transfixed by Horatio.

“It seems he cannot speak either.”

Horatio watched their mouths flap silently, a cold rage bubbling inside him. He had found the idea of exploiting

Judd so hilarious that he never even thought for a second that Alice would try the same with him. Fists shaking, he marched towards Alice. Despite his lack of vocabulary, both Johan and Alice had no trouble interpreting his next words as he mouthed them slow and focused.

You bitch.

Alice was midway through some attempt at an excuse but Horatio cut her short as both his hands clasped around her throat.

Her eyes widened in shock and terror. She flung a clawed hand towards his face but Horatio was already using his height advantage to force her down to the ground. She then attempted to pry his hands loose, but the more they dug into the flesh of her neck, the more vice-like his grip became.

She looked to Johan, who up until this point had stood unmoving, the sudden and visceral action intimidating him too much. Her gaze locked with his and even as her face turned hideously swollen and a dangerous red, her look managed to convey exactly what she wanted to say and how she would have said it.

Help me you useless idiot.

Horatio was so consumed by his rage, Johan reckoned he didn't even realise he still stood beside them. He watched the scene unfold before him, conscious of the precious seconds it cost Alice.

But he didn't help her. He slowly backed away - much to her incredulousness - and moved to pick up Judd. Horatio didn't seem to notice or care.

The self-assured part of Johan's mind told him it was for good reasons. If he saved Alice, she would only rope in more fools, over and over, punishment after punishment until she got her answer. He was saving a lot of people sorrow and hardship at her hands. But he knew it wasn't true. His honest-self thought this was exactly the kind of thing Alice had coming to her. Thinking back, he was surprised something like this didn't happen sooner. Despite acting haughtily towards most everyone in town, Alice never seemed bothered to apologise. She probably thought her scorn immune to any repercussions of the common folk.

Yet here she lay, having the life wrenched out of her in the middle of the forest by the village bard.

Johan hefted Judd's semiconscious form onto his shoulder and started what would be a long trek back to Seaworth. If he was lucky, someone in town might have a way to help Judd, or at least ease his pain. Before he lost sight of it completely, he threw a glance towards the well for the sake of morbid curiosity.

Horatio was still choking Alice but Johan was sure she must be dead.

THE HIDDEN TRUTH

Nathan Ryan McKeever

Rain thundered down on a small shell of a house; paint was coming off the wall in tiny shavings. A woman slowly crept into it. As she looked around small creaks came from the opposite end of it.

The woman slowly spoke out and said 'Hello, who's there.' Hysterical laughs came from the opposite side of the house. There was a loud bang. She slowly pushed towards the end of the house.

As the woman got to the end of it, a large hand appeared and tried to grab her. The hand's owner came around a corner. The owner was a man with a large, scarred face. The man grunted as he pushed a large wisp of his hair to see the woman. The man reached out to grab her. She dodged the hand and started to run; this angered the man. Her survival was uncertain, and she knew this.

The man huffed angrily and limped after the woman. She turned to see the man limping after her, terror had appeared in her eyes. Horror was all she felt. She knew what to do, she started kicking the man. She did this unknowing of the horrible choice, she had made.

The man grabbed her leg and started to drag her to her doom. The woman screamed but she was unheard by any.

This would be her last moment seeing any form of light before being taken hostage by the strange man.

ONE SHOT

Sam O'Brien

The football stands that were once noisy earlier, suddenly became silent as the roars and chants of fans vanished. The fans stood quietly impatiently waiting for which could possibly be the last penalty kick in the shootout. This one shot could decide the fate of the championship. There can only be one winner. Just as the penalty is about to be taken, Tony rashly urges his teammate to allow him to take the spot kick.

'Listen, I scored twice earlier, and I can do it again just trust me'.

'Fine, blast it top bins yeah?'

'No problem' Tony said confidently. Tony now has a cocky look upon his face. He's the best player on the school team. He can do this; he knows he can score. Tony takes a deep breath; he looks around at the many fans in the crowd including his friends, mum not to mention his crush but the only person he doesn't see is his dad. He promised to show but it turns out he didn't. Tony begins to focus now; he makes his run-up and... Tony smashes the ball; it's soaring right into the top corner however the goalkeeper leaps of the ground as if he could fly and he makes a drastic save. The crowd ROARS! The keeper

sprints to his teammates and is held high as the hero. Tony falls to his knees in shock and awe. He blankly stares at the goal.

‘How!’ he thought. He couldn’t believe it.

Tony walked into the dressing room and was met with disgust from his teammates. Everyone sat in silence, echoes of the opposite team celebrating could be heard which only worsened their defeat.

‘Why did you let him take it!’ shouted Liam.

‘He scored already, and I didn’t think I could...’ said Sean.

‘You would’ve scored unlike that eejit.’ Liam said. This remark only infuriated Tony.

‘Who are you calling an eejit? How many goals did you score in the match? Or how many did you score in the tournament? None, Tony said with a smirk.

‘You think you’re so good, don’t you? I don’t think that and neither does your dad. That’s why he didn’t show up.’ This sparked Tony’s temper. Liam doesn’t know what he got himself into. WHAM! Liam was knocked down after one punch. Everyone went to check on Liam and separated him from Tony so he could do no more damage. Tony stormed out of the dressing room and didn’t look back.

The next day in school was woeful for Tony. He was depicted as a villain for costing the school the

championship and for hitting another teammate. He was excluded by everyone except Sean. Now he's his one and only friend while others mocked him for the penalty miss.

'Where are you going now?' asked Sean.

'Coach wants me to meet him in his office'

'You stood up for yourself. Let him know that.'

'I'll try but it's coach, you know how strict he can be. Look I gotta go. See you later.'

'Later and good luck.'

Tony knocked on the door. KNOCK! KNOCK! Tony walked into coach's office. It's a small room but it's decorated with past sporting achievements. Tony's looks at the shelf and sees there was a place set out for the championship trophy. It was his fault he thought.

'Take a seat kid. We need to talk' coach said in a serious tone. He wasn't impressed by Tony's actions.

'Coach I'm sorry about missing the penalty. I thought I could score but the keeper-'

'Tony'. Coach interrupted. 'I don't care about the penalty. It happens, hell it's happened to me. I'm disappointed that we didn't win but I'm more disappointed with what you did after'

'Coach he started-'

'I don't want to hear your excuse. You can't pick fights with your teammates. I was told by Sean that Liam said something about your father. I'll also talk to Liam, but you should've just walked away'

'I know coach but-

'No, you have no idea. You're a great player but...there must be consequences for your actions. Sorry kid, you're off the team.

'Coach no, please let me stay on the team.' Tony pleaded.

'I made my decision it's final.'

Tony got up and slammed the door on his way out. He couldn't control himself. To release his rage, he punched the locker next to him. This left a huge dent in the middle. He shocked people nearby with his display of anger and power. He decided to ditch school without any fear or remorse of what could happen.

Tony was quietly sitting down on a bench in a nice, calm park close to his house. It was a beautiful day, the birds were gracefully singing, there was a cool calm breeze gently blowing over him. He had a nice view of the pond, watching the flowing water and the ducks playfully swimming along. This all made it easy to forget about the situation in school. Tony found it quite peaceful gazing around at the park filled with nature. Something then caught his eye. He spotted someone playing football in the astro pitch.

'He looks familiar' Tony thought.

He walked over to the pitch and he knew exactly who it was. It was Liam. He was by himself kicking a ball around.

'Looks like I'm not the only one who's skipping.' said Tony.

'Are you following me around now?' questioned Liam.

'Nah, I thought this was a good place to relax after coach kicked me off the team'

'I knew you would get kicked off but me? I did jack s***. You were the one who attacked me and gave me this shiner.' Liam proceeded to point to his bruised eye.

'Whatever you say man.' Tony tried not to let his anger get the better of him.

'You still think your better than me?'

'I know I am' Tony said confidently.

'Still cocky as ever. Let's have a game then. First to three.'

'You're on. I'll let you start with the ball' Tony said.

'Bad mistake' Liam said with a smirk upon his face.

Liam quickly pressed with the ball down the pitch, running straight at Tony. He performed a flip flap and put the ball through Tony's legs. Liam faced the goal and easily tapped it into the net.

'You really have to do better than that. You're going to need surgery now after I put a hole through your legs.' Liam joked.

Tony kept his cool. He began to dribble with the ball towards Liam. He did a few step-overs and moved to the right, but Liam intercepted with ease. Now Tony was in trouble. Liam quickly ran down the pitch, Tony was catching up, but he did a Ronaldo chop which caught

Tony off guard as he slipped on the ground. This freed up space for Liam to gently roll the ball into the goal.

‘Can’t believe you still think you’re better than me.’ Liam laughed at Tony’s expense. Their match caught the attention of two men walking by and both were intrigued by Liam’s skills. They thought Liam’s goal was fantastic, but they still want to see if Tony can step up his game.

Again, Tony kicks off with the ball. He knew that he had to change the way he was currently playing. Tony slowly walked with the ball at his feet.

‘Hurry up.’ shouted Liam. He impatiently charged to him and Tony reacted quickly to this by performing a roulette to Liam’s surprise, causing him to fall over. This left an open goal form Tony to hit the ball in the back of the net.

‘Lucky goal.’ Liam said.

Liam started with the ball this time. He ran down the wing trying to outrun Tony. Unfortunately, this didn’t work out for him. Tony slide tackled the ball off him, making Liam fall flat on his face. He began to run towards the goal. Liam ran after him and ended up right next to Tony. Seeing this Tony cheekily hit the ball off his right to set up his left foot to nutmeg Liam. He then took a powerful shot that flew to the back of the net.

‘I’m not the only one who needs surgery now am I?’

This frustrated Liam even more now.

Liam began dribbling with the football and ran to the side. Tony shouldered him off the ball, however Liam put

a foot in and regained possession. Both of their eyes met. They knew each other so well as if they could predict each move, they would make. Liam tried doing step overs to trick Tony, he saw through this and stole the ball off him. He sprinted towards the net but sneakily cut back almost catching Liam off guard. He then performed a rainbow flick; all Liam could do was watch the ball float over his head as if he was stuck in time. Tony then struck the football on the volley and it went straight in the middle of the net. Liam sat down, trying to catch his breath.

‘You know what, you are better than me.’ Liam swallowed his pride saying that sentence. Liam stood up and offered Tony a fist bump as a sign of respect. He’s the better player and now he acknowledges this. Without both knowing a man upon the small hill was watching their little game against one another. He was impressed with by their skills and great knowledge. The man walked towards the two of them in the astro.

‘You two lads have some great skill I say. I’ve seen anyone here in the park play football so well on my walks’. The man said in a deep scratchy tone, complimenting the young men.

‘Cheers’ said a delighted Tony.

‘Look kids I’ll cut to the chase. You two caught my attention and it’s very clear to see that both of you have something special about you. I’m the head coach of Bray Wanderers and we need more young players in our team. You could say we’re desperate’ the man chuckled.

‘Wait, so you want us to sign for you?’ Liam said excitedly.

‘Yes. I don’t have time I need to hurry back but here’s my number just give me a text if you’re interested and I’ll send the address of our training ground. Hopefully I see you lads later.’

‘See ya’ said Tony.

Tony finally makes his way back to his home after a pretty hectic day. So much happened both good and bad for him. He saw his mum in the sitting room and rushed to tell her the good news.

‘Mum you’re not gonna believe this. I- ‘

‘I don’t want to hear it. I got a call today from the school. They said you ditched school today.’

‘I got kicked off the school football team, and I wanted to be alone but I played football with Liam in the park and the head coach of Bray saw us play. He needs more young players in his team and he wants us! Tony said emphatically.

‘That seems very great but you won’t be playing for them after the stunt you pulled today, I’m sorry. First you punch your own teammate and then you skip school. That’s not on she said in a very disappointed tone.

‘But mum- ‘

‘You won’t be playing for them and that’s final.’

Tony stormed upstairs in anger. A professional club like Bray Wanderers wanted to give him a chance to prove

himself. He didn't know what to do. He kept walking around his room thinking and pacing himself until he realized what to do. Tony picked up the phone. He texted the coach asking him for the address of their training pitch. He responded almost immediately. He knew this was his chance. He couldn't miss out on an opportunity like this. Tony decided to put his pillows underneath his covers to make it look like someone's in the bed. His good football boots were downstairs so he had to grab the pair in his wardrobe that were a size too small and starting to lose their colour, he put them in his bag. Tony opened the window and climbed down the pipe. He had to be very careful. The pipe is very fragile.

'Phew' he thought after making it down safely. Tony peered into the kitchen window; he could see his mother sitting down gazing at the wall. She has a lot on her mind right now. What Tony doesn't realize is that he left his phone in his room but without knowing he proceeded to jump over the back gate and make his way toward the dart station.

After a short trip Tony finally arrived at his destination and made his way to the training ground. He was running a bit late and was watching the first team do drills.

'Tony!' shouted Liam. Better late than never' he joked.

'Yeah haha, where's coach?'

'He's right there next to a few of the first team players. C'mon let's go down.'

'Oi you two hurry up.' said coach

Tony and Liam approached coach and the other players.

'Sup coach' Liam said smiling.

'Wipe that smirk off your face and get ready. We're going to do some counter attacking drills.'

Tony and Liam got themselves ready in the dressing room and were eager to begin training.

'Five people will be attacking and five will be defending. When the defenders win the ball that's when you switch and try to attack and score. We have one more game left to secure promotion. We've been sloppy with counter attacking plays so we desperately need to work on this part of our game.' Coach was being serious, there was only one game left in the season and Bray are third place in the league just two points off second place. A win would guarantee them promotion.

Tony and Liam were on the same side and started attacking first.

'Touch!' Tony screamed to his teammate out on the wing but he just ignored him and Liam. He tried passing it to another player but lost the ball in the process. The defensive side now switched to the attacking side and were quick on the counter, running down the pitch it was hard to catch up and they slotted the ball into the back of the net.

'I was open man' said Tony

'Why would I pass to some unproven kid. You and your mate were given a spot in the squad because of luck. The boys and I worked hard for our spot and we won't let you two take it from us.' The guy who didn't pass to Tony had a lot to say about him and Liam.

Their side began to attack again but this time the winger decided to pass to Tony but he smashed the ball at his feet causing him to take a heavy touch and he was quickly pushed off the ball as he wasn't able to match the players strength. The other team began pushing down the pitch and easily scored another goal.

'What the hell was that pass!?! Are you trying to mess up my game?' Tony was beginning to lose his temper.

'Take it easy Tony, let's show them what we can do' said Liam being very supportive. Yet again they started with the ball, Liam received the ball and quickly gave it to Tony who flicked the ball up to himself and took a scorpion kick touch which flew over the defender's head. The ball landed back down on the ground and Tony kicked the football ferociously right into the top corner of the net. He left his teammates in awe.

'Nice one man' said Liam. The drill continued with Tony and Liam putting in tremendous amounts of effort showing how good they are. In the distance someone was walking down to the training pitch. It was Tony's mum.

Soon after Tony left, she went to his room to check in on him and found that he wasn't in his bed. She saw his

phone laying down on his desk and read through his recent messages where she eventually found the address of the training center coach gave to Tony. She couldn't believe that he snuck out and disobeyed her. Tony couldn't believe his eyes; he was bricking it. He told coach about the situation.

'You didn't tell her you were here! You know what, I'll talk to her for you. Just continue your training.'

'Thanks coach'

Tony resumed his training while coach and Tony's mother talked in the club office. After twenty minutes Tony's mother and coach stepped out of the office and onto the pitch.

'Tony come over' shouted coach. Coach walked back over to the other lads allowing Tony and his mum to talk.

'Tony I'm sorry for being harsh on you. I was just annoyed that you skipped school and started getting into fights.'

'I'm sorry I know it was wrong but I was just pissed off. I really want to play for Bray.'

'I know and I'll let you play for them as long as you never ditch school or sneak out like that again. You're lucky that coach was able to calm me down.' The two hugged it out and Tony then went back to honing his skills with coach while his mother proudly watched on. After training they got to talk more, they even went out for some dinner at a posh restaurant. Clearly things were resolved between them.

A FEW DAYS LATER

It was match day; it was the final day of the season. Bray Wanderers will be playing at home to second place Cabinteely. Both teams will be fighting for promotion. It was a beautiful morning to start off what would be a hectic day. The sun was beaming down on Tony's bedroom window. He was too excited about the match and failed to get a few hours of sleep. Kickoff is at 6:00 pm. Unfortunately, it was on a weekday so Tony had to attend school no matter how much he begged his mother to not go. All day throughout school Tony was thinking about the game. He couldn't believe his luck. The chances of being gifted a contract with a club at the very end of their season. Him and Liam enjoyed showing off to their mates about playing for an actual club. Tony rushed out the door as soon as the last bell ring. He was edging closer and closer to the match. He was getting even more nervous but also excited at the same time.

Tony and Liam were dropped off at the venue by Tony's mother. The two young men wouldn't stop talking throughout the whole car journey as if it was a Champions League final. They walked into the dressing room with the other players. It was difficult to believe that they were one of those players. The two received their jerseys and were amazed. To see their name on a jersey was a great feeling. Tony's shirt number was 37 with

Hogan his surname on the back while Liam had the number 38 with his second name O'Neil at the back. Obviously, they weren't expecting to be given the numbers for a first team player. Everyone got ready to go out for the warmup. Fans were beginning to enter the stadium and see a glimpse of the players warming up before the big game.

'Tony look!' Liam began pointing the opposition goalkeeper. It was the same keeper they faced in the school cup final.

'Looks like Bray aren't the only ones giving free contacts to young players' Tony said.

'We'll show him what we can do' said Liam very confidently.

When both sides finished up, they gathered in their separate changing rooms. Coach came in and told the players to do this for yourselves and the fans. Coach gave a passionate speech inspiring everyone in that dressing room. He then showed the starting lineup. Tony was disappointed to see his name on the bench but there was still a chance he could play. Liam was surprised to see himself on the team sheet. He'll be playing left wing for this game.

'Good luck out there' said Tony.

'Appreciate it, I'll score one for you' said Liam.

Both teams were met with a loud applause coming out to the pitch with fans roaring and cheering for them. The atmosphere was spectacular, it was very different to a

school game. It's a special feeling to have. Bray were going to be taking kickoff for the game. The ball was kicked and the game started.

The match was everything it was anticipated to be. Lots of great high-quality football. Early on in the game Cabinteely managed to score from a badly defended free kick. However, that didn't stop Bray from trying their best to secure an equalizer. Right before half time Bray were given a corner after Liam's attempt on goal was denied by the keeper. The ball was hit over the top but was headed out of the box by the defender. The ball fell to Liam on the volley. He shot and GOAL! What a shot. Like a rocket going into orbit. Unstoppable goal. He ran over to the crowd to celebrate, his teammates followed. Even the subs came over to congratulate him. The opposition fans applauded his wonder goal. The Cabinteely players and coaching staff were left speechless. Once the ball was kicked off again the referee blew his whistle for half time. Bray players were over the moon at half time thanks to Liam's goal. Coach came in and everybody went silent.

'Don't be celebrating just yet lads. You can go wild after we win the game, IF we won the game' he corrected himself.

'We got this in the bag coach' said Liam.

Coach looked over to Liam and stared a hole right through him.

‘Amazing goal kid. Don’t get too cocky now. This is our one chance lads. I want to see that fire and passion you brought after they scored the first goal. Play like that and we can secure promotion. GET OUT THERE AND GIVE IT YOUR ALL!’

‘LET’S GO BRAY!’ shouted the team.

Yet again Tony would be sitting on the bench. He was getting worried that he wouldn’t play now.

The second half begun just like the first with great attacking football and aggression showed by the two teams battling for promotion. The game was back and forth leaving everyone on the edge of their seat. We were 80 minutes into the game and coach finally decided to sub on Tony.

‘This is your one-shot kid, go give it your all’ said coach.

Tony nodded in acknowledgement. He knew what he had to do. He stepped onto the pitch and was in disbelief. He made it this far. All he had to do now was show his worth to the club. Tony made an instant impact. He retrieved the ball from the defender and quickly passed it to Liam on the left. He got the ball back near the edge of the box and tried his luck on goal. He shot but the goalie pushed the ball onto the crossbar and it was quickly cleared by a Cabo player. He came so close to scoring. Cabo were quickly pressing up the field. The defending was sloppy. A shot was taken, the keeper palmed it away but the ball rolled to the striker and he tapped it in. GOAL!

Cabo were now 1-2 up. This set Bray back they only had a few more minutes plus added time to win the game. The odds were against them. It was the 87th minute now and Bray Wanderers were on the attack yet again. Everyone of their players was pushing up the pitch trying to get a goal. They played the ball nicely outside the box. Liam chipped the ball into Tony, he took a touch and struck the ball on his left foot. GOAL! Tony equalized. He was shocked that he scored. Bray had a slight chance of winning the game now. It was the 90th minute now, the two teams were fighting for fans. 4 minutes of time was added on. Cabo were on the attack yet again but this time the defending was too much for them. Now the counter attack is on. The ball was hoofed up the pitch. The ball was given to Liam from a midfielder. He passed it to Tony in the box, his back was facing the defense. He flicked the ball up in the air and it curled around the defender. He ran past him; he was through on goal lining up his shot but he was taken out. It was a tactical foul from the Cabo captain who was given a red card. It was a last minute penalty. The usual penalty taker decided to give it to Tony after the great performance he's had in just 10 minutes. The fans went into silence. Tony stepped up to take the peno against the keeper who saved his penalty in the cup final. This seemed all too familiar. Nerves were beginning to settle in. The goalkeeper looked very arrogant. He knew what Tony was about to do. Tony took a deep breath and he ran up to take the penalty. He shot the ball, and it launched

into the right top corner, the goalie was finger tips away from the ball. GOAL! TONY SCORED THE WINNER! He was absolutely stunned. He ran to the corner flag to perform a knee slide celebration. His teammates sprinted towards him and jumped on top of Tony for a pile on. Even coach ran over to celebrate with them. After Cabo took kickoff the referee blew the final whistle signaling the end of the game and a new beginning for Bray Wanderers who will be playing in the SSE Airtricity league next season. Fans began to invade the pitch and swarm their heroes. This was the first time Tony and Liam were asked to sign autographs. Celebrations continued in the dressing room. The players were going wild. Tony had fans, players, coaching staff and even members of the board praising him after the game. After huddling in for a group picture Tony stepped away for fresh air. This was a surreal moment for him. He got his chance to show how good he can be in front of his mum and friends. He had one shot and he delivered.

‘What a performance you had out their son’ said a familiar deep-toned voice. Tony knows whose voice that belongs to.

‘No, it couldn’t be’ he thought to himself. He slowly turned around and he couldn’t believe his eyes. He was astonished to see who it was.

2020

THE ALIEN, THE ENEMY AND THE ALLY

John Murray

The vessel careened across the universe. The alien manning the vessel was engrossed in monitoring the fickle control panels fixed to the interior of the finite spaceship. So much so that it avoided being in awe of the infinite scenery, that waned in every direction manifesting the nothingness that existed on the other side of the infiltrating universe's border into more universe. It didn't care. It was bemused. It knew what the universe looked like; it didn't know what the semblance of its mission's result would. Its mission was straightforward. Find planet. If planet contains no sentient life and inhabitation is possible, report such planet's co-ordinates to be colonized. If planet contains sentient life, report corrupted planet's co-ordinates to be destroyed.

The alien finalized running its ships diagnostics and stretched out on its seat yawning. Its ship sped across space with a light humming whirr sounding from its engine. The alien felt strange, really it had been feeling strange for a while. Its coping mechanism for this strangeness was to focus on its mission, but it was unachievable to do so permanently. It sat there for a

while, paradoxically so still and fast at the same time. The interior of the vessel flashed. The alien glanced down at its contrastable dull radar compared to the phosphorescence of the rest of the control panel. The alien altered the ships course slightly, and soon the alien's gait and gaze simultaneously met that of a modestly sized planet. The ship encroached at a rapid momentum and just as the alien pierced the planet's atmosphere the ships monitor flashed static and began spewing out white noise. The alien looked confused then very anxious as the ship began to fall weightlessly....

The engine gutted to a stop. The man brought his arms off the steering wheel and sat straddled in the driver's seat for a few seconds before letting out an exasperated sigh. The man was on route whatever, south of whatever town, just west of wherever. The man's eyes languidly looked at the steering wheel, then the arid dashboard to the arid desert surrounding that the windshield showed through the dusty glass. He then looked to the rearview mirror which showed his eyes fixed back on his own haggard face. The man was tired, he was always tired, yet he was never tired enough to sidle to somewhere where he could put food into his body or get the remnants out of it. His stomach rumbled. It was time for breakfast, at what looked like four o'clock in the afternoon judging by the sun.

The man dragged himself out of the car door, before slamming it shut. He wandered over to the diner he had left his haggard car adjacent to.

As he stepped on one of the reoccurring yellow lines that divided every road, he glanced up at a troupe of three vultures, doing a salute in the process to shield his eyes from the intensive sun. "Not today," he muttered.

He plodded up the steps to the doors and entered the building with the mellow sound of a bell that door rang. The tawdry diner was quiet but not as tragically populated as the ones he'd seen before, hell he could have been here before but after a while they all looked the same. There were a few people chowing down on food that looked either fried or toasted, he couldn't really discern the two. Through the ajar door behind the counter he could see a waitress emptying a dishwasher. A man who looked like the manager but was about to play the role of a waiter was approaching him with a notepad presumably to take his order or maybe play a game of x's and o's with him. The hungry man wouldn't mind either though the latter would probably bolster his headache.

"Hello Sir, would you like your usual?"

"I have a usual?"

"Yes," informed the manager shrilly, he had a Spanish accent.

"What is it?" man asked, sounding about ten percent more energetic.

“Anything that will get rid of my headache, is what you usually ask me to fetch for you, Sir,” the manager chuckled.

“Well shoot, that was just what I was going to ask for,” the man said while shrugging weakly.

“I’ll have my usual then.”

“Right away Sir,” the manager said while smiling before rushing off.

The tired man scanned the diner. I could buy everything in this diner and itself, the man thought to himself. I could probably buy every diner in Nevada, or Utah or New Mexico or whatever sorry desert wasteland I’m in.

The man chuckled quietly and shook his head. It always entertained him, surmising over what he could do with his wealth. The man looked a tier or two above homeless on whatever stupid tier system some psychologist spent his whole career generating. The man looked around, he looked at the truckers eating BLTs, he looked at the two ranchers tucking into burgers and fries. He looked at the fussed waitress doing the dishes. On the outside he just looked like a roughed- up guy getting a bite to eat but that wasn’t who he was. He felt alienated. He felt he was an alien. The man had too many zeroes next to his account number to feel welcome.

The food arrival of the food killed that thought as the need to appease his hunger hijacked the man's brain. Not food for thought but food to kill thought. The man

preferred the latter. Should I feel belonged? the man thought. After finishing his meal ten minutes later, he put down a fifty, wiped his mouth and shifted out of his seat. Either they have a restroom outside, or a bush is getting lucky.

The man passed the waitress behind the counter on his way out. He felt her curious gaze pierce his back. The palpable feeling ended when a hinged plank of wood was put between them. He then heard the excessively loud approach of motorcycle engines as his lungs met the fresh desert air, like the waitress's stare, another hinged plank of wood belonging to the much-appreciated restroom gave him some peace and privacy.

The woman slammed the dishwasher shut. This was the second dish run of the day and the useless machine had started sputtering after it finished up the first run earlier around four. "It's emptied!" she exulted.

The manager replied, "Thank you, see you tomorrow!"

The waitress gleaned the sweat off her brow with her hand and made her way to the back of the diner. She took her bag from her dilapidated locker and continued down the short corridor to the restroom to change. She inspected herself in the mirror, at the letters "arreiS" on her nametag, which would normally display the name Sierra, and within two minutes she emerged newly clothed with a freshly washed face.

As Sierra passed back out the corridor, she passed the strange framed photo by her employer's office. It was a

picture of a red human skull facing to the left, slightly downwards, with huge heart like tubes of flesh extending outwards and reaching down the back of the skull. The skull had two pockets of veins which resembled a bare tree in autumn, one placed on the temple, the other where the ear would typically be found if the skull had a life host. Her manager would always site to her about how the head and the heart were the core of the conscious and blah, blah, blah. Sierra had to give the photo some credit, it looked cool.

Sierra went out front by the ghastly dishwasher and strolled over to the door, as she did another picture caught her attention. The photo of the mountain range she was named after. The Sierra mountains of Nevada. She had been found there as a very young child. She was of Native-American ancestry and one of the cops at the police station she was brought to - a very tough cop, who she now knew as Uncle Sam - became infatuated with her. Utterly distrustful of childcare from a firsthand experience, Uncle Sam drove her across the Rockies where she was entrusted to a Native American tribe, led by a chief who Uncle Sam had helped find a missing child for a few years back.

With that, Sierra was raised in the desert by the New Mexico-Utah state border and was now jumping from one low wage job to another where every cent counted. She didn't mind, college could wait. "Where there's a will there's a way."

She loved her tribe; what she didn't love was how she was treated sometimes by her fellow "Americans". Her elders had endured much worse in the past and growing up with their stories had made her feel as if her existence was a crime to others. Like she was the enemy. Sierra snapped out of her daydream upon hearing her boss chuckle, "Sierra, go home. Your shift is finished, I don't need you doing overtime by staring at a picture."

Sierra sighed lightheartedly, "See you Tomorrow Juan".

She stepped outside and faced the setting sun. She came trotting down the steps and walked by the restroom door. As she passed the corner of the building, someone heckled at her, "Hey, red girl," and before Sierra knew it her evening now involved five bikers and one gun pointed at her.

The alien seemed very displeased. It lay sat behind a large series of boulders which were situated aside what these creatures called "highways". The alien had also gathered from an inscription on a sign stating the area's population of fifteen thousand that the creatures of this planet were called "humans". The alien knew this because its mission had taken a dramatic turn for the worst. Its ship had been exposed to a weak signal that interrupted its ships radio causing its engines to fail (a big issue to be taken up with the engineers later). When it neared the ground even further the ship encountered an even weaker signal,

around twenty-fold the original. When its ship began to fall, it attempted to signal its co-ordinates in order to get a replacement vessel deployed to wherever the soon to be battered ship would inevitably land on the foreign planet. Its attempt failed. Then, whilst hurtling towards the surface at an intense momentum, it squeezed itself into the impact-proof cubby hole in the base of the ship and awaited a loud bang.

When the bang came, the alien then managed to wriggle out of its correctly foreseen wreck of a ship. It had found itself in the middle of a desert biome and began following a weak stream of H₂O. The alien then found its first of many interconnected “highways” where it seemed that what happened with its ship earlier had occurred again, only instead of a vessel colliding with a planet, a vessel which seemed to be restricted by the force of gravity colloquially called a “Car” had collided with another “Car”.

Then it encountered its first of the plethora of human inhabitants on the planet. The alien was very pleased as it had succeeded in its mission in finding a planet to be destroyed. Only that it was utterly enthralled in the behavior of these humans. This species had two variants. A taller more muscular variant presumably a male and a shorter less muscular variant presumably a female, however the two it witnessed did not seem to like each other. They stood by their separate collided cars and communicated loudly and aggressively to each other.

Then more humans appeared from a car equipped with intermittently activated lights and a loud “siren”. Then the humans continued to communicate with each other loudly and then began sparring! This proceeded until all the humans ended up inside the flashing car. The alien thought this was incredibly uncooperative behavior of a species.

It then began traversing by the “highway” until it reached another structure called a “Diner” as inscribed on the “Diner”. Located outside the “Diner” was another car but this car, although retaining the support of four circular, hard textured tubes used to rotate on surfaces and a similar shape and design as the ones the alien had seen prior possessed an awful odor.

The alien approached the car and had to hop up and down in a repeated fashion to peer inside. The car looked as though it was used dually for transport and for habitation. The alien stood in awe, in awe of the thought of living in a vessel and using it for travel. It hopped up and heaved itself through what seemed to be a shorter panel of transparent rock that the alien believed to be called “Glass” that didn’t seem to encase the car.

It rummaged through the interior and inspected each object found within the car quizzically. In a sense of panic however it forcibly ejected itself from the car as a female human emerged from the diner. The alien who had scurried behind the boulders it was presently recalling these events from now, glanced to get a good look at the

human and was highly confused when it saw five male humans appear from beside the dinner, one of which bearing a weapon familiar to the alien.

The humans once again engaged in a loud aggressive tone and one of the males snatched an object the female had been carrying with her right “Arm” with the help of a strap. Then two of the males rushed over to the poorly maintained car the alien had rummaged about in and one of them began fidgeting with these small wires located beneath the steering wheel, the car then activated and began to mobilize.

Soon after, the other males followed commandeering strange “bikes” that utilized only two of the rotating short tubes that cars used four of. The female human remained, stood outside the diner, gaping down at the ground with the ends of her two limbs located on her head.

The Alien was very puzzled as to how this seemingly very intelligent species could exist with such animosity existing between those who were so similar. The alien deemed this species dysfunctional and necessary for elimination.

The man began to wake up, he heard an argument ongoing outside but couldn't really make out what was being said in his confused dozy state, until of course he heard his car engine start... He shot up and darted outside without realizing that he hadn't pulled his jeans up. He fell forward and hit the pavement, before scrambling up and pulling his jeans up at the same time. He looked in

the distance and saw his car waning in size. His car had been hijacked! To his left was a distressed and at the same time horrified young woman aged most likely a few years younger than him.

“What the hell! Who were they? Why did they do that?” the man yelled out.

The woman looked at him. “I could ask you the same questions.”

Sierra profiled the mess of a man in front of her. “What’s your name?”

The man who was still zoned-in on his now out of sight car, looked over at her. “Eric.”

Sierra thought for a few seconds. She was sick of this happening to her; it was always the same goddamn gang. This was the third time this had happened to her and she’d had enough. She was at this point, scrapping the other side of the bottom of the barrel, if she couldn’t hold on to any money that she worked her ass for. She wanted to retaliate. This guy was in the same situation as her only he had lost his car. He didn’t seem precarious. She wouldn’t be able to fight him, but she was very confident she could run away from him. She needed and longed for that money back more than she feared “Eric.” He could make a useful ally. Plus, he had a charm about him even with the haggard appearance.

“Hey Eric, you don’t seem like you’re from here and no offence, you seem like you were living out of that car. I’d

say those thieves will be wasted over by their warehouse. How about we take back what's ours?"

Eric burped and began walking away. "No thanks, you want your money back you can go take it," he yawned nonchalantly.

"I'm goin' back inside to call - " Eric patted his pockets, and his whole character changed. "My credit car-! Where the hel-" Eric then looked to the direction in which the biker gang had driven off to. He then slumped and raised his eyes from the ground to meet hers. "How the hell are we going to find them, daring one?" he asked glibly and with as much enthusiasm as a rock.

Sierra grinned. "I know where they hang out, by the old warehouse east of junctio-"

"I don't know where that is or care!" Eric interrupted dryly. "How are we going to get there?"

Sierra walked in the direction she would have continued had her evening not turned for the worse. She walked round the back to where Tomahawk was. Sierra hated how she was treated sometimes because of who she was, but one thing she loved about who she was, was how she and her people got around. She even convinced Juan her manager to travel the same way too. She went and unlocked the gate to the makeshift stable round the bag. She guided Tomahawk out of the stable and brought him to the road.

Eric looked up bemused and in disbelief, "A horse?"

“Hop on,” Sierra grinned as she patted the space on the saddle behind her.

The Alien was very puzzled by now. It watched as the male and female human rode away on another species, known by the name of a “horse”. This time, the humans didn’t fight with each other, they didn’t communicate loudly, they did so quietly and calmly. The alien possibly wondered if they were going to confront the other hostile humans, maybe that’s what the humans who came in the flashing car were trying to do earlier at the collision. The alien wondered though if that process could be fair and conducted unscathed from the maleficent hands of corruption. The humans now however seemed to possess the ability to co-operate not only with each other but outside of their own species. The alien wondered if they would be able to coincide with itself. The alien quickly grew dubious about that thought and swiftly dismissed that idea. If they were to spot it, they would probably enact a responsive mechanism. The alien would likely be seen as an enemy, a threat. Which it was, to some extent. The alien intended no immediate harm to be conducted by itself but through other indirect means of making the humanity extinct.

The alien decided its mission would retain the highest possibility of success if it remained hidden. The alien was enthralled about the connection between these two humans, it hadn’t seen anything like it before and so it sauntered over to the diner and imitated the female’s

path. The alien found another “horse” in a box shaped enclosure. It mimicked the way the female mounted the creature and did so with relative success. The alien encountered another quagmire. How to get out of the enclosure. The alien mimicked the movement the female did prior with her limbs involving the straps attached to the horses feeding mechanism. With that the unprepared alien was irked forwards and the horse charged both over and through the enclosure barrier at the same time. The alien was irked again but not physically as it looked to its right. On the wall of the structure was a portrait of its own face. The mural seemed to have been sprayed on with a gas like substance. Depicted was a green face ovular face, thinning at the bottom with a small mouth and two wide black big eyes. The alien was perturbed. How did these creatures know of its existence? The horse started to move, and the alien remembered that its own personal side quest: following the pair of humans.

As it followed the tracks engraved in the sand by the horse that came before them, the alien and its new acquaintance embarked on its newly thought of mission as the sun it had once seen from space earlier, was underway its descent into the a far sandy horizon.

Am I crazy? Is this woman crazy? Eric thought to himself as they galloped across the desolate desert. “You’re sure you know where you’re going?”

“Yes,” exclaimed Sierra.

Eric may have grown dubious about Sierra's sense of direction, but he did not possess a shadow of a doubt in her ability to mount a horse. She rode it like it was second nature.

"I can tell you're uneasy, do you have somewhere to be?" Sierra beckoned sarcastically.

"No," Eric rebuked responsively in a succinct manner. Sierra had read him very well, the truth was he didn't have anywhere to be, he didn't have anything to do, nor had he for nearly half a decade, if he were to guess how long he'd been in this state. Eric didn't know what day it was or date it was usually. He didn't care. He had no reason to care, no purpose, no sense of belonging. He saw himself as just one of the hundreds of myriads on a giant rock floating around in space, until nuclear doomsday, until a meteor hit, until humans were colonized by aliens like they had colonized other humans in the past. That was why he agreed to come along, he didn't care. He didn't lose his credit card, it was in his back pocket, he changed his mind after he rejected Sierra's proposal he just didn't want to embarrass himself, which he ended up doing afterwards by pretending to search through his pockets. even if he did, he could just snap his fingers and summon another. He didn't care, so why not go on a suicide mission with a woman who obviously leaned way too much into the fight half of fight or flight.

Eric looked up - the three vultures who he had denied dinner to earlier flew overhead above them. Smart birds. Eric thought.

Sierra pressed on as they passed a road they would eventually have been on had they conducted this pathetic assault via more conventional means of transportation.

In fairness to her, she knows what she's doing. Eric glanced at the phrase, "YES TO WEALTH TAX," which was scrawled all over a large billboard which hadn't have been used in a long time.

Ah yes blame the rich.

Eric agreed with the notion. He didn't even deserve his own wealth, neither did the person who he inherited from did, his grandfather. He made millions by installing first wave radio towers when the age of communications kickstarted decades, he put them all over the inner west. Not with the intention of providing a quality radio service, but to make as much turnover as possible. The towers were state of the art at the time but grew obsolete quickly. They were also apparently very expensive to remove or modify due to the government being very picky about any development in the area and the real problem for people and competitors was the towers emitted a weak signal that would disrupt any other advanced technology that would be unfortunate enough to come within range of. This meant a very different way of life for the shadow of the once prominent population. It was a dead zone. It was common theory and still remains so that the

government who still operate a military base in the area to this day preferred it that way. This slumped investment in the region and was probably the reason why the vandalized billboard that sent Eric down this rabbit hole was not in use. His grandad cashed in initially through classic enterprise elbow grease, but once handed a monopoly the money went to his head and after the towers, he was never the same again. Sure, somebody could have come in and drove his family's business to the ground, but why bother? In this day and age, nobody lived in the inner west anymore, and even if they did it wouldn't have been fashionable. The only places businesses like being seen at are by vertical coasts in this country. Then his grandfather used his profits to invest in the oil industry. Then the six zeroes each had a baby together and became nine. Eric's wealth left him with no purpose, what it did leave him with was a big target on his back. He agreed with a wealth tax, he agreed with anything, he didn't care but he felt like an enemy to society, his relatives who held the mantle were, but he wasn't.

Eric's deep thought was converted in brooding as Sierra halted whatever her stupid horse was called and stated, "We're here," as she did so.

The sun had set, and the stars had come out from hiding from humanity. Sierra slid off the horse, with Eric following but not at all as smoothly. They surreptitiously sneaked by the side of the rundown warehouse. The warehouse looked barren, there was more rust than grey

steel on the exterior. It looked like a next level three-dimensional battlefield map with one long term prevailing victor: decay.

Eric's face lit up when saw his car; it looked a travesty compared to the bikes owned by the bikers which was a bar not set very high. Eric realized that for the first time in a while that he wasn't experiencing a headache, probably the reason why he had thought more today than he had in weeks.

Sierra hunkered down and pried the vent cover clean off the wall. She cautiously placed it flat down on the ground and beckoned Eric over to her with the use of hasty hand gestures.

Eric blinked stunned. "You've done this before" "Haven't you?" Eric asked.

Sierra grinned lightly. "Not in a long-time and not alone." The smile faded.

"I'm here," Eric argued.

"You don't count," Sierra rebuffed quickly.

"You asked me to come," Eric muttered while kicked the sand the ground.

Sierra shushed him and pointed to the vent. Eric declined the invitation without needing to speak. Sierra rolled her eyes and lay down on her back and pulled herself through the vent.

In that moment, Eric was content. He couldn't remember the last time he had this much interaction with another person. He had made an ally, maybe even a

friend. He didn't have to go through the vent. His car was right there. He would have expected himself to just bail right now but alternatively he found himself inside a destitute warehouse, littered with cans and glass, passed out bikers and a woman getting very frustrated with a safe.

“Here, let me help,” Eric uttered at Sierra quietly.

“No, I can do it,” Sierra grunted, with an ear next to a lock that was being furiously rotated.

Eric hurried over and put his hand on the lock and Sierra capitulated. A minute-long cycle of twisting and silence passed and was then broken by the sound of a click.

The safe's contents were then revealed.

Sierra reached inside, grabbing only a single stack of cash of the plurality that was at her disposal. She gently then closed the safe, relocking it.

Eric was aghast. “Why did you only take one?” he pressed.

Sierra was about to defend herself, when both their ears tensed. A loud hissing noise which was becoming increasingly sharper not only in frequency, but volume reached their ears. Galvanized, the rushed to the vent. Sierra dived through the vent lubricated by her newly broken sweat. A pummeling volcanic crash hit the ground, right on top- or more correctly through the warehouse. The dissipation of the energy from the impact of such a magnitude resulted in... tumults, sparks,

vibrations, noise, shaking, explosions, followed by darkness.

Sierra got to her feet. She couldn't hear anything; her ears were ringing, and she was covered in cuts. Adrenaline was pulsing through her veins. She could walk, but she couldn't tell if any part of her was hurt badly.

Then she remembered Eric. Eric! She screeched, "Eric!"

She frantically fettered around her. Then she recalled how they got in and out of the warehouse. She peered through the vent and there he was, lifeless. She dragged him out pressing her feet against what remained of the wall the vent belonged to and pulling with all her strength. She felt his chest. He was breathing, for now.

The dire situation became a lot less dire. She dragged him along the sand towards a very startled Tomahawk. She placated Tomahawk and pulled the still unconscious Eric up onto the back of Tomahawk. She followed and then they were off, she didn't look back, she didn't know what happened, she didn't know if any other people survived, all she did was what her tribe told her to do when she felt a harrowing feeling within her. Run. This day had been surreal, she didn't know what to think of it. She just kept going. She looked back at Eric the very badly injured leg attached to him, her comrade, her ally. "I hope you've good insurance" Sierra said as she passed another one of many radio towers that had been decimated due to the shockwave. Suddenly a huge gust of weird wind

startled her and Tomahawk from behind as she turned and then looked above, with a whirr an aircraft by the likes she'd never seen before flew up above her and up into the sky. I've never seen an emergency service aircraft like that. Must be from the airbase, that's why we've such a weird signal here.

Sierra didn't have time to speculate as she continued steadfast through the growing cold desert.

The Alien activated autopilot and did what it had neglected to do during his arrival. It glanced down at this strange planet, appreciating its surroundings. Its mission had been extraordinary, it had learned so much from the humans. It took the energy clip out of the size alterer that had come with the emergency ship it was now a flight in and placed the blaster away. The alien was immensely dissatisfied with the chaos the emergency ship's landing had caused on the new planet. It had completely decimated possibly even desecrated a structure, out of all the nearby co-ordinates from the alien's location they could have sent to ship to, the outcome had been quite unfortunate for the humans. The size at which they sent the ship too was excessive, it was much bigger than the structure it crushed, luckily for them the smoke it created had masked the ship and it was unnoticed but the alien didn't appreciate having to shrink the ship before taking off, getting its single meter long body inside the huge

ship to obtain the size alterer was a challenging task, but the alien had prevailed.

The alien was lucky, whatever caused the weak signal that had led to the alien's unforeseen descent must have been dealt with as it wouldn't have been able to have lifted off had it not been. The alien picked up the newly shrunken car that it once had been inside and placed it carefully in a storage orb. It would finish inspecting the intriguing contents of the car when its surroundings permitted it.

A high-pitched neigh was emitted from the aliens' new pet. The alien felt like the thing it had been missing in its life had finally been found. The humans were not solitary creatures and the alien could see why. The alien sat there and watched the stars with its new friend. It had found an ally on its adventure. The alien thought about how it changed its mind about the humans. After seeing the way that the two humans co-operated, it gave the alien hope. Its own race couldn't operate at all in such a way and the alien wouldn't have been on this "mission" if it had been content at home.

The alien decided there and then to embark on its own mission whatever that would be. The humans gave the alien hope, hope that peace across the universe could be tenable...

...We're interrupting this segment with some breaking news for our listeners tonight. At five past nine a large tectonic anomaly occurred by the Nevada-Utah border.

scientists stationed at the US airbase near where the tremors occurred who are investigating the occurrence say that it may have been due to underground renovations that hit a large pocket of gas underground, we have no images to show you as the area has been sealed off for more “extensive investigations”...

ANTHOLOGY 2021

THE STORM (extract)

Stephen Harpur

The Hurricane sirens haven't gone off in over twenty years, today they did.

****Warning***- This is not a test- Threat imminent for all residents in the states of Washington, Idaho, and Oklahoma. - Be advised of the following: Severe rain and wind. thunder storms and flash floods - Lock all entry points into your house, Doors, Windows, and pet entries. - Shut all blinds and turn off all lights - Please resist from using any devices that emit loud noises or light. - All these measures are now in affect and are to be followed indefinitely. - Failure to comply with these measures will result in arrest. -Stay safe and stay alert for updates.*

This was the message that cut across the Sunday news. I looked out the window to confirm my suspicion. The weather was nothing out of the ordinary, just cloudy with a bit of sunshine creeping through. Confused, I stepped outside to get a better view of the sky. I was not the only one, several neighbours were standing outside puzzled and confused. It was then that a series of notifications went off on people's phones including mine. I reached for my iPhone to be presented with a similar message that

was broadcasted to the TV. As I was reading the message on my phone, I was startled by the sudden sounds of sirens speeding down the street. I looked up to see a police car rushing down the neighbourhood. The officer was yelling, for everyone to get indoors and saying that this was not a drill.

There wasn't any sign of an imminent threat. Filled with doubt, I reluctantly decided to comply with the instructions as I used to a police officer myself. I left After securing the house and shutting the blinds, I decided to make my way down to the basement. After sitting down and reading over the instructions for a second time, it stood out to me how obscure they were. Why do the lights need to be turned off? Why could devices that emit loud sounds not be used? I snapped out of my train of thought as I heard a loud crash from upstairs.

It sounded like a truck door being slammed but I wasn't sure., I decided to go upstairs to glimpse out of the window to check what was happening. To my surprise, there was a military SUV housing three soldiers holding what looked like M16 assault rifles.

'Surely there isn't martial law' I muttered under my breath. The weather had gotten worse but did not merit a warning. My anticipation got the better of me and I made my way to the front door to try and get some answers. As I stepped outside, I was unsettled to find how abnormally warm it was. The sight of the weather was a light grey, the

kind you would associate with a cold cloudy day. I was broken out of the bewilderment by shouting from the soldiers. One of them spotted me and alerted the others, next thing I knew I was staring down the barrel of three rifles.

Like a deer in headlights, I was frozen in my tracks.

‘Why are you out here!’ one of the soldiers shouted.

‘I heard a bang and just wanted to know what's going’ I responded.

‘Sir you need to get back indoors immediately’ another officer said. I wasn’t going to argue as their guns were still locked onto me. Confused, I turned around and began making my way back. As I opened the door, I heard shouting coming from one of the soldier’s radios,

‘We need backup! they are getting in!’ The SUV housing the three officers went speeding down the estate. It was at this point that I knew the storm wasn’t the only thing I should be worried about.

I tried to gather and process the last few minutes. What does that soldier need backup for? Maybe there's people looting? I put the scenarios through my head but could not make up a solid picture that made sense. Considering the soldiers were now gone, leaving the house, and investigating further had crossed my mind. Due to recent plans for a future camping trip, I had the necessary equipment to protect against the poor conditions of storms. This equipment included a hiking backpack, hiking shoes, waterproof clothes, and a flashlight. I also

had an assault rifle as the area I was going was known to have aggressive bears. I concluded that I would investigate outside as I didn't have anything else to do and I don't have the greatest attention span.

I packed my bag with supplies such as water, a torch and snacks. I then put on my camping gear. I debated taking the gun but decided that I should just in case. I brought a fair amount of ammunition but did not overdo it. I made sure that I had everything ready and once again reached for the front door. I opened it to find it was even darker, and that it had begun raining. The temperature was still hot maybe even warmer than earlier.

Unnerved by the heat, I ventured out through my neighbourhood. The only sound was the rain crashing against the ground and the occasional flurry of wind. I began to make my way in the same direction as I saw the SUV speed off in. The city wasn't far so I decided if there was one place that the SUV went, it would be there. The journey was strange, even with the now torrential rain, the area still seemed to be dead silent. The houses seemed abandoned without the presence of light. I broke out of this trance when I heard gunshots in the distance.

Focused, I walked up slowly in the direction of the shooting. After two minutes of walking cautiously, I saw two Military SUVs with doors wide open. I called out so that I wouldn't startle any of the soldiers and possibly get shot. There was no response. I shouted again to be met with the same outcome. I know got a firm grip on my gun

and pointed it in the direction ahead of me. As I approached the SUVs, I saw the bodies of five soldiers, three of which were the ones from earlier. There was no sign of them being injured in any way. However, they had no pulse. The department store in front of the SUVs had its windows and doors broken down. It was then, further in the distance, I saw a figure.

At first, I thought it was another soldier, but as I began making my way closer, I could see that this was not the case. I could see that the person was wearing black, at least that's what I thought. As my view adjusted, I could see that the figure wasn't even human. I heard a faint whisper from beside me. I looked over to see a man in his early 40s signalling to go over to him. As I made my way over, he whispered for me to take cover behind the building. The figure was humanoid, tall, slim and a charcoal black colour.

Further in the distance, a person called out to the figure. At first the figure remained motionless. He called out again but this time the figure slowly made its way in the direction of the person. The person then reached for a holstered firearm at the side of their waist. The figure, unphased and completely silent still made its way towards the man. He fired three shots into the centre of the creature. I was shocked to see that the bullets were simply absorbed by the creature without even making it flinch. The figure simply grabbed the man with one arm and looked directly at him. The figure's eyes were a bright

glowing orange. The man, now struggling to get out of the figures grasp, simply looked into the eyes of the creature and went motionless as if his soul had just been drained from his body.

I turned to the person who called me behind the building. There were a million questions racing through my mind.

‘What was that thing?’ I asked the man.

‘There’s no time for answers now, we need to get back inside’. There’s a safe house not too far from here.’ I didn’t really have another choice. It was either to follow the person or cross paths with that figure. I decided to trust the person.

I followed the person for about ten minutes until we arrived at a church. This wasn’t my local church, but I had seen it passing through the city. The man knocked on the door.

‘We got another one’ he said. The door opened and we were met with a small refuge. It was vast with an old architecture. There were 20 people or so inside. We walked in and sat down on one of the benches. I asked him what was that thing that we saw earlier.

‘I don’t exactly know’ he replied. I have come across the creature before on a seal's operation he said. He proceeded to tell me this:

‘Three years ago, when I was serving in the seals, we were sent on an operation to investigate a disturbance in

a remote region off the coast of the Caribbean. We were searching for a missing recon team of three that was of great value to the CIA. We arrived thinking it would be just another search and rescue mission however it couldn't have been further off.

We were told to search the cave and extract the recon team. We were also told how unidentified species may be down there and to be cautious of the surroundings. We split up into squads of four to cover the area of the cave more efficiently. After fifteen minutes of walking deeper into the cave, a member of the recon team emerged from the darkness of the way we were going. He stopped for a minute and was hyperventilating, trying to recover his breath.

'Theres too many of them we have to go now' he said while gasping for air. One of the squad members went over to calm him down so we could ask him what was going on.

'Theres too many of what?' the other squad member said.

'They are from the moon; we are still studying them, but they are extremely dangerous.' We all looked at him in confused until one of the soldiers broke the silence and asked the scientist where the rest of his team was. 'They are down further, I tried to get them to come with me, but they wouldn't listen.' We then notified the other squads of the news and requested backup. One of the soldiers escorted the scientist back to the surface. The two other

squad members and I now began searching for the other recon team members. We didn't know what to expect from the scientist's brief description.

We were fully alert and had our guns locked on the vast dark area ahead of us. Luckily, we were supplied with night vision goggles for the operation, however everything still seemed dark. After what seemed like hours of making our way through the cave, we stumbled across what looked like an abandoned laboratory. The lab was damaged and close to destroyed. The windows were broken with shards of glass lining the floor around them. One of the soldiers found a power button. When it was pressed, the bright lab lights turned on, flickering every few seconds or so.

With still no sign of the backup we requested, we began to explore the lab. The interior was almost as damaged as the exterior. The lab equipment was spread on the floor either damaged or destroyed. As we made our way through the different rooms, we discovered what looked like a containment room. There were cages made of bulletproof glass. Two empty and one broken. As we approached the broken cage, we discovered another recon team member motionless on the floor. There were no signs of injury, however he had no pulse.

At this point we agreed to backtrack until we met with backup. It wasn't long, only about two minutes of walking. Now with at least thirty soldiers, we began to press forwards. The only way to go now was further past the lab.

We heard low echoes of screaming in the distance. We began running in the direction of the screaming. We eventually reached the end of the cave. There was one of those figures there approaching the last recon member.

At first, we thought it was person, but we soon realised that wasn't the case. I grabbed the recon member to allow the team to open fire on the figure. My objective was now to get the team member up to the surface. I got a glimpse of what was happening behind me and saw that the bullets weren't affecting the creature in any visible way. I didn't question the recon member due to how fast and sensitive the scenario was. After twenty minutes of running back up through the cave, we finally reached the surface. I reported what happened and was told to bring the recon member over to a helicopter in the distance which I assumed to be the CIA. As I was escorting the team member over, I saw special operation soldiers deploying from three blacked out helicopters. They made their into the entrance of the cave which I also saw the other seals retreating from.

The spec ops soldiers were suited with matte black tactical gear and were wearing gas masks. The weapons that they were carrying were not models that I was familiar with. Whatever it was, it was not standard issue for any military ranks. I now knew that what I had seen earlier was not just a fabrication from the speed of the situation. Since we signed a non-disclosure agreement before joining the seals, we could not tell anyone what

had happened. This included interviews, friends, family, and everything in-between. I didn't even know too much. When I caught up with the soldier who extracted the first recon member, he questioned the member on the way to the surface to try and get some answers. The member said they were investigating an apparent asteroid crash. The soldier then asked what those 'things' that you were referring to earlier.

'They came from the asteroids; all we know is that they are hostile and are not from earth'. That was all the soldier could ask him., as soon as they reached the surface, the suits from the CIA quickly escorted him away. We were re-briefed on how we signed our non-disclosure agreement, and that the CIA was going to be handling this operation from this point forward. That's the last we heard about the operation.

I was completely shocked about the seal's story. I asked him if he was given orders to bring people in. He chuckled and said,

'I left the seals last year'.

'Why are you here? I asked him'.

'I heard from an old friend that was on the same operation as me three years ago that the warning has nothing to do with the storm. He said he couldn't get into details right away, but it was something to do with those things we crossed path with three years ago'.

Still in disbelief from the whole situation, I took a few minutes to gather my thoughts and process all the information I had just heard. A few hours ago, I was just sheltering from an apparent storm and now I'm hiding from an alien. I saw that the seal was now packing up to go back outside again. I caught up to him and asked where he was going. He said he was going out to look for more people outside and try and bring them here safely. I said I would go with him and that I had the adequate skills of being an ex-police officer. He was reluctant at first, but he needed all the help he could get. We got our gear ready and made our way back outside.

'What's your name' I asked.

'Mason' he responded. 'You' he asked.

'Michael' I replied.

'Ok Michael, if we do run into any of those things we have to try and avoid them. From what I've seen our guns won't do anything.'

'Got it' I replied and off we went. Mason said he was still waiting for a response from his friend in the seals as to what was going on. He said it would take time as access to information that high up is heavily restricted. After wondering for over half an hour with no sign of any life whatsoever, we decided to take a five-minute brake in a park that had a sheltered area for the times it did rain. We were about to head off when Mason stopped and said his friend got back to him.

He stood there, still as a statue reading the message on his phone. His face wasn't giving off any reaction or emotion. After two minutes of him standing there and reading the message, he glanced up at me and said, 'You're not going to believe this'.

'I don't think you can surprise me any more at this point' I replied. He went on to say that the CIA extracted the creature the seals ran into three years ago. The catch is they also extracted multiple of those creatures. 'The CIA was running "experiments" with those lifeforms and apparently, they escaped. They won't tell the public the truth as they fear that people wouldn't be able to handle the situation and it would cause widespread panic.' 'How did they plan for there to be a storm at the exact time.' I replied.

'They have a weather "transformer" he responded.' It doesn't work the way you think he said. They can use it to generate the weather they want. It can enhance current weather and make it more violent and worse than what it was originally going to be. All they really had to do was choose a day that had a rain forecast. The transformer itself is still a prototype but they didn't really have any other way to keep people inside'.

'That would explain the abnormal heat and strange instructions I said'. As we were talking an explosion followed by a flash of orange flames went off in the distance.

‘Keep your guard up’ said Mason. We began to make our way over to the direction of the explosion. It wasn’t too far off, only a 10-minute walk. As we made our way to the centre of the explosion, the street leading up was full of burning debris. We couldn’t make out what the explosion was straight away until we got closer. There was a burning SUV ahead of us. This wasn’t a civilian or military SUV; it was the kind that you would see escorting the president. It was heavily armoured with reinforced windows. Even in flames it was still intact. Further in the distance we saw two bodies of people wearing all black.

As we approached the bodies, Mason said that it looked like the CIA. Both had no pulse, again like the last bodies there was no sign of any visible harm. The equipment they used was not orthodox whatsoever. It was completely different to what the soldiers earlier had. ‘These are the weapons they had three years ago’ Mason said. He picked one up and handed it to me and said ‘Theres a reason that they are using these. ‘We should take them; they could be useful’. The guns themselves were unique. They were unlike any other gun. The gun wasn’t big and didn’t weigh more than a standard assault rifle. The big differences were in its ammunition and barrel. The gun didn’t have any bullets, or even any entrance for a magazine. Instead, it had a canister at the bottom. We had no idea what was in that canister or what it would do. We hadn’t fired the gun so we had no idea how loud it would be, or what it

would fire. We were now more worried on what could have caused the explosion.

A grey fog began to descend upon the city. We weren't sure how much worse the weather was going to get so we decided to make our way back to the church. Well, that was the plan until we heard inaudible screaming in the distance. We decided to pursue the screaming. It didn't sound far maybe 300 meters away. As we approached the screaming, we saw one of the creatures. The screaming was coming from inside a building and the creature was standing outside.

We assumed that there was going to be more creatures in the area. We took cover behind a car that was parked on the street. I saw mason examining his gun, he looked like he was trying to figure out how it worked. I looked back over at the creature. It was still there stationary staring at the building. Its eyes burning orange. Mason now turned to face the creature as well. He had the weapon aimed at the creature. The creature jolted to face our direction staring right at us. Almost the reaction you would get as if you startled a cat. The creature began to make its way in our direction. Mason fired the gun. The street sat in total silence only the visual of a rapid blue beam fired at the creature. A few seconds later a loud boom filled the street, almost like sound that lags after a jet passes. The creature shrieked as it was hit by the beam. It slowly disappeared like the effect of fire burning paper.

I was surprised by the effect of the gun and I concluded mason was too by his shocked reaction.

We made our way into the building to try and locate the screaming. As we made our way up what felt like hundreds of floors we were outside the room. I gave mason a countdown to breach the door. '3... 2... 1...'. Mason kicked down the door. 'It's a god damn stereo!' he shouted in a distraught tone. The lights suddenly shut off in the building. Loud footsteps began to approach the room. It was pitch black and we couldn't see anything. My gun was grabbed from my shoulder and I was pushed to what I assumed to be the back of the room. The lights booted back on, in front of us were four people in masks. We were now disarmed and surrounded.

ICES OF BATTLE: HARD LUCK, CHARLIE

Ire Guidoriagao

All writing here is fictional with the base of historical events of the South African Border War.

Good evening. My name is Alice Vine, and I will be the presenter of this telling of today's story of Voice of Battle.

Today, we will be seeing and hearing the words of South African, Ackley Lesedi. Ackley Lesedi was a seven-year veteran of the South African Air Force from 1980 to 1987, serving as a part of the SAAF's 16th Squadron in the South African Border Wars against the communist guerilla forces such as the MPLA and PLAN that ravaged the people and military of South Africa. During this service in the Defense Force, Ackley had the job of deploying and retrieving the soldiers on the field, seeing days changing from hot and uneventful to intense and unpredictable at the snap of a finger. Ackley Lesedi was responsible for reacting to and passing the messages on his radio so that he could be able to save the lives of his fellow soldiers and other soldiers and people. Ackley Lesedi now has a wife and two sons, and works as a commercial pilot for Aer Lingus, a job he has been working for twenty-one years.

Unfortunately, Ackley Lesedi had to hear many intense radio communications in his years of his service. Ackley had to hear some of the last words of his fellow servicemembers, which brings us to this tragic tale of Sergeant Charlie Broom, an infantry soldier of the 8th infantry Battalion of the South African Defense Force, and a close friend who showed honor and respect to every person that met him, even his enemies. This tale today shows the valiant skill and bravery showed by the South African soldiers and the cunning and manpower of the communist guerilla fighters of the MPLA and PLAN who fought against them. We give respect to those who have fallen in this long and terrible war.

The South African National Defense Force was happy enough to allow us to hear and retrieve a recording of the helicopter's communications between Ackley and Broom. The recording has been converted into transcript by our transcriber, Connor Daly. The recording can now be heard at the BBC website in *Hard Luck, Charlie*.

CONTEXT

On November 11, 1985, the 22-year-old Corporal Ackley Lesedi, with the aid of 36-year-old 2nd Lieutenant Vincent Schreiner of the 8th Infantry Battalion, was given the task of going 7 kilometers west of Beaufort West to save a group of eight soldiers of the 8th Infantry Battalion from a grand ambush from PLAN guerilla fighters. Those soldiers were Private Jans Vanessa, Private Garrett Zanele,

Lance Corporal Jason Friedrich, Corporal Dennis Saburo, Corporal Siphon Nonjabulo, Sergeant Arno Paavo, Sergeant Oratile Sizani, and Sergeant Charlie Broom. Ackley Lesedi says a few words on his memories before his flight to save Sergeant Broom and his men:

I was done doing ballas bak when I was given the order to retrieve Sersant Broom from his position. Even before I got in the cockpit of the SA 330 Puma helicopter I flew at that time, I knew that he'd be able to hold out whatever position he and his men would be in. Charlie was a hard bru, one of them lads who didn't take no for an answer. He wasn't a domkop that would get everyone killed, he was a smart lad who looked death in the face like it was his friend. 'he'll be alright' I said in my head as I started me helicopter, 'Bru will be alright.'

Radio starts

Ackley: Aye you, this is Golf 5-4 reporting to you Sierra 5-3, over,

Broom: Aye, this is Sierra 5-3 reporting in. Ackley, *jy het moerse goed chommie, maar jy is befok vir jy doen dit.*

Ackley: *Ja, 'n bietjie.* Where's your position here?

Broom: We're in a- break.

Ackley: Affirmative

Six seconds go by as sounds of explosives, rapid gunfire and shouts of English and Afrikaans were heard on the helicopter radio. At the end of the six seconds, the words 'Punks've ran off, Sergeant!' were heard as the gunfire and explosives died down.

Broom: 307, 452. We're in a broken-down red house surrounded by guerilla lads with rifles, machine guns, rocket launchers and artillery. Must be close to a hundred of those lads, and we've gotten a bunch of those guys.

Ackley: Affirmative, will remember that. What's your status?

Broom: Lost one *Soldaat* and two of my One-Liners. Lads got some good shots on them, unfortunately.

Ackley: Condolences, ou.

Broom: We're having a bit of a break here, might want to speed it up before the PLAN boys do a close in on us.

Ackley: *Blerrie*, your expectations are quite enormous for a helicopter that doesn't have any machine guns on it.

Broom: *Bliksemse, het jy enigiets?*

Ackley: 2nd Lieutenant Vincent Schreiner is with me to be my helicopter gunner.

Broom: *Hy is 'n butch.* Glad to have him.

Ackley: *Ja*, he sends you his regards. We're coming for you from the south, only two kilometers away from your location.

Broom: *Baie seëninge, broer.*

Radio Communication ends. Twenty-six seconds after the conversation between Ackley and Broom, gunfire, explosions and shouts were heard again over the radio

Mr. Ackley Lesedi remembers the moments during his flight to Charlie Broom's location:

I knew in my heart that I had to get there as fast as this helicopter can go. I looked at the ground below to see if Broom and crew were anywhere down below. I prayed and prayed that he may have gotten his location wrong and that he's closer than he has said. I remember 2nd Lieutenant Schreiner had a short conversation with me. He said to me in his strong Boer accent 'Your mate's gonna be alright.' I said back to him as I continued to look down on the ground, 'Bakgat, but Charlie is bossies; loves fighting like hell. Hopefully you're right then.'

After that, we stayed silent through the flight, probably out of respect for my worry or the need of silence in the situation we were in. I looked back briefly to see 2nd Lieutenant Schreiner checking his Bren LMG and his helmet, with sweat pouring down the patient face of his. I looked back and I continued the journey for my friend.

Ackley neared the position of Sergeant Broom and his men, when his helicopter radio activated.

Broom: This is Sierra 5-3. I have now lost-

Sounds of rampant gunshots were heard

Ackley: Sierra 5-3, this is Golf 5-4 here, report in.

Broom: I've lost Private Vanessa and Sergeant Paavo. PLAN guerillas have broken our defences and are circling into the red house I and my soldiers are in. Honestly impressive that is.

Ackley: Broom, stay in there, we're coming in to get you.

Broom: Better get us before they get us, *bru*. I honestly don't think we can hold out any longer.

Ackley: Don't say that Charlie. You're getting it done. What do you have with you?

Broom: We're emptying out our R1's and R4's, we used all our grenades, and our FN MAG is screwed up and can't shoot from all the non-stop firing we've been giving to the punks outside.

Ackley: You do whatever you got there so we can get the lot of you, understood?

Broom: Underst-

Explosion was heard from the radio!

When I heard the explosion over the radio, I remembered shouting desperately, 'Charlie, Charlie! You hear me mate? Don't ignore me now!' and 2nd Lieutenant Scheiner went to me with a saddened and remorseful expression on his face. I didn't want to listen to what he said because I did not want to know what had happened to Charlie, I

didn't want to dwell on the possibility that Charlie and his crew were all dead.

We were fortunate enough to have a conversation with the now 71-year-old retired Captain Vincent Scheiner about what he did when Ackley was panicking in the helicopter.

Poor lad was in denial, he couldn't talk to me without saying to not say what I needed to say to him, kept saying stuff like 'I don't want to talk right now!' and 'Charlie needs me, I need to get to him'. (The situation) Went on for what could be, to me, about half an hour before I was able to say to him as he desperately flew the helicopter as fast he could, 'Your mate's not here no more. He's gone, I know it.', and unfortunately I did know it. When he heard it, it seemed like his body went automatic and flew the helicopter around to go back to base, but his mind was still in denial of what had happened. All I could think to myself was 'Hard luck, Charlie.' I was thinking of how bad his situation was for Ackley, like, look, I know how it feels to be in his position. I know how hard it is to lose a brother, but (Ackley) dealt with it in the hardest way possible through denying what happened with Broom and his crew, while knowing at the back of his mind that it is now a reality what had happened to them. You can't blame Ackley; you'd be in his shoes if you had to run the miles he ran.

After the failed rescue by Corporal Ackley and 2nd Lieutenant Scheiner, a rescue team of soldiers from Koevoet, the South West African Police's counter-insurgency branch, were sent to the last known location of Sergeant Broom and his crew. When the rescue team got there, they found the remains of Sergeant Broom and the other soldiers that fought with him, flies and the African heat eating away at the decomposing bodies of the soldiers. After bringing back the bodies to the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital and put through a long period of body examination, it was confirmed that Private Jans Vanessa, Private Garrett Zanele, Lance Corporal Jason Friedrich, Corporal Dennis Saburo, Corporal Sipho Nonjabulo, Sergeant Arno Paavo, Sergeant Oratile Sizani, and Sergeant Charlie Broom were all confirmed dead.

The eight soldiers were given a military funeral and were all posthumously given the Honoris Crux gold medals and Pro Merito decorations for their selfless acts to protect their fellow men in the shadow of death. The funeral was honored to the fallen soldiers as not an event of sorrow, but a remembrance of the bravery and sacrifices they've shown in the last moments of their lives.

Corporal Ackley Lesedi was given the honor of saying his words about the fallen men.

'Private Jans Vanessa lost the chance to see his mother, father and grandmother again. Private Garrett Zanele lost the chance to send half of his income and aid to his family near Millwood this month. Lance Corporal Jason

Friedrich lost the chance to see his fiancé in Johannesburg. Corporal Dennis Saburo lost the chance to see his sister graduating from University with a master's degree in biology. Corporal Siphon Nonjabulo lost the chance to achieve his dream in becoming a Grand Prix racecar driver to honor the name of his father. Sergeant Arno Paavo lost the chance to come back to his seven-year-old twin daughters and wife in Cape Town, who waited for a year to see him come back from his duties. Sergeant Oratile Sizani lost the chance to say to his mother 'Mama, I have enough money to pay for the back surgery. Now you won't ever have to have to suffer the back pain anymore.' and Sergeant Charlie Broom lost the chance to come back to his family farm in the north, to spend the rest of the days farming with his two brothers, Gotch and Oswald Broom.

We have lost friends, fathers, uncles, brothers and good men. But with loss comes a remainder of something that cannot be lost: their bravery and sacrifices. In the situation of uncertainty and extreme danger, these eight brave men looked death and fate in the face and said to them with confidence. 'Give me your best shot.' And with that, they fought with tremendous effort and valor until their last breaths. We may have lost them in body, but their memories remain in all of us. We pray that their souls rest peacefully now, for they have served a lifetime of showing what goodness that humanity is capable of.'

ANTHOLOGY 2021

LEAVING CLONKEEN COLLEGE

Mark Sullivan

“Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end” - Seneca

My name is Mark Sullivan. Soon I will be leaving Clonkeen College. I feel sad and excited. I will miss all my friends. I will miss my teachers and SNAs. I enjoyed cooking with Miss Marley. I enjoyed Macbeth and The Tempest too. I enjoyed going out to get some lunch with Daragh and Louis. I will miss Music and PE and Science with Miss O'Rourke. I will miss all of the Wednesday trips. Next year I will go to college in Bray to do horse riding. I am 18 now. I loved Clonkeen so much. I might come back to visit again.

PART II:
Poetry

HEUSTON 2015

Conor Spain

(2016)

A station is not stationary.
Conversely, it's quite fluid
Arrivals and Departures
to rail, they're best suited

Seated beside the Liffey
Old Kingsbridge Station rests.
Now named Dublin Heuston,
It faces the same tests

Dealing with early risers
And late-comers too
The masses of humanity,
simply, pass through

Ignorant to the fact,
that they have just passed
a station that has seen
the wonders of the past.

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From the age of steam
with coal a-plenty
with fire and smoke galore

To the modern age
with electricity
and always wanting more.

This technology, two centuries old
is under supreme duress.
So if your train is delayed,
Relax, breathe, de-stress.

8

Conor McLoughlin

(2012)

I am just a lost soul
Relying on suspicion
Trapped by the night
Confused but not dazed
Dazzled by the light
Staring down a tunnel
That's slowly closing -
Always closing.
No time to stop and think
If only I may.
Your pain does not hurt me
As it is all I have ever felt
Yet do not feel pity for me;
Stating my crooked turn
Does not mean we all must endure
My lingering state, my lingering state
Does not appeal to me
Neither the portrayal of the future I see.
This tirade if unleashed is fond of
Running rings around the eight,
I feel I have made a stigma that most
Will hate.

JAWS

Ronan Dunne

(2013)

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.

LIKE A FOX

Shane O'Sullivan

At dusk he emerges,
Comes out from his shadows.
Auburn curls keep him warm,
As he twitches his wet nose.

Patrolling the streets,
With his gleaming eyes.
Paws like coal wag,
At streetlamp flies.

He twists your words,
Snarling sharpened fangs.
Then goes to his den,
To hide from local gangs.

He is sly like a fox.

DREAMLAND FANTASY

Eoghan Echivarre

(2020)

I think I am going insane
so, I fabricate a world in my brain
where I am superman and you are my Lois lane
I escape out of reality and enter my dreamland fantasy
in there that the world is colourful and happy
you can say it's a cheesy movie where it's all nice and
sappy
but the real world it's all dark and dreary and damp and
eerie
where every five seconds you see a little boy being
scared and teary
but that's all it is a fantasy in my head life is boring and
pointless I am still going to end up dead
everything I say and do doesn't make a difference
I am not going down in history I won't solve murder
mystery's
SO WHATS THE BLOODY POINT IN LIVING!
I give up there is no other reason to live
Goodbye ...
oh, wait that was a lie but to be honest I am ready to die
don't start crying today I am already gone to my fantasy
where I am flying away

DEATH OF RADIO

Robert O' Gorman

(2020)

I remembered the days when I used to get played
Now my very essence has very much decayed
I now rest on the cupboard gathering dust
People don't care for me as I lack lust

Strangers look at me like I'm some sort of antiquity
They think I'm broken but I've still got my dignity
They don't dare turn me on or test me
When they want to turn on music, they don't dare
suggest me

Soon enough I'll be disposed of and die in the attic
For most of my other friends like the newspaper and
television it will be problematic.
Society doesn't need us anymore were all just history
People got their phones now, so their life is devoid of
mystery

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A garage sale was coming up and I was being ignored
They disposed me in a box where all the irrelevant stuff
was stored

An old aged neighbor came in and was interested by my
presence

The man loved me and took me in as a present

I was pleased to know that I still had purpose
Even though the amount of people using phones is on a
surplus

I see the man enjoy the music I play like I used to do
I'm happy that my life has been given a renew.

THE LAKE ISLE OF CLONKEEN

Ned Quirke

Kevin Nolan

Naoise Ó Conluain

Ronan Hayes

(2013)

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.

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