

# TANGENT

A collection of short stories



Via an open-call, 6 neurodivergent writers were selected to create new short stories inspired by their experience of being neurodivergent.

They didn't know each other. They hadn't published a short story before. Some of them had an idea of what they wanted to write. Some of them didn't.

For all of the differences that shape the lives and experiences of this collection of writers, a few things remain shared between them: they're neurodivergent and their lives are based in Greater Manchester.

These stories depict challenges, achievements, defeats, adventures, journeys and more, through a neurodivergent lens. My personal joy in reading them comes from the varying scales of reality; folklore meets hospital beds meets inner monologue meets Instagram direct messages.

Tangent is a window into creativity that has purposely collaborated with the writer's experience of neurodivergency. It's a pleasure to see how neurodiversity has contributed to the form of these stories, as well as the content; when we unlock ourselves from the 'usual' rules and expectations of literature, amazing things arise. An important thanks must go to Lekhani Chirwa, who mentored the Tangent 6 through the formation, writing

and editing of these works. Lekhani built a Zoom Room that allowed our 6 Tangent writers to learn, discuss, share and grow, which together created a recipe for 3 brilliant workshops throughout this process.

True to its definition, you can expect many diversions, unexpected twists and tangents in this collection. Whether you read the PDF, listen to the audio version, or in fact engage with Tangent in both of these ways, I hope you enjoy the adventures that await.

*Ali Wilson*  
*Director of Every Brain*



Every Brain

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Independents and produced by Every Brain.

# Intransigent Lines

Written by Lizzie Milton

Narrated by Daneka Etchells

Once there was and once there was not two little girls who lived with their mother in a house on a tiny island by the sea. The older was called Rán and the younger was called Danu. The two little girls loved the sea. They loved watching it on calm days gently lap against the land and they marvelled at its magnitude on other days, when it rose in massive crests and smashed itself against the sand. The sloshing of waves was a constant soundtrack to the little girls' lives, but they never ever went into the ocean. It was too dangerous, their mother said. Who knew what things lay beneath its calm blue exterior? When so many fully-grown men were lured to their deaths in the deep blue, it certainly couldn't be a place for little girls. So, the little girls played on the land and watched the sea and never went in. Aside from this family, the island was completely desolate.

Once a week, the mother would sail a tiny rowing boat across to the mainland, where she'd get food and books and toys for the little girls. She would row out early in the morning, until her boat was just a tiny speck on the horizon, and then nothing at all. She sometimes didn't come back until late in the day, when the sun was low in the sky. When the sisters saw the tiny speck appear on the sea, they would rush down to the shore, eager to discover what their mother had brought back for them. They would snatch bundles of fresh grapes up from the boat and their mother would playfully bat their hands away, but never reprimand them for it. There was always plenty more.

But one day, the mother sailed out on her rowboat and never came back. The two little girls waited and waited and waited, but still there was no sign of their mother's boat on the horizon. They didn't take their eyes off the sea and their usual constant chatter was subdued. The sun got low in the sky and finally disappeared altogether. It was long past dinner time and the girls' stomachs ached with hunger, when Danu finally suggested they go out looking for their mother.

"We can't go out," replied Rán. "We've been told to wait right here. We're not allowed to go out into the sea – it's too dangerous. And what if mum comes back whilst we're gone and she can't find us? It's too late now anyway. Look," The older sister pointed at the stars twinkling above them. "We'd better go to sleep. Mum will be here in the morning, you'll see," Not wanting to continue the conversation

any longer, the older sister rolled over and pretended to go to sleep right there on the sand.

Danu looked down at her sibling doing her best attempt at snoring, which was still not remotely convincing. She sighed. There was no use arguing with her sister when she was like this, so she settled down on the beach and was soon fast asleep herself. Rán took much longer to actually get to sleep, and when she did, she had strange dreams...

*the question is*

*and I just want a straight answer here*

*for once in your life can you be STRAIGHT with me*

*are you a square or a circle?*

*it's as simple as that really*

*it's not hard*

*are you a square or a circle?*

*cos you're one or the other*

*aren't you?*

*you're one or the other*

*you're either a square or a circle.*

## ***I am a shape you cannot comprehend***

The oldest daughter woke to the water lapping at her toes, and for a brief moment it was the most exquisite sensation in the world. She relished the cold water folding around her sun-scorched feet and the soothing babble of the waves. A scream broke her sharply from her reverie.

"The water! The water!" her sister screamed. All the stories their mother had told them about the dangers of the sea came flooding in at once. Rán leapt up and hurriedly dried her feet on the sand.

"You know what mum says happen to people who fall in the sea," Danu said looking slyly at her sister. "They turn into monsters." "Shut up. I'm not going to turn into a monster. I just got my feet wet." Rán replied barging past her sister further up the beach. "Sometimes, that's all it takes,"

The sun was beginning its slow ascent in the sky and there was still no sign of their mother. Danu was becoming increasingly impatient to leave and although Rán was still reluctant to, she didn't see much option but to give into her sister's requests. They pulled the tarp off the old second boat their mother kept "just in case". A cloud of dust enveloped them making the girls cough and splutter. The boat was heavily worn and discoloured through use and in all honesty wasn't sea-

worthy at all, but the two sisters were young and did not know this, so they began to push the boat out.

“You’re gonna get wet too,” Rán told her sister as they shoved the heavy wood across the warm sand.

“Nu-uh. I’ll be careful like mum. I won’t get a single drop on me,” her sister retorted. As the girls approached the shore, the boat lifted off the sand and bobbed gently on the water. The sisters looked at it uncertainly.

“You’re the oldest – you should go in first,” Danu announced.

“No, you should get in first. It was your plan after all,” Rán responded. Her little sister shook her head.

“Fine, that’s settled we won’t go then,” Rán decided, turning away from the little boat, back towards their house. She was relieved the matter was settled, but before she could go back, she heard a thud and the splash of water against the boat. She turned back to find her little sister sitting smugly in the worn-out rowing boat.

The boat swayed unsettlingly beneath Danu, as her sister clambered in beside her. She was used to having firm ground underfoot and this constant movement was beginning to make her feel quite nauseous. She tried her best to ignore the sickly sensation as she pulled the wizened oar from its lodging. Rán stared transfixed by the waves beneath her. The gentle rocking of the boat put her at ease and if she dipped her hand over the side, the cerulean water was just within reach...

***I am not like you***

***although I look like it***

***I am not like you***

***I keep myself like this***

***I mould myself like this***

***because I know it makes you more comfortable.***

***In truth, you cannot comprehend me***

“Stop messing around,” Danu’s impatience interrupted. “We need to get going.” The little sister was painfully aware of the churning sensation in her stomach. Rán looked bewildered at her own hand dangling within a hair’s breadth of the water’s edge. “Come on,” Danu whined. Rán picked up an oar and began to row with her sister.

The two girls rowed clumsily out from their home. Despite their best efforts, the sisters were hopelessly out of time with each other. The boat lurched unevenly from side to side, forcing them to push harder against the water. It felt like they were rowing through wet cement. Rán, already starting to tire, looked back longingly at their island home. Suddenly, Danu letdown her oar, jostling the boat underneath them.

“You have to be in time with me,” she demanded.

“I am in time,” Rán shot back, although she knew she wasn’t.

“Like this,” Danu then made a big show of demonstrating how she rowed, but it didn’t help one iota; the girls were just as out of time with each other as they had been before.

As they inched further out to the sea, the waves increased in magnitude, crashing against the little boat with terrifying force. The girls had loved to watch ocean storms from a distance, but up close like this they were now incredibly aware of its awesome power. Dark bulging clouds loomed overhead and then burst open pouring down heavy droplets on the girls. Raindrops caught in their eyelashes blurring their vision and something low and ominous rumbled in the sky above them.

“Told you you’d get wet,” said Rán vainly trying to rub the water out of her eyes. “Shut up,” snapped Danu, keeping her eyes firmly on the mainland ahead.

Soon, the storm made it too difficult to talk. The crashing waves and thundering sky were impossible to be heard over and all their effort was taken up with rowing. They didn’t know if they were moving forward or backward or staying in one place, but still they kept rowing and rowing and rowing.

An enormous wave rose before them and before either of them had time to react it came crashing down splintering the boat. The sisters were flung into freezing waters, limbs desperately flailing as they tried to stay afloat. Danu screamed for her sister with all the air she had in her lungs, but the storm still was louder. The rain hammered down on their faces and each new wave sent them under again, swallowing mouthfuls of salty water. Rán reached out to grab hold of her sister’s hand. She held as tightly as she could to those tiny fingers she knew so well, but the fury of the storm bore down on them tearing the sisters asunder. Her tiny drenched fingers slipped out of her hand, as they were both pushed down into the sea.

***but when I’m at home***

*alone*

*my solid shape slides off me*

*my fingers and toes become one*

*my eyes melt into my own face*

*if you can call it that*

*if you can call it a face at all*

*I wallow in this pool of possibility*

*the ecstasy of complete fluidity*

The little sister's lungs burned as she desperately tried to hold her breath.

She held.

And held.

And held.

And held and held and held and held and held and held and held and held and held and held until-

Rán felt the water hold her down as her entire body relented to the pressure keeping her submerged. She felt her skeleton soften and melt inside of her and wondered with a peculiar clarity if this was what dying felt like. She watched in horror as her body ebbed and flowed with an ease it had never had before. An ease it should not have. An ease no body should have. She felt a sick fascination seeing many arms unfurl from out of her, each holding a small piece of her.

A flood of tastes filled each arm. What had looked like empty water before, was now teeming with the aroma of life. Flora and fauna lurking underneath every rock and in every cavern. Despite her trepidation at her new monstrous form, the eldest sister could not resist stretching her arms out curiously, investigating this new world before her...

*this skin is my daywear*

*I put it on every day and*

*like any uniform it weighs on me*

*this skin is heavy and*

*by the end of the day*

*I*

*am*

*drooping*

The youngest sister emerged from the water coughing up foul-tasting sea water and relieved to breathe in fresh air once more, before a powerful wave pushed her back down into the ocean once again. She opened her eyes, the saltwater stinging her retinas as she searched the empty abyss for something to anchor her. Floating a few feet away, was a piece of wreckage from the boat. She pushed herself forward, though her muscles were now burning from exhaustion and reached out her fingers, grasping as tight as she could to the slippery fragment of wood.

Even though the eldest sister knew this was wrong, she had let herself become a monster just like her sister had warned, Rán relished in her new liquid form. She let herself move in the rhythm of the waves, sometimes folding up small against herself, so she was no bigger than her own eye. Then, the current would roll her out flat and wide like a parachute floating in the water, her arms resting lazily on the waves, tasting the world around her with idle curiosity. She was filled with euphoria as her whole being unfurled in new possibilities. It was not just a new body, but a whole new way of existence. Her mind spread throughout herself, sensing and holding and touching this Atlantis in ways she had never even dreamed of before...

*I start all taut-faced and sharp edges*

*there is a definite beginning*

*and an end*

*a slight gap in space between me*

*and the rest of the world*

*but as the day wears on*

*I slacken and shift*

*and the space between me and everything*

*else becomes less clear*

Danu pushed down hard on the wood attempting to pull herself up, but the force caused the wood to flip in the water sending her spinning back into the sea once more. The youngest sister thrashed against the waves, desperately trying to push herself back to the surface. Her lungs were burning, and her eyes stung from salt water, but still she tried with all her might to fight back against the thundering storm.

Rán sensed something thrashing in the water above her. It took her a moment,

gazing at this flailing creature, to realise it was her sister. She was clearly struggling. If she didn't do something now, Danu would drown.

Suddenly, Danu felt something grip her leg tightly. She felt suckers pull painfully at the soft flesh of her calf as she thrashed wildly trying to break free.

Rán flashed a deep orange in frustration as her sister continue to fight her best efforts to help her. Eventually, despite her sibling's protestations, she pulled her up on to the fragment of wood.

Danu, still desperately trying to pull away, sat up and looked straight at the monster that held her in its grasp.

Rán looked back at her sister's eyes, full of fear and bewilderment. She didn't recognise her. She let go of Danu's leg and slipped back once more, submerged by the water.

The littlest sister collapsed on the remnant of boat, coughing and spluttering, but at least still very much alive. She had fought off whatever hideous creature had attacked her, and it had returned once more into the murky depths of the sea. With her heart pounding in her chest, she felt now like she understood her mother's warnings about the sea with a new clarity. She was truly very lucky to have escaped from that monster with her life.

Rán looked up at the silhouette of wood she knew her sister's drenched body was splayed out on top of. She didn't recognise her. The sister she had known almost as long as she had known herself. The sister who had played with her, fought with her, laughed with her, cried with her. The sister who had been her only companion on long days when her mother sailed to the mainland. The sister who had always held her hand in hers. Rán felt a deep ache in all three of hearts. She could not be without her. She would not be without her.

She decided in that moment what she must do. She would sacrifice this body and world below and live on the land as a human with her sister, so they would never be separated again. If it was this easy to turn into a monster, it stood to her childish reason, that it must be as easy to turn herself back again. She pushed up through the water, her arms stretched back tight against her...

***I start to droop  
the skin falls over my eyes***

***my jaw softens with jowls***

***my sharp edges smoothed out***

***my flesh falls over itself in a rush***

***to escape its confines***

***each step is tortuously slow***

***sploshing***

***like walking through treacle***

***except I am the treacle***

***and then I am home***

***alone***

The little sister watched in horror as something landed with a splat on the wood next to her. No, not something. Someone. What had at first looked gelatinous and amorphous to the girl, now became rigid and fixed in shape. It was a person. It was more than a person. As she looked at the drenched figure, she realised it was her sister. She was alive! She screamed in delight and threw herself around her sibling's body.

***but I must always return to my solid state once more***

It was a lot harder to stay rigid than Rán remembered. She had assumed that when she returned to surface, she would just turn back. She did indeed look like a human once more, but now it seemed to take considerably more effort to keep this shape than it once did. Where once, her skeleton was a natural fact of existence, which she couldn't change any more than she could change the colour of the sky, now she seemed to have to will it into shape. She felt if she stopped thinking about it for a moment, her joints might shift from under her, causing God only knew what seismic tremors throughout her. She wanted to relent under the pressure of her sister's warm body around her, let her body melt into itself, but knew she must not give in. She had made her choice, after all.

Rán lay unresponsive and rigid underneath the sobbing Danu.

"I'm sorry," she cried. "This is all my fault and now we're stuck here, out in the middle of the sea and, and, it's even worse than I imagined. I'm sorry, I should have listened to you. We should have stayed at home." The little sister paused through sniffles.

"Are you mad at me? Why won't you talk to me?" She nudged her sister attempting to provoke a reaction. The eldest sister sat up laboriously as if each movement took a huge amount of effort. Eventually, she croaked.

"No, I'm not mad."

The eldest sister felt out the strange muscle in her mouth, which didn't seem as flexible as it once was.

"You are mad," her sister accused her. "I can tell."

"I'm not, I promise," Rán croaked, reaching out to grab her sister's hand. Danu moved away.

"Why are you talking so weird? Stop it." There was a long silence after that.

"Aren't you going to say anything to me?" The little sister prompted.

"I don't know what to say,"

"Stop doing that! Stop being so weird."

The two sisters looked out from their tiny fragment of wood, unwilling to talk or even look at each other.

The storm was still throwing the driftwood violently around, so Danu and Rán had to hang on tightly to stay afloat. If they let go of their makeshift life raft, they'd be submerged in the water again within seconds. They looked disconsolately at the remnants of their boat cast adrift in the sea. Their homeland was now far on the horizon behind them, but the mainland was equally far ahead of them. They'd struggled enough when they had a complete boat to row against the storm; it was utterly hopeless trying to get anywhere on this fragment.

Rán's chest began to burn from the cold air and her torso was beginning to feel tight and stretched. The effort of holding herself rigid was more tiring than she had anticipated, but she couldn't let her sister see how much she was suffering. With Danu looking away, she allowed herself to soften slightly. She felt a quiet guilt unfold inside of her as her body flattened against the wood; her suckers attaching themselves with ease. The water below looked so unbearably inviting. She could just slip silently in, just for a moment, and feel the water encompass her once more. The girl pushed the thought from her mind as best she could. She had made her choice. She belonged here with her sister.

Danu kept her eyes on the horizon ahead. She felt lightheaded and her heart pounded painfully hard in her chest. She didn't understand anything that was happening. She just wanted to get mum back and go back to the island and live like they always had. Mum would sort Rán out straight away and stop her from being so...doing that...she would stop all this nonsense. She was sure of it. But there was that little quiet part of her mind that whispered: what if we can't go back?

Just then, a colossal dark shape emerged from the mists of the storm. A boat! This was their lifeline. They were saved at last. Excitedly, Danu turned to her sibling, to tell her it would all be okay now. Everything could go back to the way they were supposed to be. Instead, she turned to see that horrific amorphous shape she had first seen wash up on the driftwood. She looked at it in wide-eyed horror, backing as far away as she could on the small piece of wood they shared.

"Get away from me!" Danu screamed as, once again, the creature before her solidified into the sprawling limbs of her sister.

"It's me," her sister attempted to croak reassuringly. Danu looked again at her sister and that quiet voice in her mind whispered once more: Who was her sister really? Or, more importantly, who was she becoming? She attempted to push the doubts and fear down. Her sister was her sister was her sister was her sister. She was the same as she always had been and the same as she always would be.

"Oh, right." Danu eventually replied. "Look, there's a boat. If we can just get to it, we could be saved."

Rán's chest felt like it was on fire. She longed to cool herself in the ocean, but she held strong. It would get easier in time, she told herself. Practice makes perfect. She was too tired from holding herself rigid to even speak now so she simply nodded back at her sister. "And please," Danu continued. "Can you just stop...you know...doing that?" Her little sister looked away embarrassed. Rán would have to try harder.

Both girls splashed through the water with all their might attempting to push the fragment forward. They had some moderate success pushing forward, but then they'd be pushed back again by an incumbent wave, so it was hard to tell if they were getting closer to the ship at all. Despite this, they kept splashing and splashing with everything they had in them, their muscles aching from exertion.

Although, it was tempting to let her arm turn liquid in the water, and it would surely be a lot easier to swim like that, Rán resisted. She had upset her sister enough and she would never become properly human again if she didn't practise constantly. Her chest now burned white hot. Each breath was agonising.

They kept pushing and pushing and pushing against the waves. The ship was clearly bigger on the horizon now. Not by much, but they were making progress. Their tired bodies ached, but it wouldn't be long now the girls knew; they would be on firm land again.

But then suddenly, the boat began to turn away from them. Despite the progress they were making, there was no way they could outswim the boat. The little sister

frantically splashed against the current, but the boat was already putting some distance between them. Danu screamed with everything she had in her tiny body. She screamed and screamed and screamed. Every movement felt like knives stabbing into her flesh now, but Rán drew up the biggest breath she could and joined her sister's wails. There was not much breath left in her, so her voice wasn't anywhere near as loud as Danu's, but she gave everything she had left in her.

The storm raged on. It was impossible for the girls to tell if they could be heard over the fury of the sky and the sea, but they continued, nonetheless. At last, a rain-soaked face appeared over the edge of the boat. It looked directly at the girls. They could see the face's lips move, but they couldn't hear what it was saying. They shouted at the face to please, help them, but then it disappeared once more out of view. Then, the boat began to turn back towards them.

Rán let go. Her skeleton softened and her joints shifted out from under herself. She hadn't intended to, but she had nothing left in her. She let herself melt into her body not having the energy left to fight it.

Danu shook her sister pleading with her.  
"They won't take you on board like this. You have to go back, please. You have to go back" It was no use, Rán couldn't go back now. Her many arms wrapped around her sister holding her comfortingly, as Danu cried into her sister's soft flesh.

A ladder appeared over the boat. Strong hands pulled Danu up separating her from her sibling. Danu reached for her sister, desperately trying to hold on and Rán too, reached out her many arms to touch her sister once more, but it was no use. Danu was pulled up over the boat. A harpoon appeared over the top of the deck aimed directly at Rán. "Don't worry little girl," a gruff voice said. "This monster won't be hurting anyone anymore."

"You can't, you can't," Danu cried pulling at the man's uniform. "That's my sister!" The man brusquely pushed her off and re-aimed his weapon. Danu ran to the deck and called out to her sister.

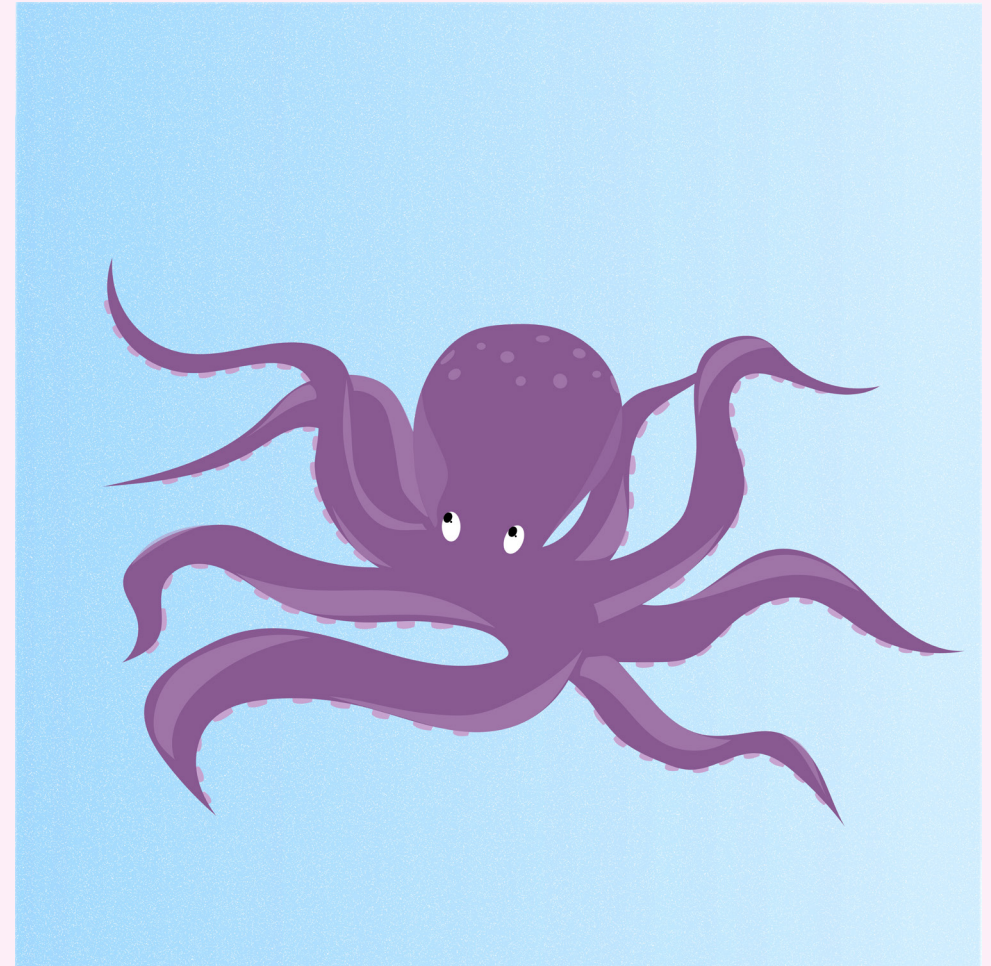
"Go! You have to leave," Rán looked reluctantly back. She did not want to leave her sister.

"I'll find you," Danu promised. "I'll find you."

"Meet me by the shore," With that, Rán slipped back into the ocean, the harpoon firing impotently into the driftwood. Submerged, she followed the boat for as long as she dared, before turning back to explore her new home.

On the mainland, Danu could not find her mother. There were many stories about what had happened to her, but no-one seemed to know for certain where she had

gone and after many years, Danu gave up looking for her mother and settled on the mainland. She was adopted by a band of sailors who were charmed by this precocious little girl. Although she never set foot on a boat again, as the sea still made her nauseous, she was invaluable in repairing and maintaining the boat on land and she listened eagerly to their exploits at sea. When she had lived with the sailors for some time and they had begun to earn her trust, she told them the story of her sister. They vowed to never hurt a single octopus again. In fact, they began to treat an octopus sighting as a good luck charm, as if it was a blessing from Danu's sister herself.





Deep under the ocean, Rán acclimatised to her new world quickly. She loved the tranquillity far under the sea. The water ran so deep, she wasn't sure she'd ever be done exploring it all, but she relished finding new crooks and caverns every day. Each day, the ocean got a bit bigger.

Over time, she encountered other octopuses. At first, it was wonderful to meet another like her. They explored each other's amorphous shapes with a fervent excitement and curiosity, noting with wonder each similarity and difference. However, it soon became apparent, that she was not built for constant companionship. Her counterpart soon began to grate and eventually they parted ways. From then on, Rán preferred to be mostly in her own company, having brief exquisite meetings with her own kind, before moving on.

On the mainland, it is said that there is a woman older than time itself. It is said that once a month she can be seen going right down to the shore's edge, dangling her feet in the cool waters. It is said, if you stand there waiting for long enough, you'll see a long cephalopodic arm emerge from the water and wrap itself around the old woman's leg. It is said that the old woman and the octopus sit there for hours talking and marvelling at each other's wondrous forms until it is dark, and both must go to their respective homes. That is what is said on the mainland anyway, but the old woman and the octopus died a long time ago now, so they aren't telling us anything.

# Eating Fire (work in progress)

Written by Tricia Ashworth

Narrated by Jamie Iggy

'Come on, come on. Where have you been?' Eleanor runs towards Rex with sweat pouring down her face. The sound of the horn blasting hoot hoot and the roar of laughter startles her. How she is going to get through tonight she does not know. She swings on her cloak and top hat and runs into the big top with her loudspeaker, 'Ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys, children of all ages, welcome, welcome, lovely to see you, are you having fun?' The crowd roars in response.

'Get ready for the greatest show on earth', she takes a bow and the music begins.

Nige and Rex are sitting in comfortable chairs in an office on deck chairs drinking. 'Another?' Rex offers, lifting the whisky bottle with his gold bracelet clinking its side. Nige nods.

'What are you going to do about her?' Rex says as he takes a swig of his liquor.

'That's a very good question' Nige replies.

'The first act tonight,' Eleanor bellows, 'is the wonderous, most delightful, fantastical gymnast.' She forces a beaming smile on her face and runs backstage where she is met by Jean attaching a big red nose.

'Is this straight Eleanor? It's not sitting right tonight.'

'It's fine.' Eleanor replies.

'What's up with you? You've got a face like a slapped arse?' Jean shouts as she rushes towards the big top.

Eleanor sits down looking at herself in the Hollywood mirror. The heat of the lights overwhelming her, she pulls away slightly. She's right, she says to herself, buck up will you. Eleanor is suddenly transformed back to school, her form teacher hurrying her to find her exercise book. She tries to mingle in with the other children desperate to find it, the more she tries the more confused and despondent she becomes. She is left standing at the front of the class by herself all eyes on her, her cheeks burning. And her, the exercise book monitor.

She hears Big Foot in the distance, the flap flap flap, tap tap tap of his feet as he enters, falling over himself. 'Will I ever get the gist of these bloody shoes' Big Foot snarls. He goes and joins her at the mirror placing his head next to hers and gently touching her shoulders with both hands. 'You always loved

sitting in front of this mirror even as a child. Your grandfather used to say *a thousand-yard stare that child*.' Eleanor smiles. 'Rex was hard on you today.' Eleanor lowers her head.

'I just can't get this new routine, no matter how hard I try, it just won't stick.' The sound of the accordion wafts in the background. 'Jean is sounding good tonight', Eleanor perks up.

'She sure is', Big Foot agrees, 'That's what made me fall in love with her, the sound she can make with that instrument'.

'You old romantic you' Eleanor gets up to give him a hug. 'Oh God it's the fire eaters next', she rushes to introduce them, she bumps into Rex who gives her a look of disdain.

'1966, the circus family, the greatest show on earth, a 16-act show, we introduced Co-co the clown for sake Christ and now there after a takeover.' 'Grandad it's for Christ's sake.' Eleanor laughs as she corrected him for the hundredth million time.

'Oh, I don't care for who's sake it is' her grandad grimaces.

'Well, I do care, it's for all our sakes.' Eleanor is full of pride in her family, in her history. Performing had been in her blood as long as she can remember. Her grandfather was her biggest fan. He was a big man in every way. Singing to her at a drop of a hat. Wearing his shirt and braces every day and always shiny shoes.

Rex stands up clapping his hands, 'Come on, let's go through that again and this time let's get it right, put some energy into it. I haven't got time to waste.' Big Foot gives Eleanor an encouraging look. Eleanor vocalises the scales loudly to warm up her voice, 'la la la la la la la, lalalalalalala.'

As the music starts, she sings but gets her words mixed up. 'For crying out loud,' Rex hollers, 'can we just have one straight run through, without a cock-up.' Everyone stands looking awkward. One of the Cancan girls uses a big white fan to cool herself down and sits on the floor. Eleanor starts singing one of the famous old songs, Jean plays the accordion alongside her and the whole troupe join in singing. Rex throws down his notebook, 'Now you've got that old shit out your system, let's get on with the new shit, because that's what it will be if you lot don't pull your fuckin' fingers out'.

Eleanor's phone pings she glances at it. It's Francine.

'Something more important Helena than this new routine? If you listened, actually paid attention, I mean are you stupid? Because I am beginning to wonder?'

'It's Eleanor,' Big Foot growled 'how many times?'

'You can't let him speak to you like that,' Big Foot says giving Eleanor

a hug, 'there's rules against this sort of thing.'

'But he's right', Eleanor declares.

'Well how come everything was fine until these two muppets took over?' Jean asks.

'But I can't concentrate, I keep getting all my words mixed up, I can't remember things. I'm always late.'

'You've got too much on your plate, too much going on up there', Big Foot points to her head.

'How's your business course going?' Jean asks.

'OK,' Eleanor replies, 'it's a bit stressful'.

'Can't be any more stressful than working here.' Jean laughs, raising her eyebrows.

'I keep having the same problems as I do here.'

Francine reaches for a coffee cup and passes one to Eleanor, 'How did you get on with the psych? Has he deemed you certifiable yet?' She takes a sip of her from her cup, 'God this coffee is shit, don't know why I keep drinking it.' The noise of clanking voices and laughter in the background makes Eleanor frown as she goes to look for a quiet table.

'I've got to email him with some dates and times to arrange when I can meet with him, I can't even get my head around that. Then fill in a blasted form, attach it to a document and then send the email and then re-send the email to my tutor. Anyway he's an Ed Psych, not a psychiatrist, for your information'. Francine reaches across the table, 'are you eating that toast?' and takes the slice before Eleanor has chance to answer. 'Surely you've done email a million times before?'

'That's not the point. It doesn't matter how many times I've done something; I can't remember how to sequence things and then if there are too many things to do at once my brain just cuts out and then the stress kicks in. Then I've no chance. Something that takes you ten minutes can take me an hour to do'.

'I'm so lucky', Francine's chuckles as she licks the butter off her fingers.

Michael Doyle is tall and handsome in an older uncle sort of way, Eleanor thinks. The musty smell of his office reminds Eleanor of bleach at school. 'Would you like to come this way please, take a seat.' He sits opposite her and crosses his legs slowly.

'So, what we are going to do today is a series of tests. It's going to take around 2-3 hrs, now, you're not going to cry, are you?'

Eleanor, taken aback, wants to say 'well if I was Mystic Meg I'd be able to answer that question.' But before she has a chance to answer Michael Doyle moves on to the first set of questions.

'Eleanor, can I have a word? Come on over to the toy corner please?'

Mrs Rover moved a teddy bear and patted a seat. Eleanor stayed standing. 'Now I know you've been struggling with being the Exercise Book Monitor of late. So, what I have decided to do is give the job to Susan Wall. I think that will be best all round, ok? So off you go back to your desk my dear.' Next morning Mrs Rover announced the change at the form register.

'So, are your meeting Mr Doyle later or should we call him Mr Darcy?'

'Ooi', Francine pokes Eleanor in the ribs playfully. 'Stop it, yes to get my results'.

'So, this might be our last rendezvous, he might ask you to run into the sunset with him?'

Eleanor grins 'Oh I didn't know you cared, you should have said earlier this could have been a sweet romance,'

'I would have bought you flowers'

Eleanor replied, 'I don't like flowers.'

'Real ones, not any of that fake stuff they have in the circus.'

'There's nothing fake about the circus, its bloody hard work.'

'Ouch. I'm just messing'

'Sorry I didn't sleep well'

'Night dreaming about Mr D?'

'You could say that.'

Michael Doyle finds Eleanor in the canteen.

'Eleanor', he waves 'nice to see you.' He takes the envelope out of his canvas bag. 'This is your report, have a look through it and if there are any questions, fire away, you can always email me'.

'What you're not going to stay?'

'Well, I hadn't planned too'

Eleanor tentatively takes the document and stares at it, then starts to rifle through it. 'But what does all this mean?'

'It means you're dyslexic, just as I thought.'

'What's *IQ scores* got to do with dyslexia? As she wipes away moisture from under her eyes.'

The acrobats, aerialists, jugglers, fire eaters, high-wire performers, all the performers are behind her, Eleanor tells herself. The way Rex has been treating her is way out of line, she knows that. What did he have against her? Did he not like the fact that she was a female ring mistress, and that she was young? Or maybe it was her close ties to the old circus family who drove a hard bargain in the takeover bid.

'Thank you for coming everyone. Find a space if you can, move Big Foot's stuff out the way, he's not the tidiest of creatures.' Big Foot growls. The Cancan girls are standing outside the caravan with their heads through the windows. 'How many people are happy with the way things are at the moment?'

A long silence.

'I take it that's no one?'

'Things can't go on as they are. I mean the way that Rex is treating people, it's just not on.'

'A circus family never behaves this way, respect it's all about respect, but what can we do, any suggestions?'

'We can string Rex up by the balls' Jean laughs.

'Put arsenic in his whiskey?' A cancan girl suggests.

'We can invite him to a meeting and just tell him we are not happy' someone else proposes.

'And is Rex interested in our happiness?'

'Or we can play them at their own game' Big Foot offers.

'How do you mean?'

'Where are we in the season?'

'In the middle.'

'Exactly, right in the middle, let's hit them where it hurts most' Bigfoot smirks.

The smell of paraffin drift through the big top, Eleanor sniffs the air and lets out a sigh as she collects the lion tamers' whips off the floor. A sense of calm runs through her as she remembers her grandfather teaching her how to eat fire. She was ten years old, and she recalls having no eyebrows for weeks. He taught her mother and her father, there was no one like him. What would he have done in this situation she thinks to herself?

Rex looks at his watch whilst walking towards the big top, Nige calls to him 'Rex come and see what they've done now.' He enters and sees the whole company sitting together in a circle.

'What the hell is going on and why have you all got your eyes closed?'

Jean stands up and walks to the middle of the circle.

'We are presenting a peaceful protest.' She locks eyes with Rex.

'We don't have time for protests, we are due to open.' He looks down at his watch.

Big Foot stands up, 'and we don't have time for your games.'

Rex squares up to Bigfoot and stands on one of his big shoes and they make a hooting sound, hoot hoot, and everyone laughs. Rex jumps back. Bigfoot squeeze his red nose it makes a loud hoot and then a bunch of flowers fly into Rex's face, they scream with laughter.

'Get back to fucking work now.'

'No, we won't get back to fucking work.' Eleanor barks as she picks up one of the lion tamers' whips.

'Finally, you've got a back bone.'

'Yes, I have, I always have had. Have you any idea what it's like working for you? It's like constantly being a trapeze artist hanging upside down, not knowing my left from right and being a flippin' plate spinner all at once. I've been in the circus all my life and you know I'm bloody good at it. I should have never doubted myself. I let you make me see myself in a distorted way.' Big Foot kicks a straw bale out of his way and walks towards Rex. 'So, what we have decided as a circus family is that we are on strike until things improve.'

'You can't do that, we've got queues of people outside.'

'No,' Eleanor stands defiantly, 'you've got queues of people outside.'

Slowly all the performers leave one by one.

Rex turns on his heels, and his angry shoes echo through the circus.

'What the fuck are we going to do now?' Rex punches the office door.

'We open in twenty.' He holds his head in his hands, 'They're thick as thieves that lot.'

'They've got us by the balls Rex.' Nige said quietly.

Rex can hear the sound of a violin coming from the dressing room, as he approaches the doorway. He stands sheepishly, watching the performers passing bottles of cava between themselves.

'Eleanor, could I have a word please?'

'Sorry' Eleanor replies.

'Please, Eleanor.'

'Well at least you got my name right for once.'

'Look I know I've not handled things, on reflection, in the best way.'

'The best way? Have you any idea what this family puts themselves through every night? All the flying, falling, sweat. And risk. They risk their lives for you.' Eleanor points her finger. 'You think you can just behave how you like and we will take it. Well, let's get one thing clear, if we are to perform tonight, or ever again, you need to change. Do you really think you can do that?' The cancan girls shout, 'Go Eleanor' and other performers join in cheering. 'I've just found out I am dyslexic and now I have had time to get my head around it, I am glad. Because at least now I can begin to understand my difficulties; no, my differences. I am going to have to make changes, make adjustments. And Rex, you asked me the other day, was I stupid? No, I am not stupid, if I was stupid how the hell would I have got a place at uni? And no one in this family works for a bully.'

Eleanor can smell the peanuts, the popcorn and the fire. The circus family have spoken, she thinks to herself, it was their way of agreeing to perform. She hears the roar of children as the lights flare, signalling her entrance. 'Rex, you just remember how lucky you are' she says, as she puts on her top hat.



# Spray Cans

Written by Kofi Gyamfi

Narrated by Jamal Lewis-Service

The plantain in the kitchen was a lasso to my nostrils. Tantalising, with the harsh hiss from the oil that browns it. The pan next to it spat at me vulgarly. It's yam drool violently bubbled away, and suddenly all of the volcanoes in the world don't seem that dangerous. 'Janko...' a motherly screech came from upstairs. Janko waddled out of the kitchen and towards the scream. 'Janko, when were you gonna tell me!!!' Marie's frown made the word 'melancholy' sound like a joke. Hand on hips, her slender frame perked up. 'What are you on about?' Janko replied puzzledly. 'Don't piss about with me JJ, I found the letter.' Janko's world came crashing down, he was mortified. 'I'm sorry, I didn't know how to break the news'. Janko murmured as he had his hands over his head whilst rocking his body a bit. 'Janko' Marie boomed as she started to make her way down to her son, now doing his best impression of an armadillo, sobbing in a ball. 'I'm not mad at that, I'm pissed that you didn't tell me.' Every move Marie made basically, parading her diamond like skin. Delicately step by step, in her blue Adidas sliders, her flamingo dressing gown and the equally as pink towel on her head, she knelt down to hold her son. 'Janko you've got to believe in yourself and know who you are.' Marie whispered, now rubbing through Janko's locs, almost guitaring the comfort through them.

'I know a guy that runs a company, he could help with getting you a grant, want me to ask him?' 'Mum, you're always bragging about guys you know' Janko replied cheekily with his head perked up taking his last snuffles. The last snuffle was a whiff, a whiff of a forest fire. *Oh Christ, dinner!!*

Janko turned a cheetah to a sloth as he entered the kitchen, with a new reason to cry. That lasso to his nostrils was now a guided shove away from danger. 'Who wants a cremated dinner?' Shouted Marie jokingly as she entered with the slyest grin on her face. Janko staring in disbelief then turning to his mother, who's giggle could rival a hyena's. 'Lets get Uber Eats JJ.' Marie sweetly said.

The following morning there was a knock on the door. 'Yo JJ'. Janko propped up out of bed like a kangaroo on the day-to-day. Janko tiredly squinted to peer out of the window. A tall broad figure was stood in the front garden. He was

just there, his height was competing with the palm tree he was stood next to. His brown mullet made time machines a borderline reality. With his white and red Cuban shirt and all those rings on his left hand, you could swear he was part of the Cali cartel in that Netflix series Narcos. 'What's up Gus.' JJ croaked 'It's 9:30am.' 'Whadya mean?' Replied Gus. 'It's 12 in the afternoon.' 'Is it!' Janko said, now reaching for his contact lenses. 'Bro this party ain't gonna liven up itself, we need to get ready.' Janko let out a large groan as he hopped downstairs to let Gustavo in.

He silkily stepped through, light footed as a household tabby. 'What you doing bro?' Gustavo smirked at a zombiefied Janko. 'Wot you on about?' Moaned JJ, now holding a door for balance. 'Where da food at?' bellowed Gus cheekily, even drowning out the repetitive thumping noise making its way further and further downstairs. 'Rah, he's a big man now yana' exclaimed Marie as she shuffled to hug the giant in her home. 'Come take a seat Gus' Marie smiled. 'JJ why haven't you made Gus food!' Marie went from 0 to 100 in record timing. Janko waddled into the kitchen, he didn't just sigh, it was more like making a typhoon feel like a breeze.

Janko's brunch was nothing short of glorious, the crunch of the crispy tofu was like a sweet stroll in some snow. The salad was cleansed so well that Jade wasn't a shade of green anymore. 'Mmm' Gus attempted to speak but was reeled back into it instantaneously. 'How's your English uwork Gus?' Gustavo, with the sternest of looks and the stupidest of glances, replied 'Marie, everything is just about fine. It's just mentally tough, unlike JJ' Gus joked. 'Haha sorry bro.' 'My boy got jokes huh.' Grumbled Janko as Marie was on the floor doing her best impression of a hyena.

'Oh baby live a little' chuckled a struggling Marie trying to get back up. A stern looking Janko, with a cut-eye so sharp, katanas were butter knives, replied 'It's nice to know, you found that amusing,' as he stormed back upstairs to get his best garments on.

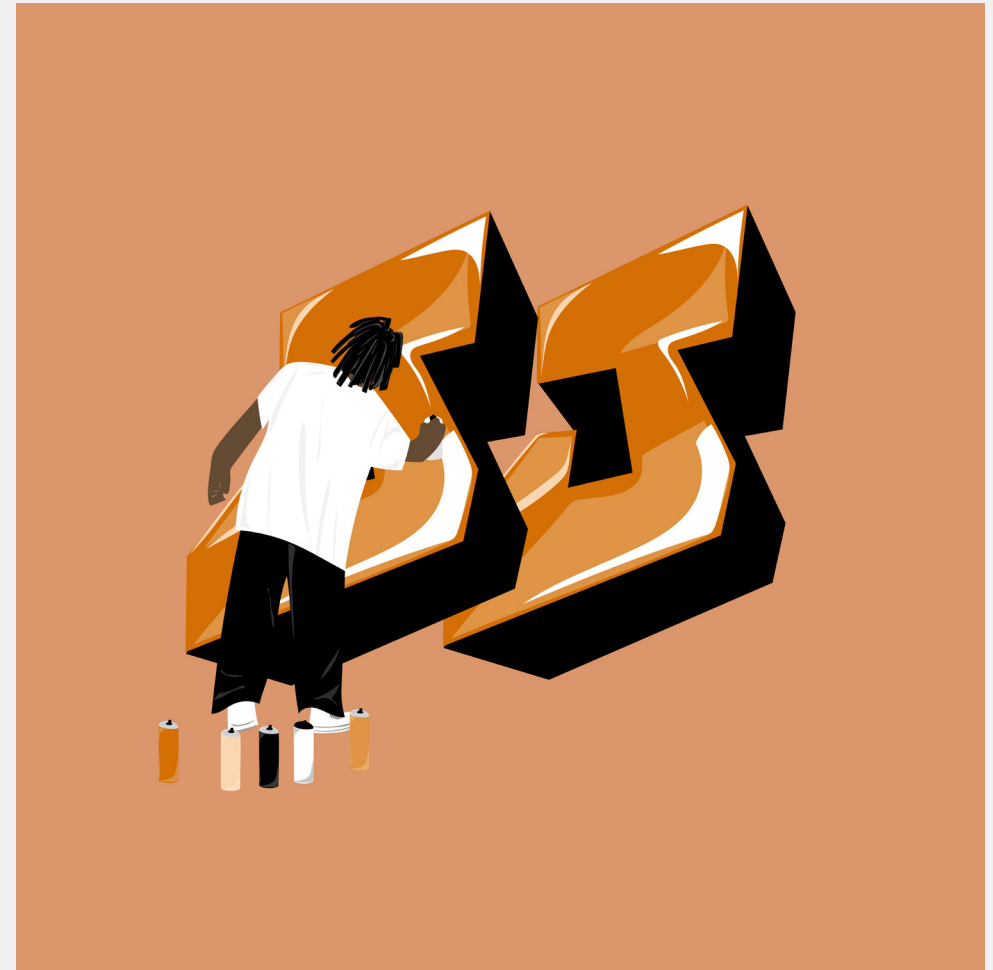
'Ooooooooh' the ever so cheeky Gus struck again. 'He never changes does he?' Marie responded with the simplest of replies, 'errrrr nope. So, Gustavo have you finally found someone to wear yellow undies for new year with?' Marie smiled. 'Sadly not,' sighed Gustavo, and in that moment he shrunk from a bear to a lion. 'I'm sure she's coming soon.' 'I hope.' Gustavo sighed, being the hurricane of his own disappointment.

Moments later that repetitive thudding started again. It was Janko and he was

immaculate. He had an all Heaven white suit on, his locks looked freshly oiled. His already immaculate skin went from marble to obsidian. His white shirt with a blue almost mandala like pattern. 'Looking fresh brother' said Gustavo in excitement, dragging his bottom lip off the floor.

'Oh shit I almost forgot.' screamed Gustavo remembering the rum he had in a carrier bag. 'Smile!' a word sweetly spoken preceded by the most violent of lights. Marie with her phone, doing the middle aged woman prodding with it, still with her flash on. Gus and JJ were not even looking, still recovering from the pain of that unnecessary flash. Three hours into pre-drinks Gus, JJ and Marie were a shadow of what they were earlier in the day. Sentences were slurred, and paragraphs were butchered, the laughter was intensified and steps were less steady. The boys were ready to party and Marie was ready for a nap. 'Bro I'm getting the Uber now. What's the address again?' A wobbly Gustavo trying his utmost best to communicate. '1 Brantingham Road, Whalley Range' said Janko with the faintest replies and the stupidest smile, like a Cheshire cat who walks into walls.

Janko's and Gustavo's Uber arrived as they clambered in, both of them were buzzing like they live in a hive. Gus gave Janko the blankest of stares, it was almost like this was more than intoxication and more like his soul had been taken. 'Gus are you okay? Gustavo!' An ever concerned Janko pondered. 'How did you do it JJ,' Gus muttered. 'Did what?' puzzled Janko, ever more concerned. 'How'd you get kicked off that course bro?' Gus replied ever more harshly, propping his head up. Gus continued, 'it doesn't matter bro. You've gotta mad gift, you were wasting it on that course.' 'I really wish you would all stop saying that.' Janko sighed 'I do this ting for fun.' 'Is that so?' 'That is so,' Janko asserted. Gustavo now had that signature smirk on his face, he looked as smug as a puppy and as demonic as a scream mask all at the same time. 'If that is so, why does your bedroom look like an art studio and why do you have a creator account on Insta?' Gustavo looked chuffed with himself. He was very much patting himself on the back. Janko was thinking of the swiftest reply but nothing was coming. 'I'll tell you why JJ,' said Gustavo, now with a lump in his throat, sparring away at his drunken tears. 'I'll tell you why, it's because you dream of that shit!' Gus continued 'Janko if you did it for fun you wouldn't be sick at it, You're even better than Lo-Lo.' 'No-one is better than lo-lo.' Boomed Janko in defiance. 'How dare you disrespect the greatest graffiti artist of all time!' Gus was ready to pounce again 'Bro when are you gonna learn, I didn't disrespect the greatest cos my best mates the real GOAT.' Janko in disbelief gave Gus one last puzzled look 'Shut up.....oh shit we're here.'



JJ and Gus embarked onto the pavement, like sausages out of a sausage machine. The house they were about to enter was a beautiful beast, heaven white as Janko's outfit, but the rumbling beast was not his doppelganger. It's violent growl was one of post-teenage joy.

'Looks wavy bro,' Gustavo with the grin to end all grins, the ends of his smile almost fell off his face. Janko however looked a little more timid, trying his utmost best to act natural. Gus turned to Janko, 'Let's jump in my guy!' Past the front door they went, over a green haired goth passed out at the front door. Their make up was smeared so badly, it was just an eccentric melancholic piece in Manchester Art Gallery. It was safe to say the goth's night had ceased. They entered the living room, where the synchronized stampede was at its centre. Entire banquets in each corner, shish kebab, rum punch, falafels ... you name it, entire cookbooks were filled out. 'I'm gonna check out the back garden.' said Gus gleefully. Janko knew that was code for he's checking for gyal.

Janko, now left to sample some punch, was just taking it all in. Pop Smoke's voice roared off the walls, while the synchronised stampede dispersed from the centre, only to mosh pit back into it. Sinister baselines committed assault on Janko's intestines. Even the two people arguing in the near corner were being drowned out. It looked interesting but the verbs showed no sign of resurfacing. The girl in the argument tried to storm off but as she turned she bumped into Janko. 'Oh I'm so sorry,' she said, full of shame. 'Are you okay?' She asked, feeling even more guilty. 'I'm okay, more importantly are you okay?' That seemed intense.' Janko was examining who was speaking to him, a quick scan of her skin, that made entire constellations seem tinted. Her huge mane-like wig that would make any lion crouch in shame. Her eyes made kaleidoscopes seem boring. 'Oh don't worry it wasn't that intense, he was just spitting down my ear.' Janko looked in disgust. 'That's nasty, why would you let anyone salivatLooke down your ear!' The girl looked confused. 'Wait, what ... no! Haha he didn't spit, he's been rapping to me all night.' Janko felt stupid and laughed along in shame. The girl glanced at the heavenly white of Janko's outfit. 'Oooo quirky !' She continued 'I likes me quirks haha, so what is the name of o quirky one then?.' She said, perfectly balancing a glass of rose in her hand. 'I'm Janko,' he smiled. 'Pleased to meet you, the name is Simone.' She said ever so cheekily. 'So what do you do Janko?' 'Well I was a business student at Salford Uni but I got kicked out.' Simone with her horizon caressing eyelashes looked intrigued. 'Oh but that's not all you do.' 'What do you mean?' Puzzled JJ. 'You're a maker, you create, a man who's that stylish must be an artist. You make you make you make!' said Simone gleefully. Janko grinned.

'Okay then try me.' 'Okay then.' Simone now with her hand on her chin, looking like she could pluck the answer out the sky. 'Well you're not an arsehole so you're not a DJ, and you sound too happy to be a poet, I'll say graffiti!!' 'Mmm sharp,' Janko said in shock, 'I do it for fun. My mum and my mate Gus say I should take it seriously.' 'Well I'll be the judge of that.' Simone was as cheeky as she's been all night. 'Pass me your phone, Janks.' 'Janks?' Janko was confused, still reaching into his pocket. 'I know you, I do this for fun types, with your creator Insta accounts! Bloody annoying!' Simone's demeanour slightly changed, she was still bubbly and cheeky but she had a bit of fierceness about her. Her mane now seemed fitting. 'Janks, they are amazing.' 'Thanks,' a disinterested Janko sighed. 'My mum keeps saying her mate owns this company and should show him my work.' 'What's his company called?' Simone asked, leaning in close. 'Ooh, sofas free!' Simone leaped onto the small maroon sofa next to JJ, still awaiting the answer to her question. 'Biggs, I think it's called,' Janko said, following Simone to sit. Simone giggled. 'Is your mum's mate Brandon by any chance?' Simone quizzed Janko with an even bigger grin. 'Wait, you know him!?' 'Yes' Simone grinned, 'he's my PA,' her grin grew. Janko was in shock. 'Is your mum Marie?' 'Yeah she is,' replied Janko, putting two and two together. 'You own Biggs ?' Janko asked in disbelief. 'Yup I own it.' Simone was still holding Janko's phone, Janko's bottom lip was getting well acquainted with the floor. 'Brandon always talks about Marie, he defo fancies her, probably told her he owns it to impress her, the poor guy, haha. Ooop I said too much.' Simone took another swig of her wine. Janko's eyes widened so much, the moon was a golf ball. 'But how!?' Janko boomed. 'Well I guess your mum's a catch,' Simone shrugged. 'No not that, how did you do that, you're so young!?' 'Janks, I was a lot younger when I started Biggs, my parents were broke musicians, I didn't do well at school. I had shit jobs, I wanted to be the one that pays, not get paid, and a sprinkle of black girl magic that's how, please stop gawping at me!' Janko felt a bit embarrassed. 'Sorry Simone' shrieked Janko. 'It's okay, you're good company, you're talented and you're charming.' Simone said, running her hand across Janko's face looking more visibly drunk. 'It must be cool having musical parents?' Janko said brimmingly. 'Not when they keep telling me the story of when I was conceived in the tour bus, it isn't!' Simone sighed. 'My god.' Janko said, covering his ears. 'Enough about that, Lo-Lo hit me up saying he's got a commission going for graffiti artists, while I've got your phone I'm gonna drop some of your photos in his DMs. Thanks Simba, you're welcome Janks haha.' Simone was in full cheeky mode tonight, Janko again in disbelief, his pulse breaking the sound barrier. 'It's done, thank me later Janks.' Janko couldn't believe his ears he was speaking to a direct contact of his hero, but something else was on his mind. 'Wait, Simba!?' Janko was puzzled. 'Why Simba?' Simone replied 'everyone calls me that because I look majestic and



'I'm fierce'. Simone sat proudly but looking ever so drunk as her head swayed. Janko grinned. 'You could probably run the savanna too'. They lightly chuckled together. Simone leaned in within an instant, with her lips puckered. Janko looked at her puzzled. 'Woah what was that?' Janko shouted.

'You've got good chat, ain't ya Janks.' Flirted Simone, fluttering her long eyelashes. 'First off Simba, it's Janko or JJ second of all what do you mean good chat this ain't Love Island.' A now perked up Simone replied, twiddling with her hair. 'Ooh someone's got a fire in their belly.' Simone was now leaning in further, her face was as keen as an eagle swooping for salmon. Janko felt like the air was on fire, he could feel it burn through his skin, the pink walls had a torrent of sweat. The floor was the crowd's trampoline. It was electric. The smell of the steak from the BBQ outside, punched everyone in the face, but Simone only had a taste for Janko's attention. 'Wanna go somewhere more private JJ?' Simone's voice got even sweeter as the rose kicked in. 'I don't know you!' Janko whimpered. 'Oh don't be like that, cutie' Simone leaned in closer till she was close enough to touch him. Gustavo was now in the far corner fist pumping into the air as he watched his friend. With outstretched hands Simone proceeded to wiggle her fingers at Janko. 'Lets see how sensitive you are, Mr. Strong and silent.' Janko leaned back in terror and then fell off the sofa, Simone flung herself on top of him. 'Tickle tickle.' A menacing Simone was there on top of Janko, her fingers on him like a swarm of piranhas on their prey. 'No' screamed Janko, Gus's head turned back towards Janko. 'Shit, hey don't do that, he don't like that.' 'I'll do whatever I want to bag my man' Janko was suffering. He wasn't laughing like people normally do when being tickled. He was shuddering like he was in severe pain, like a wounded antelope waiting for the lion to put out of his misery. Janko didn't just feel the static in his nervous system, he felt the whole storm. It was like a cactus or a thornbush on the inside of his body impaling through his skin to the outside. 'Yo, fucking stop' Gus begged and he was pulling her off him the party fell silent. The music had stopped.

'JJ!' Marie said with her motherly screech, 'you've been in your room for six days now, I can smell you from downstairs. This ain't funny no more.' This wasn't silence, it was a cricket's orchestra and an epic tumbleweed race. 'Janko!' Marie cried as she forced the door open to her horror. His entire wardrobe was on the floor, it was a sea of fabric and vomit. Fruit flies had come to nest in their 100s. There was Janko, hiding under the covers. His locks now, so dry the Sahara is a lake, Janko was skin and bone, he looked as sick as a dog and as helpless as a lost child. Marie was sparring away with her tears, but she couldn't help it. Her face was a flood, her son was a mess, all of his

artworks on the walls were scribbled out. 'Look at you JJ,' Marie sobbed.

The doorbell went, Marie regathering herself wiped her tears away and headed down to the front door. It was Gus and Simone. 'Where is he?' Simone asked nervously. 'He's in his room,' Marie continued. 'Thanks for reaching out to me.' 'I'm just glad to have the best PA' Simone grinned as she entered. 'Let's go upstairs then.' Marie said nervously. They entered the mess Janko was living in. Simone and Gustavo were in shock. Marie broke down into tears again. Simone stood with a face full of guilt. Janko with the very little strength he had in his body began to speak. 'Go away,' he croaked. 'Oh don't be like that,' Marie sobbed. 'Janko, I'm so sorry,' Simone continued. 'I didn't know about your condition, I could even tell.' 'Condition!' Janko's croak was slowly turning into a growl. 'Condition is it now!? It's not an illness.' 'Calm down bro.' A scared Gustavo shrunk from a bear to a badger. 'Saying I can't tell like it's a compliment! Ha what's with that!?' Janko shrieked.

Simone was now crying for Janko's forgiveness. 'I'm so sorry, please look at your Insta, I hope I can make it up to you.' Simone sprinted out of the room and left the house in a flash. 'JJ it doesn't have to be like this bro.' Gustavo's somber voice trying to calm his best mate down 'Just go!' Janko screamed. Marie and Gus left the room. Janko gave out one last typhoon sigh and went back under the covers.

It was 9am the following morning when a defeated Janko propped his head up. He wanted to be sick again but nothing left his mouth as he tilted his head. He observed the suffering of his safe space. The sea of clothes and puke, which was like charity to the swarm of fruit flies. The scribbled out walls, which was like the death of a dream. Janko looked at the pillow next to him. He was in disbelief. Two of his locks had fallen off. There they were, frail as most octogenarians. 'Is that how it is?' Janko said to himself. 'Rah!' Janko for the first time in a week got out of bed, slowly hoisting himself to stand. He picked up his phone and turned his camera on selfie mode. 'Shit!. Janko saw the skeletal figure before him with a slight patch of new growth where his locks once were. Janko's bottom lip could have touched the toxic puke sea of a bedroom floor beneath him. 'Still a sexy beast,' Janko sarcastically said to himself.

Janko remembered what Simone said to him. He opened his Instagram. Janko was in awe, he had a notification.

It was a message from Lo-Lo.

# Flow

Written by Laurence Young

Narrated by Gráinne Flynn

1

I'm so bored. Watch the clock bored. Sing a song bored. Can't even scroll through Twitter bored. The kind of bored where you make up little games like seeing how many times you can click your fingers in 30 seconds bored. Speed clicking, classic bored game. I hate it when the pub is empty like this, it's so much nothing. Days feeling like weeks, hours feeling like days, minutes like blah blah god even my thoughts bore me.

Still, being bored is better than being busy. Busy in my head I mean, busy in the pub I love. When it's busy in the pub I can ease into this kind of rhythm where the time flies by. I'm so fucking good when the pub is heaving. Pouring 3 pints at a time, speed demon with the card machine, blasting through glass collection. It's easy. I just kind of zone in and zone out at the same time, and then bam, it's last orders, everyone can piss off and I can go home.

I wish it were busy now, in the pub I mean, because my boredom is giving way to the wrong kind of busy. Everything I've been trying to avoid starting to flood in. Images I don't want to see, thoughts I don't want to think, feelings I don't want to feel. Please come back boredom. I really need to stop thinking about Max. You're bored. You're bored.

*'Hey Soph, can you come help me with the glass wash, it's playing up again.'*

*Colleague Amir is my saviour. Steaming in with the save, the innocuous little pin to puncture the rapidly swelling balloon of my brain.*

*'Yeah course, 100%'*

*I think I'm a little keen with my response. Straight in there, barely a breath. 'Wow, someone is keen. Is plumbing your secret passion?'*

*I do a stupid little laugh. Why does my laugh always sound stupid.*

*'Yeah something like that. Just really bored. Did you block it again by putting all that fruit in there?' 'No! That was one time.'*

*Course it was Amir.*

I go and help Amir with the glass wash. Turns out it wasn't fruit, but someone (definitely Amir), had put a glass filled to the brim with crisp packets in, which is probably not ideal. Drain the thing, remove the offending items, restart. All working fine now. It takes around 30 minutes to fix all in, once the mopping and drying is done. When I get back to the bar it's starting to get busy. Something to

focus on, and soon, barely a lull in serving. Keep coming customers, the more you buy, the less time I have to spend with my thoughts. I start to relax. All I've got to do now is let time wash over me. It's not exactly peaceful, because at the end of a busy shift I'm wired, it takes me a long time to unwind, and I tend not to sleep well. But right now, the distraction is what I need.

2

I got back from my shift last night at about midnight. The cycle home always makes me ravenously hungry so I bust out a classic: cheese and tomato toasty, with a little bit of pesto, on shit white bread. It's got to be shit white bread, with a whole load of butter on the outside. That's how you get the thing to fry in the toasty machine, giving it that glorious golden crunch. I'm gonna die by 40 I'm sure of it. By the time I've eaten it's half 12, and I get the sense that I'm not going to be sleeping much tonight. Too much going on in my brain, too much happening tomorrow. I try sleep, but for most of the night it's just switching positions, throwing the cover on and off, and glancing at my phone every 30 minutes. I think eventually around 4am I fall asleep proper for 3 hours. Now it's 7am, and I've got to get up to make my train. I smooth my knuckles down the side of my face, trying to release some of the tension in my jaw I realise I've been clenching all night.

I'm out the door at 8, walking to the station not cycling because there's no way I'm going to leave my bike locked up outside the station overnight. It's hot. Far too hot for this early in the morning at least. When I arrive at the station I feel like I've just got off some kind of log ride at a theme park; drenched, heart racing. Except I didn't choose to get on this ride, it's not that fun, and I can't get off when I want to.

I board the 8:27 train to home, it's only an hour and 20 minutes. I take a window seat about halfway down the carriage, and put my headphones on, intending to listen to something to calm my nerves. I try starting three different albums; Explosions in the Sky, Frank Ocean, Bon Iver, but none of them feel right. So I sit with my headphones on, but no music playing. I'm not sure how much time passes, but at some point I realise that the man who's sat opposite to me (white, middle-aged, widow's peak, sad business suit) is staring at me. I glance over, and see his eye-line not where I expect it, looking down at my feet. I look down and realise that I'm tapping them; a fast, fervent back and forth that when I take my headphones off I realise is really fucking loud. I stop. Always with the fidgety feet. Max would've found that hilarious.

3

The train gets in at 9:45 and I step off into the familiar world of my hometown. The station is old, seven platforms, barriers that are normally open making it

incredibly appealing to bunk the train, and always a few food stalls out the front selling tempting treats. I look down at platform 2, where I'd get the train to school every morning. It's pretty quiet. I make my way outside and get a cinnamon bun and coffee for breakfast, have a nice chat with the woman on the stall about the town. She recommends a new pizza place that has opened up down near the seafront.

It's such a nice day, and having cooled off on the train, I decide to walk the 40 minutes it's going to take me to get to my mum's. As I walk I try to think about the last time me and mum properly spoke, which feels like an age ago. There's been texts (pass-agg), voicemails (her and scammers the only people in the world who still leave them), brief phone calls, but no real time spent together in approaching six months. I know she's worried about me, but her love rubs off in such a condescending, demanding, frustratingly needling way that I've been keeping my distance. I'm probably being unfair, but I do think the space has done me good. I've needed it, just a bit of emptiness. A step away from the constant haranguing. She told me last time we spoke on the phone I was drifting. I said I was glad to be.

I've been walking on autopilot, and when I zone back into what's in front of me I realise I've diverted off the path to mum's. I should've kept on up the hill but instead I turned left towards the meadows and suddenly I'm on Max's road. I want to stop walking, want to turn around and plough on towards admonishing words in my mum's kitchen, but my feet keep taking me forward and without the time to consider the implications I'm standing in front of 200, Burnage Road. The slightly wild and overgrown front lawn. The front window, with the bright pink paint flaking away at the edges. The oversized comical door knocker. The alarmingly old Renault Clio out front. And the door's opening. Why is the door opening. 'Sophie!'

Phil, Max's dad, steps out the house, and brings me into a big hug. I think I might cry.

*'I heard some of you were getting together to celebrate Max's birthday. It's so good of you to drop by. Are you coming in?'*

*'Errr, yeah sure.'* I respond timidly. *'Sorry for this being so unexpected, I just-'* Phil cuts me off before I can fumble any further. *'It's no bother at all, Claire will be ecstatic'*

We head into the hallway, stairs on my left and the kitchen/living room combo (source of much pride when renovated 6 years ago) continuing on through. Phil

shouts up the stairs for his wife that Sophie is here, and in an instant flowing down the stairs, in a very bright, outlandishly patterned summer dress is Claire, Max's mum. She wraps her arms around my neck, going up on tiptoes as I'm a fair bit taller than her, and burying her face in my shoulder.

*'It's so good to see you' comes out muffled, barely audible from the crook of my neck. I pull back.*

*'You too' is all I can manage.*

*'Let's go through to the kitchen',* Claire says, grabbing me by the hand and pulling me through their stylish, yet defiantly kitsch, home. I clock that hologram Jesus, which switches between Mary and Jesus in different poses depending on which angle you look at it from, has moved places. It's now above the doorway to the kitchen, my favourite of their weird tacky knick-knacks. We sit at their table. Phil puts the kettle on, Claire sits opposite me. Whilst the kettle boils there's meaningless small talk. Job is going fine, still at the pub at the moment and enjoying it. Kind of tired with big city life. Not dating anyone. Started playing football again. Phil places a very milky tea in front of me with three sugars, and asks me what my plans are for the day.

*'Well, uh, I was on my way back to my mum's before I stopped in here, so I'm going to go drop my stuff off, and then probably straight back out. Me and a few of the others are having a little get together tonight, up at the chalk pits. Just to celebrate really, like we used to.'*

There's a tear in Claire's eye. *'That's so lovely. I'm really glad you're doing that.'* Claire reaches forward and grabs my hand, at the same time that Phil pushes back from the table, and heads to the cupboard above the sink. He returns holding what looks like a very fancy bottle of half-drunk whiskey.

*'Do you want this? We bought it for Max for his 21st birthday but he never got to finish it, so maybe you and the others can all polish it off tonight.'*

I reach out and take the bottle from his hand. It's a beautiful amber colour, glinting in the summer light as the day streams in through their large kitchen windows.

*'Of course. That would be really nice, thanks.'*

*'Not at all.'*

*'I'm surprised he didn't finish it to be honest, he was a proper messy twat'. The comments spill out of me before I can think whether it's appropriate or not, and for a split second I think I've fucked it, desecrated a sacred moment. And then we all burst out laughing, and I feel very at ease.*

That moment feels like a release valve has been let off, all the grief in the air suddenly mixed with joy, humour, and what Max would've called *je ne sais fuck*, that beautiful communality that exists when everyone is chatting utter nonsense but on the same wavelength. Good vibes all round. Hours pass as we revel in the memories of our shared childhood. The made-up games, always managing to injure ourselves. The many, many smashed lampshades, chairs, and assorted ornaments I managed to break around their house. The terror on my mum's face when Max cut his head falling off a bike, only for Claire to arrive and find it absolutely hilarious. Recounting the story of how Max and I met, first day of infant school, me falling over in the playground, Max helping me up. The moments of rivalry, the various teenage heartbreaks. It's mid afternoon by the time I'm standing by the door, ready to leave, hugging and thanking again, promising to visit again soon.

*'Oh shit! I almost forgot.'*

Phil dashes up the stairs, takes a left at the top, into Max's old room. There's a sound of rummaging, followed by some heavy breathing and minor swearing. Phil re-emerges, carrying a shoddily wrapped box in some clearly very old Xmas wrapping paper. He hands it to me. On the top is a note, a single piece of lined A6 paper folded in half, that on the outside says 'For Soph'. I instantly recognise Max's handwriting, and my breath gets stuck in my chest. Way down in the base of my lungs, refusing to emerge, just sitting, waiting, stuck and stunned at this gift from beyond.

Phil saves me again, hand on the shoulder. Release. *'Sorry we didn't get this to you sooner. It was in Max's will, he said he wanted to leave it to you. It's his old Gamecube. I don't know whether you're still into video games at all, but I remember how much you two used to play that thing, so it feels right that you have it. We certainly won't play it'* and he lets a slightly forced, heavy laugh.

I don't know what to say. The games console feels heavy in my arms, the note staring up at me in anticipation. I thank them, promise I'll be in touch, and head out the door.



#### 4

The walk from Max's house to mum's only takes 10 minutes. It's probably the thing I miss the most, since moving into the city, that sense of people around you, feeling wrapped up in familiarity on all sides. Maybe I'm forming an over-idolised memory, but the joy of leaving my house, walking where my shoes have walked hundreds of times before to knock on someone's house and spend a care-free, plans-free, day together, feels like a big, wide hole in me now it's gone. I hate travelling for near an hour on two different forms of transport just to see my friends for a shit, expensive pint, in a rammed bar, surrounded by wankers. I guess I'm not really sure why I'm still there.

When I arrive I'm greeted by Stella, our cat, lounging on the posts outside the front. Named after a character from Mum's favourite play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, my friends used to find great joy in picking her up and loudly shouting her

name ala Ned Flanders in that episode of the Simpsons where Marge gets cast in a community play. An odd, silly memory to be stuck rattling around in my head. I'm always amazed at what random things are in there; names of all 151 original Pokemon, lyrics to long forgotten advert jingles, raps you made up about the plot of Macbeth as an English assignment in Year 9. Yet recalling something someone just said to me when I wasn't paying 100% attention, not going to happen. Stellar lifts her head and I gently scratch under her chin. She's 15 I think now. Had some scare at the vets last year where they thought she had cancer that turned out to be nothing, except the £1500 it cost my mum to get the scans. I offered to help pay but mum didn't want to hear it.

I make my way to the back because right now I really don't want to talk to mum. Don't want to talk about life, about how shit everything is right now. Don't want the worry mixed with disapproval. Don't want to tell her about seeing Claire and Phil. Don't want to tell her about the GameCube. I kneel down and find the backdoor key under the weird statue holding not a fishing rod but a full on hunting spear, like some sort of gnomish Rambo, and push it into the lock. I pause to listen for a minute, and hear the faint sound of *Les Miserables* coming down the stairs. Mum sings when she thinks there's no one around; she's got quite a good voice actually as I have told her, but her voice remains strictly private. I make use of this perfect opportunity to head in, drop my stuff upstairs, get changed (the nervous sweating has not been good for my stench), and head back out all before mum can finish *One Day More*.

It would take about 2 hours to walk up to the chalk pits so I get a cab to the edge of the nature reserve, where I run into Riana and Nadia. They're childhood sweethearts, and it kind of makes me feel a bit sick seeing them together still 10 years after they first started 'dating' at school. Nadia has a cool bag full of beers and ciders, which I offer to help carry. We chat about life, school, work, avoiding any mention of Max, as we're making our way up the hill to join everyone else. When we get to the top there's already a fire going, which to me seems ridiculous given it's the middle of summer and at least 18 degrees still, but this is how it's always been so I guess it's how it will always be. Chalk pits. Fire. Beers. Music.

There's 9 of us here. All close friends at school, now differing levels of in touch. Of everyone here I'm probably the one that is least close to anyone else, although I was the closest to Max. There's something in the air; not tension, maybe unease? Weirdness? Whenever we had these reunion type things it was always Max that drove them, getting everyone together, being the life of the party, making everyone feel good, feel happy. So with no one playing that role it all just kind of... sits. The night drifts by, and gradually I start to hear Max's name more and more

over the evening. We're picked up on a current: the mention of his name, all his funny little quirks, memories, everything that made him *him* beginning to lift us up as the drift starts to morph into an ascent. Maybe it's Max's spirit arriving like the Terminator to eliminate our malaise; Hasta la vista. I'm not sure who plays it, or when it happens, but at some point we all find ourselves as one, on our feet, hands in the air, and bodies moving with manic abandon to *DANCE* by Justice. It was Max's favourite song, and it feels genuinely euphoric.

## 5

At some point the night ends, and we all make our way back down the hill to town. I'm so glad to have seen everyone, to have that chance to celebrate Max's birthday. I know I'm going to hurt tomorrow, maybe even more than before, but it was so good to feel like I had him back in my life, just for a bit. Most of us get in cabs but I decide to get the night bus to save some money. Without realising it I manage to just make the last bus that's going my direction home, which I'm going to chalk down to some kind of spiritual guidance. Stella isn't outside the front anymore, and I think it's late enough that going in through the front door will be fine because mum should be asleep. I put my key in the lock, turn the handle, and as I step through into the hallway I hear my mum's voice, soft and gentle, calling through from the kitchen.

*Sophie? Is that you?*

I can't ignore her now, she'd just follow me upstairs. So I resign myself to what's to come, heading through to the kitchen, pulling out a chair and sitting opposite her at the table.

*Hey mum. I feel sick. Why do I feel sick?*

*How was the party? Did lots of people show up?* Her voice is genuinely soothing. I can feel myself welling up. I guess she notices because she gets up from her chair, comes round and cradles my head against her chest as I begin to cry. She strokes my hair and there's silence apart from the sound of my sniffles. Through the rain splattered windows of my eyes I see on the table she's placed the shittily wrapped box which contains Max's GameCube. At a pace I shock myself with, I instantly turn defensive, pulling away.

*Why have you got that? Have you been in my stuff?*

*No, no not at all. I just went into your room because I thought I heard you come in, and it was there on the ground. I thought you might want to talk about it.* She's

doing her best to sound neutral, not accusatory, therapist-like.

*Well, I don't want to talk about it.*

There's more silence. This time it feels strained. I can tell she's trying to keep herself from speaking but eventually she can't help it.

*I remember how obsessed you used to be with these games. She sounds almost whimsical. She doesn't get to be whimsical.*

*Ah right, obsessed, yes. Is that why you banned me playing them?* I try and make my tone sound jokey, but I clearly fail because she looks at me with a real hurt in her eyes.

*The doctor said it was extremely easy for children with ADHD to get addicted to video games, what did you want me to do?*

*I don't know, not take away the one thing that your child loved and was really good at?*

*I thought it would help you at school.*

*Fat load of good that did.*

I'm about to head upstairs and go to bed but what she says next disarms me, freezing me in my chair.

*I'm really sorry.*

For what feels like the first time in my life, she's apologising without any extras. No add-ons, no clarifications, no but maybe you had some part to play. Just, *I'm really sorry.*

*It's ok* is all I can muster in response. I know I should add something more, but more than anything it feels like a proper, huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders. That maybe she actually gets it a bit. That maybe she understands that I don't have to live the life she wants me to.

*I'm going to head to bed now, but I'll see you in the morning before you leave? And maybe next time you're down you can show me some of the games you and Max used to play together. I'd like that.*

6

Before I leave in the morning me and mum chat a bit more. For the first time since Max's death I talk to her in a way that feels more open, less guarded. Like I'm not trying to hide something. I tell her honestly about what my life is like, that I'm thinking of moving back home, or at least somewhere that isn't so crowded and intense. We talk a bit more about my ADHD, about how I've stopped taking my medication because it was making me anxious and sad, and she says she understands and thinks that I have a good understanding of myself and what I need. We talk about hyper-focusing, the trait in people with ADHD that allows them to zone in and sharply focus on one task for hours on end. This is what she was warned about with children and video-games, that it can pull you away from responsibilities and duties and distract from the 'important' things. I tell her how I experience hyper-focusing; yes, sometimes I can get lost in tasks that aren't that important, and time can go by and I don't even know it and the stress at the end of that can be a bit much. But with things I love, I think I've always known I could control it, and I'm learning all the time how to manage that. That I can find my way in it, and it gives me this incredible sense of relaxation and clarity like nothing else, completely at one with what I'm doing. I say it feels like what athletes say when they are in 'flow', not expecting her to know what I'm talking about. Weirdly, she mentions how she actually read an article in The Guardian recently in which a 'professional video game player', as she describes it, was talking about flow and how it helps them compete. Another unexpected revelation. She gives me a lift to the station and as I get on the train back to my current life I feel at ease. At peace.

I clutch Max's GameCube for the entire journey home, and text my boss to tell them I'm sick and won't make it in tonight. I get through my front door, and set the box down next to my TV in my room. My heart is hammering in my chest. I slowly peel the note off the top, taking care not to rip any part of the paper, this precious artefact that contains Max's final words to me.

*Soph. I know you could never beat me at Smash Bros when we were kids, so here's some advice for the next stage of your training.*

*1. Stop playing Kirby, he's a shit character. Try Fox or Peach.*

*2. You HAVE to use your shield more.*

*3. Google 'edge-guarding' and learn how to do it*

*4. Stop sucking.*

*All my love, Max*

A dam breaks in me and I erupt into laughter. Proper side-clutching, belly aching laughter, at this little fuck trolling me from the afterlife. When I can just about

recover, I take the GameCube out the box, wire it up to my TV, and turn it on. The memory card, with all of our save data, a record of our friendship, is still jammed into the front. It doesn't work first time, the disk failing to load, so I pop the lid, wipe down the little mini disk, and pop it back in. The TV lights up, as the familiar logos and sounds that I haven't seen for the best part of 20 years roll across my screen. I pick up the controller, character select, Kirby (fuck you Max), and start to play.

I work my way into an easy place, a groove. It feels like a descent, an easing of all my muscles into a kind of automation where I can just be. Max is here with me. We're just two kids in his bedroom, having the time of our lives. A controller in my hand and a beaming smile on my face. Everything starts to flow.

**End.**

# Rueful Indecision

Written by Griffith Rees

Narrated by Julian Ryn Rossiter

Drear... Dream. Dreary dreamy drum of dim duty dealt a dampening deafening dash of doom.  
Doh. Do diligence dandelion dons a diddle diddle-dee dump-te-tump te-tumb. To take a tip from  
tammy (or viola):  
Time! 'tis essence'. 'Tis too much for me to un-tye(m).  
Mm... tie time, thyme, parsley sage, rosemary and...  
*Blink.*  
*The blinds swing with light.* It's not clear; the reason. The ree-A-son. Sun? That's what I hoped to  
see. The sun. Said the...  
*M?*  
*M.*  
Am I M?  
Am I...  
*M.*  
The shapes of blue and yellow solidify with flickers. The eye: twitches and trips to faces  
looming. Lu-Ming...? That friend from school. How they sound: those words, such different  
meanings but similar sequences of characters. Similar sequences, similar sounds, different  
meanings. It's not clear.  
*M!*  
**A jolt.**  
**Up!** *Blink.* Yes I'm... up. Sorry.  
*How's your head?*  
It's. Tired.  
*Lean back, lean back, don't tire yourself.*  
It's tiring!  
Yes. Yes it is.  
*A drip. A drip is needed. We need to know your vitals.*  
And back lies. Drooping eyes, limits lifted to reduce exertion. The moral: exhaustion, no drive to accumulate energy. It's drear.

**Lift!**

Placed down again, new bed. New drip. New beeps. Dry? Yes... dry. Strange to notice fresh dry warmth after moisture goes missing.  
Alliteration! That's that word I couldn't find, just wandered, missed it, interjected 'midst the prose: what better compliment?  
The gown... dressed, clear and dry, but... cold. Fresh smell at least, nose knows.  
And 30  
degrees, perhaps 40? Angle of bed, not temperatures. A button! Ascend, descend—  
*M.*  
Ah. A burst of light again, but clarity now; invasion of a sort.  
*M! Oh I've looked and looked, pillars and posts and all. They've sealed off your old ward, urine covered the... Oh M. How are you?*  
...tired again. Loved dearly charge: exhaustion, guilt. So dependent. D's be damned.  
*I'm smile I'm I'm ok. How are...?*  
*I'm fine. Oh hun.*  
Hun. Attila?  
*Honey.*  
*Oh you. Punny as always.*  
And moments of knowing, of teary knowing. Quiet, by a bed. Ears remember the drip. Louder,  
deafening.  
*Nurse? Nurse? I'll go find one*  
Roll to side. The drip, somehow cheerier when visible. Not just a haunt, a friend. Saline? Or...  
anti...?  
*What's the matter?*  
*Looked droopy and wasn't responding but... they've moved.*  
*How're you feeling?*  
I should answer. I should answer. I should answer.  
*The vitals seem ok.*  
*I am vital. Vitality vilified. Villain....*  
*Hiya! You alright?*  
I yaun. I'm sorry  
*There they are. Are you alright? We got a bit worried.*  
*Yeah I'm ok. Sorry.*  
*Don't say sorry. You just rest.*  
Thirsty! That sequence: rsty. Errs-tea. But not...  
*Could I have... just a sip?*



*Mmmm. That sound, like a letter that's a name.  
Your last was... 4 hours ago. That's a bit tight.  
Licking parched lips is silly. Keep the saliva in.  
Ok.  
Oh hun.  
Atilla the fun: Lisa would laugh.  
I'll check in in an hour. You'll need to leave pretty...  
I know, I know.  
A Pinter beat. Twirl side... oooff.  
Ooo uh.. lie back. Lie back, the catheter's still  
Back to back. Prone? No... soup...?  
There you go. The gloves snap.  
Touch. Tender. Tip to tip. Glazed eyes. A forehead kiss.  
Love you. Sleep. I'll be her first thing.  
Love you too.  
Shut. Very quietly. Door with a tricky handle. Slight slivers of light. Shadows  
dart between the footsteps of nurses and doctors and cleaners and... all.  
Finding those words is all my exercise at present. Like a game without  
pieces or a board. Or cards: crisp, stacked, shuffled, combined like entwined  
choreography. How better to fill a house? Fill till it is full. Houses seem so far  
away. Senses of belonging and home have shriveled between appointments  
and visas. But perhaps that's a wander towards a... towards a... to ward say  
**Go, villain, fetch a surgeon.**  
NO. Or just... not now. On the morrow. To-morrow. Those questions must be  
answered but  
cannot be answered now.  
What to do? *Villain*  
'Tis vile to vilify oneself. Too much for me to un-vilify. Fee fye foe fum *no*.  
Oh added. **A drip of tear.** I cannot... I shall not... I will not meander down  
meritless moments.  
I will meander down moments of hope. I will meander down moments of mirth.  
Or frankincense.  
Or gold. Or **villain.**  
Punish a mind that matches sounds? Merciless. But... what to do?  
**Villain**  
I care not. I dain to dissuade a direction. Sleep is my job. Rest for the wicked.  
How better to pass the time?  
*But my mind is too... too... nimble.* Oh was that aloud? How loud?  
Right. Well: no turns to sides. No visits. No sips. No solemnity.  
*Do not go gentle**



I will not rage... but I may... mold.  
*Are you not weary?*  
Apparently not. Or at least, not enough. Weary in the body but not the mind.  
Morphing sounds as I must. Not by intention: Midas touched my mind and gold  
sprung forth in homonyms. Or are they...?  
Villain thou art. But perhaps I can, with a gender twist  
*Blink those tears that lovingly sour swift smiles*  
That's ten. How can I hearken the moments: a sour smirk, a wry rip, a wrestled  
warmth? I persevere.  
*Savage the weary rueful indecision... that's 11. Savage the*  
*Are you alright?*  
**Light!**  
*Uh yeah I'm ok.*  
*You're sounding a bit strange. I'm just going to log your vitals. Rip:* out comes  
the wrap. A soft clamp on a finger. More colors and beeps. Other arm, not  
that....  
*Uh that arm.*  
Perfunctory: *Ah what have you got there?*  
*It's a birthmark. A... vasc...*  
*Ah this thing! May I touch?* Nod, a light shines, a touch. So familiar but... always  
altered from another hand.  
*I see, that's in the notes, ah I see.* How very vascular.  
Memory, a slight blush of pride: *It's vascular malformation. They thought it*  
*would disappear by puberty.*  
*And you had an ultrasound?*  
*Yes they were... sort of impressed. It's like a textbook.*  
*Mmmm.* Spelled like their name. They're not here.  
*Well that was entertaining. I'll draw from the other arm then.*  
Oh how they draw. How they sketch out life in measures, approximations,  
projections, error bars.  
*Just a sharp scratch.* A prick. Too many puns.  
Scratch indeed, searing pain, it... is it right? Eyes snap shut, light still bright,  
shapes of yellow linger, distractions from pain.  
*Oooo, your vein's wiggled. Sorry I think we will have to go for the other arm.*  
That smug trainy  
In A&E  
Who wanted a perfect score

So he proclaimed!

Then blushed with blame  
Thanks be: a nurse sharply—  
*Sharp scratch.* Oh verse. In verse I distract from pain. **Villain.** But perhaps the  
inverse: **villanelle.** Inverse... by gender? Or sex? Genderless (or just neutral)  
horror made feminine, which... in this case, is heavily restricted by syllables  
and rhyme? A corset in verse?  
*There we go! That's an excellent flow.* Go to flow. False rhyme. Like "trainy" to  
"A and E" (hold the "n" in "and"...). Healthier than "In-N-Out" (but perhaps less  
exercise).  
*My colleague mentioned you wanted a sip of water: we can try that now but*  
*that'd be the last until morning. Or I can come back?* Can come. Need to stop  
thinking about that burger joint, especially given the catheter. Catheter imperils  
catharsis. Maybe can come: a drip, maybe a twist? Not now. All alliterative. I  
rhyme from the starts, not the ends. I hope someone finds that  
endearing (irrespective of earrings).  
*Right that's done. Would you like a drink! sip?* (sigh).  
Decision. Not my forte. Moisture to gamble for sleep. Sleep I need. But the  
whirring... of my mind... how much more might it whirl in this way? After  
tomorrow? Might they all fall, those words? No more mutations of **villain** to  
**villanelle**? Learning the letters again, but so slow last time, perhaps worse the  
next? Peaks of guilt, wrestling with triumph or tribulation? A brain saved from  
revolt but at what casualties?  
*I'll come back. Just press the call bell when you want or I'll be back in half an*  
*hour.*  
Clockworks to care.  
*And, just for the other patients, mind staying a tad quieter?*  
*I'll take that as a yes. Please get some rest, you've got a big day tomorrow.*  
Thoughts heard, or spoken? **Is this heard?** Sounds blur, one cannot sensor  
oneself. The brain leaks.  
*Um.* Volume... indecision. *Could you hear me?*  
*Of course I can pet. Sounds like you need sleep!*  
*Could you hear the verse?*  
*The verse?* Are you alright? Forehead felt. Not feverish. Never feverish, just  
sometimes, fraught.  
*I... tried to write... without paper or pen.*  
*Tried to write?* A quiet. Softening. Closer.  
A poem. A villanelle. Puzzlement.  
*A villa what? Pet you sound a bit woozy.*  
*Can you remember?*  
*Can I remember? Can I remember your babbling as I came in?*  
*Yes, I can't remember. It was ten syllables.*

A shower: of laughter. A sheepish, slightly teary decrescendo accentuates my blush.

*Well I remember 'Savage the weary rueful indecision' but I figured it was about time I checked in on you. And I'm very glad I did. Sam next door was asking why you got to have a visitor so late and I tried to assure her you weren't talking to anyone.*

Tears. Moments the mind melts: fleeting hope of worthy rhyme, and doggerel though it may be, to savour it, keep it, cherish and twist and mold it. Memory hath not the rigidity of rock, the constance of orbit, the endurance of physical laws. It freys, like threads of worn out, thinning sweaters, still so loved but shadows of crocheted glory. And yet: might ears of others, scratched walls, carved wood, scribbled pamphlets, printed pages endure? Might... 'mongst whispers and scrapes and weather and rips...

*But that's not ten syllables either is it? 'Savage the weary rueful'?*

*Do you mind if I write it down?* Interjected... perhaps too spiky.

*Well. If it means you're quiet and your neighbours can sleep then yes. Fine.*

Emboldened. *Could you look in my backpack? It's on the chair. There should be a notebook folded open in there.*

*Well... there's three. And a tin foil with a smell. Peanut butter... peanut butter and jelly. Comfort food. I'm going to throw this away. Will this do?*

Squared dimples, hints of order ravaged by folds and bouts of rain and... jelly to say the least. Dimples of order drenched in scribbled furor, or fear, or elation or foggy—

Yes. Fitting.

*Right, I'm off.*

*Um—* Their eyes don't quite role, more a newly familiar tilt of fond exasperation. *So... can you..*

*can you remember the earlier line?*

Exeasper-puzzled: *What earlier line?*

From spigot *The line of..* verse, to flood *sorry it was another line, the one before, it was ten syllables. I lose the thread—* to teary cup, overfloweth: thoughts lost as often as made. What ratio severs that promise, that spark of creative joy (and tingles of pride) that burns in self-hatred more bitter than the sweet moments of creative hope seem to foster. Why not dull the mind and dampen the sparks as they may only salt yet more wounds and with the light and the fire—

*I think you said a really sad one like 'Blink those tears'?* Soft. Pause. Familiar.

*Or there was something about 'Are you not weary'?*

—overfloweth from ears to lips to moments of knowledge lost. To moments when one is no longer alone, one is with others. Others ears, others eyes, others minds intermingle and fashion a flow that would otherwise fester,

stagnate, and even, sadly self-punish. And so that flow bursts that old spring anew:

*Blink those tears that lovingly sour swift smiles.* That neuron fires, once more: a new path to old memory. Do not forget. Do not lose.

*Yeah that's uh... that's about what I remember you saying. I was a bit worried about you then and the next line... why don't you write that down and keep things quiet. Do you need a pen?*

A daze. So obvious, yet so easily **lost again**.

*I think you're quite tired, why don't you write that down and then sleep. Here's a pen. I'll go get your sip, it's almost time anyway.*

Thank you, oh thank you, I cannot find the right words, they seem so trivial: *Thanks.*

Bit teary. A blush. Do the tears express those thanks more than my lips? My whole body is part of the conversation I suppose, though the face seems to dominate. I think I've got too many threads again. Must write, must remember. The wet sponge approaches. My tongue, my means of sound, my means of words without a puzzle of spelling.

*Just a dab. There you go.* Oh how my tongue bursts, sated... well not quite but... better. How does a body manage liquids? Does the body resemble central, authoritarian regimes, the brain a dictator or sorts, or does blood run the show, like National Rail: still running irrespective of government, but without a sip or a sandwich the flow slows, one day, to nothing.

*Right. I think you need rest. If you care that much about those words, why don't you write those down because I won't remember them tomorrow.*

Teary thanks, thanks but: *Thank you, so much. So tired, that's very sensible uh... so sorry if you don't mind I'll just check—* the scribbles: the hand screams in silly large letters but, often illegible, even to me. But sound, sound is safer— *Blink those tears that lovingly sour swift smiles.* Getting teary again, scribble through the blush.

*Savage the weary rueful indecision,* still 11. Still 11.

*Right! Bedtime!* Eyes lock. I think my blush is bursting redder. So kind, so worried.

*... do you need something else?* oh the redder! Oh my lips, trembling.

*I, I'm so sorry I... out with it, villain, indecision, save the villanelle I need 10 syllables.*

A pause. Incredulity. My sleepiness has... diminished. They have a slight smirk. *You need 10 syllables?*

The smirk broadens.

*You need... 10.. syllables.*

Tension to giggles. Tears of laughter, my favourite. So rare, so... sweet amongst the tubes that wrap my limbs, the gown that's oh so thin, a blanket embracing

a thin sheet—like what I grew up with: comfortable comforters (rather than baffling duvets)—a farcical custom angle for my torsu that at times is lovely and ideal and at times is so baffling to change to actual comfort that I miss that simple, familiar flatness of lying on the floor. All this: washes away. My poor tongue has probably lost it's water ration as my veins give tears of joy the go ahead. Or is it my brain's veto? Or my emotions?

*I've got to say: I've never had a patient ask for syllables before. I've transcribed a message to family, taken photos, taken drawings to parents... but I don't think I've helped with syllables, in a poem, before.* Oh that cheeky grin, mine: a shape my face has not felt in so long, oh how I miss it *Well done.* forgot it even, I've shifted up, awake, clearer mind, so strange, so missed. *Right, why don't you hand me that notebook and your pen and I'll at least help you make something...* she flips through, hope she doesn't see that drawing on page 3... oh... they're looking... oh... eyes meet, an eyebrow, nod... the flips continue...*legible.*

*I'm going to start a new page. And I must, must, must leave you after we sort you syllables of this line because I've got to do my rounds. Only for this line mind: you've already got one, right, and you just need a second line after...? In 10?*

Clarity and speed of answer, that's rare: *Yeah that'd be lovely. It's a kind of poem... with a very specific structure, I got obsessed with it at school and...* A glare.

*Right sorry. So the first stanza is crap it's blanked again. Uh— sorry I've forgotten again.*

*Do not go—  
No, the one after.*

**Blink those tears that lovingly sour swift smiles?** There's rhythm there, in that voice... a tingle on my arms and just below my neck, like a beat in a scene that's finally worked. Do I hear a **limerick**? But it's not a question. Focus!

**Villain:** they're staring! Stop that train of thought! Save the **villanelle**. *Yes. Yes that's the first. And no punctuation at the end. That's quick, for me. Calm, but clear. And then there's the one after but it's wrong, it has 11 but...*

**Villain** blank.

**Savage the weary rueful indecision?** That voice, a moment at the start, finishing those thoughts, those threads... such a privilege... Perhaps dictation is my... mode? But it's not just the dictation, it's the person, their voice, their reactions, their suggestions

*Yes that's the one but... it's not fixed. It needs to be shortened by a syllable. The rules are very strict.* And in that strictness wit can bloom. Intoxicating challenges.

*Do you want a suggestion?* A moment of possessive, artistic jealousy. I should

make, I should write, I have all the—**villain**

*Look: I've got to do my rounds and I'm not here to steal your verse or lines or meters or whatever. I just want to help so you calm down and get some sleep. And because I thought it might be fun. And because I do what I said I would. You should try that last bit at least.*

Purpled again. As I should be. **Villain** they name is jealousy, and hubris. Give thanks where thanks is due.

*Sorry. Thank you. Yes I'd really appreciate a suggestion and I will give you credit. Tooo... apologetic.*

*Dear don't worry about the credit! Only so many hours in the day. Right: **Savage the weary.*** You seem to jump on that.

I jump? Oh I'm leaning forward.

*It's quite... bitter. You seem very critical of things...* Flush of memory: all the essays were late, never finished, never captured the tangents and flurry of my mind, and then the **villain** sneered and egged that dumbfounded self-loathing on. Indebted... and humbled... that's my shift... back to those other tears. *Why don't you shift it to something more hopeful? You look like you've already soured a bit more tears and then you're kicking yourself even harder after. You are articulate. You're trying to write a complicated poem and you've got a big day tomorrow but you clearly won't get any sleep now and it seems like it's eating away at you.* Better words than I can think. Better description that I self-muster.

*What if you change what's Savaged? It's quite a nasty term anyway but nevermind. Why don't you **savage** what's eating you up on the first line? A blank, but so warm. Like drifting in a pool in peace. Was that decades ago? You seem very indecisive. What if you savage that? **Savage the indecision.*** It burns, familiar: a friendly flame I remember not, or should I say not clearly, but humble moments of understanding... oh how I forgot those, how rare, how precious.

*You got that. Yup that's what it needs. Thank you.* Eyes shut. Listen to the words. Listen in the mind to their sound. Find them.

*Savage the rueful indecision.*

Nods. *That can work but is it long enough? Still very self critical.* Fingers count to nine. My favourite number. But not a **villanelle**.

**Savage the rueful indecision quick!** Found. Flush, still critical but maybe critiquing criticism is... what I need to do?

*Well. That is ten. I think that's plenty for tonight! You have quite a day tomorrow, and I think...*

She's noticing my droop... my worry: it's wrong, not good enough.

*I think it's strong. I'll keep my side and read it allowed one last time and you, you keep yours, and sleep. Or at least try.* Nods. Wynken, Blynken, and Nod...

### **Blink those tears that lovingly sour swift smiles**

#### **Savage the rueful indecision quick!**

*I think it's great. You should be proud. Rueful appeasement: second guessing but grudgingly mollified. I've kept my side of the bargain and you: you need to keep yours and sleep. Or at least try.*

*I'm putting the notebook here, the chair, strategically hard to reach from bed: clever I'm leaving the pen over here bedside table, another flank, with a wryly caring glare and I'll see you in the morning—*

#### **Blink those tears**

*Oh don't worry, just rest, rest!*

#### **Blink those tears that lovingly sour**

*Hey, hey, hey: don't worry. Tomorrow will be a long day but you'll be in excellent hands with Mr Plaha—*

#### **Blink those tears that lovingly sour swift smiles**

*Thanks. Breath, fixed grin. I'll stop taking so much of your time. What you've done is, really, really nice, I really appreciate it. I'm so sorry about the sound, I just didn't realise—*

#### **Savage the rueful indecision quick!**

*It's fine. I'll tell the other patient your visitor was kindly but firmly asked to leave. Sweet, apologetic, guilt-slightly-dissipated pause. Grins shared, a giggle.*

*Ok. Thank you. How do I really thank? My words never seem enough. Try: Um... honestly I've never had a nurse help me like this before. Is there like an 'outstanding patient support' prize, or some feedback form or— Oh trying to be nice in American forwardness leads to eyes fluttering any which way. An elephant spectator snorts, oft unamused.*

*Yes there is but I don't deal with those. You can ask one of my colleagues in the morning. I'm putting my foot in it. This is silly awkward. The road to regret is paved with sweet sincerity.*

*Maybe don't mention the syllables. Grin. How very British.*

*Ok cool. I will, I— don't promise what you'll forget! **promises oft marred.** Don't raise expectations further, only to puncture even more spectacularly! How many colleagues have you lost? How much good will? Chide thyself? From frustration... perhaps more lines come? Never have I been transcribed... at least... in verse, with suggestions. Much less a **villanelle.***

*—could you, before you go, and I promise this is my last request— one promise I can keep... I hope would you mind reading the lines, just so I can hear them? I think it will help me sleep. Lips open but... more words And sorry, actually, may I write something in between, to finish the first stanza. It's... well I hope it makes sense. I'll write slowly to make it legible. This is perhaps*

more selfish than thanks, it unwinds her sensible restrictions on further late night scribbling but... maybe that's what I need, to somehow express what I think. Is it easier on a page than spoken by myself? And maybe this isn't the best way but... it's a way of trying.

A frown.

*There's a line in between?* Resigned, us both.

It's selfish, but it's started. The notebook is handed, so too the pen. A weary ritual. The lines are neat and tidy, fitting the dots. Dots as in dotted graph paper dots, a notebook meant for math, a less rigid frame for my meandering mind. Reading my words scribed through a neater hand...

*Your handwriting's very neat.* A nod, but more distant. Urgency time, other patients, sleep, tomorrow. **Finish if you start** more for later?

The lines fit the grid in neat rows, with a small gab between. My hand trembles, my eyes close. **And would...** it comes. I arrow in between, to one side... slower... more careful... a few more seconds but legible, clarity, understanding—

*Here you go.* Handed. Eyes, perhaps the last, before a very different morning.

A puzzled glance to the side... oh I hope it reads at least.

#### **Blink those tears that lovingly sour swift smiles**

#### **And wound good will with promises oft marred.**

#### **Savage the rueful indecision quick!**

I'm a moron: **villain** it doesn't even rhyme! I've wasted time, sleep and oh: delayed the rounds for other patients! Such... a selfish tunnel through which I view this world. If only I paused, and saw, through others eyes, widened my lens... **villain**

How easy it is to critique post pain! Harder to remember and learn.

Weary eyes. Dried. I've ruined her time to no avail, all this for the want of a **villanelle.** Putrid lust.

*Thank you.* a token of kindness undue, a reflection of kindness unearned, an expression of kindness unconditional *Please sleep. Good night.* A somber exit. A slow door close. Just slivers of light under the door then... quiet. A hum. And then: out go the lights. Mouth... so dry. Spiked, rueful tears. A flurry of anger. A head banged on a pillow. Oh Winkin, Blinkin and Nod what can I do? All... lost. Exhausted, and... jittery. Ratchet the tension. **Villain**

Oh a smirk.

Stranger. Unyielding bouts of imagination of what's to come. The knife, the tests, the cognitive... impairment. I'm more fluent now. The first was much worse but I'm still, I'm still here. Words are back, they flow untempered, unfettered—

#### **M**

Her: morning will come and so will she. She'll ask why I haven't slept. I'll

apologise, I'll try to explain—

### **Villain**

Unclench hands; relax jaw. And shoulders. And eyes. A moment. Time is quick but still can...pause. Fighting the sounds in the mind... or channel?

Channel the **villain** to—

### ***Wider, villain, than self in tangled bliss***

Upright. A moment. Channel

### ***Hapless thoughts lead wandering pens amiss***

A privilege. A rhyme, in tens. Are they earned? No... a note is needed. Hands do your duty!

What hands unclenched: a page ripped and worn. A bedside lamp, a glare but... needed. A new page. A thank you.

*Dear* oh gosh a name... what's in a name? Everything at present. Patience, slow, not perfect but... honest:

*Dear Staff,*

*A nurse kindly helped me write my thoughts down this evening? More traditional but not honest... I guess... maybe the reference is too strange in the wee small early hours of the this morning. It was very, very kind and supportive of her.*

*If there's some way of expressing that thanks I'd be grateful. Feel free to hand her this note if that's easiest. A nomination for outstanding support would be appreciated. I'm sorry I cannot remember her name.*

*Best wishes to you all and thanks,*

A careful fold. Oh hands, where to put? Under a pillow then thrown away?

*M.* What would *M* do? Have an envelope and a nicely printed name, a remembered name, on the front. What can I?

Just a fold, a *To: Staff*, a prop.

Oh **villanelle**, how I misled you, how I foolishly toiled to finish, offering so much at the expense of others. It is my fault. I cannot give you as I offered. I am sorry. I would like to try one day but I cannot promise. I can offer. Perhaps that's the lesson.

### ***Hapless thoughts lead wandering pens amiss***

### ***Wider, villain, than self in tangled bliss***

Perhaps my offer is to at least remember to write unchallenged, peaceful, but... finished. And find a way to be kinder to me and by extension others.

And to write and not forget. And so, I'll try, for you—**M**—a **villanelle**:

***Hapless thoughts lead wandering pens amiss.  
Don't wound good will with promises oft marred.  
Wider, villain, than self in tangled bliss.***

***In days I sadly lose thread, snarl and hiss  
With slapdash attempts at life's basics tarred,  
Hapless thoughts lead wandering pens amiss.***

***Loom larks, a nurse and soon a morning kiss  
Can save a dawn, a day that seemed too hard.  
Wider, villain, than self in tangled bliss.***

***Oh M! Abashed by follies in days this  
Mannic, mottled, muffled, morbid and scarred!  
Hapless thoughts lead wandering pens amiss.***

***Some rye response? No I shall not be remiss,  
Claim clarity and wit: a budding bard.  
Wider, villain, than self in tangled bliss.***

***These hours seem long. Yet: I shall rue and miss  
People, times and care, this privilege, this ward:  
Such patience, warmth, cheer, kinship and kindness.  
Hapless thoughts lead wandering pens amiss.  
Wider, villain, than self in tangled bliss.***

# headstart, a lovesong to otherness

Written by Fee Plumley

Narrated by Justina Aina



younger: can you tell me how relationships work?

older: what kind of relationships?

y: all of them. i don't get any of it. family weren't safe. friends don't stay, or i don't. loving people feels like a form of self harm - and i have enough of those already. it's just... i'm so tired of being alone. i want to love and be loved. i just don't know how.

so... do you know how it works?

o: um, well, yeah... i guess. i know how i have made it work for me.

i got myself safely away from my blood family and found a new one. i'm now really discerning with friends and lovers, celebrating our differences and finding the harmonies between.

mostly it all began with my relationship with myself.

y: can you teach me how to be you?

o: well, i don't believe any of us can teach another who they are, or who they may choose to become. i can share my journey, though. maybe that will help you find your own.

y: i'm scared.

o: i know you are. it's scary, at first. you're brave, too. you've survived this far, you're curious, you're liberating yourself... which liberates us all. you can't yet see how brave that is... one day you will. one day you'll remember this moment, and you will be so proud of how strong you were to take this leap. to learn how to be, how to love and be loved. starting with you.

would you like to walk with me?

y: yes. where should we go?

o: anywhere - there's no destination. let's just start walking together, and see what we find.

they walk in silence awhile.

from here, through the magic lens of a literary-distanced observation, we can see what they choose to see, feel how they choose for it to impact them. if, that is, we - their observers - choose to lower our own barriers enough to allow the energies of others to enter our own awareness. so much is expressed nonverbally, if we

choose to notice. how we connect with our environment speaks to how we feel in our own selves, which then reflects outward in how we behave with others, and how they behave with themselves.

so much can be learnt from the cycles of simply noticing.

the younger walks with a stiffness, back hunched, dragging the heavy feet of a body weighed down by a tormented mind. their gaze is downward, narrow, guarded. they choose to see only the darkened cracks in the pavement, patches of greybrown soil where grass has not yet regrown, deep puddles from recent rainfall calling them to step inside and drown in their darkness. this perspective limits what light gets in, a narrowed lens designed to protect, hide, escape. their colour palette reduced to dim shades, lost in swollen shadows. a myriad of scents lost in breath too shallow to reach the olfactory.

the older walks tall, shoulders rested back, flowing with the fluidity of someone confident in their embodied shock absorbers. while whatever comes may wobble them, their sturdy foundations ensure they will not collapse. their chosen gaze is outward, widescreen, wide eyes absorbing every drop of sunlight bouncing off every surface. rainbows ripple against dew-laden leaves, the ground firm yet giving beneath their feet, petrichor evaporating into their long deep breaths. birdsong and breeze tickle the trees, whispering softly the only words which matter: be here now. we've got you.

their first circuit of the park arrives effortlessly, and we may choose to notice that things have shifted, just a little. words can lead before we are ready to follow; the silence of movement sets us on a path less trodden. this gentle co-regulation through mindful steps, heartbeats synchronising alongside the light physical effort, allows the two bodies to find their commonalities. evidence of the simple trusting truth of showing up, walking with.

the body speaks far more wisdom than a mind trained in defence.

o: there's a river down there. fancy heading that way?

y: yeah, whatever.

o: can you give me a moment to take off my shoes? i love the feeling of damp grass on bare feet.

y: uh, aren't you afraid of broken glass, or needles?

o: we'll see them, navigate around them. and if we don't and they break the skin,

we'll work it out. i'd prefer a barefoot walk ending in wrapping a bloodied foot, than not taking one in case an unknown something might - or might not - happen.

they sit, to remove their shoes, on a bench carved from a fallen oak. the head of a green man intertwines with celtic knots in the space between them. the older traces the indentations with a slow finger before laying their hand flat over its surface, absorbing the delicate craftwork, the remnant energies of the artist's hands, and the life force of the rooted trunk still feeding into the mycelium networks below.

the younger takes longer with their task. their boots are tall and strapped-in over their skinny jeans, laces binding with a tightness which leaves an indent when removed. the older slips off loosely fitting converse, spreads and wiggles their toes in gleeful connection with the earth beneath, and rolls up their baggy trousers to allow their legs to embrace the sun.

the older sits, eyes closed. inhaling deeply, exhaling longer.

the younger doesn't notice themselves doing the same.

as they walk toward the river, the older steals a subtle side-glance. the younger's gait is already a touch lighter, bare feet treading more softly against the gentle give of the grass. their head is slightly more raised, allowing a little more light in. a heron flying low overhead grabs both their attention; eyes, heads, necks flicker upward to trace its flight. the slow swoosh of broad wings brings a deep exhale, marking the younger's body dropping into safety.

"now we can start", thinks the older, wearing a smile imperceptible to the eye, felt strongly in the heart.

o: so, what's alive for you right now?

y: what do you mean?

o: we're here now because of your new diagnoses, right? you've just found out you're neurodivergent, with developmental trauma, isn't that what you said? what you wanted to talk about?

y: yeah, i guess.

o: so that's a world of stuff going on for you, inside and out. any late diagnosis can



bring discomfort, uncertainty, disconnection. tell me about that.

y: i wouldn't know where to start. it's such a mess. i'm such a mess. it's all just shit, isn't it? i have nothing, no one, and the only thing that's changed is that now i know why.

o: you know why?

y: i'm a freak. unlovable. always wrong. always in the way. neither use nor ornament...

o: ooo, they sound like someone else's words. who taught you to speak to yourself that way?

y: i dunno, everyone. my parents, teachers, kids who bullied me, bosses...

o: that sounds hard to receive.

y: it was. still is.

o: so why do you use their words against yourself now?

y: what?

o: 'i'm such a mess', 'i have nothing, no one', 'i'm a freak', 'i'm unlovable', 'neither use nor ornament'. you know those words come from others, yet you use them against yourself. why hold yourself accountable to such negativity?

y: call that negative? that's nothing!

o: do you enjoy it?

y: what?? who enjoys negativity?!

o: well, exactly. just because people behaved badly with you, it doesn't mean you have to follow suit. i wonder if you've noticed how often you deny yourself a kind word.

y: i'd have better luck noticing when i don't. does that count?

o: well, kinda - i think i'd enjoy noticing the nice things instead. your choice though.

y: there's a choice?

o: absolutely there is! especially now you know your brain works differently. you get to choose everything now - it's a fresh start, if you want it! i mean, you could keep going as you have so far - hating on yourself, mimicking others just to fit in, pushing yourself just to keep up, then collapsing again... on loop. or you could learn who you are, what you're dealing with, and what you might need to become your true self. the you who was hidden underneath the weight of other people's expectations.

i mean, look. if you wanna continue down the road of self-hatred: go for it. it's your life. i just can't help you navigate that.

however, if you wanna try sommat else instead: i can at very least help you find your path.

y: what path gets you out of... this? i mean, the whole world's fucked. what's the point of 'becoming myself' when there's always gonna be shit to deal with out there?

o: <sighs> well, yeah. the world is pretty fucked - i can't argue with that. it's a pretty common trait of our conditions that we feel injustice more deeply, too. except in medical terms, they call it 'a deficit in immorality'.

y: a what?!

o: yeah, i know. one of many ways we don't fit this world.

i spent years in social justice movements trying to do anything i could to make things better. i couldn't fix a thing, and it almost killed me. eventually - not long after my own diagnoses - i realised if i wanted the change out there in the world, i'd have to begin with myself. i started noticing how i speak to myself, how that ripples out onto others, and i started editing out the words that were unkind. over time i started noticing when people reflected nice things back at me - i'd been letting them bounce right off. so i began letting them in, out of curiosity. to see what they felt like. they felt nice. i decided to keep looking out for those, and more came.

i started letting other people love me

i started to belong.

and i stopped feeling alone.

oh look, we're at the river... fancy a dip?

before the younger has a chance to reply, the older throws their bag and sneakers

down by the river's edge, strips off their floppy clothing and dives straight in. they sploosh back up from submersion with a delighted screech from the impact of the temperature shift.

o: whoa that's cold!

y: what the fuck?! how'd you know it's safe?

o: it's a place i'm pretty familiar with. though to be honest, i'd probably jump in anyway. bit of a waterbaby, me, these days.

y: i can't swim. i'm scared of drowning.

o: i only learnt in my 30s - there's time for you yet. it's made a huge difference to my mental health these last 20odd years. i feel alive in here... observing the world from the perspective of the water really shifts things for me. especially in the ocean.

y: nah, no way. too scary. and too many people here to watch me fuck it up, too.

the older playfully flips, relishing the watery sensation, before swimming back over to join the younger. with a springy flick of the wrist, they pirouette and land on the bank with the graceful control of an olympic gymnast. any claim of olympian pomp then evaporates as fast as water under hot sun; they shake their body unceremoniously dry with the vigour of a shaggy dog.

o: cmon, take a seat. i won't hassle you to go in. though you could dangle your feet in there if you like - it's very cooling in this heat. and you've already taken your boots off...

reluctantly, the younger slopes forward, places their boots and bag down, and takes a seat on the edge. with feet tentatively dangling just above the water's surface, it's clear they're anticipating the impact of icy cold water with a hefty dose of cynicism.

o: it's good for you, you know. a quick cold plunge every day does wonders for your immune system - and your somatics.

y: som-what-now?

the older laughs hard at this, still giddy from their dip.

o: somatics! it's a type of therapy which works with the body to heal the mind.

y: sounds like snake oil - what's the body got to do with fixing a broken brain?

o: i hear you - i'd always lived in my head with no connection to my body, too. ohhhh my poor body, i was horrible to it for decades. never knew i was missing out on so much good stuff! now it makes complete sense to me - it's all connected, after all. what you eat, drink, how you move, they all impact how you feel emotionally. when bad things happen to us they create an impact in our polyvagal - our autonomic nervous system. they get stuck in our bodies and set patterns in our thoughts, together causing all kinds of damage to our physical and mental health. the next time we're faced with a threat, our in-built defense mechanisms look in their rollerdeck of resources and say "no. stop. that's similar to a bad thing we once experienced. we're dropping into 'fight, flight, freeze, or fawn' to stop you risking that happening again".

it's very clever, when you think about it.

y: doesn't sound very clever to me. sounds rubbish.

o: well, it's rubbish that we aren't taught this stuff, and even more rubbish that it's so hard to get the right help for it. the nervous systems themselves are clever, though. it's a bit like an overzealous bouncer: "hello new experience. your name's not down, you're not coming in".

you can reset it, though. you can open up those trapdoors, safely release what's stuck there, and build new neural pathways. eventually all the things that used to throw you sideways don't even ruffle you anymore. it's kinda like rewiring dodgy electrics and replacing the shock absorbers in a vehicle.

y: show me.

o: if you drop those toes into the water, i'll share a little thing you can do anytime you're in distress. deal?

y: deal.

aaaaaaaaaagh!!!! fuck that's cold!

o: hehehehe, oh i'm sorry - i promise i'm not out to get you. all new things can feel a bit daunting at first - and there's a lot of new things to come for you, this is good practice!

your feet will acclimatise, give 'em a wiggle. you'll see.

ok, i'm going to share a grounding exercise. you can use it anytime you feel things are spinning out of control.

y: what, like now?

o: yeah, maybe. can you describe how you're feeling in this moment?

y: angry, mostly. i don't want to be here, especially not bare- and cold-footed, with a total stranger who seems to be talking complete shit. you said you were gonna help and all you've done is make me feel even more stupid than i felt already.

o: so you feel angry, uncomfortable, vulnerable?

y: didn't i just say that?

o: you did, i just wanted to be sure i'd understood you. are you willing to try this exercise with me? i promise if you don't get anything out of it i'll leave you alone. it'll only take a few minutes.

y: <huffs grumpily> fine. go on then.

o: thank you for trusting me.

okay. i'd like you to check in on your senses.

first, sight: look around you - in front, to the sides, and behind. take as long as you want. you can tell me or just make a mental note of whatever you see.

the older pauses silently while the younger jolts their head, first rapidly then gradually more slowly. perhaps they saw that cabbage white butterfly flickering over the dandelions, or the after-ripples of a fish coming up for air. the older waits patiently, knowing this is the start of something too precious to rush. "this kid may be pissed at me right now, but they trust me enough to still be here. that's everything."

the younger's head comes to rest, facing the older. a cue for the next instruction.

o: excellent, now what do you hear?

the younger squints their eyes tightly as though focus only comes from forced effort.

o: you can close your eyes if that's easier.

the sun emerges from behind a puffy white cloud as the younger's eyes rest closed. a gentle smile passes over their lips as they feel the sunlight. their face

softens as a new stillness arrives, emboldening them to share what they hear.

y: i hear... the river. it's got a gentle trickle right by the rocks here, it makes more of a splooshy sound as it hits my feet (you're right, they're not so cold now), and i can hear it rushing over the dam much further away. there's traffic even further off, a low rumble - ahh, no, there goes a motorbike. and birds. dunno what type, just hear a few chirrups from different directions. and there's sommat rustling behind me. not breeze, tho there's that, too. i can hear it rippling through these trees. and my breath, i can hear myself breathe.

the younger gently opens their eyes, blinks a few times against the bright sunshine, and smiles wide.

y: fuck me. i feel different. that was lovely.

o: well we haven't finished yet... though i'm glad you've got the idea so fast. you look different, too - your whole body dropped into total relaxation while you described the sounds. what feels different?

y: i dunno. everything. i'm not angry, i've stopped wanting to run, my breathing is slower, broader, somehow. i got really into how layered all the sound was... how distances kinda morphed into one channel, but i could still control the sliders; bring some things in, fade others out.

o: do you enjoy sound, music?

y: yeah, music is my safe place. i'm always in my headphones. that's what was weird about this, though: no headphones, more safety.

o: i'm so pleased! do you want to continue? or do you want me to explain what comes next so you'll know for next time?

y: explain. i wanna know how this works.

o: hah, typical autistic brain - we like to understand things, not just experience them. and you did catch on quick. never seen anyone drop into it so fast - especially considering how pissed off with me you were a moment ago! the basic idea is that when you're feeling super-anxious you can step out of that state by dropping into the body. you did the sight and sound thing really beautifully, so you'd next do smell, touch, and taste.

y: what if it doesn't work?

o: what, you mean like, what if you don't smell anything?

y: yeah. or all of it - what if i don't sense anything. or what if it doesn't stop the anxiety?

o: it's unlikely you wouldn't sense a single thing out of all of those options. if that did happen, it's probably because the environment has become an over-stimulant... which means it's probably time to get yourself safely out of there.

y: what if someone's talking to you?

o: you're allowed to leave an environment which is causing you harm. in fact, it's essential. neurodivergent brains have heightened sensory experiencing, and we often don't know how to decode all the information flooding in. that leads to overload which can send us into a meltdown, or shutdown, or eventually, autistic burnout - like a breakdown only worse. this is about noticing those patterns and catching them earlier, so they don't impact you so intensely.

y: what about other people? won't they tell me i can't leave? or mock me? they don't understand the shame of being different. how can i feel safe sharing what's going on with me?

o: yeah, i understand that, we tend to mask our gifts and internalise the shame. it's exhausting to shed our true skin just to survive in their world. in a place like this, with me - and with other neurodivergent people - we can open all this up, dive deep into it, and enjoy the pleasure of being stimulated, safely. it seems like you respond particularly well to sound. have you ever thought of being a sound engineer? it's a common job for us... most technical things are. there's enough of a special interest to satisfy our inner deep-diving geek, and enough of a clear practical role to allow focus and alone time. y'see, once we know what we love, what we're naturally drawn to, what works with our conditions, not against them... life gets a whole load easier.

y: ok, well that's all well n good... but... what about relationships? what's the point of all this self-work to calm ourselves and survive when the outside world is still cruel and chaotic? it's a human need to connect, to belong, right? how can we belong when our way - honesty, directness, justice - are deemed 'wrong'? how can others not see what we see? how can they just carry on like all this is 'right'?

o: we all have different capacities, strengths and weaknesses, needs and fears - regardless of neurology. it can be hard for any of us to perceive what we don't understand. instead, we can accept we don't have all the answers and find those who can do the same. they don't have to be neurodivergent, just comfortable being around people who aren't like them. willing to meet each other wherever we are. those are harder to find when we don't know what we're looking for, especially when we're used to changing ourselves to suit everyone else. you'll work that out. and the more you're connected to yourself, the happier you'll be, alone or in company, and the more your radiance will shine. that light will help the folks you do want around to find you. do you know what you are looking for in others, yet?

y: i dunno. compassion, honesty, trust, respect, accountability... they seem to not be typical human traits. i'm after the impossible.

o: they can feel rarities, yes. they are not impossible. some are doing the work you're starting now. they are brave enough to face their own demons so they can show up fully for themselves, with others, breaking past chains, healing forward. by experiencing new memories with those people, we replace the old painful ones. by creating new boundaries, we become more protected. by accepting we cannot change anything other than ourselves, we stop taking responsibility for other people's reactions.

y: how do you know who to trust?

o: there's an energy exchange which happens between our bodies, look out for it. you'll start noticing it more and more. some people leave you empty and ruffled... or worse. others leave you buzzing and alive... and feeling sexy as fuck! when you find them: be honest. tell them that you like how they are and you'd like to hang out. if you meet their friends and get a similar vibe: they're keepers! for me this started working best when i sought the company of otherness, people who also don't fit in. they're generally on their own journeys into self-actualisation.

y: what's self-actualisation?

o: it's this, this journey. the one which starts from a deep knowing that where you are, who you are, is not where or who you want to be, then dedicating everything you've got into becoming that version of yourself - no matter what anyone else says you 'should' do, or 'should' be. and watch out for anyone who says 'should' a lot. language is a profound lens. being you, owning you, loving you - warts n all. that.

y: why is it so hard to just be? i don't know who i am, never mind who i want to be.

o: it's hard because it means taking total responsibility. we live in systems designed to make life appear easy, someone else's problem, when existence is extremely complex. we're told there's only one way to be, so being different makes you stand out as a threat.

y: why are they so afraid of difference? maybe if we graffiti'd the word everywhere it'd become so familiar people would stop being afraid of it.

o: hah! you could be onto sommat!

i mean, i get it. hearing "things are not what you thought they were" is bound to freak people out. human brains default to the path of least resistance. they'd rather stick with what they know, even when it's hurting them, than dare to step into unknown territory.

y: why do they stick with stuff that hurts them?

o: why have you stuck with what hurts you? why did i, for all those years?

y: yeah, fair point. we're all pretty fucked up i guess.

o: it seems to me that everyone's so desperate to be liked - or at least, not hurt more - in a world where no one's presenting their true selves. so everyone's running around trying to please each other, doing stuff none of them find pleasing. and no one mentions it because it'd mean revealing that they'd been lying all that time, too.

it's a mass-self-cover-up, a loselose game of catch22. can't survive without playing. can't opt out without losing your high score. so we stay in those patterns, thinking happiness comes from stuff that doesn't matter, miserable in the meantime. high scores and loot don't feed your soul. they can't. they're a shallow hit of something you'll never attain, don't need, and don't want. no amount of gorging will fill your gut; they're a non-diet. we're all addicted to a lifestyle designed to destroy us, one breath at a time.

yeah, i'd much rather hang with society's outsiders: the queer community, other cultures, creatives, changemakers - diversity is where life's richness sits.

y: so life is easier in diverse communities?

o: hah, well, no. not really. we all have a lot of conditioning to shed, which can get messy if it's not handled well - we're all full of so many scars. it's just that

we're more aware of all that. we understand when others behave in ways that we find uncomfortable. we see that discomfort and sit with it instead of run from it, knowing that maybe they need help they can't ask for, yet. we are honest in our vulnerabilities instead of hiding from them. so many of us have felt so alone, misunderstood, without hope, for most of our lives. we are not alone, we have the potential to understand each other perfectly - in our myriad ways. we just have to dig away the crap to see it.

y: you sound so brave. are you like this with everyone or just other neurodivergents?

o: isn't it sad that being honest about existence seems brave? i used to get told i was brave - or authentic - all the time, when all i was doing was removing the masks and being open about what i see in the world, how it all makes me feel, and what i want to see there instead. they meant it as a compliment, it just left me feeling depressed.

y: you don't seem depressed now. what changed?

o: i did. i stopped feeling bad about showing up as i truly am, and started living by my values. through that i found people doing the same, all of us standing as an invitation for others, if they choose. not everyone wants to do this, and not everyone has the safety to do this. the most powerful thing in human existence is our impact on each other during our time living it. alone, we are a fraction of ourselves. in bad company, we're suffocated. through intentional relationships i found i could grow and stretch and become more than i knew was possible. what was destroying me was living behind the masks, complying silently with a status quo which denied my true self the right to exist - and which treats others far worse. i won't survive that world - i don't even want to. so i do whatever i can to co-create a better world, and rely on my connection with self, other, and nature, in order to survive the fucked up one we've got.

y: well it's sure fuckin destroyed me.

o: you're not destroyed: look at you. think back to how you were an hour ago when we first met. do you feel the same?

y: no, i don't. this work stuff sounds hard, though. facing demons doesn't sound very nice. how come you're so confident i'll get through it?

o: because, my dear young friend: i *am* you.

i was where you are now. i have lived through the journey you have begun. and

i am proof that things get better.

i told you that i've got you, and i meant it. because what that means is that YOU have got you. all the answers we need are inside us, if we choose to learn their language to hear them properly. when our mind and body communicate the way they're meant to, they can show us our paths, warn us of dangers, help us find safety, and empower us to be brave and kind, loving and loved.

y: and if you're wrong?

o: hah, that's a fair point. you may find paths i did not, and end up becoming a different version of us... that's the beauty of all this. i'm here now because you needed me to show up, to navigate you away from that bridge. i wasn't going to let you give up - just like long ago a part of me showed up when i was drowning in this very river, and helped me get to shore. that was when my journey began, when i learned to breathe, listen to my body, got curious and got sober. if i can survive that and become this: you can, too.

i'm always here, we can always talk.

the rest is up to you.

just... take care of us, okay? we matter.

the younger sits alone by the side of the river where their older self had made their decision to live.

listening deeply to nature's shifting chorus of connection, they began to hum in harmony.

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