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Empathising with indignant zombies and conflicted cavemen: how George Saunders creates
New Sincerity from postmodern themes in “Sea Oak” & “Pastoralia”.

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Abstract

This thesis comprises two sections: a critical section analysing two short stories by George Saunders, “Sea Oak” and “Pastoralia”, and a creative section of five works of short fiction. The critical section is an investigation into how Saunders uses postmodern writing features such as outlandish characters, stylistic coolness, surrealness, and satire, but goes against the grain of postmodernism in that he writes with seriousness and authenticity. Saunders is described as a New Sincerity writer and this thesis looks at what this term means and how the author creates affecting stories that “make us sensitive to the experiences and perspectives of others” (Basseler 154), while populating his texts with characters who range from zombies to ersatz cavemen. In the critical component, I focus on how Saunders creates a pathway to empathy while deploying cruel, dark humour.

The creative component of the thesis: *Get Me Out of Here*, a collection of five short stories, explores this theme of creating New Sincerity fiction from postmodern styles of writing, particularly satire, dark humour and the surreal. The first two stories, “Tiger Tamer” and “Georgia & Trevor” feature absurd events that interrupt otherwise realist narratives and are influenced by the postmodern techniques used in Saunders’ work. “Speech Bubbles” dwells on themes of connection and relationships, following a moment of surreal drama. The story “Escape Room” ventures into territory similar to Saunders’ “Pastoralia”, as occupants of a gameshow prison provide entertainment to viewers while also being prisoners of a corroding corporation. “Gustav’s Pole” deals with themes of mythology, escapism and the trials of adolescence.

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I would like to thank my wife Inge who has been a constant source of support during my studies, as well as a willing and honest reader of numerous drafts. My thanks also to my daughters Lara and Ria for their help in guiding me as to how a young woman might react if she woke up with a penis on her head.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge George Saunders. During my studies I have read essays and interviews where Saunders generously passes on words of wisdom for aspiring writers, and I have drawn upon his expertise during the writing of this thesis. I also want to acknowledge the moments of joy his short fiction has given me.

Introduction

Aunt Bernie is one upset zombie: “Some people get everything and I got nothing. Why? Why did that happen?” (125) she laments at the end of George Saunders’ story “Sea Oak” (1998). The character of Aunt Bernie rises from the grave intending to eat shrimp, take a string of lovers and set right the injustices she faced in life. If postmodernism is characterised by “outlandish characters, stylistic coolness, surrealness, and satire” (Basseler 154), then the resurrection of Aunt Bernie in “Sea Oak” can be seen as the work of a postmodern writer. In this thesis I highlight how postmodern authors often oppose traditional values and ideals; they seek to upend those structures, while making no attempt to create clear messaging, and instead “creating a culture where it is difficult to understand what values or beliefs are held” (Balliro 38). Yet George Saunders has been described, by academic and literary critic Layne Neeper, as a writer at the vanguard of the New Sincerity (287) – a movement Neeper defines as “a congruence of avowal and actual feeling” (283). New Sincerity places emphasis on sentimental values, and “encourages readers to see themselves in others” (Neeper 287). So, in this thesis, I will establish how Saunders writes in a way that invokes empathy and authenticity while deploying postmodern features such as dark comedy, the grotesque and absurd. How does a “brutalist architect of whimsical despair” (Harvilla) create empathy and “soften the heart” (Saunders, in Neeper 286)?

My analysis of Saunders’ short stories “Pastoralia” and “Sea Oak” will highlight his deployment of supernatural elements and grotesque theme parks: these are Saunders tropes that crop up throughout his work, including: “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline” (1996), “CommComm” (2005), and “Brad Carrigan, American” (2006).

I will also pinpoint the postmodern features of Saunders' writing in "Pastoralia" and "Sea Oak": the comic, absurd and surreal. I will go on to explain why these stories are also examples of New Sincerity because of a willingness to engage readers in a serious, authentic examination of the issues surrounding his characters.

In Chapter One, I look at the features of postmodernism and how New Sincerity seeks to transcend the cynicism associated with it. While zombie aunties and conflicted "cavemen" characters may seem incongruent with seriousness and authenticity, I will demonstrate, in Chapter Two, how Saunders' use of absurdity and satire provokes the reader into engaging with the ethical questions raised in the texts of "Pastoralia" and "Sea Oak". Furthermore, I will address the complex issue of the darkly comic themes in these short stories and explore the question of how empathy is created for characters who are also demeaned and ridiculed.

This effect of Saunders' writing is of interest to me as I develop my own collection of short fiction. I wish to give greater consideration to narrative ethics – my responsibility to my reader. In a literary context, an author who is conscious of narrative ethics sees the reader's needs as a "visceral concern" (Filipovic 72).

Saunders has been an inspiration for my writing and it is clear that I have been using some of his features in my work, such as satire and magical realism. Saunders has described how many of his stories develop from "goofing around", experimenting, and having fun with characters and situations (Saunders in Brockes). Yet he addresses serious themes and issues in his stories. I hope to gain some insight, with this study, into how having fun with drafting a story can lead on to a substantial narrative relationship between writer and reader.

Literature Review

Methodologically, I am working in the discipline of Creative Writing. The fields I am working within are Narrative Ethics and New Sincerity. As cited above, in the introduction, Zlatan Filipovic's 2011 analysis of Emmanuel Levinas' work on narrative ethics defines the term as the self's "responsibility for the other person" (Filipovic 59). In a literary context, an ethical encounter with the reader involves a writer pushing beyond their own needs or feelings to ask: what will my reader get from this experience? The term New Sincerity, meanwhile, was coined by literary critic Adam Kelly, who defined the writing style as "a congruence of avowal and actual feeling" (283), adding that it places emphasis on communication with others. In his 2018 University of Rhode Island PhD dissertation, Matthew J. Balliro also examines New Sincerity in American Literature and defines it as an intense focus on fostering coherent connections between literary texts and readers. He argues that at the heart of Narrative Ethics is "interpreting how an author or text navigates innumerable layers of artifice and performativity in order to pass along an earnest message, idea, feeling or value to their audience (Balliro 1).

My research into New Sincerity has helped me place Saunders within context, alongside other writers referred to as proponents of the New Sincerity. David Foster Wallace and Jennifer Egan are two authors Kelly has highlighted within the movement, while Jonathan D. Fitzgerald, writing in *The Atlantic* in 2012, includes Zadie Smith, Jonathan Franzen and Michael Chabon as New Sincerity authors who write "popular books with a sense of morality" (Fitzgerald).

My primary text is Saunders' second short story collection, *Pastoralia*. This collection includes the short story primary texts that are the subject of this thesis: "Pastoralia" and "Sea Oak". "Pastoralia" is narrated by a worker at a struggling theme park where he

performs as a “caveman”. The narrator is a conscientious worker who is caught between pleasing his employers and being supportive to his more rebellious cave-mate colleague. “Sea Oak” also has a male narrator performing a role for his employer. He is an exotic dancer at a pilot-themed club. He struggles to maintain his dignity while performing his work, much like the caveman in “Pastoralia”. The story also features Bernie, who is a hard-working, long-suffering auntie holding the family together until dying of fright during a domestic burglary. She rises from the grave and returns to haunt the family with a string of foul-mouthed orders as to how to turn their fortunes around. These two stories are selected because they share postmodern themes: black humour, satire, playfulness, magical realism. It will be useful therefore to explore how the stories move beyond the confines of postmodernism and into New Sincerity.

I also make reference to other stories from Saunders’ oeuvre in this thesis. These stories are from the collections *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (1996), *In Persuasion Nation* (2006), and *Tenth of December* (2013). Saunders deploys zombies and ghosts liberally throughout his work. They haunt the pages of “Brad Carrigan, American”, “The 400 Pound CEO” (1993), and “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline”. I will look at how Saunders’ ghosts often bear witness to injustice, for example as the victims of a neoliberal system or a society that comes under the microscope in Saunders’ fiction. Just as prevalent as the ghosts and zombies in Saunders’ work are the malevolent corporations that seek to control their workforce through manipulative language. This is exemplified in the story “Exhortation” (2000), which is in the form of a jokey but menacing memo to staff from a middle manager regarding performance evaluations. “Escape From Spiderhead” (2010) portrays a prisoner coerced by superiors into inflicting pain upon others. There are some parallels in this story with the ethical decisions the narrator in “Pastoralia” finds himself having to make.

I have drawn on several interviews with George Saunders where he details his writing practice. His 2017 article for *The Guardian*: “What Writers Really Do When They Write”, describes a process of “fooling around” leading eventually to a draft of substance. This article was useful in informing my own practice, and helping me to build more substantial drafts in my creative section of this thesis. In a 2014 interview with Deborah Triesman in *The New Yorker*, Saunders talks about his use of outlandish events to drive his creative work in new directions. This interview gives an insight into Saunders’ awareness of some of the tools he deploys to engage a reader, such as moving away from realism in favour of creating cartoonish but relatable worlds.

Saunders published a new book, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* (2021), during the writing of this thesis. The book contains essays on six Russian 19th Century short stories and insights into Saunders’ own practice. One of the stories featured in the book is Nikolai Gogol’s “The Nose” (1836), a satire about a nose carousing around town. In Chapter Two, I compare the absurdity of “The Nose” with the surreal resurrection of Aunt Bernie in “Sea Oak” in order to analyse the narrative relationship of both stories. Saunders’ analysis of Gogol’s story also led to me experimenting with a similar absurd theme in the creative component of this thesis, which I will explain further in my bridging statement. Chris Power’s 2016 article, “George Saunders's Funny, Sad Stories From a Divided Nation” in *The Guardian* was also helpful in examining how the surreal humour in Saunders’ stories pulls in the reader and invests them in the story. Alex Millen’s 2018 essay on the “Wonderful-Sounding Words of Neoliberalism” in Saunders’ work was useful in analysing how humour is deployed to critique “the gap between the promissory words of neoliberalism” – liberty, freedom, choice, rights – “and the grim realities of social life” (Millen 128).

My key research texts were those that focused on the themes within Saunders’ work that the authors believed elevated it from the realms of postmodernism to New Sincerity.

Layne Neeper, in his essay “To Soften the Heart” (2016), puts Saunders at the vanguard of the New Sincerity movement because he is unafraid of creating satire that is designed to draw attention to values. Neeper claims Saunders “functions in a realm beyond irony and is designed to encourage readers to see themselves in others” (287). This is a view backed by Michael Basseler who, in “Narrative Empathy in George Saunders’s Short Fiction” (2016), describes the humour as a mask for a deeper message about people transcending situations through human love and interaction (Basseler 154). Both writers seem to share an assumption that, in the work of postmodern writers, their cynicism overrides their ability to deliver a statement about society.

There were some key texts that were helpful in analysing how the use of theme parks and ghosts facilitate the sincerity in the subject texts. Michael Trussler, in “Everyday Zombies: Ethics and the Contemporary in ‘Sea Oak’ and ‘Brad Carrigan, American,’” (2016), and Dana Del George, in “Ghosts and Theme Parks: The Supernatural and the Artificial in George Saunders’s Short Stories,” (2016) both highlight how postmodern magical realist themes are used to critique neoliberal society. David Rando, in “George Saunders and the Postmodern Working Class,” (2012) focuses on Aunt Bernie’s resurrection in “Sea Oak”, suggesting “the comic shock of her rising from the grave forces the reader to think about the story as a construct” (Rando 452). Zombie Bernie prompts us to consider the wider implication of what is going on in our world. The main thrust of these essays is that Saunders’ is using recognised postmodern tools to tell unconventional stories that jolt readers into considering wider ethical questions.

Finally, I make reference to a number of texts in an effort to establish links between dark comedy and New Sincerity. The question I seek to address is: how do the cruelly comic situations, within which characters find themselves, square with the sense of empathy and sentimentality that proponents of Saunders as a New Sincerity writer suggest underpins his

work? How does black comedy “soften the heart”? (Saunders, in Neeper 286). Brittany Hirth tackles the complex issues surrounding the deployment of black humour in her 2016 University of Rhode Island PhD dissertation on "Absurdity and Artistry in Twentieth Century American War Literature". Sam Chesters looks at the relationship between dark comedy and narrative ethics in his 2021 article on the satire in “Brad Carrigan, American”. Describing the “Paradox of Comedy” (1997) in the context of theatre, Paul Woodruff argues that comedy has the power to attract and repel; to distract us from painful emotions, and yet help us to engage with characters, to come to care about them. (Woodruff 319).

Chapter 1

Contextualising postmodernism and New Sincerity in relation to Saunders' short fiction

Before attempting to categorise Saunders' writing, it is appropriate to clarify what is meant by some of the terms often used to describe his work. In this chapter I will look at what is meant by postmodernism in a literary context. From there I will outline the New Sincerity movement and how it applies to Saunders.

Saunders and Postmodernism

Postmodernism is "irritatingly difficult to define" according to author and sociologist Mike Featherstone (30). He firstly places postmodernism against the context of modernity – a period that traverses the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution. Postmodernity can be seen as the post-industrial "computerisation" period. This is a period where simulations and models come to blur the lines between "real" and "appearance" (3). Featherstone goes on to describe modernist artists as those "attempting to make sense of the experience of life" (4). The postmodern period in the arts saw a challenge to the high art/pop art hierarchy; the breaking down of boundaries between art and everyday life; a stylistic promiscuity mixing media styles; a tone of parody, pastiche, irony and playfulness; an acknowledgement that art can only be repetition (7).

Gerhard Hoffmann, in his analysis of postmodern American fiction, states that postmodernism arrived in the Sixties as "a reaction against materialism, moralism, individualism, self-consciousness, domesticity, the Cold War" (13). Postmodernism brought a spirit of deconstruction. Hoffmann highlights the subversiveness of postmodernism; a rebellion against ideology. It brought a new intellectual and experimental style; a "spirit of irony, comic mode and playfulness" (14). The postmodern writers took an ontological

approach: they were less concerned with knowledge of truth than questioning the possibility of alternatives. Hoffmann states characters, setting and plot may be retained but fictional worlds are intersected with reality to playfully construct new worlds from old realities (18). Saunders' tendency to set stories in quasi-historical theme parks can be seen as the sort of postmodern trait Hoffmann highlights. Saunders use of theme parks in stories such as "Pastoralia" and "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline" makes the reader conscious of these blurred boundaries between reality and construct. Such boundaries are further blurred by Saunders' deployment of supernatural themes. Ghosts and living characters interact in stories such as "Sea Oak" and "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline". This technique, according to Dallin J. Bundy in his 2012 Utah State University MA thesis on magical realism, is, at its core, an attempt to question the real world (Bundy 9).

It is easy to find further elements of postmodernism – irony and parody – in Saunders' stories. In "Pastoralia" the park management consistently use language that flies in the face of reality: redundancies are merely "Staff Remixing" (63) and rumours are not true – "even those that haven't yet been spread, are false" (62). In "Sea Oak" characters watch a TV show called *The Worst That Could Happen* – an exaggerated, fictional version of contemporary reality shows – in which a man accidentally chops off his hand, gets sucked up by a tornado, and then dropped on a pregnant kindergarten teacher (107). I use these examples in order to establish how Saunders' writing fits into the postmodern category because of a number of motifs: magical realism; a tone of irony, parody and playfulness; and the intersection of fictional and real worlds.

Saunders and New Sincerity

Matthew J. Balliro's 2018 PhD dissertation on New Sincerity in US Literature, defines New Sincerity as an intense focus on fostering coherent connections between literary texts and readers. He argues that at the heart of New Sincerity is "interpreting how an author or text navigates innumerable layers of artifice and performativity in order to pass along an earnest message, idea, feeling or value to their audience; these studies have placed The New Sincerity in opposition to irony or any other mode of expression that purposely obfuscates meaning" (Balliro 1). The opposition referred to here is the postmodern tendency to value irony and obfuscation over meaning and sincerity. Balliro goes on to equate postmodernism with a tendency to sneer at traditional values and ideals – "to upend those structures, to make no attempt to create clear messaging, instead creating a culture where it is difficult to understand what values or beliefs are held" (38). Balliro refers to a 1991 essay by Peter W. Kaplan and Peter Stevenson in crediting New Sincerity with being the reaction to obtuse cynicism. New Sincerity, they argue, is a reversing of this course. It is a statement: Life is a serious business. (Kaplan & Stevenson in Balliro 38). Balliro analyses David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* as part of his thesis –Wallace is a writer to whom Saunders has been compared, as in John C. Hawkins' 2013 Liberty University master's thesis: *David Foster Wallace, George Saunders, and Storytelling in the Age of Entertainment*. Balliro acknowledges that *Infinite Jest* is darkly comic with elements of detachment and fragmentation, but what "overrules" these postmodern themes is the personal, intimate narrative of the central character, whom the text drives readers to connect with (Balliro 54).

In his 2016 article in *The Guardian* on the 20th anniversary of the publication of *Infinite Jest*, Sam Leith also outlines the way Wallace uses postmodern themes, yet eschews postmodern detachment and cynicism. The "antic silliness of *Infinite Jest* masks an intense

moral seriousness” (Leith). This is a statement that I suggest could as easily be applied to Saunders’ “Sea Oak” and “Pastoralia”. During the second chapter of this thesis I will look at how the bizarre and comic scenes in “Sea Oak” and “Pastoralia” draw readers into an invested relationship with the characters in these stories. Leith does not use the term New Sincerity in his article, but he uses this quote from Wallace to illustrate what might have prompted such a trend: “Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what’s wrong, because they’ll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists. Irony’s gone from liberating to enslaving.” (Wallace in Leith). I contend that Saunders can be counted among Wallace’s “few artists” who are just fine with wearing their sentimentality on their sleeve. He can have fun with the “Pastoralia” theme park’s management’s ironic denials of future rumours (63), but as I will detail below, he is also drawing attention to the injustices faced by the workers.

Saunders’ decision to set his story “Pastoralia” in a theme park where workers are employed to act like cavemen and grunt at each other immediately drives the narrative into the realms of the postmodern. The fictional park resembles a dystopian Disneyland, where actors are employed to play characters in order to entertain the visiting public. Saunders, however, takes his theme park to the extreme, portraying it more like a prison for the workers who have to cook their own goats (3), pay a “shit tax” to dispose of their waste products (52), and only communicate with outside family members by fax (17). This tendency of Saunders to use “near-futuristic settings and broad parody” (283) is what Sarah Pogell, in a 2011 *Critique* article, cites in naming him as the “natural heir to such old-guard postmodern greats as Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Vonnegut, and Barthelme” (Pogell 283).

Accepting that Saunders is a natural postmodern heir raises another question: what is it that takes stories such as “Pastoralia” into also being examples of New Sincerity? I contend that Saunders’ characters might inhabit satirical settings such as the absurd theme park of

“Pastoralia” but there is a humanity that comes through that makes their struggles easy to identify with. The narrator of “Pastoralia” is trying to scrape together a living so that his sick son can continue to receive medical care. This is where Layne Neeper suggests a distinction can be drawn between Saunders and his “hip, hyper-ironic peers” (281). The trials and challenges faced by the narrator of “Pastoralia” have a “cumulative effect on readers that is unmistakably intended as moral and salutary” (Neeper 281). The juxtaposition of satire and sincerity might seem incongruous but I argue in Chapter Two that it becomes a potent mixture with the humour drawing the reader into the story to such an extent that an empathetic bond can be formed with the characters. It is what Neeper labels a “sincere satire” (284) which, he argues, places Saunders alongside David Foster Wallace, Richard Powers, Michael Chabon, Zadie Smith, Jennifer Egan, and Dave Eggers as adherents of New Sincerity.

Neeper nails down the key feature of Saunders’ satire: the ability to deploy characters that help place the reader in relation to flawed fellow humans, rather than as potential targets for satiric correction. Saunders provides acerbic critiques of human failings while encouraging readers to empathise with the hopeless and downtrodden. “We are asked to understand, not condemn; the satiric intent has been redirected away from correction toward empathy.” (Neeper 295). Neeper goes on to propose that a feature of Saunders’ stories is that they foster the empathetic development of his audience but “eschew endings with some amorphous sense of correction” (286). I feel Neeper overstretches here. While I agree Saunders develops an empathetic contract between reader and character, I can’t help seeing a “sense of correction” for the narrator of “Pastoralia”. Yes, we can empathise with the worker struggling to balance his loyalty to colleague Janet with the need to provide for his family, but when he finally caves in and reports Janet’s misdeeds to management, he gets a replacement cave-mate who appears to be about to make his life a misery (akin to a sense of

correction). I do, however, agree with Neeper's fundamental point that Saunders' writing seeks to "soften the heart" (Saunders, in Neeper 286). Using the example of the misfortunes of the protagonist of "The Semplica Girl Diaries" (2012) from *Tenth of December*, Neeper argues the reader is left not seeking "the censuring of the story's narrator but our empathetic understanding of a character who has been led to detestable acts for reasons we might judge to be good and worthy" (286). Similarly, when we, as readers, have been in the cave of "Pastoralia" with the narrator scrabbling around in the dirt and skinning goats to help pay his son's medical bills, we are more inclined to empathise than condemn. Neeper sums up the effect when he states Saunders' writing "functions in a realm beyond irony and is designed to encourage readers to see themselves in others" (287).

When Saunders deploys a conflicted "caveman" or an indignant zombie – such as Aunt Bernie in "Sea Oak" – the reader is drawn unsuspectingly into a world where real-life issues are hidden behind a veil of cartoonish postmodern playfulness. In his critical essay on Saunders' narrative empathy, Michael Basseler observes the effect of these outlandish settings and characters is to "strip off the habitual and thereby make us sensitive to the experiences and perspectives of others" (154). Readers are drawn into the narrative by the spectacle, just like an actual visitor to a real theme park. They are entertained by all the outlandishness, recognising the fictionality of the world they are being exposed to. This is what Basseler calls a "protective fictionality" (166); the strange settings, characters and exposed fictionality paves the way for narrative empathy because readers respond to "an unreal situation and characters but still internalise the experience of empathy in a later real-world responsiveness to others' needs" (166). The postmodern irony and satire seems to "elicit rather than block the reader's empathy in Saunders's fiction" (Basseler 166).

I have now established that Saunders is a writer who uses hallmarks of postmodernism in his writing. The motifs of ghosts and talking corpses recur throughout his

work, and notably in “Sea Oak”, “Brad Carrigan, American”, “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline”. There are instances of hyperreality or the intersection of fictional and historical worlds in his theme park-set stories, including “Pastoralia”. Satire and comedy are an indisputable feature of Saunders’ writing.

In this chapter I have also detailed how Saunders is a writer whose work can be seen to eschew the cool detachment and cynical irony attributed to postmodern writers. It is suggested that Saunders, instead, belongs with a category of writers in the New Sincerity movement. New Sincerity is difficult to pin down with a precise definition and, as Stephanie Lambert suggests in her 2020 essay on New Sincerity, it is more helpful to view it as a “sensibility rather than a movement” (395). Writers such as Saunders, Wallace and Egan might be trying to move to a post-ironic literary landscape but this “does not mean they are creating texts that are naively nostalgic or uncritically earnest” (Lambert 395). Such writers might use the tools of postmodernism but their work can be seen as an attempt to form a relationship with the reader that encourages empathy with central characters and a willingness to espouse, as Nepper puts it, an “unapologetic advocacy of human ideals” (284).

While I have made attempts here to illustrate how and why Saunders is often classified as a member of the New Sincerity “movement”, my overriding interest in this thesis is how the sincerity in Saunders’ work finds oxygen. During the next chapter I will build evidence as to how Saunders’ work includes such a sincerity. I will be seeking to establish that his stories – though sometimes cruelly comic – provoke a reaction from readers that draws them into serious and authentic reflections on the “real life” forces that shape the actions and behaviours of characters within the text.

Chapter 2

Examining how Saunders creates New Sincerity through postmodern techniques in “Pastoralia” and “Sea Oak”.

Pastoralia

At the beginning of “Pastoralia” the unnamed narrator is trying to stay positive. His job is to play the role of a caveman at a theme park. The trouble is visitors are rare; his co-worker, Janet, constantly complains and slips out of character; and even their daily deliveries of dead goat dry up as the theme park falls on hard times.

The interactions between the narrator and Janet are often comic. In an early scene between the cave-mates Janet complains – in English – about the lack of goat delivery. The narrator, trying to stay in character, mimes and grunts his way through a possible explanation: the goats were scared off by “big rain come down”. In response, Janet lights a cigarette and mocks her mate for continuing to stay in character when there are no visitors around. The narrator makes a “gesture to her to put out the cigarette. She gestures to me to kiss her butt” (3). This tension in mode of communication between the narrator and Janet continues as a motif throughout the story. The narrator’s long-winded attempts to communicate “authentically” through grunt and mime are often met with withering and dismissive responses in English from Janet. She also engages in conversation with visitors on the rare occasions that someone “pokes their head in” to view their cave. This tension becomes central to the story: the narrator is exasperated with Janet for failing to stick to the rules; he fears her lack of professionalism is compromising their site’s viability and they will lose their jobs. He needs the income to support his sick son, who is in hospital. Meanwhile, Janet cannot understand why her cave-mate insists on keeping up the act when there is no

audience. “Will you freaking talk to me?” she asks. “This is important. Don’t be a dick for once.” (23).

The tension between the characters creates comedy, but the reader also has to navigate whose point-of-view they find most reasonable. With the narrator in control of how events are relayed, it is natural for the reader to empathise more closely with this character and share his point of view. The narrator needs this job desperately to pay his son’s medical bills, and fails to understand why Janet cannot just shut up and play along. The narrator tries to be loyal to Janet, despite her provocations, and initially refuses to mark her down on the “Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form” (4). By the time, however, the narrator has been persuaded by management to help get Janet fired, both he and the reader realise what they have lost. Janet is an impetuous and rebellious antagonist whose antics throw the narrator’s passivity into relief. Janet, too, is struggling to support a son, but she is prepared to break the rules. She drinks, smokes and wears a T-shirt saying “I’m with stupid!” over her cavewoman robes (44). Janet questions the logic of playing her part in a broken system: “What a bunch of shit. Why you insist, I’ll never know. Who’s here? Do you see anyone but us?” (3).

Janet is ultimately fired because she breaks the rules, or, as Clare Hayes-Brady puts it, in a 2016 essay on language and subordination in Saunders’ fiction, “Janet’s disruption of the discourse system put in place by the theme park’s managers makes her a threat to the economic stability of the park, meaning that she has to go.” (29). This complicates things for the reader if they have identified with, and felt empathy for, the narrator whose struggles are ones many real-world workers can identify with: scraping a living together, trying to be a good colleague, and a competent worker. As readers, we cannot hide from the fact that it is the narrator’s complicity – or even treachery – that is required, via the “Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form”, to get Janet fired from her job. In return he gets a new co-

worker, Linda, a zealot who takes the job so seriously that she frowns at him when he offers to shake her hand when they first meet (65). The good worker who tries to “stay positive” and play by the rules ends up having to play by his new co-worker’s stricter rules. Readers who have identified with the narrator are left questioning his adherence to the neoliberal system he works under. The comic interplay between Janet and the narrator eventually leads to a serious questioning of why workers find themselves propping up a corporate value system.

The third “voice” in the early part of the story is that of the management running the theme park. Management communicates with the protagonist via notes in the “Little Slot”, faxes, and on one occasion, a personal visit in the form of the boss Greg Nordstrom, who is looking to build a case for firing Janet. Nordstrom tells the narrator that he would be doing a good thing to nark on Janet, explaining that, “Actually it’s positive because then the defect can be fixed...If you admit she’s a bit of a pain I’ll write down how positive you were...what an exciting opportunity for you to admit it”. (19). Later on, when the narrator finally dishes the dirt on Janet, Nordstrom congratulates him in a fax message, using a pruning metaphor: once the rotten branch is chopped off, the entire organisation becomes stronger. He continues, “She is a goner. And we have you to thank. This is the way organisations grow and thrive via these small courageous contributions by cooperative selfless helpers” (60). Nordstrom is right, of course. The narrator has been a model of selfless cooperation in his efforts to stay in character (on message) and in his efforts to co-exist with a disruptive colleague.

Corporate communications feature in many of Saunders’ stories. Middle managers hector employees to maintain positivity with jokey, aphorism-filled memos, often laced with dark, threatening undertones. In “Exhortation”, Todd Birnie emails staff under his management to encourage them to stop complaining and focus on being more productive. He

uses rambling metaphors and anecdotes in an attempt to illustrate the benefits of teamwork. In the opening two paragraphs of the story, Birnie suggests work is like cleaning a shelf (best done happily) and describes, at length, how he recently helped move a rotting whale from a beach (1). Birnie tries to strike a tone of bonhomie and peppers his missive with jokey asides: “Did you cash your last paycheck? I know I did. Ha ha ha.” (1). He calls on workers to stay positive while reminding them further poor results will not be tolerated. Readers of “Exhortation” might imagine that Todd Birnie went to the same school of management as Greg Nordstrom, the pep-talking manager from “Pastoralia”. Nordstrom pulls the narrator aside to remind him of his obligations to the company, rather than to Janet. He points out what an exciting opportunity it is to be able to highlight a colleague’s faults (19) and then uses a metaphor to compare Janet to a rotten toe: “and next to that bad stinking toe lives her friend the good nonstinker toe, who for some reason insists on holding its tongue” (20).

The narrator of “Pastoralia” one day finds a memo in the Little Slot of his cave attempting to dispel rumours surrounding mass job cuts at the park: “Relax, none are forthcoming, truly, and if they were, what you’d want to ask yourself is: Am I Thinking Positive/Saying Positive? Am I giving it all I’ve got? Am I doing even the slightest thing wrong? But not to worry.” (63). The corporations that run Saunders’ theme parks claim to really care about their workers – until they cull them.

This emphasis on positive thinking is something Alex Millen identifies as a neoliberalist political technique in his 2017 essay on “Affective Fictions and the Wonderful-Sounding Words of Neoliberalism” in Saunders’ work. Millen claims Saunders tackles these neoliberal strategies and shows their effect on characters. The language management uses in “Pastoralia” is “over familiar” and “almost engaging in self-persuasion” (Millen). The tension in “Pastoralia” is “ratcheted up because of the impossibility of being compassionate

in a world of savage individualism. Neoliberal language is the tool routinely used by the powerful to mutate and manipulate; to divide humans and obscure inhumanity.” (Millen). On the first page of “Pastoralia”, the narrator confesses to not feeling his best but is determined to remain “thinking positive/saying positive” (1). As the story progresses, the narrator submits to pressure to betray Janet, learns his son has lost all mobility, has to roast plastic goats due to cutbacks in the park, and gets landed with Linda the zealot as a new mate. Despite all this he is still “thinking positive/saying positive” (66) on the final page. It is this “unbending insistence on the power of positivity in the face of abject desperation” (Millen) that Saunders uses to undercut the stay-positive rhetoric of neoliberalism. In particular, Saunders’ use of humour highlights the “disparity between the intention of neoliberal language and the actuality” (Millen). An example of this, I suggest, is the aforementioned memo the “Pastoralia” narrator finds in the Little Slot, which sets out to deny rumours of cutbacks while simultaneously propagating them, and the use of stridently positive terms such as “staff remixing” (63) as a sugar-coated euphemism for redundancies.

Our beleaguered narrator’s only way of responding to the manipulative neoliberal language of positivity is to try to conform. He is among those Saunders characters that have no other answer when faced with “a language they cannot master and a world they cannot understand” (Kelly 43). Indeed, the language used by management throughout “Pastoralia” is aimed at reinforcing superiority over the workers, even going as far as to state in one memo: “we are a family and you are the children” (48). The same memo accuses workers of being “silly” (47) and “whining” (48). The effect of such language is to position the narrator and his co-workers as children naively trying to please the adults who are in control. These earnest efforts to please and the “intellectual difference results in an emphasis on sincerity” (Kelly 43).

Towards the end of Chapter One, I described how the absurd characters and settings in Saunders' work can create a pathway to "elicit rather than block the reader's empathy in Saunders's fiction" (Basseler 166). The comic entertainment and surrealness of places like the Pastoralia theme park form a protective fictionality that lures readers into comparing the injustices faced in the lives of characters with "what is deeply unjust in our own" (Millen). The opening pages of "Pastoralia" are humorous, but by the end of the story, the narrator's problems correlate with the struggles of life within a capitalist system: working under stressful conditions; pressured by middle management; navigating relationships with difficult colleagues; fears about finances; balancing loyalty, kindness and honesty. And yet there is a moral challenge in the implication that the narrator would love to have Janet back at the end of "Pastoralia": Linda the zealot cave-mate is his punishment for selling out Janet. Indeed, readers are left to reflect on their own lives if they keep their head down and just try to earn a living within the neoliberal corporations for whom they work, or support as consumers. Such a reader is forced to confront their own complicity in propping up the types of institutions that exploit Janet and the narrator.

This reading of "Pastoralia" suggests something stronger at play in the narrative ethics, more than simply a yearning for old-fashioned values and authenticity – a genuine challenge from author to reader to acknowledge what is at stake when we identify with the narrator's point of view. We, as readers, have been given a tour of the theme park, had a few laughs along the way, yet come away with serious and sincere challenges from the author.

Sea Oak

Let us now leave the cave and head to the strip club. This is where the unnamed narrator of "Sea Oak" earns a living waiting tables in his G-string. Here we have another

narrator struggling to do his best work, keep his boss happy, and put food on the table. The “Sea Oak” narrator also works in a theme attraction: a club called *Pilots*, where he dresses up as an airman before undressing to serve food and respond to various customer requests. Performance reviews come in the form of customer evaluations via a “cute rating” (92) and this has a direct relation to the waiters’ longevity in their work – much like the “Pastoralia” visitor experience evaluations. The caveman dug around in the dirt for bugs in “Pastoralia” and here the stripper is told to pick up dollar tips from the floor so the customers “can see your crack” (110). We see a clear link, in these two stories, of workers having to debase themselves or end up on the scrap heap. In “Sea Oak” this is spelled out with a dwindling cute rating resulting in staff getting a Farewell Pen and the contents of their locker in a trash bag (92). In both stories the emphasis is on employees “performing”.

Once Aunt Bernie enters the narrative of “Sea Oak” there is a direct attitudinal link to the “thinking positive/saying positive” (1) narrator of “Pastoralia”. Aunt Bernie is a woman who walks home with a broken foot when someone runs over it; doesn’t marry because she has to look after her grandfather, who then dies and leaves all his money to a stranger; and who now has to work all day at DrugTown. According to Bernie, however, everything’s just “hunky dory” (94). The Sea Oak housing complex may be a pit, but Bernie’s “just glad to have a roof over her head” (95), and when the narrator complains how poor they are, Bernie just recalls how, as a child, she was “thrilled” when she got pencils for Christmas (95). Then a burglar breaks into the house and Bernie dies. And, that’s that. Except a few pages later, Bernie busts out of her grave and everything has changed.

The initial startling change is the appearance of a risen-from-the-grave, zombie auntie in what was hitherto a realist narrative. The reader suddenly has to re-evaluate the text and ask what kind of fictional world they have now entered. In his essay on George Saunders and the modern working class, David Rando describes such developments as a consistent feature

of Saunders' fiction. The previously realistic narrative often registers as "a comic shock which forces us to think about the story we have been reading as a construct with certain rules and assumptions" (Rando 440). If, as Rando puts it, "there is simply no place in the established narrative settings for a working-class zombie to appear" (451), then readers are led to question everything about what is going on within the story – including the relentless positivity of pre-death Bernie. To recall Mike Featherstone's description of postmodernism in Chapter One: "the lines between real and appearance have been blurred" (3).

Zombie Bernie is the antithesis of Living Bernie. The woman who never swore, never complained, and stayed positive, is transformed into a bitter, foul-mouthed tyrant yelling: "My life was shit!" (113). It has taken a traumatic death and a short spell in the grave for Bernie to realise the truth about the American Dream: she was sold a crock. This is the same dream the narrator's stepfather, Freddie, is peddling after Bernie's death. He tells the family they haven't worked hard enough to succeed. "It's the American way," he says. "Anybody can do anything." (106). Bernie spent her 60 years working hard for no reward. When Zombie Bernie busts out of the grave, she is not just haunting her family, she is haunting the proponents of the American Dream. "Bernie's zombie is in excess of the narrative system, just as the complex, differential experiences of the working class are in excess of the inadequate narrative strategies traditionally used to represent them." (Rando 451). The jarring effect of Bernie's resurrection within the narrative makes a reader question not just the narrative logic but also the themes addressed within the narrative – namely neoliberal values; that anybody can do anything if they just work hard enough. Just as the narrator in "Pastoralia" clung to the mantra "thinking positive/saying positive" (1), Bernie maintains everything is "hunky dory" (94) until death gives her a new perspective on life: "Some people get everything and I got nothing. Why? Why did that happen?" (125) she complains, in what can be seen as a direct plea, or provocation to the reader. This "playful" (Hoffmann

14) postmodern deployment of an indignant zombie by Saunders is leading readers to an earnest message, idea, feeling or value” (Balliro 1). In other words: New Sincerity from postmodern themes.

In his essay on Saunders’ use of zombie characters, Michael Trussler also views “Sea Oak” as a critique of the capitalist mantra of staying positive. Zombies in horror movies come to feast on the flesh of humans. They instigate a breakdown of society. Often, there is little attention given to their background, other than that they have been created by a plague or virus. Saunders’ undead are largely ignored by the society that created them. “They are disavowed by mainstream American culture: if their wretchedness was to be taken seriously, this act would repudiate the pervasive American ideology of ‘positive thinking’.” (Trussler 206). The role of Zombie Bernie in “Sea Oak” is to bear witness to the injustices of society; “Sea Oak” is a social critique that signals “a utopian desire for improved social conditions based on empathy and political justice” (Trussler 206). Bernie, like your typical movie zombie, is a malevolent force who possesses destructive powers. She threatens and cajoles her family. But mostly, Bernie is just simply spitting about what she’s missed out on in life and how she’s going to make up for lost time – bring on the lovers and dishes of shrimp (113). Bernie desires to experience what she’s been denied, so she can attain the sort of lifestyle glamorised by consumer culture. Her inability to aspire to anything beyond the consumer culture framework leaves her trapped. She may have “powers” (113), but she’s still ruled by neoliberalism (Trussler 208). Pursuit of the sort of glamorised lifestyle promoted by consumerism leads people into corrosive debt, argues Trussler, and indeed, Bernie’s family end up being sold a headstone for her they perceive as desirable, yet cannot afford.

Bernie may be a zombie but she is still trying to do right by her family. She wants to use her new-found powers to set them up for a brighter future. One way she plans on doing this is to help the narrator earn more tips at the strip club. She orders him to “show your

cock” (115) to the customers she puts a special mark on. Bernie’s transformation into crass dictator is funny because of the contrast with her previous mild-mannered self. Slowly she begins to decompose. Her body parts are all over the place, allowing scope for more dark comedy. Bernie’s resurrection and degradation might be humorous, but her demise carries the uncomfortable message that while Bernie swallowed her dignity in life, she loses it again in her undead state. Why humiliate her twice over? Why such cruelty? Bernie is thrown under the bus to reflect the inequity of life. Her resurrection brings realisation of “a morally bankrupt society that is excessively vicious and seemingly bereft of ethical responsibility” (Trussler 209). Once more we are seeing a Saunders story that uses grotesque scenarios or characters to seriously critique grotesque aspects of life. Zombie Bernie is no more disturbing than the hopeless pursuit of the American Dream. The (passive) Living Bernie vs (rebellious) Undead Bernie dichotomy mirrors that of the Narrator vs Janet in “Pastoralia”. Zombie Bernie and Janet are the antagonists trying to fight the system, while the narrators/living Bernie constantly compromise to live within the system.

More disgruntled zombies appear in Saunders’ “Brad Carrigan, American”, a story about a character in a kind of reality TV show. In both “Brad Carrigan, American” and “Escape from Spiderhead” the protagonists find themselves facing moral dilemmas: Brad Carrigan must either listen to his co-stars and stop “focusing on the sad” or decide to help the zombies, refugees and babies he encounters. Jeff in “Spiderhead” must decide which of two recent sexual partners will be inflicted with a drug that results in unbearable pain. In both of these stories, unlike in “Pastoralia”, the protagonists choose humanity over self-interest. Their decisions to defy the laws of the corporation result in their deaths. As Aunt Bernie would say: “Why did that happen?” (125). Brad and Jeff end up as kind of Saunders World Martyrs in the resistance to the neoliberal mantra of “staying positive”. In contrast, our “Pastoralia” narrator continues to debase himself under the rules of neoliberalism, and has to

live with the consequence: desperately trying to keep pace with new colleague Linda's fanatical commitment to her role.

Brad Carrigan acknowledges the zombies' pain and desires to assuage it (Trussler 213). Brad's actions can be seen to be prompted by a life lesson from his grandfather. Earlier in the story, the grandfather helps an injured sparrow, telling young Brad they are in a position to help, so they should. This act represents an ethos of freedom coming with moral responsibility. Trussler describes this as "an empathetic ethos primarily confined to a nostalgic past" (213). This assertion draws me back to David Foster Wallace's statement that there are few writers "who dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists." (Wallace in Leith). It also fits with Neeper's claim that Saunders' is at the vanguard of New Sincerity because he is prepared to "treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions and U.S. life with reverence and conviction, eschewing self-consciousness and fatigue" (Neeper 283).

To evoke nostalgia and sentimentalism can give the impression of softness and romanticism. The effect of Saunders' sincerity, however, can be to invoke a sense of injustice, a desire for change. An innate sense of justice that focuses on the self can be extended to others: "(we) are capable of assigning worth to other people, and feeling anger on behalf of others" (Fukuyama in Trussler 213). So, as readers, we might find ourselves entertained by the black comedy of the zombies' misfortunes, yet if Trussler et al are correct, we can still care about them, develop an empathy towards them, and a sense of injustice on their behalf. If this is true, it follows that the reader may be left reflecting on the societal system that creates this injustice within the text, and how it relates to our own society.

There remains the question of a potential incongruity of fostering empathy for characters while simultaneously exploiting them for comic value. But, in his essay on the ethics of humour, Dr John Morreall asserts that it is not only okay to have a laugh, it

facilitates critical thinking: “Besides moral virtues, psychologists have shown that a good sense of humor is correlated with intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness, tolerance for diversity, resilience, critical thinking, and creative thinking.” (Morreall). I, therefore, assert that the black humour in “Sea Oak” and “Pastoralia” does not merely draw the reader in by engaging them in the text, but fosters the ability to reflect on the wider causes of their predicaments. In a 2019 interview with Benjamin Nugent in the *Paris Review*, Saunders explains how he had toiled away at trying to be Ernest Hemmingway, but hearing his wife laugh at some comic poems he had written made him realise the power of humour as a legitimate tool of fiction. “And this switch got thrown in my head. It goes back to that idea of entertainment. She didn’t keep reading those poems because she had to, or in order to submit to my big intellectual plan—she just found them funny.” (Saunders in Nugent).

Satire has long been a tool for critiquing political systems and politicians. In his 2018 study of stand-up comedy routines around the time of Donald Trump being elected U.S. President, Morton Nielsen declares that comedy feeds on an “anti-hegemonic energy that threatens the stability of any entrenched social and political system” (177). In his 2016 essay on the Saunders story “The 400 pound CEO”, Alexander Lavrentyev argues it is this use of satire and the cruelty of the black humour in Saunders’ stories that highlights the injustices and hypocrisy of a neoliberalist consumer culture. Lavrentyev states that the extremism of the black humour discourse makes it possible for the writer “to break through the multilayer network of simulacra in contemporary society and thus, coming back to simple forms of humanity” (Lavrentyev). This can explain the seemingly paradoxical mixture of acidulous satire and sentimentality in Saunders’ stories. They become “the basis of compassion, empathy and humanism” (Lavrentyev). Chris Power, referring to the humour and pathos in “Brad Carrigan, American”, puts it another way: “The story is a masterpiece of Saundersian juxtaposition: satirical and absurd but heartfelt, and bleak but intensely funny. What better

form for a critique of a divided country to take than a radical split between registers?" (Power).

The comedy paradox

In my introduction I posed the question about the potential paradox of a writer described as "brutalist" (Harvilla) creating sincerity and empathy. I want to examine more closely now how Saunders' "cruel humour" (Laurentyev) can create a pathway to New Sincerity. Describing the "Paradox of Comedy" (1997) in the context of theatre, Paul Woodruff argues that comedy has the power to attract and repel. Comedy can act as a barrier to empathy. It stops the reader/audience getting close to a character and instead puts them at the far reaches of our concerns. It protects us from the troublesome emotion of pity. Comedy serves to detach us from painful emotions. The other side of the comedy paradox is that theatre/texts rely on drawing on an audience's emotions. Dramatic tension is created when a character becomes endangered. We come to care about characters. "The virtue of arousing emotion towards characters and events is that it counters the obvious artifice of staged fiction by helping us take staged action seriously rather than dismissing it as ridiculous." (Woodruff 319). In terms of Saunders' fiction, we can take Woodruff's suggestion to mean that the black comedy in "Pastoralia" and "Sea Oak" can have ambiguous effects: it has the potential to distance the reader from caring, but can also evoke empathy with characters.

Brittany Hirth tackles the complex issues surrounding the deployment of black humour in her 2016 University of Rhode Island PhD dissertation on "Absurdity and Artistry in Twentieth Century American War Literature". Hirth suggests exaggeration and caricature result in two-dimensional characters with a "lack of reader investment in the characters or their fates" (27). Black humour and absurdity show a rejection of any attempt to capture the

human condition and emphasise the inability of art to represent life. Often, argues Hirth, we find ourselves laughing at the various cruel and violent events that fill the pages of darkly comic fiction (69), “yet we remain detached from the unreal characters, and our disengagement explains much of the so-called black humor” (Hirth 27).

I reject Hirth’s view of such a disengagement when it comes to Saunders’ black humour. As absurd as Aunt Bernie’s resurrection and subsequent demise is in “Sea Oak”, it is nonetheless tragic. The juxtaposition of laughter and sorrow, farce and horror has the effect of disorientating the reader. Such an effect is explained in Elaine Safer’s “Studies in American Jewish Literature” (2006). Safer explores Jonathan Safran Foer’s use of black comedy against a contextual backdrop of the Holocaust in his 2002 novel, *Everything is Illuminated*. Safer defends Foer against charges of making light of the holocaust, arguing instead that the “comic by contrast emphasizes the tragic” (117).

A detachment from realism does not necessarily create a barrier to the serious themes being highlighted. The absurdity and grotesque elements of Aunt Bernie’s rise from the grave in “Sea Oak”, along with the parody of corporate culture in “Pastoralia”, are elements that can be traced back to the work of Nicolai Gogol, and in particular, his short story “The Nose”. According to Eugenie Samier and Jacky Lumby in their 2010 article on Gogol’s portrayal of “bureaupathology”, he was able to critique bureaucratic mentality through the use of comedy, deploying elements of the fantastic or the grotesque (362). Gogol had experience of working within the 19th Century Russian system of bureaucracy just as Saunders has drawn on his experience of working within the 21st Century U.S. corporate system. Gogol’s absurd plot for “The Nose” features a man who wakes up with his nose missing and then proceeds to try to track it down as it carouses around town. Seeking help from bureaucrats only leads to frustration and failure because they insist on sticking rigidly to routine. The runaway nose may be an absurd development, but the reaction of the bureaucrats

to the situation can be seen as just as absurd. Gogol's intentional flaunting of literary convention, argue Samier & Lumby, "reinforces his critique of the social conventions he brings into question" (363).

It is quite striking to read Samier & Lumby's thoughts on what the absurdity of "The Nose" is drawing the reader's attention to: "examining the demeaning drudgery of work and life within a bureaucratic regime that has become dehumanizing, spawning a broad range of bureaupathologies that, infect identity, mentality and professionalism" (363). We could take this quote, substitute bureaucracy with corporate culture and apply it just as readily to "Pastoralia" where the theme park employees know all about dehumanising daily drudgery in the face of management pressure to conform and acquiesce.

"The Nose" is one of the stories featured in Saunders' 2021 book, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*. Saunders defies the categorisation of Gogol as an absurdist whose work suggests we live in a world without meaning. He sees Gogol as "a supreme realist, looking past the way things seem to how they really are. Gogol says that we are, in our everyday perceptions, deceived." (Saunders 297). Gogol's runaway nose, along with Saunders' conflicted caveman and zombie auntie, are unreal characters who might lead readers to "disengagement" (Hirth 27), but instead their absurd interventions in the narrative highlight real-life absurd and "dehumanizing regimes" (Samier & Lumby 363). In this sense, we can see how both Gogol and Saunders draw New Sincerity from postmodern themes.

Sam Chesters is another who pushes past Hirth's argument that black comedy creates a disconnect with meaningful characters. In her 2021 article on the satire in "Brad Carrigan, American", Chesters claims Saunders is associated with the ideas of empathy and kindness. Although his darkly comic depictions have led to him being pigeonholed as "a wit and absurdist," he writes about "deeply relatable, flawed characters" (43). The laughs, suggests

Chesters, are a cover, “beneath which reside some profoundly serious intentions regarding the morality of how we live and the power of love and imminent death to transform us into vastly better creatures than we could otherwise hope to be” (44). This coexistence of humour as a tool, and serious subject matter, is a feature of Saunders’ work, “as many of his texts meet questions of what it means to live ethically” (Chesters 44).

Thaddaeus Hadaway, in his 2019 University of Canterbury MA thesis on dignified optimism among the satire in George Saunders’ writing, argues that readers are able to connect with absurd, grotesque and comic characters because they frequent worlds that remind us of our own. The reader knows this absurd story is supposed to be funny, and yet it is told in realist mode, and “it is hard to escape the fact that the setting could be swapped out for many current workplaces, where management control would bear a striking resemblance to those on display at Pastoralia” (Hadaway 70). The joyless settings of “Pastoralia” and “Sea Oak” are used to satirise America’s optimism based on consumerism and financial prosperity – the culture of thinking positive. And yet, argues Hadaway, the absurdity and satire leads readers to a hopefulness in the individual and human spirit; “a replacement of America’s positive thinking with a Saunders Aspirin—a form of clarity with moral dignity made possible through an empathetic engagement with someone else” (Hadaway 134).

This leads me to assert that readers are not missing the point of “Sea Oak” if they start laughing at zombified Aunt Bernie trying on sexy bras and leaving goo all over them (119). Nor is it callous to laugh as the narrator gives Bernie a consoling rub on the shoulder “which is next to her foot” (123). We are meant to laugh: it is parody, it is satire. Aunt Bernie’s antics are at such contrast with her modest living self that she is both obscene and amusing. In short, she has become one pissed-off, feisty, foul-mouthed zombie, and every time she urges the narrator to “show your cock” (122), it is the incongruity with the original prim, living Bernie that makes her comments all the more shocking and funny. Then, as Bernie dies

for the second time, the event is all the more affecting. The comedy has become a pathway to the empathy. Bernie has endured so much. As a resurrected zombie we learned more about her unfulfilled dreams and aspirations. Bernie has literally and figuratively woken up to the myth of thinking positive and is determined to get what she wants. Then she dies, again: “That’s it for me. I’m fucked. As per usual.” (122) – a sentiment so many of Saunders’ characters might utter as their final words: Brad Carrigan, Jeff from “Escape from Spiderhead”, Janet from “Pastoralia”. The fact we are so engaged with these characters helps us empathise with their plight, and question the circumstances of their (and our) world. Just as Aunt Bernie laments at the end of “Sea Oak”, “Why? Why did that happen?” (125) we may well find ourselves provoked into reflection about our own lives and asking the same question as a zombie who used to think everything was hunky dory.

Conclusion

I have established that while Saunders is in many respects a postmodernist – who places characters in absurd, darkly-comic, and supernatural situations – his fiction also touches upon serious themes, daring to question why certain things happen to certain people.

Saunders is placed, by a number of critics, as a writer who has moved beyond the confines of postmodernism to create work that is authentic and heartfelt; work that can be described as being at the vanguard of New Sincerity – a movement or style that seeks to convey an earnest message, feeling or value to an audience.

My aim with this thesis was to explore what exactly is this “sincerity” that Saunders creates, and what is the resulting effect with the narrative relationship. The intentions of the writer are less important than the resulting effect of engaging with stories such as “Sea Oak” and “Pastoralia”. A key result of this study is how these stories can be read as entertaining and horribly funny and yet leave such a strong connection to certain characters and an empathy for them as they endure injustices.

The grotesque resurrection of Aunt Bernie in “Sea Oak” ultimately serves as a critique of the grotesque societal system of which she is a victim. The absurdity of the theme park setting for “Pastoralia” matches the absurdity of the narrator’s attempts to stay positive in the face of injustice. In both these stories, postmodern tropes are used to construct situations and characters. Nonetheless, the suffering of these characters creates an empathetic response from readers because the challenges faced in the fictional world are relatable to readers’ real-world concerns. Even the most grotesque of characters might surprisingly resemble us in their words or actions. The characters are struggling to navigate capitalist societies with neoliberal ideals. They are told that with freedom comes a responsibility to stay

positive and work hard to achieve, or you only have yourself to blame. These are characters we come to identify with because their challenges mirror our own.

In a nutshell, Saunders' sincerity is that through his characters and stories he highlights the absurd and unjust elements of characters' lives and prompts us to ponder such unjust events in our own lives. Characters who behave badly or foolishly habituate his stories and are read by those of us who sometimes behave badly or foolishly. We are allowed to care about the characters because the stories are imbued with acts of humanity among the brutality and black humour. And if that character is an ersatz caveman or a zombie, we care about them just as much because – even though they are out of this world – their world, with all its challenges and injustices, is strangely familiar. Redundancies and workplace bullying are not confined to a theme park called Pastoralia. Sea Oak is not the only housing estate where crime is rife, and people work all hours to pay the rent. Saunders' cartoonish worlds are not so far removed from our own.

Bridging Statement

During my time studying creative writing and developing my own collection of short fiction, I have found myself contemplating the reason why I write. Feedback I once received from a lecturer has stuck in my mind. He suggested I was writing merely to entertain myself, whereas writing can be so much more than that. He was urging me to pay greater consideration to narrative ethics. What was I offering my reader? This question has been at the forefront of my mind during my thesis research. “Sea Oak” was suggested to me by the lecturer as an example of a comic piece of writing that developed a rich narrative relationship. I was drawn to the humour, the strange settings and characters, but I also found myself feeling empathy for the characters and reflecting on elements of society highlighted within the story. Since then I have tried to be more considered in my own creative writing. How can I write stories which go beyond the frivolous; stories that might engage a reader and prompt a reflective response? I have tried to create stories that are entertaining and interesting to read, but also explore the notion of the New Sincerity I have discussed in Saunders’ work.

The resulting collection of short stories, called *Get Me Out of Here*, has a key theme of characters trying to navigate the constraints of the societies they live within. Many of the protagonists are seeking a way to escape their roles within organisations, communities or relationships. The collection includes secondary themes of familial and gender relationships.

The first story in the collection is “Tiger Tamer”, influenced by Saunders’ “Sea Oak”. A soldier rises from the grave and mistakes two boys playing in the cemetery as part of his old tank crew. Like the resurrection of Aunt Bernie, this is a supernatural event in an otherwise realist setting. The soldier disrupts his new family’s domestic life in comic fashion. Despite the generational gap, and the clash of values, the characters come to form a relationship of mutual benefit. The story touches on themes of loss, disconnect and

dissonance. A challenging aspect of editing this story was to maintain a playful, quirky tone while also drawing attention to the aforementioned themes.

“Georgia & Trevor” began as a pastiche of Nikolai Gogol’s story “The Nose” which, as stated in Chapter Two, was featured in Saunders’ book *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*. Gogol’s story is, on one level, simply fun to read. The unruly nose and its anarchic adventures was such a contrast with the other short stories that Saunders had included in his book. Among the silliness of the events in “The Nose” the reader gains an insight into the bureaucratic nature of 19th Century Russian society. My initial idea was to recapture the absurdity of the premise of “The Nose”, use a different body part, and place the action in a contemporary setting with a female protagonist. What started as a bit of fun – the premise being that a woman wakes to find that a penis has grown on her forehead – began to develop into a narrative with some complex themes emerging. Once again I was dealing with an absurd interruption of realistic events, but I was also encountering issues around gender, patriarchy, relationships and equity. This became a difficult balancing act: engaging the reader with comedy and absurdity while also developing the story to consider how attitudes and roles within our society could be reflected in the way characters respond to a woman walking around with a penis sprouting from her head.

In “Speech Bubbles”, a man having a crisis about his impending marriage tries to escape his stag night while dressed in a gorilla suit. The story contains some absurdity and dark humour in terms of the behaviour of the protagonist while dressed as a gorilla. After playing around with strange scenarios surrounding what might happen to the “gorilla” man, the story developed into a meditation on what happens when two strangers, who feel a sense disconnect with their world, are thrown together by unusual circumstances. It explores how our need to stay connected via social media is mistaken for a true sense of connection. The characters in the story are trying to step away from the pressures of society and its

expectations. They feel the pressures bearing down on them just as the narrator of “Pastoralia” was trapped in his cave by the need to earn money for his sick son. This story looks beyond the confines of society’s figurative “Pastoralia” caves. What if we could put all the pressures of modern life on pause – for just a few moments?

“Escape Room” critiques voyeuristic reality TV shows – something Saunders has done with “Brad Carrigan, American”. The story examines how people tend to offer up inauthentic versions of themselves to please others. The central characters are prisoners trying to pass a series of tests to win their freedom. As I worked through drafts of this story I realised my attempts to deliver a serious, earnest message were strangling the joy of the reading experience. When I injected more fun and humour into the characters the shackles were thrown off. I feel the resulting story does offer a sincere reflection on reality television and the ethics of profit-driven corporations. But the final draft conveys this message with absurdity and satire in an effort to emulate the reading experience in stories such as “Pastoralia”. When I reflect on the evolution of “Escape Room” I realise that as I attempt to write stories of substance, I can still have fun with interesting characters who hopefully draw my reader into the narrative.

“Gustav’s Pole” is a fable which draws on the concept of the scapegoat character from “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” by Ursula Le Guin (1973). My story also features an outcast who is the subject of village folklore. Gustav lives in a barrel atop a tall pole in the village square. His role, like Le Guin’s outcast, is one of sacrifice, so the rest of the village can thrive. Such outcasts serve a similar purpose to the exploited workers in Saunders’ fiction. Their dignity and dreams are sacrificed so the corporations can thrive. Oli, the boy who climbs the pole to meet the outcast, is searching for his place within society, trying to prove himself, searching for something. His journey has some parallels with the young protagonist of “Tiger Tamer” navigating adolescence.

Many of the stories in this collection began with playful experiments based on something unusual, comic, or bizarre happening. I have tried to develop each story so they are an interesting and engaging experience for the reader. As I have reflected on early drafts I have then revisited the question of narrative ethics. What else does my story do apart from (hopefully) engage and entertain? Can I turn this absurd, bizarre experiment into something that says something serious about the world we live in? I have tried to develop whimsical, playful scenarios into stories that have sincerity. Sometimes, as with “Escape Room”, I have become too serious and dull, and have had to rewrite in order to rediscover an element of absurdity or humour to bring the story back to life. Having studied Saunders’ work so closely I acknowledge the influence of his style in the following short fiction. It has not been my intention to mimic Saunders but instead to draw from his influence in order to create my own original New Zealand-based collection which explores Saundersesque themes. In doing so, I have embraced the concept of utilising dark humour, absurdity and other elements of postmodernism in attempting to write interesting and impactful stories.

Creative Component: Short Fiction

Get Me Out of Here: A collection of five short stories

Tiger Tamer

One minute I was screaming down the cemetery hill on a “For Sale” sign and the next I was waking up on a stranger’s grave.

“What the hell, bro!” Toast’s grinning moon face loomed over me – slightly better than the sight of his bum crack, which had wobbled away in front of me as we’d raced down the hill.

“Any damage?”

“I’m good. Just give me a minute.”

“Nah, the headstone, bro. Might have broken it with that thick head of yours.” Toast, my so-called best mate. He wrapped his meaty hands around the headstone and wobbled it back and forth like a giant’s loose tooth. I tried to make out the name on the sorry old slab: ‘SGT GORDON MITH’. No, there was a faded ‘S’ in there – ‘SMITH’. Toast hauled me to my feet. As we turned to head back up the hill, something clasped around my ankle. I was going nowhere. I looked down to see a hand, reaching out from under the parched grass, had grabbed hold of me. Cracks appeared in the earth and a head popped out of the grave. A face covered in grime. Dark, matted hair. An old young man. Slowly its eyes opened: bloodshot. It blinked a few times, squinting in the sunlight and then looked up at me. The head in the ground said, “Get me out of here, Joe.” Out popped the other arm, a hand reaching up to me. That was probably the moment to say, “My name’s not Joe.” It was definitely the moment to

kick my ankle free and hoof it out of there. Instead, I reached down and took hold of that zombie hand. That makes me a total dumb-arse, I know. But, as it turns out, I'm actually a pretty smart dumb-arse.

Mum had the door open before we'd even started coming down the drive. Got that sixth sense, she reckons. Stood there like a sentry, flour-caked fists on hips and that "What now?" expression as she sized us up. The undead fella was in the middle, arms draped around me and Toast, gradually finding his feet. I had some explaining to do. So I said, "Um. Mum. This. I think. Is Sergeant Smith."

"Smithy," he corrected me abruptly, in a drought-stricken voice. He gave my shoulder a little squeeze. "No need for formalities among the crew. You know that boys." Mum was a boulder in front of the door, weighing him up. There was a flicker of recognition in Smithy's bloodshot eyes. He greeted Mum like an old comrade, "Good to see you, Dobbo."

Mum didn't miss a beat. "Nice to see you too...Smithy. Looks like you've been in the wars." Smithy's hands slipped from our shoulders, as he pulled himself to attention.

"Just a few battle scars. That Bastard Shit Man. I'll be right as rain, you'll see."

Mum's eyes remained steely, the fists stayed on hips, but she shifted her weight and slowly stepped aside, declaring, "Nothing a cup of tea won't sort out, I'm sure." Smithy gingerly headed for the door, Toast went to follow, but then remembered something, stopped, and pulled three limp, anemic flowers from the back of his trackpants and handed them to Mum with a goofy grin before going to the aid of Smithy, who had just banged into the doorframe.

Our little mutt Buster came over to greet Toast with his tail wagging. Everyone has a soft spot for Toast. Buster checked himself when he saw Smithy. He did that thing dogs do, when they put their head on one side and look at you funny. Then he let out a little whine and scuttled back to his basket. Smithy and Toast got cups of tea. I got frozen peas pressed

against my head. Smithy made his presence felt, or rather smelt, immediately. Imagine a wet dog and spilt milk in the same car on a baking hot day. Mum opened a window, but the smell, like Smithy, was in no rush to leave. Toast, normally one to linger, was trying to excuse himself, but Mum was having none of it. The table was set and dinner served. Me and Toast watched in wonder as Smithy despatched more fish fingers than you could count on two hands. “Beautiful, Dobbo, must say your cooking’s improved. Best square meal I’ve had in ages.” Mum kept trying to get a conversation going, but Smithy was on a different planet. At one point he gazed around the room and declared, “The mess!”

Mum kept a tight smile in place. “Yes,” she agreed. “Difficult to keep the place tidy with a teenager in the house.” She gave me her glare.

Smithy seemed delighted. “Great to be back in the mess,” he announced to no-one in particular and raised his glass of water. We all found ourselves awkwardly toasting “The mess.” About then, something happened to Mum’s face. It went all soft. Same look she gets when the SPCA advertise pets looking for a home. I looked down at Buster, who was slumped in his basket with one eye on Smithy. I knew what was coming next. Mum’s not the only one with a sixth sense. “You can stay here on the sofa bed tonight, Smithy. Now finish your ice cream and I’ll run a bath for you.”

Mum headed to the bathroom, Smithy gathered up the plates, Toast dashed for the door. “You can’t leave me,” I pleaded. “What if he turns hard-out flesh-eating zombie in the night?”

“He seems happy enough with fish fingers and ice cream,” said Toast. “Besides, zombies aren’t real.”

“What the hell is he then?”

“Dunno, do I? Your mum clearly thinks he’s just some soft-headed hobo.”

“Who came out of the cemetery!” I hissed.

“Maybe he was sleeping rough.”

“What, *in* the grave?”

Toast shrugged. “I’ll message you later. See if you’re...ok.” Something behind me made Toast’s eyes widen and he dashed off down the drive. I turned to see filthy Smithy standing there in just a pink bath towel. “Where’s Twizzles off to?” he asked.

My attempts to find a rational explanation for Smithy’s appearance were fading with the daylight. I was about to become the victim in a horror movie of my own making. What was that rule with vampires: they can suck your blood if you invite them into your home? Do zombies play by the same rules? I turned to Toast for help. He messaged back:

Get a cross or a silver spoon 2 ward him off just in case.

It was close to dawn when he came for me. The bedroom door burst open. Light daggered into my eyes. I could smell his cat-sick breath. His eyes were now bright, clear and boring into me. Lips parted to reveal a row of tombstone teeth, ready to feast on my flesh. There was a hunger about him. He said, “Drop your cock and put on your socks.” I thrust the duvet back over my head and drew my knees up, the best defence I could muster against molestation and murder. He grabbed the duvet and swept it aside, exposing me. I felt something hard poking into my ribs. The silver spoon! I grabbed it and waved it in front of his face. This seemed to confuse him for a second. Then he took the spoon out of my hand, examined it, shook his head, and broke into a horrible, demented smile, “Come on Joe, my boy. Six a.m. revellie. Time for some P.T.” I had no idea what P.T. was but my brain started firing out dire definitions: P for Paedo, P for Pervy, P for Penis – P.T. Penis Time! I tried to cover the front of my undies with my hands. But now Smithy’s interest had turned to my bedroom floor. The filthy rambling hobo from last night looked refreshed and re-energised. With all that grime scrubbed away, he looked so much younger. And what the hell? Weren’t those my dad’s old pyjamas? He stood there with hands on hips going tut-tut-tut as he

surveyed the carpet. Then he suddenly pointed at me, and I flinched. “Morning run before breakfast, Joe, time to get back into our old routine. But first, we need to get all this crap squared away.” I looked around the room. What was he on about?

“Crap?”

“Civilian clothes. Shoes. Contraband biscuit packets. Boiled sweet wrappers. You’ve been letting standards slip, Joe.” By the time Mum arrived to see what was going on, there was Smithy thrusting the vacuum cleaner around the room and me folding clothes and tucking them in the wardrobe. Smithy noticed Mum at the door and switched off the vacuum. He put a hand on her shoulder. “Stand down, Dobbo. All under control.” To my disgust, she nodded and went back to bed. No way was I getting that option, though. I was marched out of the door and found myself having to run around the park in the dark. What the hell!

He’ll be gone after breakfast, I told myself. Mum will give him a feed and politely show him the door. He’ll bugger off back to the cemetery, find someone else to haunt.

But the breakfasts came and went. The rude awakenings continued. The enforced runs around the park. My humanitarian rights trampled underfoot. This was supposed to be the school holidays. As far as I was concerned, the zombie had well and truly outstayed his welcome. Problem was, Mum might seem like a tough woman but that big heart of hers was melting into mush. Smithy had wormed his way into our home and showed no sign of wanting to head back to the cemetery.

Meanwhile, Toast was proving to be the most useless best mate in the world. Each day he would fearlessly message me from a safe distance to see if I had joined the ranks of the undead.

Harmless then?

You try living with him

It was strange having three “people” in the house again. One good thing about the breakup was Mum could get a bit distracted. She used to be harsh on bedtimes and devices but once dad moved out she’d often forget I was supposed to be in bed, or still had my phone. And sometimes I reckon she just didn’t have the energy to bother about it. But all that changed with my own personal sergeant-major moving in. “Lights out, Joe. Twenty-one hundred hours.” He was a total Nazi about it. I had to leave my phone on charge in the lounge where he could keep tabs on it. I tried the old ‘just getting a drink of water’ trick one night and snaffled it on my way back to bed. I was mid-message with Toast when Smithy burst in. I slipped the phone under the duvet but he had his radar on. “Out with it, lad.” I feigned ignorance but he ripped the duvet away. He did his tut-tut-tut, shook his head. “I’m disappointed in you, soldier. You know the standing orders. Radio silence during curfew.” He held out his hand. I handed over the phone.

My life was fast becoming a misery. After dad did the dirty and deserted us, I had to spend a lot of time playing games on my phone to look after my mental health. Sometimes Mum would check in on me or come and ask for some help with something but totally understood when I explained I needed some quiet time to reflect. But those golden days were a thing of the past once Smithy’s dawn raids started. The abuses stacked up one after the other: daily P.T., ironing my own frigging shirts, making my own lunch, having to do my own laundry. He even said I’d have to start polishing my shoes each day. Then he looked down at my Converse, frowned and said, “Maybe more spit than polish.” He was always coming out with random, lame-arse little sayings, like: “Cosy costs lives!” or “Discipline Defeats Shit Man!” I had no clue who this “Shit Man” was supposed to be, but he would often go on about him.

The more Smithy sucked the life out of me, the perkier he seemed to get. He was setting a torrid pace on our morning runs. Even though I was getting stronger, it was always an all-out effort to keep up with him. Whenever I stopped and doubled over to get my breath back, he would be there in front of me shaking his head, tut-tutting, like I'm such a disappointment. So, I got going again, just to show him.

Mum couldn't seem to care less about the abuse I was suffering at the hands of this undead lunatic. The sickening stuff that came out of her mouth: "Such a good influence on my boy, Smithy." "You really bring out the best in him, Smithy." "What a positive role model you are, Smithy." Positive role model, my arse. I'm supposed to look up to a zombified sadist who thinks my iPhone is some top secret device developed by army intelligence.

Even Buster came round to Smithy. He started coming on the morning runs with us. Have to say it did that lazy mutt some good. He dropped some flab and got a bit of swagger back. Mum reckoned the same was true for me. Bloody cheek. Buster abandoned his little doughnut bed and started curling up at Smithy's feet at night.

And what about the haircut incident! One day Smithy nearly gave me a heart attack, popping up behind me in the mirror as I was gelling my hair. He had this slightly more weird look than usual on his face and I was immediately on my guard. "Tut-tut-tut." My heart sank. What now? Right on cue, Mum walked past. "What is it, Smithy?" she asked. He stood there shaking his head, glaring at me.

"It's got to go. Standing orders." I turned to face them. I was still not sure what he was on about but I knew it wasn't good. Mum stood next to him, nodding. The pair of them studying me.

"What?" I said.

"I'll get the clippers." Mum headed for the bathroom.

I flinched like a cat snuck up on by a cucumber, and made a bolt for the door, but a firm hand gripped my shoulder. “In the chair, soldier.” I wasn’t having it. It was time I stood up to him. I told him straight: no-one’s touching my lovely locks, blatant violation of my humanitarian freedoms. Smithy nodded in what appeared to be full agreement. “That’s what we’re fighting for, Joe. All these small sacrifices to preserve our freedom.” And with that, he steered me over to the kitchen stool. Smithy was just finishing off his act of genocide when Toast finally put in a reappearance. “What the hell, bro!” he cackled. “Didn’t tell me you were having a Halloween party. Where’s the rest of your convict outfit?”

Smithy stood back to admire his work, nodded approvingly. “You look like a proper soldier again, my lad.”

“Like a proper tit, more like,” chimed in Toast.

“You next Twizzles. Take a seat.”

Toast gave a nervous laugh, “No chance.”

Five minutes later, Mum said, “Very handsome boys. Very nice job, Smithy.”

“Shall I do you next, Dobbo?” offered Smithy.

“Aw, thanks Smithy. So sweet. But it smells like those fudge brownies are done.” She gave his hand a squeeze. Smithy nodded and smiled and his eyes went all dreamy. He’d grown to love Dobbo’s cooking.

Next day I was chilling out on the sofa playing on my phone. Mum came and sat down beside me and switched on the TV. Bit of a distraction, but I didn’t mind. We both looked up as rain started spattering against the window. Smithy was out there in the garden digging away. Mum elbowed me in the ribs. “Take him a cup of tea will you, love?” I filled the mug too high and drops were splashing over the side into the puddles as I reluctantly headed out into the garden. Smithy paused from his furious digging when he saw me coming and leaned on the spade with a smile on his face.

“God bless yer, Joe. Nothing like a...”

“Nice cup of tea, yeah I know.”

I handed over the mug, pulled my hood up. “What exactly are you doing out here, anyway?”

“Vegetable patch. Can’t believe you don’t have one already.”

He’s so eccentric. “You realise we can just buy vegetables from the supermarket?”

He smiled and shook his head.

That night, Smithy came into my bedroom to say good night and collect my phone. I was just scrolling through some photos my dad had sent through. Smithy hesitated, then sat beside me on the bed and asked me what was up. I showed him the photos of my dad with his new woman and her two daughters. Smithy looked on in wonder. “This new intel is incredible. Must be giving us the edge. I can hardly wait to get back to the front.”

“He says those girls are kind of like my sisters now,” I said. “But I don’t have any sisters. Don’t really have a father right now, either.”

Smithy sat beside me for a while. Then as I closed the photos and handed the phone to him he said, “We all miss our families, Joe.”

I turned to look at him as he got up to examine the wallpaper he’d put up in my room the week before. Smithy was always immaculately groomed, clean shaven, hair cropped. His flesh clean and pink. Yet, just like the day he popped out of the grave, there was strange sense of him being both a young and old man at the same time. “Did you...do you have any kids, Smithy?”

He ran his thumb along the join between two sheets of wallpaper and nodded in approval. “You boys. The crew. You’re my family, Joe.” As he headed to the door, he paused for a moment. “Try writing to him, Joe. Your father.” He left the room, only to return a

minute later with a pen and notepad. “What’s that for?” I asked. And then I realised. He was suggesting I write to my dad using an actual pen and paper. This guy!

Smithy spent each and every day on the go, from morning P.T. to evening cup of tea. Everything in the house that needed fixing was fixed twice over. While the rest of us were ready to flake out in the evening, he was still a bundle of energy. Mum had a word with her mate Kristi, who worked down the local RSA, and Smithy started working a few evenings a week behind the bar.

Mum took me down there for dinner one night and Smithy looked like he was already part of the furniture. There he was sharing yarns with the old soldiers as he served their beers, helping the prehistoric nanas out of their coats and pulling out chairs for them like they were royalty.

I was tucking into my roast beef from the buffet when Kristi came over to speak to Mum. Turns out Kristi is just as deluded as Mum when it comes to spotting irritating zombies.

“He never stops, does he,” gushed Kristi, as the two of them watched Smithy dash over to hold the door open for Deaf Doug and his wheelchair. “A little bit soft in head – he fits in all right. And lovely with it. You want to loan him out for a bit? I could do with a man around the house again.”

“Not on your life, Kristi Newman. Don’t want you corrupting the poor love.”

The two of them started cackling away at whatever the big joke was. I chewed on a roast potato and watched as Smithy quick-stepped back to the bar and began polishing a beer glass. He held it up to the light and examined it as if it was some kind of crown jewel before placing it back on the shelf. What did they all see in him? Then, as if he’d overheard my mind, he looked over and gave me a cheesy grin and a wink. I couldn’t help but smile and wave.

A few days after my dad, and his *new* family, had appeared on my phone, he appeared on our doorstep. Mum answered the door and those fists of hers went straight to her hips. She stepped out, half closed the door behind her but I heard snippets of the hushed verbal knife fight that followed. The door eventually opened again and I sensed dad's presence behind me as I hunched on the carpet next to Smithy. Lawnmower parts lay scattered over newspaper between us.

"Hey, mate. Good to see you."

"Hey."

I kept my head down, focused only on passing the electric screwdriver to Smithy. My dad started to say something else just as Smithy activated the screwdriver, drowning out dad with a high-pitched whirring. Smithy concentrating on tightening the screw, and I tightened my gaze onto Smithy, who switched off the screwdriver and looked at it in wonder.

"Amazing, Joe. I bet the Krauts have got nothing like this."

"Actually, this is made in Germany," I pointed out the name on the side: Bosch.

Hushed conversation started up again behind us: *Who's the bloke? What's with calling him Joe?*

Our new lodger, not that it's any of your business

Lodger eh?

I'd offer you a cup of tea, but you're not stopping

I knew his face. I'd looked at those photos on my phone so many times. I didn't need to turn round to see him again. I could smell the old leather coat that he's had so long he's taken on its scent. I breathed in the leather in short rapid breaths while he gave his speech: how much he missed me, how we would speak regularly now, how *Jessica* was looking forward to meeting me, how everything was going to be absolutely fine. And I wanted to turn

round. Run to him and punch him, run to him and hug him. I stayed there on the mat with Smithy, just listening and breathing, even when he came up behind me and went to ruffle my hair like he used to, only to find not much hair there anymore.

I heard a door close and I shut my eyes tight. The smell of the leather coat drifted away until there was no longer any trace of my dad in the house. As if he was a ghost that had just passed through. When I opened my eyes again Smithy was a blur.

“Ok, Joe?”

I swallowed. “All good, Smithy.”

But things weren't all good. As the days passed, I noticed some changes in Smithy. One day it would be a little thing like having trouble tying his shoe laces, the next it would be forgetting we'd already had breakfast. One morning I woke up thinking, shit, I'd overslept. It was 6.15am. Where was Smithy? I went through to the lounge to find him with my phone in his hand, giggling away at cat videos. It became harder and harder to motivate him to get up off the sofa and come outside for some fresh air. One time I had to practically drag him out to the garden to show him that actual real vegetables were starting to grow out of the soil. “Look at them! Just look at them!” I beamed at the carrots. But he simply nodded and asked if he could go back inside and finish his game.

Slowly, our Smithy went from sergeant-major to rest home resident. I ran around the park with Buster before coming back to help Smithy get dressed and washed. I couldn't motivate him to get up and about. He gave up his shifts at the RSA. All he wanted was to sit on the sofa and watch TV, with Buster curled up beside him. One morning I got home from my run and set about fixing up dad's old bike that was gathering dust in the garage. I brought the bike inside to show Smithy and suggested he might like to take it for a spin. Maybe he could ride it each morning and keep me company on my runs? He leaned forward and

inspected the gleaming chain. “Good job, Joe. Always good to keep up with the maintenance. Cleanliness is...” Then he lost his train of thought, slumped back in the sofa, and returned his attention to *Love Island* on TV.

It seemed like a good idea at the time. I thought a good war movie might help return Smithy to the land of the living. But as we settled down to watch *White Tiger* one night, I could sense Smithy tensing up beside me. In the movie a German panzer tank was creeping out from the mist and laying waste to scores of Russian tank crews. Smithy started gabbling, “Shit Man! Shit Man! He’s coming!” and then he grabbed a cushion and began chewing it. I had to switch the movie off and put on a cartoon before he’d come out from behind the sofa.

The next morning I noticed strands coming away in the comb when I parted Smithy’s hair. His nails were yellowing and his skin was looking waxy. Purple crescents underlined his eyes. “Smithy, who exactly is Shit Man?” I asked him, as I spooned porridge into his mouth. Rheumy eyes searched the room before landing on me, “Hmm?”

“Shit Man. Is he someone from, you know, someone you fought against.”

“Come off it, Joe,” Smithy had suddenly snapped to attention. “You gone soft in the head? Shit Man Wittmann.” Then his face slackened again, and he leant in towards the spoon like an expectant baby bird. I gave him another spoonful, scraped a dribble of porridge from his chin. I decided I would make it my mission to track down who this Shit Man Wittmann character was. I would need expert help. Just then my phone pinged: Toast.

Eh boi sunz shining gud day for gaming gunna get yr ass kicked bro

Nah meet you at the library secret mission

Huh?

When I told Mum I was heading down to the library to meet Toast, she looked at me funny, asked when we’d suddenly become avid readers. “Nah, Mum,” I explained. “Free

wifi.” She did her eye-roll thing, like when I sniff my socks to see if they’ve got another day in them. Toast gave me his *s’up bro* chin raise as we met outside the library and I gave him the briefing. We had to make our way through a whole bunch of book shelves to get to the bean bags at the back of library and hook our phones up to the wifi. Toast was not impressed. “Look at all these dead trees,” he gestured at the rows of dusty books as we walked through a section called *Military History*. “No wonder climate change is a thing. These librarians need locking up.” We crashed down into the bean bags and set to work. It was obvious that Smithy had been a tank commander with a crew of Joe, Twizzles and Dobbo. But who was this Shit Man Wittman who seemed to haunt him?

“Start looking up army stuff. Tank battles,” I told Toast.

“How do you spell battles?”

“Forget it, just search up Shit Man or Wittmann or whatever.”

Intelligence gathering proved to be trickier than I imagined. Just as I started looking something up, Toast would get distracted by TikTok and we ended up watching videos instead of digging the dirt on Shit Man. We found a lot of plumbing sites when we searched key words: “shit” “man” “tank”. This led to further distraction as Toast told the story about how his big brother had blocked their toilet for days with a growler that they eventually dislodged with a potato masher. Finally we found Shit Man thanks to a site called, *World’s Coolest Tank Duels*. Michael Wittmann, nicknamed Shit Man by his enemies, was an ace Tiger Tank commander, feared by tank crews during World War 2. Wittmann was finally killed in combat after an ambush by Allied tanks lying in wait in a French orchard. The kill was credited to a British Sherman Firefly commanded by a young Kiwi sergeant, by the name of Gordon Smith. Smith had died during the same battle when the hatch of his tank hit a tree branch and smacked down on top him, knocking him so senseless he fell out of his own vehicle.

“Doesn’t sound particularly heroic, does it?” said Toast, when I showed him.

“Yeah, bit lame – falling out of your own tank. But he did get Wittmann. So he’s an actual war hero! Thing is, he doesn’t even seem to realise Wittmann is dead.”

“Well, duh! You’re talking about the guy who calls me Twizzles, and thinks your mum’s a tank driver.”

I gave that a bit of thought. And that’s when I started getting my pretty smart dumb-arse idea. Smithy was stuck in a battle he could never escape. A ghost needed laying to rest.

*

Me and Toast were in the back seat of the old ute, with Smithy’s replacement “headstone” – a wooden cross me and Toast had cobbled together from some of the back fence – propped between us. I turned to look out of the rear window. Smithy was standing on the flat-deck outside, a pair of spades lay beside his feet. All I could see was his lower half. But I could hear him all right. He kept barking instructions at Mum, our driver. “Keep it steady, Dobbo! Eye out for those damn Tigers!” He seemed more like his old self. Once we’d told him we were going “back into the field” he’d perked up. Buster was back there too, barking along with Smithy. I’m not sure which of them was more excited. Then I saw something small and pink go careering off into the distance. Was that an ear? I hoped Smithy was holding it together out there.

Mum pulled up at the car park overlooking the cemetery. Smithy approved. “Nice one, Dobbo. We can cover the field from here.” Mum looked at me in the rear view, raised her eyebrows. You could see she was not totally on board with this mission. Smithy issued another command from up top, “Get on the radio, Twizzles. Let HQ know we’ve taken up position.” Toast turned round in the back seat, gave a little salute to Smithy’s knees behind him, “Aye, aye, sergeant.”

“Aye, aye?” I gave Toast a thump on the shoulder. “We’re supposed to be a tank crew, not friggin’ pirates.”

“Just trying to get into character.”

It was time to launch our offensive. I gave Toast a nod. He grinned, he was looking forward to this. “Enemy sighted, sarge!” he yelled. “Three Tigers coming into view.” From above the roof we heard, “Sighting confirmed. Three Tigers. Falling right into our lap, lads. Load her up, Twizzles.” Toast made a show of heaving up an imaginary shell and loading it into the breach between the front seat headrests. Another order from above: “Once we’re in range, line up the rear Tiger, Joe.” I gave it a moment, and then shouted, “Zeroed in, sarge!”

“Then standby lads, counting down,” Smithy was in his element. “Three-two-one-FIRE!” Nothing happened. I had to hiss a reminder at Mum. With reluctance, she finally leaned on the horn, shattering the cemetery tranquility. Smithy getting such a fright that he actually toppled off the side of the ute wasn’t actually part of the plan. Toast looked out of his window at Smithy sprawled on the concrete. “Oh shit. What is it with this guy and falling out of tanks?” We all clambered out of the ute, helped Smithy back to his feet and managed to shush the barking Buster. Smithy was as unsteady on his feet as the day we’d first met him here. One of his ears was AWOL. The other was hanging on by a thread. There was something grey and slimy trying to seep through a gash in the back of his head. Anyone else, we would’ve been taking them to the hospital. Our only option was to go straight to the cemetery.

“Come on sarge, you’re badly injured. Let’s get you back into cover.” I started leading him down into the cemetery. I looked back to see Toast raising the wooden cross onto his shoulder and follow on behind. Mum was giving us a head start, I noticed she’d put on a pair of sunglasses. There was no sign at all of Smithy recognising his surroundings as I led

him towards the grave. He clutched my sleeve with a wrinkled hand. “Did we get him, Joe,” he gasped. “Did we get Shit Man?”

“Direct hit, sarge,” I assured him. “He’s gone up in smoke. We tamed the Tiger.”

He gave a little wheeze. “Luck alive. Got your shooting boots on today, Joe my boy. I knew I could count on you.” I felt a little catch in my throat. I led him into the land of fallen soldiers. He was looking around now. “Just need to get my bearings,” he was mumbling. “All a bit foggy.”

“Don’t worry sarge, you fell out of the tank, that’s all. We’ll get you to safety.”

“Fell out of the tank?” He took a moment to consider this. “Yes, of course, I remember now. I feel such a fool. Thanks for coming back for me, Joe. You’re a good lad.” My eyes began to water. I put my arms around Smithy, gently lowered him so he was leaning back against a grave. There was a faint crack in the grass along its length. The crumbling old headstone leaned back like a drunk soldier on a bar chair. Toast came over and propped the cross against the old headstone, gaining Smithy’s attention. His brow wrinkled as he studied the words we’d painted on it last night, “Sgt Gordon Smith - Tiger Tamer”. Finally Mum arrived and stood slightly apart from us, pulling her coat around her. Me and Toast headed back up to the ute to get the spades. When we got back, Mum was sitting with an arm around Smithy, who had his face buried in her coat. She had plucked one of her magic tissues from her sleeve and was holding it to the back of Smithy’s head. She didn’t look like she wanted to let go.

Me and Toast heaved the old headstone from the grave, worked on a narrower, deeper slot in the earth and dropped the wooden cross into place. We’d thought about saying a few words about Smithy at this point, but it would have been a bit awkward talking about the deceased when they’re standing next to you. So, instead, Toast pulled out his phone and began playing a downloaded version of *The Last Post*. The tinny wail of a bugle faintly

fought against the breeze, before breaking into a rap beat with lyrics maybe never heard before in a cemetery. I looked at Toast, shook my head, mouthed: “Idiot.” He shrugged, held up his hands. Whatever, it was recognisable enough for Smithy to haul himself to his feet and give a half-hearted little salute with a shaky hand. He gazed around the cemetery as if he was seeing an old friend coming into view. His eyes fell on the flag with the four red stars above the memorial to the fallen. *The Last Post* faded out.

Smithy turned to me. “Am I going home, Joe?”

I bit down hard on my bottom lip, and told him, “Yeah. I think it’s time.”

Smithy said nothing more. He sat with Buster in his lap, while the rest of us set to work digging. At one point my phone pinged: a message from my dad. I slid the phone back in my pocket beside the envelope with my dad’s name on and his new address. I took up my spade and started digging again. We dug until darkness fell and then we carried on digging until we’d dug a Smithy-sized hole. When it was time for Smithy to lie down, his eyes were already closed, and his arms folded around Buster. We prised Buster away, picked up Smithy. There was almost nothing to him. It was like carrying a little sack of twigs between the three of us. We lowered him snugly back into the earth. Toast borrowed some flowers from a neighbouring grave and placed them on Smithy’s chest. Mum pulled a fudge brownie from her coat and placed it in one of his hands. I put a little plastic toy tank in the other. Buster crouched a few metres away with trembling legs and delivered his own tribute. Once we were sure Smithy was fast asleep, we started putting the earth back over him. When we were done, we stood there for a bit in the dark. Nothing much was said. Buster curled up at the foot of the grave, and gave a long sigh. And that kind of said it all.

Georgia and Trevor

I stare into the bathroom mirror contemplating life's cruelty. There, in the middle of my forehead, is this huge zit staring back at me. Like the Goddess of Spots waved her wand during the night and bestowed upon me this nuclear whitehead. I dig my nails in on either side and squeeze until my eyes water, succeeding only in making it more angry. Just what I needed, today of all days: go into my interview with a facial toadstool for company.

Dave walks into the kitchen, navigates obstacles and locates his chair without taking his eyes off his phone screen. He senses my presence: "Any chance of a coffee?"

I slide a steaming mug across to him. "Any chance of a conversation?"

"Hmm?"

This is his opportunity to wish me good luck for my interview today. He shakes his head at his phone and says, "Female penguins use prostitution to build up their nests."

"Really?" I say, to the prematurely thinning crown of Dave's head. If he looks up from his phone, he'll see I'm wearing my lucky earrings. *Oh, that's right, it's your job interview today. Best of luck, babe.* Dave doesn't look up. He says, "If they need more stones for their nest they go visit a single male, let him have sex with her, and then take a stone in payment. Unbelievable!"

"Unbelievable." I'm going to have to help him out. "Do you think you could organise a takeaway tonight? I've got that thing after school."

"Sure." Still not looked up. "Sometimes the female flirts with the male and, while he's getting all worked up, she grabs a stone and pisses off with it before he can even get his rocks off. Unbelievable!"

"Unbelievable." I shake my head at him. "Next thing you know, a man will be buying a woman a drink in a bar and she'll piss off home before he can sleep with her."

Dave nods in apparent agreement while still studying his phone. Then he sighs, drains his mug of coffee, and pulls on his cap with the energy drink logo. This is Dave code for “off to work now”. He gives me a perfunctory kiss good bye, still troubled by the secret life of penguins.

“I mean you think they’re these cute little birds and they turn out to be...I don’t know...”

“Smart?”

Dave looks pained as he grabs his keys. He’s going to spend the day with his head in car engines but his mind in the Antarctic. As he walks to the door, I ask, “You notice anything different about me this morning?” He stops and turns and I see his confusion only deepen. I touch an earlobe with finger and thumb. *This is my earlobe, Dave, and see the amber right here? That’s one of my LUCKY earrings, remember?* Dave’s expression morphs into a sympathetic grimace, “Oh shit,” he says. “That’s the mother of all pimples, isn’t it?”

I emerge from the bathroom after ten minutes and several layers of foundation. A severe parting has helped camouflage the spot-atrocity, but I look like I’ve had an appointment with Hitler’s stylist . Then it’s another ten minutes I don’t have rifling through the wardrobe, trying to find something practical for the classroom but elegant enough for an interview. I end up matching a sombre grey jacket with a long flowery dress in a doomed effort to compensate for the show-stealing pimple. I head out the door, turn, head back inside, grab my funeral outfit as a back-up. Now I’m behind schedule, so practically running down the drive and into my faithful little green Nissan Micra. There on the passenger seat is the marking I was meant to do last night. “Morning Froggy, how was your evening?” I ask, as I turn the key, and he splutters into life by way of reply. I give him a little pat on the dashboard and we head off.

I pull up in the staff car park and manage to spill the marking onto the concrete in an attempt to juggle my laptop and bag. I'm scooping up books as Rachel's BMW glides into the space next to me. She's the last person I want to see this morning.

"Hey Georgie, how'zit?"

My hand reflexively goes to my forehead and I re-spill the books I've just gathered.

"Good, thanks, Rachel." *It's Georgia, by the way. Do I call you Rachy, for fucksake?*

She looks at me hunched over the scattered books. "Oh, gotta hate it when that happens," she says far too cheerfully. "You okay there?"

"I'm fine." *No, don't worry, just stand there gawping.* "How's things with you?"

"Fantastic! Boot camp is such a rush. Just sets you up for the day."

Yes, Rachel's face, pristine and pimple-free of course, is particularly aglow this morning. She flashes me a smile, her hair is swept back in a plaited ponytail to draw attention to those cool green eyes and salient cheek bones. She looks effortlessly gorgeous and sickeningly stylish in her charcoal suit and I now realise I'm going to have to change before the interview. *A flowery dress, for fuck's sake!*

I finally scoop up the last book and give a little grunt as I haul myself back up. Rachel looks me up and down. "You should come and give boot camp a go. Might do you good."

What does that mean?

"Oh, not really my thing, you know. Chocolate camp, now that I might even break into a jog for. Ha!" *Good one, Georgia.*

"Ha, you are funny, Georgie." *Georgia!* "Seriously, think about it. Maybe bring that hot man of yours along too."

Really?

We walk across the car park towards our respective classrooms. Both of us pretending this is a normal day, just two colleagues chatting, until Rachel can no longer help herself.

“Well, big day today, I guess. Just want to say best of luck to you, Georgie.”

“Right, you too.”

“And whatever the outcome, I’m sure you...and I can be professional about things.”

“Yes, but you’ll totally get it.” *Shut up, Georgia!* “You’re such a talented...” *gossipy two-faced arse-licker* “... professional.” Rachel gives me her shitty condescending smile, tells me I’m kind, and touches my arm without breaking stride. One of the marking books slips from my grasp again, and as I bend down to gather it, Rachel’s heels clack off into the distance: *bitch-bitch-bitch-bitch*.

If I don’t get disturbed I can get the daily schedule up, have my first lesson ready to go, and get some of the marking done before the kids start to arrive. But within two minutes of me unlocking the classroom and firing up my laptop, Oils slithers in. He’s accompanied, as ever, by that pungent pine scent that I’ve yet to determine is mouthwash, aftershave or even toilet cleaner. He waltzes over and parks one butt cheek on my desk. “Ah Georgia, what a fetching dress! How was your weekend, my lovely?”

I don’t have time for this. “Fine thanks Mr Royles. And you?”

“Tim! Tim! How many times do I have to tell you, my dear?”

And off he goes: lots of boring chores to be got out of the way, “Angela and her fridge lists!” before managing to escape “wifey and the rugrats” for an afternoon of sailing. Enough wind in the sails for a bit of a blast out to the reef. Blah blah bloody blah.

I move to the whiteboard, upwind of the pine fumes, and begin writing up the day’s schedule for my class. I can feel his eyes running down my spine as I write the word “Inquiry” on the board. “And what about you, my dear? Did you and Davey get up to much?”

Davey!

“Oh, you know...” *You can piss right off back to your office now, thank you.* “...pretty quiet.”

“I do hope he’s treating you well.”

The pine snakes up behind my back. His voice, close now, and full of suggestion: “Should come and join me one weekend. Really can be so exhilarating, you know. Or if that’s not your thing, we can always take things more gently.”

My pen pauses at the end of Sexuality and before Education.

“Sounds...” *absolutely horrendous*. “...nice,” I say. “Sorry, but I’m often tied up with Dave at the weekends.”

“Gosh. Too much info Georgia. Ha!”

Oh my God, now I am actually fucking blushing!

“Sorry. Figure of speech, Mr Royles. Tim.”

“Ha! Of course. Ha! Just my little joke, my dear. Mind you, if you do need any advice on knots you only need ask a sailor! Ha!”

Eww. “Right. Sorry. Thanks.” *That’s right, there you go apologising again!*

“Hmm. Well, I’d better let you get on. Big day today, eh? All the best for this afternoon.”

My shoulder muscles tense as he walks past. Sure enough, a hand lands fleetingly on my shoulder, gives it a little squeeze. “I’ll be rooting for you.”

I’m using an (unmarked) maths book to fan all trace of Oils out of the door when Lyrix walks in – early as usual. “Morning Miss. Smells rank in here.” I turn from the board to greet her, and her face contorts and she lets out an “Urrghh. Gross!”

I immediately put my hand over my pimple. It’s starting to throb and a blotch of foundation comes away on my fingers.

“Sex!” Lyrix is disgusted. “You really making us do Sex?”

I look behind me at the schedule. “Sexuality Education, Lyrix. It’s not just about sex, it’s about identity, empowerment, respect, choices...”

“Yeah, well, I choose not to do it.” Lyrix steps closer, stares at me with sudden concern. “That’s one hell of a whitehead, Miss. Just saying! Don’t worry, we all get them. You wanna give it a good squeeze, get all the puss out. You want me to do it for you?”

I thank Lyrix for her kind offer.

After school, I’m sitting outside Oils’ office going through all possible questions that might be fired my way during the interview. I rifle through my bag and take out my make-up mirror. Oh God, look at that bastard! The zit has swollen to twice its original size. I rummage around for emergency foundation but the door is opening and Rachel is stepping out. She throws a parting remark over her shoulder and the interview panel can be heard chuckling away. Rachel winks at me as she passes and struts down the corridor as if it’s a catwalk. Each swing of her hips an elegant “fuck-you” and “follow-that”. A member of the school board comes to call me in to the interview. I try to smooth my Hitler parting over Zitzilla.

I go through the interview failing to do myself justice and distracted by the build-up of pressure in the centre of my forehead. I imagine hot lava puss exploding out of my face crater and all over the salty old cow who keeps pressing me on my knowledge of reciprocal teaching practice, or better still, squirting straight into the piggy eyes of the patronising board chairman who has the cheek to ask about my “relationship status”. Oils tosses in the occasional question – his manner is professional, polite – but he spends a long time looking out of the window. I look around at the sympathetic smiles fixed on faces when the grilling is over, knowing I have left them cold. *Look, I’m actually a really good teacher, I know my stuff, I just don’t interview well, I have some great ideas for how we can turn this school around, get the best out of the kids...* “Thanks so much Georgia.” Oils is holding the door open for me. When I step back into the corridor there’s a third interviewee waiting. Oils steers me out with a hand on the small of my back, and says to the man, “Ah, you must be

Andy.” As I look back, I see them shake hands and head into the interview room. I wonder if Andy will be asked about his relationship status.

When I get home Dave is on his laptop doing more bird research. He has not remembered the takeout, and now has no chance of noticing the lucky earrings because I have plucked them out as soon as I walked into the deserted kitchen. I am holding them in my fist above the sink wondering if the Insinkerator would make a meal out of them.

But Dave does notice something about me when he looks up from his bird searching. He notices the zit from this morning is now attempting to colonise my face. And that’s just perfect. That’s just tipped me over the edge and now I’m sobbing. And he takes me in his arms and he asks me what’s wrong and I want to yell at him that he should know what’s fucking wrong. That he needs to take less interest in penguins and more interest in his girlfriend. But I can’t say anything. All I can do is sob into his chest and his arms wrapped around me are all I need right now and that makes me even more bloody angry.

“Oh, shit. I was supposed to get takeout, wasn’t I. You had your interview today. Sorry babe, I clean forgot. How did it go?” And by way of reply I shudder and blub and smear snotty tears into his T-shirt.

Dave grabs us a takeaway. The tikka masala makes me break out in a sweat. I manage just a couple of forkfuls. My head is starting to throb, a pulsing that penetrates through to the skull. I go to bed, wrap the duvet around me, cocoon myself, drift in and out of sleep. I wake in a fever, rip the duvet away, start shivering, grab the duvet again. Dave gets in beside me. I cling to him, push him away, cling. I’m back in the classroom, packing up my things, about to leave, but an elephant is stuck in the doorway. I try forcing it out, pushing so hard my hands are sinking into the wrinkled flesh of its buttocks. It lifts its tail, farts a blast of pine in my face and squeezes out through the doorway. It turns, waves its trunk at me, and says, “We really should go sailing sometime.” The trunk is right there in front of my face. I

swipe it aside. And then I'm opening my eyes, aware of a hint of daylight behind the curtains, and the hot fever is back, skin soaked. I flap at the flesh lying against my cheek. It falls back against my face. I reach up. Feel it. *What the hell Dave! Get your dick off my face!* This time I grab it, and as I try to move it, I realise it's not attached to Dave. I stagger to the bathroom, holding the thing against my forehead. I blink into the light and stare at the wide-eyed Georgia in the mirror. A Georgia who has a penis hanging out of her forehead.

After locking myself in the bathroom, I try pulling the thing off. I take hold of it in one hand and give it a tentative tug. Next I reach up, get both hands around, grip it hard and watch myself in the mirror as I slowly pull. I see the skin around my forehead stretch but refuse to yield. I pull harder until my eyes begin to tear up. It's not shifting. I let out a stifled yell in frustration.

"You okay?" Dave's up and outside the door.

"Go away!"

"Well, hurry up, I'm busting."

"Piss off!"

"You still mad about the penguins and the earrings?"

I hear his feet clump off towards the kitchen. I can't take my eyes off the bathroom mirror. How can this happen? Why me? And then the name John Merrick pops into my head. We'd done a class study once on diseases and someone had looked up the Elephant Man. The kids couldn't believe that someone actually looked like that. And now here I am: Penis Woman.

Dave's next knock has an urgency about it. He's threatening to pee in the kitchen sink if I don't let him in, so I turban a towel around my head, ensuring the *growth* is gathered up

and concealed within the folds. I'm sitting at the table in my dressing gown, eyeing up the kitchen knives, when he emerges from the bathroom with a sigh.

"No breakfast?"

Breakfast? A dick has sprouted out of my forehead. "I'm sick. Fever. Staying home."

"Yeah, you were burning up last night. One point your tongue must have been hanging out. Felt it flopped against my ear."

I adjust the turban slightly, say nothing.

Dave looks around the kitchen, as if surveying a 3-D riddle, before finally grabbing two slices of bread, splatting some ketchup over them and then slapping them together with an air of triumph. He pulls up a chair, chews, studies his phone, chews some more, gives a little snort, says, "There's this rooster from Kansas called Mike, got his head cut off 18 months ago and is still alive. The farmer feeds him by chucking grain straight into his..." He looks up at me and the smile falls away. "Anyway, I better get to work, babe. Let me know if there's anything I can get you." He comes in for the goodbye kiss and I flinch as his brow glances against my towel.

"Don't worry," he says. "I'm sure it's nothing contagious."

Cap on head and he's out the door. Plate still on the table. Mug still on the table. I touch the front of the towel. Penis still attached to head.

Within ten minutes of calling in sick, I get a text from Oils. "So sorry u r unwell look forward to having u back fit and well not that u r not always fit lol! take care Tim x"

I unwrap the penis from the towel, give it another examination. It's still definitely a penis. I Google "penis growth" with unhelpful results; I want this thing to go away, not get any bigger. By mid-morning I have self-medicated the best part of a bottle of gin and an array of painkillers. I run my thumb along the serrated edge of a kitchen knife, watching it swim in

and out of focus. At some point I am rebounding off the bathroom door frame and trying to recognise the creature in the bathroom mirror. Knife in one hand, penis in other.

Someone is calling my name. They need to go away. I am back in the womb. As long as I stay curled up like this I am safe. As long as I keep my eyes screwed shut, no light will get in. Head thudding. Light unacceptable. Shut it out. Keep arms folded over tummy. Cuddle the nausea away. Just stay like this. But someone is shaking my shoulder now. They need to just kindly fuck right off until this passes. No, don't tug at me like that thank you. Do not fucking disturb.

“Arghh!”

For a moment, everything's a blur. Then Dave's horrified face sharpens into focus.

“What happened to you?”

“Unngh?”

“And what the fucking hell is that?”

He is pointing at me. And out of the corner of my eye, I can see it, hanging there. I reach up to touch it. It's flopped next to my nose. Wads of crusty, bloodstained toilet paper are stuck to my forehead. The penis has sprouted back through the tissue with a vengeance. The thing, I swear, is even bigger than before.

“What the fuck?” Dave's talking so very loudly. “It looks like a dick!”

He seems almost more affronted by the (re)appearance of the penis than I am. He says things like: “You can't be seen like this.” “It's not natural.” “Fuck me! That's a monster!” I pull the duvet back over my head. Dave stomps off. Everything throbs.

By the time I drag myself out of bed, Dave is using dishwashing liquid to scrub his hands in the kitchen sink. He's been cleaning up the bloodstained bathroom. Now there's a first. I have the mother of all hangovers and slump into a seat at the kitchen table. Dave dries

his hands and slides a mug of coffee in front of me. Instead of sitting down, he backs up to the sink to observe me at a safe distance.

“Don’t worry,” I mumble. “Like you said, sure it’s not contagious.”

“I’ve already got one, thanks, and not one like that!”

He approaches, very slowly, getting a closer look. He takes his phone out of his pocket.

“Don’t even think about it!” I yell at him, causing my head to throb harder.

“Calm down! I’m not taking a photo. Just Googling it.”

“Tried that already. No use. Men have woken up with them missing but ...”

He tilts his head to one side as he studies it. “Could it be something you ate?”

I glare at him.

“You’re going to have to go to hospital. That thing needs a surgical procedure.”

“Tried that already, too. Besides, I’m not walking into a hospital with a dick on my head.”

That night Dave abandons the bed and sleeps on the sofa. “How can I sleep, with that thing on the pillow, staring me in the face?”

Next morning, he has left for work before I get up. I find a dirty bowl and coffee mug on the kitchen table. I sit, lay my head down, and the penis flops in front of me like a prize-winning sausage. I can feel the kitchen knives twitching on the shelf. Not going through that again. Dave’s right about one thing. I have to be a big girl and get proper medical help.

When I pull up at the doctor’s surgery, I tug the rear-view mirror towards me and adjust the headscarf to ensure the penis is fully concealed. I take a seat in the waiting room next to a little girl who is slumped against her mother and coughing phlegmily. I flick through the women’s magazines: “I wasn’t going crazy...he was cheating on me!” “How to

hold those wrinkles at bay!” “Divorce triggered my eating disorder!” I mutter to myself, “Woke up with a real dick head!” The girl turns and looks at me.

Dr Lubanski appears preoccupied by something on her computer screen as I’m finally called into her room. She offers a tight smile, removes her spectacles and says, “So, tell me about this infection of yours.” She replaces her glasses and her eyes wander back to the screen as I start to unravel the headscarf. When she looks up, I see I have her full attention. Dr Lubanski’s fingers are soon roaming over my penis. She seems positively fascinated by my affliction. “My God! My God!” she keeps saying. “What a specimen!” She does something, some little kneading motion with her fingers, and I feel a little tightening, a slight quiver. She backs off, clears her throat, takes off her spectacles and touches them to her lips.

“So, um, any ideas?”

“Just a moment.” She returns to her chair and starts clicking away on her laptop. “Let me Google it.”

I leave Dr Lubanski’s clinic no wiser. Since I am otherwise healthy, I will have to wait for an appointment with a dermatological consultant with a view to possible surgery. At least she has the decency to write me a week’s sick note, for my “unspecified growth”.

*

Rejection teams up with dejection. I get a text from Oils telling me I interviewed so well but didn’t quite get the position. Dave says he still loves me. He just can’t stand being with me, right now. Those weren’t his exact words but it’s become obvious that he is freaked out by me and “it”. He needs some space, poor flower. I need support! Some days I will come across a tool or appliance around the house and wonder if I can attempt another short-cut solution: The electric carving knife. The pruning shears. Last resort: the blender?

I’m bingeing on gin & Netflix romcoms one night when the old movie “Sliding Doors” gives me a great idea. I head out of the door with my car keys and sway my way

down the drive towards Froggy. I'm trying to squeeze the life out of my penis by jamming it in the automatic window, when I hear a rustling close by. I can turn my head just enough to see my neighbour carrying his rubbish bag to the roadside. I give him a little wave. He places the rubbish bag down carefully, and backs away up his drive.

Clarity comes calling the following morning. I wake up with my bruised penis sprawled out on the pillow beside me. I find myself apologising to him. *Time for the rejection to stop. Time to embrace who I am. Stop hiding away Georgia. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and think about the kids. They need you. Besides, you're all out of sick days.*

"Hey Miss, missed you."

"Thanks Lyrix, good to see you too."

"Like your scarf, Miss."

"Thanks Lyrix."

"You haven't got cancer, have you?"

"No, Lyrix. You haven't got a filter, have you?"

"Huh?"

Lyrix, of course, is a genius. It makes perfect sense. The headscarf and the barely concealed growth it hides. I decide to go with it.

We're waiting in the staff room for Oils to come and get the staff meeting underway. I'm sat next to the Food Tech teacher who is telling me about her best friend who has breast cancer and is successfully self-medicating with apple cider vinegar. I nod and smile and watch Rachel casually flirting with Steve, the deputy principal. *It's all right Rach, you can stop now. Position filled.* Look at her. She must have the job. Steve leans in and murmurs

something conspiratorially. Rachel's hand goes over her mouth and she gives a wide-eyed look of mock horror. Yup, already one of the team.

I feel a hand brush my shoulder as Oils walks in, glides past the back of my chair and into the centre of the room. Someone is lurking just inside the door.

Before we begin our meeting, Oils says he would like to introduce the new member of the senior management team. I look at Rachel. Something's wrong. She looks down for a moment, blinks a few times, before raising her chin, fixing a smile on her face. Oils turns and beckons. Now I get it. The stranger called Andy comes to stand beside Oils and introduces himself. He's delighted to be part of the team. He's so looking forward to working with us all. And then Oils is shaking his hand and sharing a joke. I look over at Rachel. She's still kind of smiling. Our eyes meet for a moment.

After the meeting, Oils pulls me aside. A quick "in and out" in his office please. The air in the principal's office is clammy and laced with his scent. He closes the door behind me, sealing everything in. Oils sits me down and props himself on the corner of his desk, placing the taut nylon across his groin at my eye level. I lower my eyes. He hitches at his trouser leg, exposing a flash of bleached shin above cartoon character sock. Oils begins by putting on his concerned face and asking after my health. I watch his attention drift away as I answer. He interrupts and tells me about the exciting developments I have missed at last week's staff meeting. I count off the buzz words he loves to use: Cultural Responsiveness, High Ceilings, Educational Equity. And then, having ticked off all the key words in his play book, he starts giving me an update on his sailing exploits. Normally I would sit there, listen passively and nod. But today there's an irritating heated itch under my headscarf.

"Sorry to interrupt but I'm curious about something."

Oils stops mid-anecdote. He looks a little miffed at me cutting him off.

“I would understand if Rachel got the job. I could accept if she was the better candidate. But why give it to someone from outside the school?”

Oils puts one finger inside his shirt collar. “My dear Georgia, let me assure you, your application was well received. You – both you and Rachel – interviewed extremely well. If it was just up to me...” He holds out both hands as if about to catch a falling object. And it’s the stupid, mock-rueful smile on his face that flicks the switch within me. I feel the blood running up my cheeks.

“Well, it kind of is up to you, isn’t it? You’re the one who knows me and Rachel. The rest of the Board take their lead from you. But clearly you didn’t try too hard to persuade them. What happened to all this stuff you preach about supporting staff in progressing their careers?”

Oils’ face takes on that sour expression he gets when someone questions his wisdom. Slowly, he manages to force something approaching a smile back onto his face. “Believe me, my dear, I fought your corner, I really did. But the Board, well, I have to take others into account. That’s part of being in management: making the tough decisions.”

I’m trying hard to keep my breathing steady. By gripping the arms of the chair I stop my hands from shaking. “And you don’t think a woman is capable making the tough decisions? You’d sooner give the job to a man who walks in from the street rather than...”

“Andy was simply the best man for the job!” The words are shouted. Oils pushes himself up off the desk with an abruptness that causes an Equity in Schools Handbook to fall to the floor. “Board decisions are not up for discussion. I suggest you stop getting so emotional about it all and move on.” And with that he brushes past me. When I look round, he is actually holding the door open, dismissing me from his office like a scolded child. As I push myself out of the chair I realise my hands are no longer shaking. My breathing is under control.

“You’re right,” I say, unfastening my scarf. “I shouldn’t get so emotional.”

Unwinding, I walk towards Oils. His eyes start to flare as he tries to fathom what he is seeing. Trout lips silently opening, closing. He takes a step back, presses his back against the wall. I lean in until my penis is almost touching his nose. He shuts his eyes tight. I tell him, very calmly, “As long as you’re sure you’ve got the best man for the job.” As I walk off down the corridor I keep my chin high and my shoulders back. My penis swings freely from side-to-side.

Get a message from Dave that evening: miss u muchly (three sad face emojis).

I drink a cup of chamomile tea, take a long bath. Afterward, I wipe the condensation from the mirror. The cheeks have a bit of colour back in them, eyes clearer. My penis is a little wrinkled from the long bath so I treat it to some moisturiser. Doesn’t take long for it be looking quite the specimen again. “Yes, you’re a handsome fella, aren’t you? Yes you are.” I give him a little peck. “You need a name don’t you, my lovely?” I go back through the data bank of old flames. Did he remind me of anyone’s? That freckly accountant who had a thing for feet. Gregor? Trevor? Trevor, that was him.

I wake the next morning refreshed and vital. I shower, dry my hair, and select a new scarf from the wardrobe. I start wrapping it around my head. Stop. Unwrap it. Discard the scarf on the bed. *Embrace who you are*. I take a lingering look in the mirror and apply a subtle hint of foundation to Trevor. If we’re going to be hanging out together, I want him looking his best.

Trevor, Froggy and me arrive at the school car park and I sit there for a few moments mentally preparing myself. The arrival of Rachel’s BMW stirs me into action. I open the door and greet her.

“Hi Georgie.” She throws a quick glance at me, then turns back for another, longer look.

I put my bag over my shoulder and stride past her and her open mouth. “Morning Rachel. It’s Georgia, by the way. Have a great day.”

I’m putting the daily schedule on the classroom board when Oils slips in behind me. “Ah, Georgia, I just wanted to say, about yesterday...” Me and Trevor turn to face him. He shrinks back towards the door. “Uh, er, just wanted to say sorry for shouting like I did, and, er, check you’re, er, ok.”

“Never better, thanks Tim. Anything else I can help you with?”

“Nooo. No all good. I see you’re busy.”

I watch him scuttle away. No sailing stories today.

When Lyrix walks in she takes one look at me and screws her face up.

“I know Lyrix, sorry. This is Trevor, better get used to him. New class member.”

Lyrix, for once in her life, is speechless. As are the rest of the class when they arrive. Funny, I’d expected uproar, but everyone seems very subdued as we plough our way through a morning of maths and literacy. Trevor even proves a useful resource as we touch on Sexuality Education in the afternoon. There is one snide remark I hear from that gobby little shit Nate, but once me and Trevor loom over his desk and ask him if he has something to add, he goes very pale and quiet. It’s also very quiet in the staff room over the next few days when me and Trevor walk in for lunch. I get plenty of room to myself in there – just as I do in the gents’ toilets.

At the next staff meeting Oils proposes banning kids bringing phones to school. Rachel suggests kids could bring phones but hand them in to the office at the start of the day. Oils calls this unworkable and Steve and Andy nod in agreement. Then Oils turns to me and

asks what I think. I say, “The phones are becoming a problem but the kids need them to contact parents. Getting them to hand in their phones during school hours is the best option.”

Oils nods thoughtfully.

“Good point,” notes Steve.

“Agreed,” adds Andy.

“Ok,” declares Oils. “Let’s give Georgia’s suggestion a try and see how it goes.”

I look over at Rachel who is blowing out her cheeks and staring at the ceiling.

Disaster strikes gloriously during the weekend. I arrive at school on the Monday and I’m immediately called into Oils’ office by Steve. Our principal is nowhere to be seen. Steve sits in Oils’ chair and gestures for me to take a seat. “Bad news, I’m afraid,” says Steve, looking grim. “Tim’s in hospital.” I try to muster look of concern, as he continues, “Sailing injury. Boom swung across, whacked him on the head and swept him overboard.”

“Oh my goodness. Is he going to be ok?”

“Too early to say,” says Steve, importantly, like a doctor in a TV drama. “Of course, that means I’ll be in the hot seat for a while.” He leans back in the chair, puts his arms behind his head. *Look at you! Light a cigar up, why don’t you?* “Anyway,” says Steve, “we’ll be needing to bring someone on to the management team until Tim’s back on his feet, and you’re the obvious candidate. Keep it under your hat for the moment,” Steve gives me a wink. “Until I get the Board to make it official, but you’ll be a shoe-in.”

I realise I’ve been absent-mindedly twiddling with one of my amber earrings. There’s a nagging knock-knock rapping at the back of my brain. It’s going *Bitch-Bitch, Bitch-Bitch*. And so I say, “What about Rachel? Haven’t you spoken to her?”

Steve puts his feet on the desk, looks at me with surprise. “Rachel’s a good teacher, she’s great with kids. But senior management’s a whole different beast. We need someone

who can handle the pressure, if you know what I mean. So, enough of the false modesty – you're our guy."

When I arrive home I feel uneasy as I put my key in the door. Something fishy is going on. I find Dave in the kitchen. This is weird because Dave moved out. It's also weird because he appears to be cooking. He turns around when he hears me come in. He looks at me, and looks at Trevor. He has this crazy-eyed smiley face expression going on.

"What are you doing, Dave?"

"I thought I'd surprise you. Fish curry."

"Well you've surprised me all right. Now you can kindly fuck off."

"Don't be like that, babe. I've missed you. Can't we just talk."

"Key." I hold out my hand. He sighs, hands over the house key.

Just in case I haven't realised, he says, "I've been learning how to cook."

"Unbelievable!"

"Yeah, unbelievable, eh?" He turns for a moment to stir the pan, then looks over at me, points with his head. "Your lucky earrings, right?"

Yup, they really have been working their magic lately. I look over Dave's shoulder and breathe in the aroma from the bubbling pan.

"Smells good," I concede. "Fish curry. My favourite." *He remembered.*

He shows me the Riesling he's got cooling in the fridge. Also my favourite.

He says, "I've been a dick." He looks at Trevor. "No offence. It was just a bit of a shock, you know?"

"I'm so sorry it was such a shock for *you*."

"I'm not expecting you to take me back but at least we can still be friends. What do you say?"

“I say I’m going to have a shower and when I get back I’ll try that Riesling.”

As I step into the lounge, I notice something else weird. Dave’s been through here and tidied up. He’s even picked up towels from the bathroom floor. Very impressive! The toilet seat is down though. Me and Trevor take a long, hot shower and, afterward, when I’m moisturising him in front of the bathroom mirror, I decide to cancel my appointment with the consultant. “Don’t worry Trevor, I’m not letting anyone get their hands on you.”

There’s a glass of wine on the table waiting for me. Dave is hovering by the stove, studying his phone, as I come up behind him. “More unbelievable bird facts?” I ask.

He’s about to pocket the phone, seems embarrassed, but then shrugs. “This woman’s unbelievable! She does something with aubergines you wouldn’t even dream of.” I sigh and shake my head. Then he shows me the phone screen. It’s a cooking website.

When we sit down to eat, Dave’s phone stays in his pocket. I do, occasionally, have to tell him that it’s rude to keep staring at Trevor. He apologises and says it just takes a bit of getting used to. Yes, I tell him, it does. But after a while you forget he’s there. After dinner I see Dave out the door with a peck on the cheek. Trevor gets a little squashed up between us.

*

I’m coming to the end of my one-week free trial at Boot Camp. It’s not for me. I can handle the early starts, and yes, I’m sure my core muscles will eventually put in an appearance, but it’s just too painful. Not the physical pain of attempting more than one push-up or lunge, but having to listen to Rob the instructor trotting out his motivational platitudes. Apparently, we won’t get the arse we want by sitting on it. Rob has stripped off his vest and is caressing his abs as he chats up Rachel after this morning’s session. I go over and plonk myself onto a moonball, elbows on knees, Trevor on nose, getting my breath back. Rob asks me how the session was while scanning the gym. It takes less than a minute for him to lose interest in our conversation and move on to help the new girl, Siobhan, with her warm-down.

Rachel watches him go, rolls her eyes. “Thanks for rescuing me, Georgia. Man’s hot all right, but you can see why there’s so many mirrors in this place.”

I shrug. It’s nothing. “Hey Rach, I’ve got your reports in my car. They’re all checked.”

As part of my new role in senior management I’ve been approving end of year class reports written by teachers.

Rachel looks at the floor as she says, “Everything ok?”

I try to keep my voice light, breezy, “Great, fine. Just one or two minor things to fix up.”

We walk out into the fresh air of the gym car park. I take Rachel’s reports from Froggy’s passenger seat, and as I hand them to her, one of the sheets slides out and falls to the ground. I’m about to pick it up, but Rachel gets there first, stooping for it and apologising. For a moment I’m staring down at her, kneeling before me, wondering how I’d misjudged her so badly; mistaken her briskness for disdain. I feel a strange tingling, a light-headedness, and can only look on with a sense of strange detachment as Trevor falls away in front of my eyes and drops into Rachel’s lap. She performs a kind of electrified star jump and backs away with a shudder, sending Trevor flopping onto the ground. I bend down to scoop him up. He doesn’t look well at all. Still clutching Rachel’s reports under my arm, I try reattaching Trevor, squishing him against the seeping wound in the centre of my forehead, but he’s not having it. I cup him gently in my hand and examine him. Already he seems diminished. When I look back up, Rachel is there in front of me, glaring. She says, “That’s just so gross.” She snatches her bundle of reports from my grasp. “I’ll give these to Steve for a proper look through.” And with a dismissive shake of the head, she turns and strides off with that haughty swagger I’d almost forgotten about.

I look down at Trevor nestled in my hand. He's turning blue. I've got to get to the hospital. I jump into Froggy, crank up the air con, stamp on the accelerator. It's still early, traffic is light. Trevor lies limp in my lap as I gun Froggy through an amber light. I take a glance in the rear-view, see the seeping, angry wound. And to think I'd once freaked out over that little pimple! Hidden Trevor behind a scarf in shame! Froggy's engine is starting to whine as we move into the uncharted territory of the overtaking lane. The concrete tower block of the hospital is coming into view. I put one hand on Trevor, gently stroking him. He feels so cold, lifeless. Oh Trevor! Hang in there, buddy. Don't you go leaving me now.

Speech Bubbles

Jordan is beginning to wonder what happens if you puke inside a gorilla suit. Another bar on the stag crawl around town and the tequila shots-through-a-straw are kicking in. Steve has an arm around Jordan's shoulder and is steering him towards more strangers.

"This is Grace and that's Kylie. Karla. Whatever. They want a photo." Before Jordan can protest, Steve booms, "Come on girls, squeeze in. Just keep your hands off his banana." Jordan feels himself shrinking into the anonymity of his gorilla outfit as bodies press against him and a phone points his way.

Through the eyeholes Jordan sees Steve's arm around a waist, a band of pale flesh where his wedding ring normally lives. Another wave of nausea breaks in Jordan's belly. Steve is staring at him with mock concern. "Try to look like you're enjoying yourself," he hoots, as he gives his new friend another squeeze and they burst into laughter.

Stag night: the last hurrah. Celebrating one last night of freedom before settling down to married life. Lap dance in a strip club, handcuffed to a famous landmark. The rules are simple: be a good sport and don't spoil it for everyone else. But Jordan's reaching that point where he might ruin everything.

Another shot glass finds its way into his hand. He wants to say, I don't want this. I'm not ready for this. But who's listening? Steve's more of a ringmaster than a best man, and this show must go on. Jordan is sweating tequila into the gorilla suit. And now he needs to pee. His head is starting to swim but his mouth is dry, so he drains the tequila through the straw and staggers off towards the toilets, nearly losing his balance when Steve slaps him on the back and brays, "You go mark your territory, you beast."

On the way to the toilet, Jordan sees a sign through the eyeholes: EMERGENCY EXIT.

The gorilla man makes his escape into the night. It's a strange city. He starts walking, just trying to put distance between himself and the stag party. He remembers the name of the motel they are staying at, but not where it is. His phone has been confiscated by Steve, but he has secreted his credit card inside the foot of the suit. Getting at it right now is another matter. Still, he tries to flag down a passing taxi.

Rohit looks into his rear-view mirror to see a gorilla giving him the finger. He drives on. Away from the waterfront, away from the pubs and clubs where the drinkers and the dancers search for escape, affirmation or oblivion, and out into the residential streets where the couple are settled down in their beds, breeding familiarity. Rohit casts an eye over the GPS and then the photo on the dashboard. Three more months and there'll be a new addition to that family photo. Another mouth to feed, more night shifts to pull. Not that he's complaining. Rohit wouldn't have it any other way. "You have reached your destination," the GPS informs him. He pulls up by a wrought iron gate in front of a pathway. The house beyond is built of brick. A door opens. A figure steps out onto the path, lights a cigarette, takes a couple of urgent puffs, and then dispatches it onto the ground as he opens the gate, the hinges whining in protest. A face at a window for a moment, then gone. The man gets into the taxi. Rohit glances at him in the rear-view. He looks like someone who's just left an arduous business meeting, Rohit tells himself, as he pulls away. Drop off this sorry-looking guy, then go home to bed.

Jordan plods on, deep in conversation with his fiancée. Or rather the conversation he might get round to having with her. He hears the gentle murmur of an engine and sees a police car has drawn up alongside him, keeping pace. The cops are having a good old look at him, shaking their heads. Jordan gives them a wave, wonders if he should ask them for a ride.

The driver says something to his partner. They both laugh, and the car accelerates away. Jordan watches them go, gives a few violent tugs at his gorilla ears, but the head is glued on. He's trapped. Jordan gives a roar, waves his fists at the sky. He yells in exasperation and the muffled word sounds something like: "Stuck!"

Jordan's feet are aching and blistered. The numbers on the credit card he snuck into the foot of the suit feel like they are now imprinted into his sole. He plonks himself down on the pavement where he finds a hardly-smoked cigarette, still warm. Jordan inserts it through his monkey mouth and sucks. Wrong end. He discards the cigarette and spits out dead, ashy strands of tobacco. He doesn't even smoke. Something's swimming inside him. It's not the nausea anymore. This is something else creeping up on him, up into his throat, he tries to clamp it down, but here it comes: shoulders shaking, eyes stinging.

His breathing slows, he rubs at his eyeholes, looks around. Behind him is a wrought-iron gate, the path beyond leads around the back of a brick house. There's something there. He can feel it, instinctively. The pull of water. The hinges whine when he opens the gate.

Gina opens up the freezer and lets the cool air work its way into her pores. When she presses the bottle against her cheek it's so cold it starts to numb her flesh. Somewhere outside she hears a metallic whine. Like his voice when he'd said: *I don't really go in for that kind of thing*. She rolls the bottle up and down her cheek, thinking: But that's just the thing.

A kiss to start the night, electric, energetic. A kiss goodbye, perfunctory punctuation – full stop.

I guess I should get going.

And he's out the door, she's by the bedroom window, watching him suck on the cigarette, a deep cleansing inhalation. Discarded with a flick of the finger. By the time the taxi pulls away, the cigarette has fizzled out.

Gina takes a glass from the sink. The rim is faintly pink. Her lips have been here before. She pours herself two fingers: one for sorrow, one for bloody annoyed, and raises her glass to her reflection in the window, which is doing her few favours. Chill the throat, burn the belly, numb the brain. She stares again at the reflection in the window. There's something weird about her eyes. She leans forward. Her chin is all wrong. What about the mouth? By standing on tiptoe she can just press her lips against the pane. What is it like to be kissed by me, she thinks. She runs the tip of her tongue along the cool glass, trying to spell out her name. And as she's dotting the "i" she is distracted by a shape out there in the dark – a gorilla is about to dive into her pool.

Jordan stands swaying above the water. Clammy skin sticking to the inside of the wretched suit. A thick, syrupy tongue licks arid lips. The pool lights make the water glisten turquoise. An oasis offering an instant, irresistible solution. He closes his eyes and leans forward.

It takes Gina a moment to register the gorilla can't swim. Once her mind's made up, she moves fast: out the door, across the patio, leaping into the water. Adrenaline coursing, she grabs two fistfuls of gorilla suit, finding the strength within her to haul its occupant to the side of the pool. Gina rolls him on to his back. He lies limp and still. She shakes his shoulders, tries tugging at his ears. She leans over him and contemplates putting her lips to his gorilla mouth. Instead, she's back on her feet, running back to the kitchen to arm herself with the baddest blade from her selection of stainless steel kitchen knives. She inserts the knife into the neck and begins to carve away until the gorilla head is severed. The shock of his pale face, blue lips, long black hair. She slaps him hard in the face. She pinches his nose.

As her lips approach his, he jolts violently. She recoils. He opens his eyes, turns, and pukes chlorinated tequila onto the pool tiles.

*

The ape man is all over the place. He's over there in the pool, floating on his back, long black hair waving like a clump of kelp. His shed skin is flopped over a sun lounger. His gorilla mask clings to a patio tile, squashed flat, as if trodden on by an elephant – which is pretty much how Jordan's actual head felt when he'd woken this afternoon. He's also all over Gina's various social media feeds. There he is in between her friends Grace and Kylah. Gina screws up her nose at the sight of the leering bald guy with the predatory arm snaked around Kylah's waist.

When Gina has finished scrolling, she slips on her D&G sunglasses, sucks in her cheeks, and aims her phone. Hint of cleavage cropped in. Hint of anything unflattering cropped out. The sun is dipping. The gentle glow of evening casting her in a sympathetic light.

“Who is it for?” Jordan has slipped out of the pool and is standing there, dripping onto the patio tiles. The unruly black hair is the only trace of anything remotely simian about him. His angular body and his manner of standing at awkward angles makes her think of a deer. She's studied him without making it obvious. Too young. Too brittle. Fascinating, none the less. If he's studied her, he's made it even less obvious. Not her type anyway, but she's still a bit put out by that.

“What's what for?”

“The photo. Are you sending it to someone?”

Gina looks at him like, *what's it to you?*

“Or are you just posting it onto Insta or whatever. Hey look everyone, me by the pool.”

Gina lays the phone down, feels her nostrils flaring. She puts her sunglasses on her forehead and studies Jordan.

“If I’d known what a smart arse you are I would have left you at the bottom of the pool.”

Jordan looks amused, lowers himself onto a sun lounger.

“Give me your phone,” he says.

She throws him a look that says, *As if that’s gonna happen.*

“I bet you’ve got an Instagram account full of pictures of you doing exciting things, being wonderful, smart, funny and looking terrific,” he says. Gina stares at him. “Don’t get me wrong,” he goes on. “I’m not accusing you of being any more vain or shallow than anyone else.”

“Oh, that’s so sweet of you.”

“I mean, when did you last see someone post a picture of themselves getting out of bed in the morning? We’re all so concerned about presenting this image of ourselves. Instead of...I dunno...”

“Just being ourselves? I guess that works if you’re truly comfortable in your own skin.” She waves a hand at the gorilla suit. “Not quite that simple though, right?”

He sits down, examines his toes, finds a strand of what might be gorilla hair under a nail and pulls it free. “No. Not quite that simple.”

*

He asks if he can cook a meal for her as a way of saying thank you.

When he brings cheese on toast out to the pool, she raises her eyebrows, says he must be really grateful.

They eat. The sun sinks into suburbia. He gazes out over the pool, seemingly lost in thought. She is about to say something but stops herself, realising it’s quite pleasant just

sitting there. When you've saved someone from drowning, and cut their head off, there's no need to try to say anything impressive.

*

He points at Gina's phone and says, "What if you had to tell the truth. If everything you posted about yourself was authentic?"

She says, "What if you had the guts to tell your fiancée you feel like the walls are closing in on you?"

He ignores this, continues, "And all your secrets, all your dreams and desires, your most shameful thoughts. Everything gets posted out there with those getting-out-of-bed photos, so everyone really gets to know who everyone else is?"

Gina's phone buzzes. She checks the screen.

Then she says, "Is there a more melodramatic way of crying for help than throwing yourself in a stranger's pool?"

"That Chinese tattoo on your foot looks really mystical but I bet you don't even know what it means."

"It means, 'Always save drowning monkey'." Her phone buzzes again. She checks the screen.

Jordan asks, "Why am I so scared?"

Gina puts the phone down. "What if the online version of myself is the one I like best?"

A mosquito hovers and whines. Jordan looks back out over the pool, and says, "I'm going to tell her."

Gina follows his gaze. The water looks tempting. She says, "Sometimes I pinch my nipples and twist them really, really hard until my eyes water."

Jordan looks at her.

She shrugs, “You asked for honesty.”

*

They sit outside in the dark drinking tonic without the gin. She brings out two bananas and he thinks it’s a joke, but then she puts the jar of Nutella on the table. Comfort food for uncomfortable truths.

Jordan talks about the things that set his teeth on edge. The way his fiancée loops her arm through his when they are in company. Such a sweet act of affection that somehow jars. “It’s like I’m being accessorised.”

Gina bursts out laughing. Jordan realises how ridiculous he sounds.

Gina tells Jordan about the thing she asks a man to do for her. The thing that sends them scurrying off into taxis in the middle of the night. And after Jordan’s eyes have returned to their normal size, he suggests there must be an app for that kind of thing. “Kind of like Tinder, but for the depraved.”

Gina considers this. “Mental note. Possible idea for a start-up.”

Her phone buzzes. Jordan stands, reaches over, gently takes the phone from her hand, and lobs it in a beautiful arc through the air and into the pool.

Gina gets up and stands beside Jordan. Together they watch the ripples work their way to the pool edge. She turns to him. “It *is* waterproof. You knew that. Right?”

He grunts.

*

There is a moment when they float side-by-side under the stars. The buoyancy of the water boosting them up to meet the downward force of gravity.

*

Rohit recognised the address as soon as the dispatch came through. And here he is again: the gate, the pathway, the door opening and another man leaving. The man turns and

reaches out to someone hidden behind the door. Maybe a touch of hands. It's too dark to make out exactly. Then the man is heading this way. As he steps closer he can see this is going to be an unusual fare. He's a fairly young man with long dark hair, stark against the white bathrobe riding high at the knee and sleeves halfway up forearms. He's carrying a shopping bag with a gorilla mask peering over the rim. He gets in the back. Rohit pulls away.

“You have a beautiful family,” says the man in the back seat.

Rohit's eyes flick from the rear-view mirror to the photo on the dashboard.

“Yes,” he says, quietly. “Very beautiful, thank you.”

They drive along a parade of shops, closed and shuttered but for the 24-hour laundrette where a lone figure leans against the doorway, silhouetted by the glare of the strip lights.

“You all look. I don't know. You look like you're all so happy together. Is that how it is? You know, in real life.”

Rohit squints at the man. Driving the weekend night shift, you get used to handling the boisterous drunks, the gabblers who want to share their pearls of wisdom. But this guy is sober and strange. Rohit pulls into the station forecourt and orange neon bathes the photo on the dashboard in a warm light. The photo is there as a reminder. It reminds aggressive passengers he is a family man. It reminds Rohit why he drives the city streets late at night, humouring the hotheads, nodding along with the bigots, wiping up the puke the partied-too-hard leave in their wake. He does all this for his wife and children. Because he loves them. Of course he does. And no, Simra does not always smile, like she does in the photo. And when he doesn't sleep well, he might not be that patient with the kids. There are even nights when he's glad to get in the taxi, to escape into the city – just be the anonymous driver who ferries people from one place to another; one job – simple.

“Yes,” says Rohit. “I have a beautiful family. Really happy.”

He watches the man shuffle off towards the platform, occasionally stopping to adjust his footwear. The furry slippers he is wearing are a few sizes too small.

The first train of the day is nearly empty. Jordan shares a carriage with a young man in a hi-vis jacket who bends morosely to his phone with sleepy eyes. Jordan stares out of the window, one hand on his chin, the other tucked inside the shopping bag, stroking the gorilla hair. As the train passes through an industrial estate, Jordan stares up at the few persistent stars holding out as dawn approaches. He closes his eyes and he's back on the bottom of the pool, arms crossed across his chest. Opening his eyes and the words come out in bubbles, slipping from his mouth and bobbing to the surface where Gina crouches, holding a strand of hair behind her ear. The bubbles tingling against her ear before popping to release whispers in the wind. Everything he wants to say is out there in the world.

Then they are lying on their backs floating side-by-side, staring up at the night sky as it slowly rotates. Their outstretched fingers fleetingly brush against each other. And in that moment they are not thinking of what has gone or what is to come.

Escape Room

Theme music crackles from the speaker fixed to the cell wall by two strips of wrinkled masking tape. Dalton kicks off the sheet with his scrawny legs and scurries over to the Dronecam – yet to stir from its docking point. Stark naked, he begins a chicken dance under the sleeping camera: stringy neck jerks, bony elbows wagging, knees knocking. Then he places both hands on his shaved head and gyrates his hips vaguely in time to the rising music.

Geddis opens his eyes. “Oh, God.” His vision is a little blurry, but there’s no mistaking Dalton’s puny, pimpled buttocks jiggling away in the middle of the cell. There is a faint flapping sound, like a sardine being slapped against a sapling, as Dalton twists his hips from side to side, before another energetic burst of pelvic gyrations. “This is called the windmill, baby!” cries Dalton. “The ladies used to go nuts for this.”

Geddis shakes his head. “Oh yeah. Of course. Back when you were a male stripper.”

“Exotic dancer!”

“Right.”

Dalton’s face is rhubarb and custard – yellow bruise ripening around one eye, a distinctive red blotch on the opposite cheek. He turns his back on the dormant Dronecam, thrusts his hands on his knees and attempts to twerk.

Geddis props himself up in bed, revealing the full glory of his pot belly, from where a line of fuzz works its way up to his unruly ginger bird’s nest of a beard. One of his hands is a metal prosthetic. Geddis grunts with the effort of reaching over for his tinted spectacles. He puts them on, focuses on Dalton, grimaces, removes them. “Better not be chipolatas for breakfast.”

The theme music continues its jaunty jingling. Geddis tells Dalton to cover himself up before the cameras come on.

“Just trying to boost the old approval ratings, fatso.”

“Well, that’s a guaranteed way to turn the audience off,” says Geddis. “Not that there’s much to see.”

Dalton takes hold of his penis between index finger and thumb, gives it a little wiggle. “You’re just jealous I got *the body!*”

Geddis raises his eyebrows.

Dalton slinks back to his bunk, pulls on a pair of grey sweatpants, looks over at Geddis clenching and extending his metal fingers. He dabs at his tender swollen eye, says, “Put that evil thing away.”

The red lights on the ceiling cameras illuminate and the Dronecam lurches from its docking port. The relentlessly jovial voice of host Lance Spur gushes through the speaker, welcoming the audience back to *Escape Room*.

“Sadly, we had to inform one of our inmates that he was to be executed today. Yikes! Poor man. He got...quite a *shock!*” Geddis and Dalton hear a drum roll, a cymbal crash, and groans of laughter from an invisible audience. “Just kidding inmates! *Hang* in there!” Another cymbal crash. The laughter sounds like it comes straight out of a can. “Let’s launch straight into our first round of the day – Questionable Behaviour! First up will be those two rascals in Cell 4, Dalton and Geddis. Gotta say, love your work, gentlemen. That little fight last night was hilarious! First question goes to Geddis ...”

Geddis stares up at the ceiling, trying to concentrate as Spur’s voice fades in and out of the speaker.

“Inmate Geddis. You are in a café. A customer at the next table leaves but forgets the designer jacket on the back of his chair. Do you:

- A) Run outside with the coat. Try to catch up with him.
- B) Check the pockets and then hand it to a member of staff.
- C) Try the jacket on for size.”

Geddis, hardly hesitates. “I’m in no shape to catch anyone with my blistering speed, so it’s B. I’m gonna give the jacket to the staff member, but stay there while they go through the pockets and check for ID. I want to be damned sure that if there’s gonna be a reward involved, it’ll be me picking it up, not some opportunist waiter.”

Ping!

“Congratulations Inmate Geddis, your answer is morally acceptable. One Escape Room Credit awarded.”

Geddis looks over at Dalton, who’s giving him the fist-pump. The Dronecam spins away from Geddis with a high-pitched whine and tears off towards Dalton, who has to duck as it flies straight past, smashes into the wall, and drops to the floor.

“Oh crap!” crackles Spur’s voice over the speaker. “Inmate Dalton, stick that thing back in its docking port, would you?”

Dalton picks the drone up gingerly, holding it at arm’s length. “It’s making a buzzing noise and it smells funny.”

“Yeah, yeah. Look, just leave it there.” Spur clears his throat. “Inmate Dalton. A woman invites you to her home. You visit the bathroom to urinate. The toilet seat is down.

Do you:

- A) Raise the seat. Urinate. Return the seat to the down position.
- B) Raise the seat. Urinate.
- C) Urinate.”

Dalton blinks. “I don’t get it. What kind of a question is that?”

“Come on now, Inmate Dalton,” Spur gives a hollow chuckle. “It’s quite a simple question.”

Dalton bites his bottom lip with his oversized front teeth.

“Well I guess I’m going to be going with A because it’s the...”

A loud cough from Geddis.

“...I mean it’s the nice thing to do, but...well, it’s definitely not C because...I mean who wants piss all over the seat, so what I’m thinking...is maybe B...”

A low hm-mmm from Geddis.

“...because well, you know, it makes the most sense. So probably...”

Spur is losing patience. “You’re keeping us waiting, inmate. Some of us have places to go, people to see. Show some *con*-sideration! Ha ha!”

“B. I’m going with B.”

“You’re going to leave the seat up?”

Dalton looks at Geddis, who offers the slightest of nods. “Yes, I guess.”

There is a long pause.

Dalton looks up to the speaker, frowning. “Uh, hello?”

“Hang on! Hang on! The button’s not...” After a few dull thuds and muttered expletives, Spur just shouts, “Ping!”

Dalton and Geddis share a look.

“Congratulations on passing the round, cellmates. Two Escape Room Credits awarded.”

“Whoop-de-doo,” says Dalton. “How many more we need?”

The theme music drifts in and Spur announces a commercial break. Once the speaker falls silent, the cell cameras flick off.

“I don’t get it,” says Dalton. “Why B?”

“There’s a kind of logic to it, if you think about it.”

“Yeah, right!” Dalton starts pacing the room in quick, jerky steps, scratching at a wispy-whiskered cheek. “Your question was about temptation to steal. Why do I get this random toilet seat question? And who’s this woman inviting me to her home?”

Geddis has yet to move from his bunk. He raises his eyebrows. “You think it’s a sex question?”

“How is it a sex question? I don’t lift the toilet seat to piss, I’m a sexual deviant?”

“Psychological profiling. Mildly inconsiderate in the bathroom, majorly inconsiderate in the bedroom. They’re weeding out the nutjobs and perverts. You’re clearly a prime suspect.”

“You’re hilarious Geddis! The questions are a bunch of shit. How about I strangle her in the bedroom, then go take a piss and put the seat back down?”

“Strangle her?” Geddis looks over the top of his spectacles.

“I’m just making a point, you idiot.”

“Now I really am concerned.”

The cell bell rings. A lock is thrown. The door slides partially open, then sticks. A metal hand appears, gripping the edge of the door which suddenly slides all the way open with a groan of protest. The robot attendant, which the two men have nicknamed Crankum, shuffles in with a tray on each rickety arm and almost topples over as it uses its foot to drag the door closed behind it. Crankum is a mishmash of spare parts: gunmetal head, smooth and dull with rust patches, eyes like lamps off an old bicycle, a grill for a mouth and thick red cabling snaking out from what could be an ear and connecting with the chest plate. The copper limbs are spindly, and the metallic hands full of scratches and pin dents. It creaks as it tilts at the waist to place the trays on the cell’s solitary plastic table. Crankum pauses in its

stooped position for a long, lingering moment as if trying to figure out its next move. Once upright, Crankum croaks, “Good morning inmates. Breakfast is served.”

Geddis swivels out of bed and lumbers over to sniff the milky-yellow splat, masquerading as scrambled eggs, beside tinder dry toast and solitary plastic spoon.

“Just a spoon? We’re supposed to eat like babies?”

“I’m sorry,” Crankum goes all high-pitched. “Your cutlery rights have been partially revoked due to your...” Crankum pauses, head nodding back and forth, then lets out a metallic burp. “...mis-use of eating utensils...yes...terday.”

“That was just a misunderstanding,” sighs Dalton. “We love each other dearly, don’t we Geddis?”

“That’s right. When Dalton tenderly stuck his fork in my face, I mistook his act of affection for one of extreme provocation.”

Dalton blows a kiss at his cellmate, smiles sweetly at Crankum, “We promise not to stab each other with plastic cutlery anymore. Can we get a knife, pretty please, with some butter on the end of it?”

“Request being processed.” Crankum goes perfectly still. Geddis puts his head on one side, wondering if the wiring has finally given out. “Request denied!” sings Crankum, as if delivering great news. Then it staggers off, inserts a finger into the lock, and wrenches the door back open. The robot is halfway out when Dalton calls, “Crankum! Can I ask you something?”

Crankum goes into deep hesitation mode, “Request being...”

“Can you remove the trash from the cell for me?” Dalton stabs a skinny finger in the direction of Geddis, who sits on his bunk slowly shaking his head. “And bring me a new cellmate. I’m not fussy who, just as long as she’s blonde. My little boy’s not seen action in a while and...”

“Request denied!” Crankum takes two attempts to slide the door shut.

*

Spur’s voice fades in and out for a while as the speaker hisses. Geddis heaves himself on to the plastic table which wobbles precariously as he reaches up to the speaker with his metal hand. A ceiling camera tracks Geddis’ progress, it’s red light blinking on and off. Dalton is trying to loosen something from between his teeth with a fingernail. He looks up. “Oh jeez, circus elephant on a ball! This is going to end badly!” Geddis steadies himself by putting his flesh hand flat against the wall, then gives the speaker a clunk with his prosthetic. Spur’s voice has taken on a concerned tone as it hums back through the speaker. He is truly sorry if anyone was upset by the scenes in Cell 7. Inmate Amanulla is currently receiving first-class medical care and will receive free entry to next season’s *Escape Room* should he survive. Inmate Jarvis is currently being removed to the high security unit from which he came. If it’s any consolation, he adds, both inmates leave the show with their ratings through the roof. Spur then updates the viewers on the remaining active cells in *Escape Room*.

“Now it’s time for TruConFessions!” Spur suddenly sounds much more upbeat.

“Let’s head back to that cranky couple of cellmates: Dalton & Geddis in Cell 4!”

Geddis tells his Christmas tale. The cameras concentrate their gaze on the trailer park Buddha, cross-legged on his bunk, holding court. Dalton is perched on the edge of his own bunk, listening intently, his bruised eye twitching tic-tic.

“I’m in full costume – red suit, hat, sack on my back, and I’m trying to stuff the presents into my sack.”

“What about the beard?” asks Dalton.

“I already got the beard, dummy.”

“Since when did Santa have a ginger beard?”

Geddis dismisses Dalton with an impatient wave of his metal hand. “I’m a bag of nerves. I drop one of the presents onto the floor and it must be some kind of fragile gift because it makes this cracking sound as it hits the tiling by the fireplace. I freeze, wondering if I’ve woken anyone, take a few breaths with the old heart going ba-boom, ba-boom. No-one stirs. I figure everything’s okay, and I’m picking the broken parcel up, feeling it, trying to figure out what’s inside, because I don’t want to waste room in the sack on broken presents, and then I sense this presence.”

“Presence or presents?”

Geddis huffs, “What?”

“Never mind. Go on.”

Geddis takes a moment, ruffles the fingers of his good hand through his beard, finds some residual “egg”, inspects it, and flicks it away. “I sense a *presence*. I turn and there’s this kid. A boy. About seven or eight, I guess. He’s wearing these blue and white striped pajamas and his hair is all sticky-up from his pillow and he’s staring at me with these big brown eyes.”

Geddis pauses, picks up a plastic cup, takes a sip of water. Dalton is shaking his head, mumbling, “Oh shit, oh shit.”

“So, there I am with the sack in one hand, this gift-wrapped broken whatever in the other, and I say to the kid, low and firm, ‘You know the rules.’ And I look at him like this.” Geddis stares at Dalton over the top of his tinted glasses. “And the boy looks like he’s about to piss his pants. Then I tell him, since he’s not asleep, I’m taking all these presents – all these wonderful gifts I had for him – I’m taking them to the next house where the good kids are sound asleep.”

Dalton’s mouth opens, stays open.

“And this kid, his bottom lip starts doing the wobblies and his eyes are tearing up, so I take pity on him. I take the broken present and place it beside the fireplace. I tell him I’ll leave him one present, but he’d better get his butt up to bed right away. And he’d better work his little arse off to get back in my good books by next Christmas or he’ll get nothing more from me. And the blood drains from this kid’s face. He turns and runs up the stairs and I’m out the door with the sack over my shoulder.”

“Man, that’s got to be the cruelest thing I ever heard,” Dalton’s voice is little more than a whisper. “You traumatised that kid for life.”

Geddis shrugs, “Spoiled little snowflake. That house already had everything a kid could want: high-end gaming room, VR and AR units. Even had one of those Passive Playmates chained up in the garden. This was one privileged kid who clearly would want for nothing. What about my boy? I was a good worker. But they don’t need no drivers no more. What was I going to lavish my boy with that Christmas? Bread and soup?”

“So, stealing this boy’s presents from right in front of him and giving it to your own kid, that’s okay?”

Geddis gives a long slow blink and exhales. “Ever heard of Robin Hood?”

Dalton scoffs. “You’re a fat ginger Robin Hood who steals from little kids?”

“Huh, Little Lord Spoiled Arse got all his presents back when I got pinched. Meanwhile, my boy got nothing. Then he lost me too. You tell me how that’s fair.” Geddis lifts up his metal hand and gazes at it. “And not satisfied with that, they took my hand – as a reminder.”

“Man, that’s medieval. They still do that kind of shit in your quarter?”

“Ping!” Spur has given up on his broken button and continues to make the pinging noise himself. “Your Con-Fession is acceptable. One Escape Room Credit awarded. We’ll be back after this commercial break with Inmate Dalton’s Con-Fession.”

The cell bell rings. There's the sound of rummaging before the bolt is thrown and Crankum heaves the door open. The robot takes one step in to the room, pauses, holds up a finger, turns, and exits again without a word. The door slams shut. Geddis rolls his eyes. "Think he might be due for a service?" asks Dalton.

Beside the metal toilet bowl – no seat – is the chipped enamel basin where the tap drips with precision timing onto a lengthening green stain. Dalton leans on the basin with both hands and peers into a small rectangle of mirror with a diagonal crack. "Look at the state of me!" he says to the mirror. It takes an effort to fully open the left eye with the bruising. He collects a few drips from the tap and runs wet fingers over the outline of the red blotch on his right cheek. "You know, I used to be hot property. Took self-defence classes to fend off all the ladies."

Geddis is deadpan, "Yeah, we got vitamin deficiencies in our quarter too. Affects the eyesight." He gives his spectacles a wipe. "So, your confession time is coming up. We going to hear how your pretty face got ruined?"

"You lost your shit and punched me with your freak hand, is what happened. But I'm not complaining – all helps with the ratings."

"You know what I mean. That big, squashed strawberry on your cheek."

The music whines through the speaker. Spur is welcoming back the audience. One ceiling camera light flicks on and tracks towards Dalton, the other camera remains dormant, pointed at the floor.

Dalton spins away from the basin and walks to the middle of the cell, taking centre stage, he exhales dramatically before beginning his story.

“You know what these farmers’ daughters are like. All that cream and cheese and manual labour. This girl was robust, man. And pretty with it. A flower in full bloom. Golden hair down to her arse and rosy cheeks you could warm your hands on. Of course, she couldn’t resist me. One afternoon when her father’s out in the fields, I take her into the barn and I’m showing her my moves.” Dalton purses his lips, puts his hands on his hips and starts doing little jiggles.

“Oh, please,” groans Geddis.

“And I’m about to take her to another dimension when suddenly the barn door opens and in strides the farmer, ‘Cawm on Daisy, oi needs youse help.’”

“That’s how farmers talk?”

Dalton ignores the interruption. “I panic. The guy knows his daughter’s in there. I jump up out of the hay and try to make a run for it, but my pants are still round my ankles. I trip over and crash straight into this old donkey which gives me a kick and starts hee-hawing. I’m lying there all winded from the kick in the guts, the donkey’s braying blue murder, and the farmer’s standing over me with these wild eyes.” Dalton throws out his hands towards Geddis, tries to make a wild-eyed-farmer face but he can’t quite pull it off with his swollen yellow eye. “And this farmer, he’s all purple in the face, he says to me, ‘Whar yew be dewin’ wiv moi Daisy?’ Dalton crosses one eye, lets his tongue hang out the side of his mouth. “Meanwhile, would you believe it, I see the girl creeping out through the barn door behind her father’s back. And guess what? I think to myself, her name’s not Daisy.”

Geddis rubs his temples, sighs. “So, who’s Daisy?”

“Daisy’s the donkey, dumb arse! I got my pants at half-mast and he thinks I’m trying it on with his donkey!”

A smile fights its way through Geddis’ beard.

“That sick old bastard had me put on trial. Just imagine it. The gigolo of the quarter! Think what that did for my reputation. And not a shred of evidence.”

“Maybe the lipstick on the donkey convinced them.”

“So funny, Geddis.” Dalton strides over and plonks himself down on the end of his bunk. The Dronecam suddenly buzzes back into life, shoots straight up, bashes into the ceiling, and crashes to the floor again.

Dalton sits looking at the Dronecam, shaking his head. “They found the donkey guilty too.”

“They put the donkey on trial?”

“Co-defendants. Unnatural act of pleasure.”

“And that’s when you got the branding?”

“Damn right. Me and the donkey, both.”

“And you call my quarter medieval.”

Spur interjects by shouting “Ping! Ping!” through the speaker. “Cracking Confession Dalton! Best I’ve heard yet! Two Escape Room Credits!”

Dalton leaps off the bunk, takes a few laps of honour around the cell, as Spur announces another commercial break.

Dalton completes his celebrations with a crabbed cartwheel and slumps down against the wall in breathy elation. “Cheer up, man! I just scored us two more credits!”

Geddis tilts his head to one side, frowns slightly, as if troubled. “You didn’t think to do the decent thing and marry her?”

Dalton looks perplexed. “The girl?”

“Daisy. You still in touch?”

Dalton stalks back to his bunk in a huff. “You’re on thin ice, Geddis. You keep pushing my buttons, I’m gonna smash your metal hand with my other eye.”

*

The theme music is playing at twice the normal speed. Spur's voice comes through the speaker loud and clear: "Shit! Shit! Shit!" There's a clunk, as the music abruptly stops and Spur resumes, in a more composed voice. "Welcome back viewers. And a special shout out to our bronze culinary sponsor All-Most Meatz. Now, before we move on to the next round, I would like to assure viewers that Inmate Gronk has been removed for remedial counselling following the incident with the Cell 3 Dronecam. I can assure you that what might pass for recreational festivities in Inmate Gronk's quarter have no place here within the confines of Escape Room Entertainments Ltd." Spur's voice gives way to a hiss of static. Dalton is just telling Geddis they should hurl the defunct Dronecam at the speaker, when it crackles back into life in time for Spur to introduce the next round:

"Okay inmates, this next round is called Escape Room Riddle. First cell to solve today's riddle earns three Escape Room Credits! So here we go: Incarcerated night after night..."

The speaker fizzes, emits a puff of smoke, dies.

*

Dalton is sitting on Geddis' shoulders, trying to force the cover off the speaker. Every time he gives it a thump, Geddis has to take a couple of steps to regain his balance.

"Jesus! Hold still man! How am I supposed to get this thing open with you dancing around?"

"Want to swap?"

"How about you just lie on your back and I step onto your belly, that should do it."

"How about I just drop you on your head, you blotch-faced donkey-digging pervert!"

"Shit. You're not gonna let that go, are you? I didn't get sexy with no donkey."

After a bit more wrenching, bashing and bickering, Dalton forces the cover off, reaches in to examine the wiring.

The cell bell rings. The door eventually groans open. Crankum wavers from bass to falsetto, “Greetings inmates. Mr Spur has instructed me to ask what you are doing.”

Dalton adjusts his position on Geddis’ shoulders, holding on to the big man’s beard with one hand and shielding his eyes with the other as he scans the room. “Just enjoying the expansive views over the ocean from up here, Crankum. Wanna take a look? Jump up here with me.”

Crankum pivots at the waist, looks around the cell, notices the broken dome by Dalton’s bunk. “The Dronecam appears to be deactivated.”

Dalton rolls his eyes. “Try finding something in this place that *does* work!”

Geddis gives a huff of impatience. “Crankum, the speaker’s broken. We never got to hear the riddle. Can you install a new one?”

Crankum looks at Geddis with the same blank expression it always has. Then says brightly, “May I be...further assistance inmates?” And with that, the robot turns and leaves.

*

Dalton and Geddis sit on a bunk with speaker parts strewn between them. Geddis uses his metallic hand to strip back some insulation wiring. Dalton spits, “I’m sick of this game. Three credits we missed out on because of this crappy thing.” He glances up at the overhead strip light, which has started blinking and buzzing. “How many credits we got now, anyway? How many do we need?”

Geddis doesn’t answer. His tongue’s at the corner of his mouth as he reconnects a speaker wire.

“I mean, we done okay, haven’t we?” says Dalton. “We done good in the quiz rounds, put on a show, got a whole bunch of audience entertainment credits. Got to be close?”

“When did we last get told how many credits gets us out of here?”

“Yeah, like never.” Dalton gives a heavy sigh, picks up a speaker part, squints at it.

“You know what you’re doing with this thing?”

Geddis carefully twists another wire. “I got my skills. I wasn’t just a driver. I could fix things too. I watch and learn.” He glances at Dalton. “You should try it sometime.”

“Huh. Well, your great talent is certainly going to waste in here.”

Geddis holds the speaker diaphragm in front of his spectacle lenses, squints at it, while asking, “What about you? Apart from your obvious talents as a gigolo-in-chief?”

Dalton sits for a moment, quite still. He’s about to say something when Geddis makes a final connection and the speaker emits a low buzz. Geddis lowers his ear towards the voice coil. “Listen.” The two men press their ears close together. The faint but unmistakable sound of Lance Spur’s voice is coming through the speaker. “...you mean there’s nothing you can do...what am I supposed to....oh, that’s just great...where else am I going to get that kind of...”

Dalton squishes up his nose, whispers, “Who’s he talking to?”

Geddis puts a finger to his lips. The sound fades out again as Spur is saying, “no way, no way...you’re going to regret this!”

The connection dies. The inmates look at one another. “That guy gets weirder by the minute,” says Dalton. “Was he meaning to broadcast that?”

Geddis shrugs. “Not to worry. He’s only the guy in charge.”

Once Geddis has completely reassembled the speaker, the men sit around waiting for something to happen. They’re kept waiting.

Dalton mopes over to the toilet bowl.

“Don’t forget to put the seat back down,” says Geddis.

“Ha! Maybe you were right after all. They’ve seen my records. Perhaps that whole toilet seat thing was a sex question.”

Geddis leans back against his pillow, closes his eyes, exhales. “Maybe. Or maybe I gave them too much credit. The questions, the credits, they’re all just random junk being thrown at us.”

Dalton steps away from the toilet. He checks the camera lights are off, before coming to sit on the edge of Geddis’ bunk.

“Thing is, I really got to get out of here. I want to go home. I want to see my wife again.”

Geddis opens his eyes. “I thought you were Mr Gigolo-in-chief or whatever?”

Dalton stares at his knees. “Stop playing with me. That’s all talk, you know that. I never been no gigolo, no exotic dancer. But I do got a wife. And I’ve not seen her in a long time.”

Geddis studies Dalton. His voice is mild, “You think she’s...not being funny but, she’s waiting for you?”

Dalton shakes his head dismissively. “I’m not stupid, man. She thinks I’m a big shmuck, all the things I done. But I just want to see her again. Tell her some things.” Dalton sniffs, straightens up, checks the cameras again. He looks at Geddis and asks him, “What about you? All that true – about your son and all that?”

Geddis rubs his metal hand. “Sometimes you just need to tell people stuff that makes them feel better than you.”

Dalton scratches his scalp, frowns. “But you got a son, right? You get out of here and you’ll go see your son, yeah?”

“You think that’s going to happen? Hope is a dangerous thing, Dalton. We’re locked up in here for a reason. They going to make it easy for us to get out?”

“We’re no worse than most of them out there.” Dalton flicks his hand at one of the dormant ceiling cameras. “All this, ‘your answer is morally acceptable’ bullshit. How about we turn the cameras the other way? What gives these people the right to judge us?”

Geddis nods, exhales long and hard. He gives a grunt as he hauls himself off the bunk. Slowly, he walks to the wall, pauses, turns, looks Dalton in the eye. “Okay, you want to get out of here? Go find your wife, your donkey, or whatever.” Dalton is about to argue, but Geddis cuts him off. “Forget clues, riddles and credits.” Geddis holds up his metal hand and clenches it. “We’re going to take matters into our own hands.”

*

Dalton’s all nervous energy, pacing the cell, making little farting noises with his hand under his armpit. Geddis sits on the bed, showing beatific patience with his restless cellmate. The cell bell clangs, announcing a visit from Crankum. Dalton hops over to his bunk. Crankum ensures the door is secured behind him before clopping in with the dinner trays. “Good evening inmates. Dinner is mashed...” Crankum emits a high whistle mid-sentence. “...with reconstituted elements of umpphh...” The trays go flying as Dalton launches himself from his bed and tackles Crankum to the floor. By the time Geddis has hauled himself off his bunk, Dalton is straddling the robot and its limbs are waving around like an upended cockroach. Geddis kneels in a pat of mashed something, catches one of Crankum’s waving arms, and holds it steady with his metal hand. He examines Crankum’s hand as if considering whether it would be an upgrade, then gives it a twist. It detaches without protest. Geddis waves Crankum’s hand in front of its face. “We’re going to borrow this if it’s okay with you.”

“Request being processed!” sings Crankum.

The two men take Crankum’s hand over to the door and Geddis tries inserting a finger into the lock. It doesn’t fit.

“Here, give it!” Dalton snatches the hand. He tries slotting different fingers into the lock at various angles, with no success. “Shit. Got any other fantastic ideas, you big lump?”

Geddis slumps against the door. “It was worth a try. I swear he just puts a finger in to unlock it.”

Dalton looks over his shoulder, “Hey Crankum! Give us the key and we’ll give you your hand back.” Crankum sits up and looks around the cell as if trying to figure out what’s going on. Dalton steps over to the robot. Waves the hand in its face. “We’re holding you hostage until you...” Crankum’s remaining hand comes round with a swoosh and knocks Dalton to the floor. As Geddis comes over to check on Dalton, Crankum gets to its feet, looks down at its hand-less arm, and almost trips over Dalton’s feet as it staggers towards the door. Just before the cell door closes, Crankum announces, “Is there anything else I can get for you?”

*

The only sound in the cell is the drip-drip of the basin tap. The men can’t remember the last time they heard anything from Spur over the speaker. They’re not sure how many days have passed since food arrived. The camera lights show no interest in illuminating. The Dronecam is a trail of discarded parts around the floor. Geddis reclines on his bunk examining Crankum’s severed hand.

Dalton sits up tentatively, runs a palm over his rumbling belly. “It’s all right for you, you got plenty of reserves. How’s my eye looking?”

Geddis looks over and gives a rare smile. “You got a matching pair. You really should stop annoying the metal hand community.”

Dalton shuffles over to the basin, gives a sigh as he checks out his reflection in the cracked mirror, then drops to hang his tongue out under the dripping tap. After a while he rests his back against the wall and asks Geddis, “You think we’re being punished?”

Geddis shrugs.

“No food. No water. They can’t do this. They could at least just say something. Tell us how long this will go on for.”

Geddis adjusts his spectacles, says nothing.

“It’s got me spooked. I mean, it feels like we’ve been abandoned.” Dalton gnashes his teeth. “What if they’ve closed up the show and all just...moved on?”

Geddis puffs out his cheeks. “Can you stop. I’m trying not to think.”

And for a few moments it’s just the sound of the tap dripping again. But then there’s a faint scuffing against the other side of the cell door. Suddenly the door slides ajar, sticks, and then grinds all the way open. Dalton gets to his feet, but stays warily planted against the wall as one-handed Crankum lurches in balancing one empty tray.

“Crankum,” shrieks Dalton. “So good to see you, old buddy. No hard feelings. Where’ve you been? What’s going on?”

Crankum makes it part way into the cell, drops the empty tray, gives a low gurgle, turns, and jerks back out the way it came, leaving the cell door wide open. From somewhere beyond the cell doorway comes the sound of an echoey metallic crash.

Dalton and Geddis look at one another, then simultaneously move over to the doorway. They stand at the threshold staring out.

“You think we can just walk out. Just leave?”

“I guess,” Geddis murmurs. “Nothing’s stopping us, right?”

“Right.”

The two men stand there for a while, looking out beyond the door. Each man waiting for the other to make the first move. Geddis shifts his weight from one foot to the other. Dalton rubs his mouth slowly with the back of his hand. The tap continues to drip. They stand there a while longer.

Gustav's Pole

There's four of us gathered around Gustav's pole. It's still dark and the village square is quiet. No-one's going to stop this act of heroism. I stare up, up, up into the nothingness. Nothing, that is, except raving old Gustav, up there, doing whatever disgusting things Gustav does.

"Come on, Oli," Ludo urges me. "It'll be light soon. What are you waiting for? Going to chicken out on us?"

"Put your thumb back in your mouth, Ludo. I'm deep into my preparation phase. Need to concentrate."

Remi scoffs. "Ha! I hope you climb as well as you talk. Let's see some action, Pigeon Boy!"

Okay, it was true. I was having second thoughts. Once again, my mouth had flapped freely, and I'd talked myself into a stupid dare without considering the consequences. The timber pole looks so smooth and slender from a distance, but I can barely bring it into a full embrace, and as I run a hand along it, I feel its gnarls, nooks, knots, and splits. Splinters like needles lie in wait. Cracks and crevices prepare to snare skinny fingers. Gazing up at where the pole disappears into the dark, I visualise each warp, each twist, as it snakes its way up a good 30-longbodies to Gustav's barrel.

When Sylvie speaks, her words are soothing: "Second thoughts Oli? We can call it off. No shame in it." But there's an archness to her voice, just like there is in one of her eyebrows as I turn to look at her. Those sleepy, hooded eyes are unreadable in the gloom, but I can sense amusement. I'm trapped. If I don't go up, I back down. Little Oli with his big talk. What a shame he didn't measure up.

I spit on both hands, jump up, and grab onto Gustav's pole, bringing my legs up and wrapping them around. And for a moment, I'm kind of stuck there like that, wondering how to proceed.

"Hoorah!" hollers Ludo the beanpole, his goofy face appearing next to mine. "Nearly there!"

Ludo, Remi and Sylvie are now in hysterics. I'd better get moving, rather than hang around here being humiliated. I get a technique going. Clench with the knees, reach up with the arms, hug the pole to me, bring the knees up and grip with my feet. Finally, being small pays off for me. Not much Oli to haul up the pole! Remi and Ludo are still not taking my efforts seriously.

"Oli, you've disappeared. Have you got to the barrel already?"

"Give Gustav our regards!"

"Don't waste your breath, Ludo. He can't hear us from up there in the clouds."

Sylvie doesn't say anything. I can feel her watching me. Evaluating.

Of course, those idiots Ludo and Remi are making so much noise that the shutters are flung open at Edvald the Shoemaker's, and then there is the unmistakable out-of-tune whistling of Olaf the Baker coming over to see what all the fuss is about.

No-one climbs Gustav's pole. It is outlawed under village bylaws. It is also too high to climb. You would have to be an imbecile to try.

When the sun pops up to see what's going on, I look down with delight to see how far I have climbed. Pigeon Boy rising into the sky! My good spirits are only slightly tempered by seeing I have the same amount of climbing ahead of me. For the first time I can see the underside of Gustav's barrel, right up there at the top of the pole. Looking back down, my friends have indeed been joined by Olaf the Baker, one hand shielding his eyes against the

sun, the other scratching at his backside. Edvald the Shoemaker is now wandering across the cobbled square. According to Edvald, Gustav lives up the pole because he wanted to get away from his nagging wife. But if you ever come to my village and meet the shoemaker's wife, you will know where that story comes from. Go over to the bakery, get talking to Olaf, and you will learn that warm, fresh bread becomes less appealing when you see the baker constantly scratches his arse. You will also learn that Gustav was sent to live up the pole when he was a small boy, for stealing a loaf from the bakery.

If you believe the old stories, the pole was hewn from the tallest tree in the old forest; a tree that grew through the clouds and bore fruit to the gods. I feel the first pangs of hunger. I rue the decision not to eat before the climb. Didn't want to carry any extra weight up with me. I stare intently into the deep, dark brown fibres of the pole and I start thinking about chocolate. I give the pole a sniff. It even smells a bit chocolatey. I give it a lick. It tastes like tree and scratches at my tongue.

I reach a metal ring around the pole where bracing chains are attached and run taut down to anchor points in the square below. I can support myself here and take a rest. I take a moment to consider why I am here, halfway up a pole. What is it with me? I just seem to talk myself into things. Always trying to prove myself. Runt of the litter is what Mama lovingly calls me. From here, I can look out over the rooftops and see our home. Mama will be in there, clapping around in her clogs and wielding her broom like a staff, rousing my brothers to their chores. Any moment now she will call for me. "Where's Oli?" she will ask. "Where's my dear little Oli?" and her heart will soften, and give a little gloomp, as she worries that I have been stolen in the night. Sorry to worry you, Mama, but when you're the little guy in a big family, and the smallest among your friends, you've got to rise up! And so it goes. No dare too tall an order! Steal schnapps from the innkeeper? Oli's your man! Sneak into the chapel and pee into the Holy Cup? Leave it to me! Anything to impress my friends, and

especially anything to try to impress Sylvie. I look out over the rooftops again and there it is: the cherry tree. In spring you can climb up through the blossom and find the strong, broad bough, settle your back against the trunk, stretch out your legs, and gaze at Sylvie's window. And there you can wait for her to come to the window and notice the small boy with the big heart sitting among the blossom.

I'm startled by the sight of a pail dropping from the sky. Gustav's lifeline! He is letting out the rope, lowering his pail to the ground. The villagers will replenish the pail and send food back up. Once it was fruits to the gods, now it is nuts to the imbecile.

There's a crowd below now. The Magistrate has tried to call me down, but he's drowned out by the raucous shouts and laughter of the villagers. I see Hector the Preacher lope over. He's unaccustomed to large crowds. If you ever come to my village and make the mistake of stumbling into the chapel, you will get a sermon from Hector. If you can get a word in, ask about Gustav. The preacher will widen his eyes and point his shaky finger at you, tell you Gustav lives up the pole because he wants to be closer to the gods. Others will tell you that Gustav has been up the pole for five New Years; he's been up there for 1,000 nights. Mistress Gnud gravely warns us that Gustav was sent up the pole because he was lazy at school. Mama swears Gustav was a mischievous child who was chased by an angry ox he was teasing. He bolted up the pole and has been too scared to come down since. I scan the crowd trying to see if Mama might have come to see what all the commotion is about. My eyes catch the brilliance of Sylvie's quilted cloak. Look up, Sylvie! See how far I have climbed. Look at me!

Climbing this pole will be one of the Great Feats. Stealing the schnapps, peeing in the holy cup. These are notable feats. They impress Ludo and Remi: "Didn't think you had it in you, Pigeon Boy." But they don't compete with Sylvie's Great Feats. She truly is the king of the dare: The eyeball that found its way from Vled the Undertaker's to Mistress Gnud's cup

of broth; the mad pig smuggled into the sleeping quarters of Rufus the Drover after he took his whip to Sylvie. You cross Sylvie, be ready to reap. She's the one who never walks away. No challenge too great. Or small. Kiss the Pigeon Boy? It's nothing. Nothing at all. That's no Great Feat.

Does she see me now? Is she waiting to see me struggle and fail and then show everyone how it's done? I picture Sylvie shimmying effortlessly up the pole. I feel a stirring in my breeches. I push on before things get too uncomfortable.

Now with each thrust upwards, I can feel my muscles protesting, tremors run through my legs as I try to hold fast. There is a dull ache in my shoulders and my arms feel spent. The splinters in my hands and feet sing out with every clutch at the pole, hands slipping as I try to maintain my grip with sweating palms. I crave liniment for my sore feet, wish for a strip of cloth to bind around my smarting hands. You don't think about these things when your big mouth flaps and you find yourself at the bottom of a pole. There's no one who can tell you how to climb this pole. Except, maybe, Gustav.

"Oli, what in the name of the gods are you doing? Get your runty arse back down here!" Mama's tender salutation booms out from the square below. I look down. There must be a hundred people down there now. Looks like the whole village has turned out to witness this great spectacle. My tummy swims a little as I stare down at the tiny square. I can't see Mama's face, but she must be the one with the little circle cleared around her. And yes, here she goes again, "I'll take my broom to your backside for shaming the family like this, you little pea brain!" Pea brain's just a pet name to show her affection. She's going to be so proud when I reach the top.

*

At first, I think a cloud has passed in front of the sun, but then, unbelievably, I look up to see I have entered the shade under the base of the barrel. Ha! The runt of the litter

triumphs! There is a strut running diagonally from pole to barrel which I hoist myself onto. Here I can maintain an awkward sitting position and rest my weary limbs. Hoots and cheers drift up from the crowd below. The bright quilted cloak no longer visible but I'm sure she's still down there, a look of wonder on her face. Lips mouthing words of adoration. I'm sliding down the pole to kiss those lips. And this time she doesn't pull away with a dismissive smirk, dare fulfilled. This time it is really something. She kisses me again and again and stares dreamily at me and then...a grunt from above shakes me from my reverie and I look up to see another face entirely. He's staring down at me from the rim of the barrel. A shock of silver hair sticking up in all directions. A face all leathery, lips dry and cracked. Bloodshot eyes ringed with thunderclouds. Here I am, face-to-face with crazy old Gustav.

*

Come to my village and ask my friends about Gustav; ask anyone at the schoolhouse, and they will tell you: Gustav is the imbecile who lives in a barrel on top of a pole in the middle of our village. He lives up there because he does. Because he's an imbecile. The villagers send up bread, nuts, fruit, and water in a pail on a rope. And mad Gustav stuffs it all into his frothing mouth while gibbering away, sitting in his own shit, and pulling on his little maggot to pass the time.

But if you do come to my village, don't ask my friends about Gustav. Don't ask the kids in the schoolhouse, or Vled the Undertaker, or a baker who has floury fingermarks all over the back of his breeches. Come and ask the only person who has spoken to Gustav since he's been up the pole. Come and ask the little boy with a big heart – the King of the Pole. Come and ask me.

And I might tell you.

I might tell you how Gustav saw me starting to lose my grip. How he reached down and grabbed me by the hair. Held on as I dangled 30-longbodies above the square. How the

crowd gasped and edged away from the base of the pole. And how that wiry old man must have had bolts of lightning crackling through his biceps. How he found the strength to whip me up and into the barrel just as if he was pulling a drowning cat from a brook.

I might tell you how that “crazy old man” showed no surprise that a stranger had dropped by after all those years alone in the barrel. How he frowned and cocked his head and said, “Oli, son of the late farrier?” And how somehow, this hermit on high seemed to know all about the comings and goings within the village below.

I might tell you of the pristine and orderly interior of Gustav’s barrel and describe the intricate carvings that decorated each plank of oak: finely detailed constellations from his observations of the night sky.

I might tell you about the words of wisdom, the poems and his sweet songs. Of the birds which would land on the rim of the barrel to share his bread, hop onto a shoulder or the palm of his hand.

I might tell you of how he came to be in the barrel. And you would be surprised how similar his story is to mine. Boys who may have lacked stature but had strong hearts. Boys who reached out beyond themselves and ascended.

I might tell you all of this, if you take the trouble to find me, and you really want to know the truth. Look for me at Mama’s house. Look for me at the schoolhouse. Look for me sitting on a branch of a cherry tree outside Sylvie’s window. Look for me in a barrel, at the top of Oli’s pole.

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