

*Fate and Fortune:*

*A Collection of Stories*

**by Deniz Besim**



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## Twenty-first Anniversary

Anne stirs quietly in bed. It's morning. Anne senses the day break through the curtains. She begins to wake. She reaches for her robe on the chair and wears it. The TV is on in the background. Anne yawns.

As she sits up to fluff the pillow she sees something. It's a tray left on her bedside table. Breakfast? Oh, he shouldn't have.

A single red rose sits beside marmalade, toast and tea. Two sugars and milk, just how she likes it. Anne picks up the rose and breathes in its fragrance.

Mark enters the room. "Are you awake, love? I didn't want to disturb you." Anne beams. He's being such a gentleman today. But hold on. That's weird. He's not usually like this. "Come over, sexy," Anne says, giving him a pout. Suddenly she notices the neatly wrapped parcel in his hand. Is that a present? Anne shifts on the bed uncomfortably. Mark gives her a kiss.

"Happy anniversary, sweetheart," he says. She takes the gift from his fingers. Oh, damn. That's what it is. Their anniversary. She'd

completely forgotten. Anne tries to buy time.

"Er...it's...it's...it's.." She fiddles with the wrapping. She can't quite get the tape off.

Mark's eyes follow her fingers. "Here, let me do it," he says finally. "No, I've got this!" she says. Eventually the wrapping's off and it's a.. Gucci bag. She traces the material over with her fingers. Oh boy, she doesn't deserve this.

"So?" Mark asks. "So?" she replies. Mark's eyes shift from the bag to Anne's face.

"What about mine?" he says. "Yours?" she asks. Suddenly a wave of inspiration hits her. She gets up and walks across the room to the foot of the bed. She takes her robe off and throws it on the bed.

"Hey do you remember this?" she teases. She slowly unzips her silk nightdress and lets it fall onto the floor. Thankfully, she's wearing her favourite satin underwear. The purple one that Mark likes.

Victoria's Secret. Now it all seems like part of the plan. "And.." she says. There's a mischievous look in her eyes. She takes off the bra and throws it over at him. He catches it and gives her a wicked smile.

"And.." She slowly slips off the remains of her lingerie. Mark hoots.

Anne seductively sways from right to left.

"You know you're spoiling me right now?" he says.

Suddenly there's an interruption at the door. Little Richard walks in. Anne grabs her robe. "You know you have to knock before you walk in darling?" she says. Little Richard rubs his eyes.

"Mum?" he says. "Did you get that Gucci bag I bought you for your twenty-first anniversary?" Anne gives Mark a frosty look. "And the breakfast in bed I made you?" Mark sits across the room looking sheepish. "You rascal!" Anne screams grabbing for her nightdress.

"Sorry, darling! I forgot all about it."



## **Mother Snowman** (a Christmas story)

Amy runs into her bedroom and slams the door shut. A loud bang echoes through the corridors of the house. She hears the sound of steps thumping upstairs. Amy panics. She breathes fast and looks around. Quickly working out what to do next. She heaves a chest of drawers from the side of the room and shoves it in front of the door. Surely he can't come in now. A dizzying sensation overwhelms her as she desperately pushes a few more objects in front of the door. A pot of flowers, two side cupboards and finally ends it with a wooden desk. Amy squeezes her eyes shut hoping that that's enough. The sound of Gareth heaving his body full force over the door startles her too soon. He heaves again. Thump! Thump!

"You know you can't hide in there forever!" he shouts. "I'm gonna get you good." He tries again, heaving his body a couple of times more, inching the room's objects forward. Amy pushes back with all her might and holds her breath. A few attempts more and Gareth has enough. There's a silence. Amy hears the sound of wooden footsteps

retreating. Then the sound of silence. Relieved, she lets out a breath.

She makes her way toward her bed and collapses on her soft duvet cover. She whimpers in exhaustion. He's right. She can't hide in here forever. He'd get her soon. Or get *her toys* is what he means.

She gazes around her room downhearted. She doesn't even mind that her board-game collections aren't complete. The Guess Who game lacks all the faces. The Ludo's missing counters. The Monopoly set's got no houses. Her Twister game has no mat. Her Connect 4 has no coins. Or that one of her pretty pink roller-skates is missing. He likes to harass her toys but if only that was it. What matters most is that her Fireman Sam's lost an arm. Barbie doll has had her hair pulled out. Millie the china doll has its face smashed. Elsa her princess doll has an eye missing. Heavy tears form in her eyes. She wipes them away with fury. And even more frustratingly, Tiddles has been coughed out of the tumble dryer. She stares deep into his sorrowful eyes. He looks so unhappy, she can't bare it.

"I'm sorry Tiddles," she says hugging her bear close. "I promised I'd protect you. I failed."

Now Gareth wants to get to what's left of her toys. To destroy them. To rip them into shreds so she won't recognise them anymore. A whimper escapes her lips. He wants to kill them.

There's nothing she can do about it. She can't stay inside her room for long and she would need supper soon. He knows that.

Carefully, Amy makes her way toward her toy box, she opens the chest and takes out her doctor's kit. She puts on the stethoscope and places it on Tiddle's heart.

"Don't worry, Tiddles, it's not that bad," she says. "Take a spoon of this medicine every day and you'll get better soon." She kisses his furry forehead. "I promise."

She makes her way round the other dolls and delicately nurses them.

"I'll get you a good arm soon, Sam," she says. She sighs. Just as long as she could keep Gareth away.

Amy looks out the window at the cold December day. A ladder stands beside her window sill. The window cleaners will be coming soon to wipe the snow off the window. She rubs her hands together. Light flakes of snow fall gently down and consume the ground. Amy has an idea. Why not escape down the ladder? Surely she can leave the

bedroom now and still keep the door jammed so that her dolls should stay safe. Yes.

Amy goes into her wardrobe and pulls out a thick coat, a scarf and some mittens. She dresses warmly. She opens the window and makes her way down the ladder cautiously. She holds on tight and descends slowly making careful of each step.

Out in the fresh, frosty air, a laugh escapes Amy's lips. She runs around the garden, picking up snow and throwing it over her. What a gorgeous time to build a snowman. The perfect time.

Amy begins by piling together mounds of snow. She wants the snowman to be taller than her. That won't be difficult since she has long arms.

Amy pulls out two brown buttons from her coat pocket to use for the snowman's eyes. She runs quietly into the kitchen and brings out a carrot to form its nose. She wants the snowman's lips red and uses a red apple peel to achieve this. Finally, she snatches a curly black wig from her father's collection. She wraps a warm cloak around it. One at the front and one at the back so the Snowman will be extra warm. She gives it arms, feet and adds gloves, shoes and a scarf. When she

finishes, Amy steps back a moment to admire her creation. Oh, what a surprise. This is the prettiest snowman she has ever seen. The way her cherry-red lips frame her face with those sultry chocolate-coloured eyes and felt-tip lashes that Amy adds as an afterthought. Her creation is a woman. Oh, what a most beautiful Snowwoman.

As Amy stares deep into the snowman's button-brown eyes she senses a connection with it she doesn't understand and it stirs her. Amy reaches up to plume its curly hair and as she reaches up to define the lashes, the snowman suddenly blinks. Is she seeing this right? Did the snowman just do that? The snowman blinks again and smiles. Amy trembles slightly in confusion.

"Hail," says the snowman. "I am your mother snowman." Amy gasps. "Don't be afraid, child," says the snowman. "You may call me Mother Snowman." Amy's heart leaps. She runs forwards and hugs her. "I'm here to make all your Christmas wishes come true."

"Oh, Mother Snowman," says Amy. "Can you do that?"

"Of course I can, sweetie," she says. "Now where would you like to start?"

"Oh, Mother Snowman," says Amy. "I've got a bunch of toys. But

they're not quite well. It breaks my heart to see them like that. Can you heal them?" says Amy.

"Is that your wish?" says Mother Snowman. "Yes, oh, please!" says Amy.

"Then it shall be done."

"First it's Sam," Amy says leading Mother Snowman up the ladder back into her room. "You see, he has no arm." Mother Snowman reaches out a cold puffy hand and touches Sam lightly. His broken toy arm is magically replaced with a new one. Sam beams proudly.

"Then there's Millie," says Amy leading her to the broken china doll. "She needs a new face."

"Oh, we can't have that," says Mother Snowman reaching out and healing Millie.

"Elsa's blind in one eye," says Amy. "Look at the state of Barbie Doll's hair." Then after a pause, "And Tiddles too, please." Mother Snowman heals them all. Amy's particularly joyous that Tiddles' fur is looking so new and fresh. Oh, would you look at her dolls. Now all looking so healthy and vibrant. Amy is about to thank Mother Snowman from the bottom of her heart when suddenly all her dolls

chime:

"Thanks for healing us, Mother Snowman!" Amy gasps.

"Oh, they are better than ever!" she says. "I always knew they can talk. I mean, I did used to talk to them *before* they were unwell. But ever since Gareth made them ill.. I suppose I forgot they knew how."

"Of course they can," says Mother Snowman.

"Well said, Mother Snowman," says Tiddles. "Do remember. It's that boy Gareth who hurt us, Mother Snowman. You must beware of him." Mother Snowman hugs him warmly with a considered expression on her bright, glowing face. After a moment:

"But what a selfless young lady you are," she says. "Putting your dolls before yourself. As a reward for this..." she waves a cold arm around the room. Suddenly all Amy's board-games are whole again. The Connect 4 has all its coins back. Her Twister has a mat again. Her roller-skates are a pair!

"Oh, thank you Mother Snowman!" says Amy.

"Now come with me," says Mother Snowman. "Our work is all but done yet."

She scoops Amy into her arms and whooshes her out of the window. Amy has never flown before or seen anything from this high up but the experience is so exhilarating. "Oh, Mother Snowman," she says. "This is extra-ordinary. But where are we going?" Mother Snowman laughs a silvery laugh that makes Amy tingle. "You'll see!" she says.

Hovering overhead, Amy spots a wooden-brown grotto. Spaces and spaces beside the grotto, Amy sees hundreds and thousands of little baby snowmen from overhead. They make up miles and miles of the empty snow space ahead. Amy gasps.

"Why, there are hundreds and thousands of them!" she says. "Who are they?"

"Each and every one of them are my children," says Mother Snowman. "They are my babies."

"But they are all so small," says Amy.

"They are very adorable, aren't they?" says Mother Snowman. She and Amy hover over the grotto and then she lands them both gently inside of it. "They're all here to make a wish for Christmas."

"And is that a wish-list that they each hold?" says Amy. "That it



is," Mother Snowman says, her bright eyes twinkling.

"Mother, we've been waiting for ages," fires one of her little snowmen, "Surely you cannot get through us all?"

Mother Snowman gives Amy a side-glance and winks:

"Oh, that I will," she says.

Mother Snowman gets through all her baby snowmen and as they each all make a different wish, Amy realises that she's never had more fun. True to her word each and every baby snowman has their wish come true. Amy knows that those babies will never forget her but even more so, Amy has had *her* wish come true and she knows Mother Snowman's given her more than she's asked for.

After the day is over and the last little snowman makes his wish and leaves the grotto, Mother Snowman and Amy make their way back home. This time rather than fly, they take a walk.

When they reach the house, Amy realises that the ladder is gone. Oh no, there's no way of going up to her room now. As Amy makes her way toward the house, the door suddenly breaks open and Gareth storms out. Amy looks behind her noticing that Mother Snowman has suddenly frozen still and stands in the centre of the garden remaining motionless.

"I see you've made a snowman," Gareth grins. "Hey, it's got hair! What is this freak job?" he says. "Hey, isn't that dad's wig?"

Before Amy could protest, he raises a huge arm and smashes it into Mother Snowman's head. The wig falls on to the floor. He breaks two big arms through the rest of its head and chops through her neck.

"No, Gareth stop!" shouts Amy. "Stop! Please, Gareth, no!"

The head falls on to the floor and he stomps over it, breaking it into the snow. He karate kicks his legs through her cloak. The body falls hard. By the time he finishes, there is nothing of the snowman left but a mound. Mother Snowman's dead.

Gareth takes a step back admiring his handiwork as Amy collapses on the floor and releases her bitter tears. She doesn't even glance at him.

"It's about time you got over your fancy toys," he screams. He makes his way back into the house.

Amy cries all day. Even when her father calls her in for supper, Amy doesn't leave Mother Snowman's side.

"Darling, what's wrong?" asks her father. "Whatever it is I'm sure we can sort it out. Now come into the warmth, supper's getting cold."

When Amy wakes up the next morning, she looks out of the window and there's a joy to see. Hundreds of thousands of baby snowmen outside the garden.

"Hey, what's going on?" Amy shouts through the window.

"We've come to avenge our mother," they chime.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," says Amy. Her eyes well up again. "I've tried everything."

Gareth soon runs out of the house.

"Amy!" he shouts. "Who are you talking to?" Amy looks away from the snowmen to look at Gareth. He's got something in his hands which he waves up in the air. "Guess who I've got!" he says. Oh no! It's Tiddles. Amy breaks down into tears.

"Shut up! You cry-baby," he says.

"Oi you!" someone shouts from behind him. Gareth turns around perplexed. He hadn't noticed before but now.." hey is that *snowmen*?" he says.

"You're darn right it is!" the baby snowman calls out. "Gently put the teddy bear down. I don't want to have to pull the trigger."

As the snowman steps forward, Gareth notices to his horror that he holds one of those toy pistol holsters. Anyone fired by one of those

knows exactly how bad it bruises. "How about a taste of your own medicine?" says the baby snowman clearly unafraid to use it.

"No stop!" shouts Gareth. "I'm putting the bear down."

"He has a name!" shouts the snowman.

"Tiddles," cries Gareth. "I've put down Tiddles." Had the baby snowman been on his own, Gareth might have considered him easy to handle but with a pack of hundreds and thousands of snowmen on his case, he has to think again. Gareth runs into the house screaming in horror.

"Nobody treats our Mother this way and gets away with it," shouts the baby snowmen and they all chase after him. "We're going to make your life a nightmare!" they rage.

Amy laughs like she's never laughed before. "Oh, Mother Snowman. I'll never forget you." she says. "But fear not, for I shall resurrect you. I will build you up again."

And so, not just that day, but for every year on Christmas month, Amy brings Mother Snowman back to life all over again. The process of building her is by no means easy, but she celebrates the festive season first with her father and then (when she gets older) with her husband

and children too. Gareth, having been chased by hundreds and thousands of raging snowmen, never forgot the experience and never would he hurt a toy or a snowman ever again. He truly had learnt his lesson. And every year for the rest of her life would Amy enjoys resurrecting Mother Snowman and even more so helping her to make everyone's Christmas wishes comes true. Next time you see a toy, you make sure you treat it properly or else the baby snowmen will be after you too. Now season's greetings everyone and with hopes that this Christmas, you get everything that you deserve. Just like Amy and just like the baby snowmen.

Merry Christmas!

## A Love Despaired

She left him alone in the apartment again. Didn't she know he was lost without her? No, she didn't know because he never explained it to her. It would be too much like opening up. He couldn't. Yet every time she left him in the apartment the absence in the room was so intense and he could feel the loneliness plaguing his entire existence like a hollow mothball.

The mess she left. The crumpled bedspread, the unwashed dishes stained with her morning English breakfast of sausages and beans, the dirty towels she's left on the bathroom floor. These details made him desire a profound sense of order and yet made her absence a lot more bearable. Maybe he could immerse himself with tidying it all up. Maybe that could take his mind off her.

He always did have a heightened sense of hygiene. He knew that as he progressed to washing up the dirty towels she left behind. He felt obsessively immersed in her dirt. He was nauseated but he needed it. It was a reminder she was there. The absence begins to feel a lot more bearable as he immerses himself with her chores. Scrubbing up the

breakfast-stained dishes. He touches the saucy breakfast stain she's left upon the plate and he licks it. He's aware he has a secret. He's aware there is something he's not told her. His desire for intimacy. He could not fill this void without her.

The clang of metal keys as she opens the lock:

'Calum?' She says. 'Calum, what have you done here?'

The room possesses a heightened sense of order and cleanliness. He's tidied up. The television's off and the room is so quiet, it would seem like nobody's there. The clothes neatly stacked inside the cupboards, the polished floor, the neatly vacuumed rug in the middle, the whitened window ledges. It was all so... clean. Maybe too clean.

Calum's neatly seated by the side of her bed:

'I am lonely,' he says.

He notices as she casually dumps her light brown bag on the floor besides his bed. In two more strides she is sitting on her bed besides him. She shakes off her brown stiletto shoes and comfortingly places her hand upon his shoulder. He can't tell her. He can never tell her. The room disappears and the only thing he is conscious of is her

presence beside him. He can feel the bed. It's the only thing he can feel besides her presence. He stiffly moves a cold, robotic arm and slowly brushes a lock of her black hair away from her pink face. This is the moment now. This is where he desires emotion, where he wants her to feel. He closes his eyes as he begins caressing her lips lightly with his own. If she moans, it's a good sign. It would mean she's feeling. However, she doesn't moan. Is she not feeling? She's not feeling. That's the problem. Cold kisses lacking emotion. She abruptly pushes him away. Gradually, he begins to recall her name...

'Marissa,' he says.

She detaches herself from him. She says she needs to use the bathroom. He removes himself from her single bed and takes to lying down on his own bed. No, they do not sleep together. They sleep separately. With his back upon the bed he stares up at the scrubbed-clean cream ceiling. No longer hollow. No longer absent. No longer lonely.

She carefully washes her face in the bathroom. Her breathing is steady. She glares at her pale reflection in the mirror in front above the



basin. Droplets of water running down her face. She picks up a towel and dries it, keeping her gaze on the mirror steady. Why does she feel like there's something he's holding back? Why does that feeling never go away? She wants to confront him. There is so much she wants to say but the words never come out when he's there. She's rehearsed it in her mind so many times.

She can't have been in the bathroom too long, yet when she comes out, he's already napping. Take today, for instance. The way he reacted was like he never knew she goes to work every day. It was like he needed reminding again. It was like everything she had to say needed repeating.. again.. and again.. and again.

She glances at him as he naps away peacefully. Angel.. she thinks. The deep understanding she feels for him. His naivety. Yet the quiet that pervades the room is his silence. It's his choice not to open the television in the room or to break that absence. It's the reason he sat there so long appearing not to know when she was returning. Her 9-5 job at the office. She gets home at around six o'clock every week day. It was no different today. Yet the way he sat there waiting in oblivion to the schedule. This man was a perfect specimen. He had no schedule.

She picks up the remote control and turns on the television

breaking the quietness. Although the sound is on low, Calum stirs.

Marissa looks at him waiting for him to open his eyes. He doesn't.

Her attention turns to the TV screen. The daily news. A woman is refused abortion by the doctors because her decision is based solely on the baby's gender (not revealed). Recent advances in science makes it possible to form the first ever android babies. A discussion on cloning.

Marissa has opinions on these stories. She wants to tell Calum about them. It was difficult having to keep to herself about everything. And that was because he was so quiet. It was because he wouldn't open up. Those gorgeous blue eyes. What were they hiding?

As Calum napped, the light noise of the open television fills his subconscious. It was her. It felt warm. The sound of the news chatters over some of his light dreaming. The dreams floating in front of him like butterflies. He sees a vision of himself naked in the middle of a cold, misty valley:

'I'm not the same, I'm different,' he starts chanting. There's no one there. His chants get louder. Then he dreams of an army of cyborgs fighting in a battle:

'It's my conflict,' he shouts. A vision of an old man appears in front of him:

'Father,' he calls. The old man raises a compassionate hand and touches his face. 'I'm not the same, I'm different,' he says.

'I know, son,' says the old man. Suddenly Calum opens his eyes. Marissa's sitting by his bedside and her hand touches his face. She gazes into his open eyes as he stares back. She's so beautiful, he thinks. She slowly approaches him with her eyes closed and gives him a long lingering kiss on his lips. She's come back for him, he thinks. Her warmth.

'Mmmmm...,' she says. She's moaning. That's good. It means she's feeling. He moans back trying to make a better effort to seem involved in the kiss. He knows she's the only one in his life. He has no one else. He doesn't want no one else. He needs to show her the way he feels for her physically. He needs to give her more. He needs to give her a lot more. She's the only one who completes him, he thinks, as he tries to make his lingering kisses a lot more passionate. He tries to demonstrate a lot more urgency.

'Calum, that's soothing,' she says as his kisses begin to trail towards her neck. Her words give him a meaningful push to involve

himself more in the action.

His lips trail from her neckline to her visage and then gradually back up to her lips. He immerses himself with trying to make his kisses longer and more sensual. He continues to need a reaction from her. Her reaction is his only indication but he doesn't know how to elicit it. The next fifteen minutes feels like an eternity, as the two are involved in deep passion, feeling hungry and needy. For those fifteen minutes, Marissa makes no sound. She is completely wrapped up in their passion together. Her lack of speech is no indication and he pushes her away.

'What's wrong?' She says.

'Were you.. um.. enjoying that?' He asks. She kisses him softly behind his ears.

'Of course,' she says, 'why wouldn't I?' She gazes at him adoringly and his sharp blue eyes stare back. Gradually, she narrows her eyes. Once again, it appears to her like he's holding back. Like there's something he's not saying.

'Do you want to stop?' She asks. He doesn't reply and she gets off of his bed to sit on her own. The television is still on. Whatever he needs to say, she won't force it out of him. She won't make him

uncomfortable. A black-and-white movie is airing on screen and Marissa tries to absorb herself in the details of the film. As the pictures flicker Marissa realises she's not paying attention. There are still other things on her mind. Such as Calum. *I need to get out of here*, she thinks. The room was beginning to feel oppressive. She needed some space from this. From him.

'Calum, I'm going to take a walk outside,' she says. 'I'll bring us some pizza on the way back.' Calum says nothing.

Marissa wears her shoes and picks up her bulky brown bag as she makes her way out:

'OK, I'll be back soon, honey,' she says. She leaves.

Calum listens to the sound of the closing locks as she goes. Leaving him in a loss of her absence again. But she'll be back soon, he reassures himself. With pizza. Calum gets up and walks to the kitchen. He looks out of the kitchen window at the dull, gray day. He sees a bustle of people walking down the high street from the kitchen window of the apartment. He recalls how there are sometimes groups of protesters who would walk down these very roads holding signs up saying, 'ban government cloning.' It niggled at the very root of his

existence and he shivered.

Momentarily, he was affected by a pang of amnesia and the absence in the room made him wonder where she had gone. He sat by the side of her bed and waited.

There was a knock on the door and Calum got up and opened it. A young girl wrapped in a scarf stood outside and her sweet voice called out to him:

'Can you sponsor my cause, Sir?' She says. He takes out some loose change from his trouser pockets and hands it to her.

'Thanks much, Sir,' she says.

Her gratitude compels him, but as he shuts the door on her, he says nothing. The buzz from the television is the only sound in the room. He leaves it on because it reminds him of her. It's how she's left it. How much longer will he have to wait before she came back?

'I'll be back soon, honey,' he recalled. It was... pizza. Ah, yes. Pizza. She was bringing pizza. That was something he could occupy himself with. Preparing the table before she came back. He occupied himself deeply in the act of setting up the forks and knives and neatly preparing the dining room table. The napkins too. He lit up a wax

candle and placed it at the centre of the table as well as a vase with a single red rose inside it. It made him feel passionate. The moments went by minute after minute. The room harboured a deep sense of absence and silence although with the TV on. The jangle of keys in the locks. Marissa was back. He almost forgot that she's... brought back pizza.

'Oh, you've set the table,' she says. As she looks at him he gradually realises.. he did. 'How romantic,' she exclaims, 'A candlelit dinner.' He blinks, gazing at the candlelight and at the rose.

'Darling, let's tuck in,' she says, kissing him on the lips. 'I'm hungry.'

How did she do that? He thought. How did she make this scene come so alive? The table. The candlelight. The rose. It was all her. He gazed at her noticing every part of her face as it moved. As she spoke to him:

'Peperami. You like peperami, right?'

'Yes..' he says.

The taste of the pizza. It was perfect. The way the hazel of her eyes sparkled as she spoke. He was in paradise.

Marissa notices the signs as he gazes at her while she speaks. A man of so few words. He continues gazing at her unashamedly and without a blink of an eye. Chewing on his meal very slowly. Mechanically. Those attractive blue eyes eyeing her up. Making her feel sexy. After a few glasses of wine she begins to get tipsy. She notices that he's had no wine. She feels like she wants him to make passionate love to her but she knows it's the alcohol speaking. Wasted. Calum was too respectful to do that. Bringing her napkin to her lips, she yawns tiredly:

'Darling, I think I might take to bed now,' she says flirtatiously.

'OK, goodnight,' he says, failing to notice her suggestions. 'I'll clear up, don't you worry about it,' he says. It's been a long day for both of them and she has work tomorrow. He's right, she has to go to sleep, but if he'd tried, she would not have said no. Even while her head was spinning and his figure was looking so blurred in her vision, she was desiring him. She leans over the table and with her eyes half closed she gives Calum a light goodnight kiss on the lips.

'OK, I'll leave you to it,' she says stumbling over her own feet as she makes her way to bed.



It was his favourite part of the day. Just having her there sleeping while he clears away. Her presence. Reassuring him. No longer making him feel hollow. He knows she'll have to go away again tomorrow. He knows her absence will make him feel empty. But not now, because now she was here. Lightly breathing as she slept away. The soft tones of the night and the moonlight streaming in from the kitchen window. He looks out upon the high-street and notices there is nobody there. He places the plates in the sink, then he gets dressed for bed.

The moment he closes his eyes, some light dreams start to sail above him. It was like counting sheep. An old man materialises in front of him:

'You still haven't told her, have you, son?'

'No, father,' he says.

'Is she the one?' asks the man.

'Yes,' he says.

'Then you're going to have to tell her.' Calum knows the old man is right. It's going to have to come from him.

When Calum wakes up in the morning Marissa is sitting by the

side of his bed. She's biting her lip and she's distracted.

'Calum, what happened last night? Why aren't the dishes washed up?' She asks. From her tone he realises that something's wrong. Something's really wrong. For a start she should be gone. But she wasn't. She was here:

'Why aren't you gone?' he asks.

'Gone?' She replies. Surely he means her 9-5 work at the office. Marissa bites her lip.

'Why aren't you gone?' Calum asks again.

'Calum, I'm pregnant,' she says.

'Pregnant?' He asks. He doesn't quite know what that means.

'Yes,' she says, 'I've just tested and it's positive.

It's impossible, he thinks, she can't be pregnant. He reaches out for her hand and holds it within the cold enclosures of his own.

'Marissa, I need to tell you..' he says.

'Yes..?' She asks.

'I was born half android,' he reveals. There's a pause and a moment where they're both staring at each other in silence. He looks at her for some reassurance.

'I mean the baby, I don't know how that could be.'

'Half android?' She asks, 'What does half android mean?'

'I mean the baby we're having together,' he says, 'It's the reason I told you. I had to.'

She doesn't let go of his hand and that's a good sign. In fact her grip tightens.

'You don't know how long I've been waiting for you to tell me that,' she breathes. She's relieved that he's told her but he's not. The truth begins to cut at the very core of his existence and for the first time he is identifying with the reality of what he's admitted and it doesn't feel pleasant. He searches her face for some consolation and although he feels the compassion in her words, there is no reassurance. For the first time for a very long time he desires that she is not there. He needs some alone time. One thousand different ways to tell her this seeps through his mind at the same time but none of it begins to be translated into words. He seems to have forgotten that he's going to have a baby and his mind is completely wrapped up solely on his one issue. The fact that he's told her. The fact that it is all now true. While previously he'd been able to deny it all. To fool himself to believing that he was actually normal. That he was not any different to her at all. Now everything had

changed and he had no idea how he would cope.

'I want you to go. Please go.' He says. She fails to understand why he pushes her away. Not after she's announced they're going to have a baby. Her eyes swell up with the tears she quickly brushes away before he notices. She does as he requests and leaves the apartment. Although her boss has given her the day off, that's where she would be heading. To the office. The day's activities will take her mind off what's making Calum unhappy.

Calum sits solitary in the apartment but this time her absence is welcome. He needs much more time to himself. She'll be back soon today but he needs a lot more alone time than that. The unwashed dishes in the kitchen sink reminding him of last night's romantic dinner. So much has changed since then. *Why aren't the dishes washed up?* She had asked. The dishes. It was her. It was an unneeded reminder of what happened. An unpleasant memory of the truth. He can't face her now. He could probably never face her again.

Calum takes out a small suitcase. He empties all of his clothes from the side cupboard into the suitcase. He reaches out for a pen and

scrawls a small note for Marissa leaving it somewhere she will see it.

Calum exits the apartment. He's gone.

The keys jangle over the locks as Marissa enters the apartment room.

'Calum,' she calls, searching the rooms and the bathroom but it appears the apartment is empty. The previous night's dishes are washed. The beds are neatly made. The whole place is looking.. so clean. Marissa spots a single white note lain on the duvet of her bed. She picks the note up and reads:

*I need some time to come to terms with these revelations. It reads. Won't be returning.*

Her eyes swell up as the tears start streaming down her face. He's left her alone. To manage a baby. She couldn't. Not by herself. Marissa reaches out for the telephone and makes a call:

'Hello, doctor?' She says. 'I would like some information on abortion.' It was her and the baby but there would be no baby. Not while she's alone. Not while Calum's not there. She would manage her life perfectly well without him. She didn't need Calum. She *doesn't* need him.

## The Paper

"And what is your name, madam?"

The girl sits on the wooden stool - the only seat available - within the small, mystical room. Incense sticks burn as the girl turns her nose up at the exotic-smelling aroma, finding it a tad too strong for her liking. The psychic gypsy across her has her head tilted up expectantly; her wild, black hair cascading around her shoulders as her striking deep blue eyes stare back at the girl, still awaiting the reply.

'Liz,' replies the girl.

'Ah...' the psychic breathes. 'Wait a minute.' She stares at the crystal ball in front of her, waving her arms around it and her glare penetrates into it. 'I do see something... yes...'

Liz licks her lips, 'What's that?'

'Terrible! Something truly terrible.' Liz raises an eyebrow in bemusement, half believing the vision the psychic has just seen. 'What is it?'

'Give me your palms too, my dear,' she says. 'We must be sure.'  
Liz thrusts forward her hands, her eyes darting back and forth between

her palms and the psychic concentrating. 'Terrible! Just terrible' Cries the gypsy. She shakes her head, making her hooped earrings dart back and forth. 'However,' she says. She stares into Liz's slightly frightened eyes. 'Something can be done about this. Don't worry too much, I will do my best to protect you from this happening.'

'What's happening?' asks Liz.

The gypsy taps her nose, 'I'm sorry,' she says, 'I cannot tell you but you must have faith in my vision. This is what you must do..' She waves her palm over the crystal ball which suddenly opens up from the top and a gust of fresh smoke rises out of it. The gypsy puts her hand into it and takes out a scrap of paper. 'This..' she says, 'This is what will protect you!'

'How?'

'Listen dear, heed carefully these instructions. It is your only chance to safety. Now I give you this scrap of paper and you keep it somewhere safe. Never lose it. But you must not open and read the paper until 4pm tomorrow afternoon. Do you understand? 4pm tomorrow afternoon.'

'Sure,' Liz says. 'I'll try not to.' She takes the paper from the gypsy's hand.

*Until 4pm tomorrow afternoon.*

'Ok, thank you.... for.... um... whatever this is.'

The psychic waves her hand. 'Sure, no problem - Next please!'

Liz leaves the room as another two girls enter the psychic's abode.

'Hello, my dears. We only have one stool so the one who wants their reading done may take a seat.' A girl with chestnut coloured hair sits down and rolls her eyes at her friend.

'And your name is, madam?'

'Beth,' says the girl.

'And that is short for Elizabeth?' 'Yes.' The gypsy gasps, 'Oh no...!' She says. 'Is there a problem?' Asks Beth. The room is silent. Beth's friend rolls her eyes. 'Listen carefully,' says the gypsy. 'Something awful will happen to you today. You must follow these instructions in order to be safe.' The gypsy's crystal ball opens up letting out a puff of fresh smoke. She takes a paper out of it and gives it to Beth. 'You must not read the contents of this paper until precisely 4pm tomorrow afternoon, understand? Keep the paper safe until then. Now I'm done - ' With a



commanding hand, she waves off the two girls, and they realise they are being instructed out of the room.

'Is that it?' Asks Beth, putting the paper into her handbag. The gypsy responds with silence and the girls both reluctantly leave the woman and her strange little room.

Liz strolls out into the city roads taking gulping breaths of air, glad to be rid of the aromatic incense smells that confined her to the psychic's room, very conscious of the crumpled piece of paper in her trouser pocket and curious of its contents, she taps her pocket. Gazing at the dresses by the window of the shops on the high street, she thinks about the psychic's instructions, battling her curiosity to stop her from opening the piece of paper before tomorrow at 4pm. She wants so much to pick out the piece of paper, forget about the orders and read it. Yet the psychic said it's supposed to protect her. Everything about it just didn't make sense. Was it something to do with her palms? The crystal ball? Or a reading of her name? Liz taps the paper in her pocket.

As Beth and her friend come out of the psychic's room, Mel rolls her eyes about the hundredth time.

'You don't *seriously* believe what she said, do you?'

'She said something awful's gonna happen. This scrap of paper's supposed to protect me.'

'She probably sells that sh\*t to everyone.'

'There's something about it.'

'Bullsh\*t!'

The girls come across the kerb and wait for the oncoming cars to pass the street so that they can cross the road. The lights take a while to turn.

'Oh, come on, don't you want to know what the paper says?'

There's a challenging twinkle in Mel's eyes. Beth digs into her bag and pulls out the paper. The traffic lights turn colour. She unfolds the paper and reads:

**Careful. Pay**

**Attention. Be**

**Responsible.**

As she reads the paper she notices the traffic lights change colour and she subconsciously steps onto the road, failing to hear Mel call, 'Car!' Beth is still too distracted to hear the loud hooting of the car speeding at 70mph, which drives into her very suddenly and kills her instantly.

Liz makes her way out of the city park, her curiosity still getting the better of her as she feels the crumpled paper that resides in her pocket.

Until 4pm tomorrow.

Liz waits at a kerb to cross the road. The lights turn colour and Liz thinks it's her queue to cross. However, someone from behind shouts, 'Car!' And only then does Liz notice the obstacle that has just crossed the light at red. Liz turns around hoping to thank the person behind her.

'Don't worry about it,' he says. 'Keep safe.'

Liz takes a leisurely stroll toward home and forgets about it all. It's been a long day. She makes herself a cup of coffee and opens the television. There's been a road accident not far from where she lives. *Oh, how awful!* She thinks about the crash she could have been a victim

of and sighs. *Phew.*

Liz gets ready for a shower and a good long soak in the tub. She lights the scented candles around the bath and inhales. After a satisfying soak she gets ready for bed. She awakens late in the afternoon the next day. She wears a new sweater and the same trousers she wore the day before, forgetting about the crumpled paper until after 4pm. She takes it out carefully. 'This was supposed to protect me,' she thinks, and reads:

**Careful. Pay**

**Attention. Be**

**Responsible.**

'What a lot of b\*llshit!' She throws the useless scrap of paper into the trash.

## Caroline's Witness

I lay across my master's feet with my head over my paws and sigh. It's moments like this that makes the whole day worthwhile. Just enjoying a quiet moment of solitude with my master, the Old Farmer. The clock ticks away from across us and is the only sound that breaks the silence. Below the clock there is a fireplace and on the mantelpiece stands a blue urn. With her ashes.

'I still miss her, old boy,' says the farmer. I look up at him and walk over to the fireplace. I face the urn, paw at the mantelpiece and whine. I know he's talking about her.

'You understand everything, don't you? Clever boy.' I continue whining. I know my master is sad.

He gets up and goes to the kitchen. I perk up right away and follow him, with my tail wagging. 'Here boy,' he says and throws me a fine chunk of meat with a bone too! I see him making a sandwich as he butters the bread and lays very fine slices of cucumber over it. He also takes a tin of sardines from the larder and a jar of pickles. He puts the snacks on the table and begins eating. I continue munching on my bone

as he also pours himself a glass of lemonade. The lady who lives in the next nearest cottage from here gives the Old Farmer lots of food to make sure he is not hungry. Ever since the death of Caroline the Old Farmer does not have a lady at home to cook his breakfast, lunch, tea or dinner for him. He is a big, tall man and he needs his meals. Jan, the nearest neighbour, takes pleasure to make sure that the Old Farmer is fed now.

'I've still got a great big pie in the fridge to have for lunch tomorrow. Good old Jan,' says the farmer.

'Woof!' I reply.

Suddenly I hear sounds of the key in the lock and I start growling. I've already smelt who it is. It's Rob, the Old Farmer's son. As he comes in he says, 'You said you'd do something about that damned dog of yours, I can't come anywhere near you without him going off on me.' If only the Old Farmer would give me the chance to nip this idiot really good!

'Well he's got pretty good intuition. You come to try to take the urn from me again?' says the Old Farmer.

'She's damn well family to me too!' He says raising his voice. I

notice a maddening look on his face. The farmer says nothing but he gives his sandwich a very hard stare before he picks it up and munches.

'I need that urn!' Shouts Rob. The Old Farmer shakes his head.

'Not in a million years will I give you that urn. You don't deserve the dirt she walked on. You treated her like sh\*t when she was alive. What makes you want her ashes now?' I growl at Rob even more fiercely and start barking.

'You better get that dog away from me. Right away, I say!' says Rob. Seeing he's losing the argument, Rob leaves, slamming the door behind him. I make my way to the farmer and consolingly put my paws on his knee.

'Here boy,' he says. 'Good boy.' He goes into the cupboard, takes out some biscuits and throws me over one. I munch it happily.

*I'm in the kitchen. Caroline is making a very big dinner and she's very busy. I follow her everywhere she goes with my tongue hanging out and my tail wagging. She brushes my head with her hand and smiles at me.*

*I notice she's made a great deal of food and she's still cooking! She's made a wonderful leg of ham, a fine chocolate cake, a whole lot of vegetables including carrots, broccoli and sprouts and is currently*

*making pastries. She also has an orange juice on the table which she slowly sips as she cooks.*

*Suddenly Rob comes in and his demeanour is menacing. Although I don't like this man I know he's related to the family so I neither greet him nor hate on him. He gets into an argument with his mum. As I stare at him, I'm used to seeing him treat her with disrespect. I hear her say,*

*'You've gotten into some bad company the past few years. I don't even recognise my own Rob anymore.'*

*'What's it to you and what do you know about them anyway?' They argue and I begin to whine.*

*'I know more than you think, son!'* She says, then she puts a hand over her mouth. *'I know enough to realise you've lost the plot.'*

*'Lost the plot?' he says disgustedly.*

*Caroline sits on a chair near the table. She puts her arms on the table, rests her head on them and sobs.*

*'You're not my son anymore. You're not my son anymore...'*

*Then Rob takes a bottle out of his pocket and pours out a liquid into the Farmer's Wife orange juice. He says, 'Ma, have this, it'll refresh you.'* She takes her head off from her arms and gladly accepts the orange



*juice as she tries to console her sobbing. She drinks it. Rob looks around with a smirk on his face and then he sees me.*

*'Woof!' I bark.*

*'Oh, what would a dog know anyway?' He says. He takes a can of food and puts it on a plate. He then puts some of that stuff he put into the Farmer's Wife juice into the plate. He hands me the plate with the food in it and he leaves the cottage. I approach the plate cautiously and sniff it well. I instantly recognise the smell of poison! I retreat from the plate and run to the Farmer's Wife who I notice consumed the drink with the poison in it. I find her unconscious. I wince, trying to wake her up and then I begin to bark as loud as I can so that I can call some attention. I don't stop barking.*

*The Old Farmer hears me some time later. He runs into the cottage and sees his unconscious wife. Unfortunately it's too late for she's dead.*

*I growl while I watch Rob's figure from the window as he walks away from the cottage, getting smaller and smaller, disappearing into the distance.*

*I know Caroline is now the urn over the fireplace and that the Old Farmer loves her. I know who killed her. This is the hundredth time he*

walks away and he wants the urn. There are still traces of the poison on her ashes that I can smell through it.

The Old Farmer walks out of the cottage and although it is wet and raining outside, I follow him. I have a bone in my mouth and contently chew at the little pieces of meat stuck on in. He picks up the mud and lets it slip through his fingers.

*From ashes to ashes*

*Dust to dust*

'Carrrooolllnnne!' He screams his distress so loud it can be heard for miles away over the hills.

I know what's happened to her. I am the only one who knows.

## The Curse of the Stone Statue

I looked behind me, having just made my way out of the Forest Pleasant. The forest was exactly as its name suggested. Pleasant. Looming beyond me was a long, shaky bridge. I reckoned it would take me at least half an hour to cross to the other side of it. This was the part where nobody had the courage to go. No one dared to stray away from the Forest Pleasant, where the birds sang and the rabbits danced. Nobody was brave enough to confront the dangerous ancient history of the castle.

I checked my watch for the time and brought my backpack off my shoulders and opened it. I took out an important book. It was all about the history of the castle. I took the book out and flipped to the part about the bridge. An instruction said, *tread the bridge slowly and carefully*. With a bit of luck this will get me through to the other side all in one piece. My breathing gets heavier as I realise I'm advancing on to a taboo area. I was stepping towards the part that everybody from the neighbouring towns were scared to tread.

According to legend, anyone who dared enter the tower of the haunted castle was subject to a curse and may never return. Yet within

the tower, there was a precious Book of Secrets and the story has it that only one person can ever touch the Book of Secrets and break the curse of the castle. As I made my way shakily over the bridge, I closed my eyes breathing hard. I prayed that that person was me. In fact, I was convinced it was.

The book of information I had about the castle was very limited for all it knew about was its tales and an assumption about its history but it knew nothing about what the curse of the castle was nor why anybody who entered its tower never returned. The book also had nothing on who would break the spell, what would happen and what exactly was written in the Book of Secrets that was so important to the castle.

I made a note on where the position of the sun was and as I headed closer to the grounds of the ancient castle, the atmosphere grew more and more dreary. It felt hollow and abandoned. I could also begin to see the building of the castle itself. I still had a chance to turn back and get away from it all, yet I was so sure I was the one who would break its curse. It was the only thing that drove me forward.

The castle was both tall and wide. It was made of stony pebbles of grey and white. As I arrived over the bridge and towards the grounds,

everything seemed to be getting colder. The castle's grounds was made of little and large stones, pebbles and boulders. There was a stony and cold silence looming. I reached the stairs outside the castle's porch. I climbed the stars and entered the dreary doors. There was still time to turn back and run away. According to the book, the curse wouldn't begin until I read what was in the Book of Secrets. However, the curse wouldn't advance on me at all if I was the one who would break its spell.

As I entered the castle, I noticed a variety of stony concrete statues. There were so many of them. They seemed to be.... people. They all stood in different positions. Some seemed like statues trying to escape. Suddenly I felt an icy chill on my back and then I heard a noise:

*Cass-an-draaaa*

How did it know my name?

'Who's there?'

*Wh-y are you heere, Cass-an-dra?*

'Um..' I was shaken, 'I want to see the tower...'

*Wh-at makes you think that you'd be the one who breaks the spell,*

*Cass-andra?* It said. Then I heard a chuckle.

*Wh-at makes you so special, Ca-ssandra?*

'Um - ' This was the moment of truth.

*You see the statues, Cassandra - they were all once young hopefuls like you. The fools... they thought they were the ones who could rival the spells of the Book of Se-crets. Now they've all been turned to stone... and so will you be...*

'Am I then not the one?' I asked.

*I don't know... a-are you?* The voice taunted. *We won't know until you touch the book. Le-eave the castle now while you can, else you too will be in its peril...*

'But I think I might be the one!' I said.

*Al-right then Cassandra... t-ry..* taunted the voice. Then a cackle.

I was frightened but the only thing that propelled me forward was the conviction that I was, indeed, the one who would break the spell. Yet, as I glanced at the other statues, I began to cry. For all these people were also once as hopeful as me. And looking at them now, they had all been turned to stone.

I leant against one of the statues and my tears continued to flow. Was it because I wasn't brave enough? Was it because I didn't have faith enough? After a long while of crying, I realised that the voice taunting me had stopped and the castle was now back to its stony, hollow silence. in a

way I felt relief. The voice had said that I still had the chance to escape the castle. I won't be turned to stone unless I found out the secrets of the book. Unless, of course... I was the one.

I moved onwards towards the castle staircase. I supposed that the tower resided at the very top of the staircase. Carefully, I began advancing.

One thing the castle didn't know about me is that I've been a charity worker. I've helped lots of poor and sick people in the past. A couple of years ago I was one of the fortunate few who won \$23 million on a winning lottery ticket. I donated the entirety of the cash to all of the charities I've been working for. I went from being a very wealthy woman to back to my humble roots. Money was never an issue but I was never greedy for so much of it. I strongly believed that my humble generosity made me the right person to challenge the Book of Secrets.

After four slow hours of climbing the steps, amid a lot of pauses and gasping for breath, I finally reached the top of the castle. There was a small wooden door about half my size. I realised this was the door that leads into the room of the tower. I closed my eyes hoping the door would open. I challenged the bolt of the door and it gave way easily. I crouched through the entrance and into the room of the tower.

The room was the most spacious and beautiful room I had ever seen. The floors and the walls were a gorgeous shade of pink. There was an open window that breathed in air. Within the centre of the room there was a glass casket. And inside that... it was the Book!

I carefully walked towards it and lifted the casket. I took out the Book and began reading its pages. What I found out was astounding! I kept turning and turning. I had to know more! I spent far longer time in the tower than I assumed I would, reading the scripts and savouring all the information of each and every page. There were over a thousand pages and all of its scripts were as shocking as the last. I now had all the secrets of this sacred book within my hands.

The first time I checked my watch, I realised I'd been in the tower for all through until the morning, having kept awake straight through the night. As I absorbed all the revelations of the Book, I realised I still was not overcome by sleep. In fact, the contrary. I felt quite alive. After a couple more hours of reading I decided it was about time to leave. Yet I couldn't go without the Book. It is what I had come for.

I opened my bulky backpack and stuffed the sacred Book inside it. Its revelations were now entirely in my hands. One important thing I



noticed is that I was still me and not turned to stone. I silently prayed that I might be the one after all. I'd had the Book in my hands for hours so there just might be hope.

I left the entrance of the tower and proceeded to go down the enchanting staircase. Going down the staircase was a far easier ordeal than climbing up it had been and I realised that I was now moving faster. In no time at all I was down in the hallway where were all the other statues. The castle's victims who hadn't made it. My progress stalled as I realised that the castle might just turn me to stone anytime now. I closed my eyes and prayed, hoping it wouldn't. Gradually, I found myself advancing out of the doorway and through the doors of the castle. I had now reached the porch.

'Yes!' I shouted realising that I had made it through the hallway and outside of the castle building still not turned to stone. 'There might just be hope yet!'

However, as I lift up my right foot to tread my next step, I realised that I couldn't move it. I couldn't move my foot! It felt like concrete. I then attempted to lift up my left foot and realised I couldn't move that one either. I looked down the ground at my feet and they appeared to be cemented together.

'Oh, no...no...no...' I said.

Suddenly I noticed a greying cement beginning to work its way up through my toes and on towards my ankles.. my shins.. up my legs and my thighs and on to my hips. I couldn't move any part of the lower half of my body anymore. The cement worked its way up to my stomach.. my back.. my chest and through to my neck.. chin.. and head. It now consumed every part of me and I could no longer move at all. I was being turned to stone.

*Cass-an-draaaaa... Did you really think you could defy the spell of the castle, Cass-an-draaa? Did you th-ink you could run off with the Book and tell the world its s-ee-crets? Not this time...*

I couldn't reply even if I wanted to. I was now a beast and a slave of the castle's ancient curse. My mortal humbleness and generosity stood for nothing against the secrets of this book. My backpack.. I had subconsciously dropped that while being turned to stone. It was the only part of me that hadn't been. My clothes.. my watch.. my jewellery.. it was all frozen. I was like them. No different.

Yes, actually, there was one slight difference. All of the other stone statues were in the hall but I was the only statue in the porch.

Why hadn't I turned to stone in the hall like the rest of them?

*Y-es, you a-re different, Cass-andra, the voice called as if reading my thoughts. Anyone who looks into Cassandra's eyes shall be turned to stone... unless.. they're the one. A cackle.*

I stood inanimate waiting for the voice to say something more. I waited hours for something to happen. For her to say something else but she no longer did. It began to sink in that the mortal world was now my prey and I was its predator. Those who looked into my eyes shall be turned to stone. In a strange way that made me happy...

Suddenly I heard a shuffle as something behind me made a noise but I couldn't see what it was. It arrived in front of me where my backpack was situated. As I remained frozen, I realised it was a troll:

'You stupid, quack!' The troll said angrily and he kicked me on my leg quite hard. Once.. twice.. three times.. I couldn't move though I heard it vent: 'Take the Book of Secrets from us! No you don't.' He kicked me again. I saw him open my backpack and take out the Book. I knew he was going to deliver it back to the tower where it's supposed to be. He took my backpack too and then he disappeared. He went back in to the castle and left me in the lonely hollow silence of the

castle's porch with nothing or no one around.

Over the next couple of centuries I noticed a few people enter the castle's doors but I never saw them come out. Then one day I saw a young man coming towards me. He reached the steps of the porch when he noticed me. He whistled towards me in appreciation:

'My aren't you just the most beautiful statue I have ever seen.'

As he made his way up the stone stairs, he began checking me out. He then inspected my face and looked into my eyes. I don't know what he felt at that moment but it was electric. The man seemed to be hypnotized by me as he gazed into them. If my eyes could speak a thousand words then he would have recognised despair. He gazed at me and as I looked back, he gradually started turning in to stone. Consumed by the overpowering energy of my gaze. He was not the One. He probably deserved that. We were equal now.

For the first time, I languished at how well my powers worked and eagerly wanted to do it again. Over the next few centuries, I consumed a few more victims. They all deserved it.

Then one day I saw a mother arrive with a little boy no older than two or three years old. She should have known better than to be

in a place so dangerous with a child. The child was crying for what I realised might have been fatigue or a clear disliking of the castle. I saw the woman slap him hard on the cheek and his crying intensified. He was the first mortal I had seen who would rather have left upon arriving and who would rather have not been here. The mother and her son disappeared in to the castle and I saw no more of them.

A couple of weeks later and to my surprise, I saw the child come out of the castle but his mother wasn't with him. In his hands he held the Book of Secrets. I saw him open the Book and have no understanding of it because he was too young to read. I then saw him take the Book and escape the castle. He went back over the bridge and toward the Forest Pleasant where he was since safe. That little boy had made it out of the castle with the Book alive and he was no longer a victim to its curse! This could only mean one thing. That mysterious little boy was the One!

Suddenly I saw an intensity of clouds gather and it began to rain pebbles. Moments later I began to turn into my mortal self Cassandra. I couldn't believe it. I could move! I entered the hallway and noticed all the other statues too were turned back to the mortals they were.

Then I heard a voice that sounded like an angel:

'The spell of the castle has been broken. The Great One has arrived and is now in possession of the Book. In fifteen years time the Great One shall be made King of the castle and its neighbouring towns and villages. You are all now free to go. Hail to the King!'

'Hail to the King!' We all repeated, thrilled that we were all now free.

So that little kid was the One? The boy had been too young even to be able to read. I was stunned by how easily he took the Book out of the castle like that. That little boy... Who'd be King of our towns in fifteen years time.

I make my way out of the castle's doors and marvel at the pebbles as they gracefully and gently fall over the building. Marking the final end of its ancient-old curse.

Miri was a dark haired, dark eyed woman, with a striking pale-white complexion. She was slender, and tended to accentuate her curves and body tones in black clothes. She would wear black lycra tights, black leather tights, black blouses, gloves, socks, black shoes, black sweaters, shirt, dress, trousers - all black. Today, she was wearing a gorgeous, black lycra dress, underneath her new black leather jacket, and her hair was tied up neatly in a single black scrunchie. The static ends of her hair were dipped back tightly in shiny, black clips.

Today, Miri was out in the front garden collecting the post from the post-box, when she noticed her handsome neighbour watering the flowers using a watering can, and as she strode to collect her mail, she naturally lifted an arm up, and greeted him in acknowledgment:

'Hi, Miri!' her neighbour acknowledged, 'Apparently there's an all Summer long hosepipe ban, that I'm having to water my flowers using this watering can.'

'I guess it would have been all the more easy to water these beds using a hose,' she observed. She shook her head. It was a stupid, unnecessary rule, and hindered a lot of gardeners. Although it was Summer season, weekly showers were regular, and the state was hardly

running dry.

She took a bundle of letters from today's post-box, and as she walked back towards the house, she flipped through them. Ah! There's what she was looking for. One from her eight year old daughter. She crossed her fingers, praying that her little girl's mail wouldn't be censored. Ever since the new government, all mail was unnecessarily censored. The simplest of sentences were rephrased, or, sometimes, not allowed at all.

When she opened her mail, she noticed a drawing of a person, and her daughter labelled it 'Dad' underneath the picture. It was drawn messy, and you could just about discern the face and the body, and though the colouring-in was not neat, you could tell the effort was made by an eight year old girl. Her girl.

Besides the drawing, there was also another letter, but this one was from the State. The note declared that the little girl had also written a letter to accompany the drawing, and 'the message is not allowed.' Miri could not hold back a single tear which fell down from her face, in missing her beautiful daughter, desiring her eight year old's censored message, and holding the drawing her daughter produced



close to her heart. How dare they?! How dare they snoop into an ordinary person's private mail, and censor innocent messages?!

Miri's daughter was called Josy, and she lived far away up north with her ex-husband. Miri and Josy's father had divorced some time ago, and John was who was given custody of the child. John was a good man, and never banned Miri from ever seeing the child, but the inconvenience of doing so was caused by both distance and Miri's working hours. Apart from Josy, Miri had another kid, but from another man. This man had walked out on the both of them six years ago, and had never come back. The day before Sam's dad walked out on both him and Miri, he and Miri had a very huge argument, but she was hardly prepared when he walked out on her and her son the very next day. Sam was fifteen years old, and his father walked out on them when he was just nine. She was extremely bewildered when she discovered that the very day after the argument, he had gone, just disappeared, and never came back again. Even today, she would look intently at the front doors, eagerly anticipating that they would open up, and George would be walking back in. It took her a very long time to realise that he wouldn't.

When Sam returned from school that day, he had red blisters all

over his arms, he was helplessly holding his sides, and there were blisters on the sides of his face:

'Darling, Sam!' she exclaimed as he dropped into her arms. He wasn't crying, but gasping heavily and taking long drawn-in breaths.

'What happened, darling?'

Sam had come home from school in a similar state yesterday, and it was just as bad for the two of them then. Secondary school had gotten a lot harder ever since the new government brought back the cane. They would slap the children, and beat them unnecessarily as a statement of their authority. Miri was thinking of boycotting the school while her son was suffering. Of never letting her son return there again, until they got sorted.

'It's the prefects,' gasped Sam. Sam's secondary school imposed a rule that in the event a pupil was considered to behave disobediently, both the teachers and the student prefects were allowed to punish the pupils using corporal punishment. The prefects tended to be students who were in their final year of school, and they were elected so that they would maintain the order. Most of them tended to be sixteen years old, and no older. Sam himself was only one year below the year

prefects were elected. It was possible that if he behaved himself, he also had the chance of being elected prefect next year. However, he opposed their laws so much, he didn't want to be. Surely these kids were still too young to decide who would receive punishment, and surely they were too young to be allowed to dish it out.

'A boy called Ronny,' Sam said. 'He's a prefect, and he really has it in for me.' Sam always knew that the reasons Ronny had to dish out these punishments against him were feeble lies. What Ronny was really after was blood. Sometimes what Ronny wanted to do was to outdo the punishments of the other prefects. Ronny wanted to prove that he was a lot tougher than the other prefects, and Sam was the subject of Ronny's attempts to outdo their punishments.

'This is preposterous, Sam,' declared Miri. 'You cannot go back to school while this situation goes on.'

'I don't want to go back to school,' wailed Sam. 'I can't, mum. I won't go! Please don't let them make me.'

It was resolved then, that while the situation continued under the circumstances, Miri would not let Sam go to school. She would let him take sick leave with a message from the doctor. Permanently.

Indeed, when the doctor inspected the marks and scabs that Sam

took from school, he instantly understood, and wrote him a letter for sick leave. Doctor Raja was always a good doctor, and always a good friend of Miri's family. He had been their doctor for a long time. He was their doctor under the old government, and continued, still, to be their doctor under the new government, purely under the merits of his qualification and experience. However, he still maintained his own principles, and this by no means changed under the new government. He would give Sam a sick note, and let Sam take leave for as long as need be.

Miri's only fear was that the school would get suspicious. That the authorities would call asking about why his leave was so long. That is exactly what happened.

It was barely three weeks Sam had taken off school, when Mr Mains, Sam's class teacher, called to enquire about why Sam had not been coming to school.

'Can I come by please, Mrs Mellow?' he asked, addressing Miri formally. 'It's important.'

Miri allowed Mr Mains to come over to the house to see herself and Sam, so he might realise for himself how bad the situation was.

Within minutes, Mr Mains arrived, driving briskly in his blue Ford car. Once he rang the bell, he was guided into the living room, and Miri made a mental note of his face, as she sat him down. His jaw was rigid, and there were sympathetic lines framing his mouth. His eyes would wrinkle as he tried to smile, but his eyes stared fixedly at Miri and Sam, as the mother and her son faced across him.

'You don't have to explain. I understand your son's predicament. I really do.' Mr Mains said. 'I myself cannot put up with the new laws of our school.. Not just our school, but the same laws that is now governing all the schools within our land.' He continued, 'You do know that if any one of us breaks them, laws under our new government is far more severe. However, you understand this.' Miri nodded her head slowly, but she was curious as to where all this was leading.

'So, you must understand that your son can by no means miss school. Punishment can be severe to you also, Miss Mellow, for being responsible for his absence.'

'Right.' Said Miri.

'I do, however, understand your predicament,' said Mr Mains. 'I am thus willing to record that your son has been attending school on our school's daily register. By no means will I be ready to confess that

he hasn't because he is too frightened. Consequences can be severe, and I am by no means willing to risk putting either you or your son through those consequences. Because I am aware that you are breaking the laws of our new government, and I cannot risk putting you through the harsh punishment of doing so, Mrs Mellow. I do not want to raise suspicions against you, Mrs Mellow,' he explained. 'Thus, I will be marking your son as 'attending,' although we are both aware that he isn't.'

'You do not want to raise suspicions against me,' Miri echoed. 'Mr Mains, that is incredibly noble of you. Both me and my son are absolutely indebted to you. The way you are willing to put your career on the line to protect my son is so incredibly noble of you. How can we ever repay you?' Upon that question, Miri went into the kitchen and brought out a basket of her finest green and red coxes apples. Over the handle of the fruit basket there was a pretty bow, and the apples were small, but scrumptious and plentiful.

'Please take a basket full of our finest apples as a gesture of our gratitude, Mr Mains. We are obliged, Mr Mains, and we won't say a word.'

Mr Mains took the basket, and on his way out, he said to Miri:

'We cannot continue living in fear, Mrs Mellow,' and he left.

Miri worked as a journalist for the local Hampshire newspapers, and as a journalist who had worked many years with the Hampshire papers, she sometimes was allowed to shadow journalists who worked for the bigger, broadsheet newspapers. The national papers, for example, the City National. She was also sometimes permitted to contribute an article or two for the City National, but was not a regular columnist. She did, however, have a regular column for the Hampshire newspapers, and she was, primarily, a reporter of petty crime events that occurred within the district city.

Miri always felt that if affairs happened that concerned the State, as a journalist, she would always be the one who would be informed of the information first. Although she was reporter of petty crimes, she was by no means responsible of reporting any bigger conspiracies, or crimes higher up the State. She was, however, all ears, and she would listen carefully in order to keep herself aware. There was also the political news, and although Miri herself was not responsible for those columns, she would always listen carefully for politically sensitive

information. The local Hampshire newspapers she worked for so many years also tried to keep the majority of information positive, by talking about gardening, bakery, and lifestyle. Miri was sometimes responsible for the editing of these columns, and she was considered an influential individual at the local Hampshire newspapers Headquarters, and part of that probably owed to the fact that Miri would refuse to think inside the box. She was analytical, and able to absorb information that wasn't particularly secluded to her own publishing.

As an informed journalist, Miri was perhaps one of the few journalists who was already in fear of the new government. It was a new government, because it had only just survived the last two elections. It was absolutely astounding that anyone would suppose to elect a government with principles so repressive and undemocratic. It was, ironically, because of democracy that the winning party was even allowed to take part. But who in the world would be voting for them was always a question on Miri's mind. She wondered how democratic, or how rigged, the last election even was. There were rumours that was brought to her attention that the election was, indeed, rigged, but it wasn't enough to act upon.



To some co-workers within the Hampshire papers, Miri prepossessed a facade of being pro the new government. She would publish the news that was due for publishing, and censor the news that was called to censor. The censored news often included information that made the government looked bad, or undermined them in any way.

For example, it was brought to her attention that ten people were arrested in the city for busking the other day, and over twenty were arrested in district London for homelessness. The government was considering of introducing bans to magazines, including the Big Issue, and if that was forced to become another underground magazine, they would consider introducing bans on those also.

Miri was aware that neither busking nor homelessness could be considered as petty crimes within the principles of the old regime. It was an indication of how bad the new regime actually was, and Miri did not know how she could possibly print out any of this news without demonstrating signs of her own alarm.

Not printing the news appeared to some of her co-workers as if she was not wanting to undermine the new government with the news, and particularly to Mark Wright, who was the Hampshire Papers Sports

Editor.

'I hope you're aware, Miri,' Mark Wright reminded, 'That by censoring this news, you are denying us from the truth that takes place within the new regime, and denying us from a free press. People would have liked to know this news, so that we could prevent the new government from getting away with the crimes they're committing against buskers.' But Miri thought not:

'Printing the news would make homelessness and busking appear to be a crime to people,' she argued, 'and this would give the government lee way to take their laws a lot further.'

Mark was not convinced, and believed Miri was protecting the government by censoring this news. Miri was not prepared to share with Mark all the personal baggage she kept secret, and all the reasons why it was she absolutely hated the new regime:

'If the government got any more powerful under this regime, it is you who would be getting the sack for prepossessing those ideas you have against it.'

Although Miri was making a point, Mark interpreted what Miri said differently. He thought Miri was trying to fire him for admitting his

convictions against it. He thought Miri was an advocate of it, and although Miri wasn't, she could tell he thought she was:

'If you listen carefully, Mark,' she said, 'you might realise by my points that I am no advocate of it. People could lose their jobs for expressing political opinions such as you just did.' She thought about Mr Mains for refusing to indicate her son's school absence, and even of Dr Raja for issuing her son's sick note. If the government grew any more powerful, their jobs were all in jeopardy, she thought.

Once again Mark misinterpreted Miri, and assumed she said she would fire him for expressing his opinions. He shook his head and whispered:

'Don't tell anyone.'

Later on Miri was informed with news that there were protest groups forming across the streets of Hampshire. However, these protest groups were not just limited to Hampshire's streets, but were forming across the whole of the city. Surely these protest groups were no indication of a fair election. Surely it was up to her to make sure that the newspapers informed the country that it must not have been a fair election. Perhaps using her influence within the local media, she could prevent the government from growing anymore powerful. Maybe she

could do so in subtle ways, so that the government will not suspect her. Maybe yet she could do so by pretending she was on their side.

When Miri checked the time she realised it was five minutes past her working hour and it was time to go home. Her house was barely a ten minute drive home, and on a lovely day as it was today, she really should be walking it. Miri contemplated how lazy her job made her. When Miri arrived home, she noticed Sam was not there. She took off her long, black coat and hung it on the coat stand. After taking off her formal, black shoes, she proposed to get a lot more comfortable, and wore her fluffy, black slippers, which was decorated with a single, black button on the top of its fluffy material.

Where was Sam today? She wondered. She went into the kitchen to begin cooking up a meal for the two of them, knowing he would be back later. As she prepared the pots, pans, and ingredients for the meal, Miri remembered Sam's dad who left them. She remembered that she and George were always on-again, off-again. She and George had had Sam while she was just his girlfriend. She never married George, until the divorce with John, her first husband, but she had known George long before she had ever met John. Sam was seven

years older than Josy; she had had Sam first.

When George left them, Miri still retained George's surname, and her married title, because they never officially divorced. She always fancied that George would walk back through those doors at any time.

Miri's soup and shepherd's pie was ready when Sam returned:

'Yum!' exclaimed Sam hungry.

'Where were you today?' Asked Miri as they munched on their first few forkfuls.

'I briefly took part in the Hampshire protest groups that were escalating down the city,' he explained.

'That's my boy,' started Miri, but just then, the phone rang.

When Miri picked up the phone, it was the editor of the Hampshire local papers, Ms Pecks. She began explaining something to her:

'It has been brought to our attention, Miri, that you have refused to publish stories that were reviewed by you. Let me remind you. Firstly there was the news about the government's arrest of the homeless, and secondly, you failed to publish news about the protest groups that were forming through this city.'

Miri swallowed, as she assumed she was about to be

reprimanded:

'Miri,' Ms Pecks continued, 'Our board have decided that your actions have been admirable. It is clear you were protecting our new state, and reluctant to expose any of its crimes. Your actions indicate to us that you are an advocate of the state.' Miri knew she couldn't be any more wrong, but was not ready to confess.

As Ms Pecks spoke, there was some very harsh clicking coming from the other end of the line, and it was clear that even with the undertones of this formal conversation, intruders were shamefully listening in on them. The clicking got harsher and more violent:

'I'm sorry, I cannot hear you, Ms Pecks,' Miri proclaimed, disturbed.

'I said, I have arranged a meeting between you and the editor of the City National. He wants to talk to you about the admirable reasons you have sought not to publish the news that you rightly assumed would make our regime look bad.'

'Oh, right, ok,' Miri said. When Miri hung up the phone, she let out a large groan. She would be meeting the editor and Head of the City National for all the wrong reasons. Even so, Miri was not willing to

drop her facade, because it could put her into trouble with him. She was going to meet him early the next morning, while Sam lounged at home from school, or, perhaps, pursued to join more protest groups.

The very next day, Miri took off her expensive, silk, black night-dress, and changed into a black shirt, underneath a formal black jumper, and contemplated whether to wear her black trousers, or pretty black skirt, alongside her thin, black stretch-tights underneath. After changing a few times, she eventually chose to wear the skirt, and tights. Right before she left the house, she took off her fluffy, buttoned slippers, and wore her heeled, black, formal shoes.

The drive to the City National took a lot longer, because unlike the Hampshire papers, its departments were by no means local. When she arrived at the City National Newspaper Headquarters, the secretary told her to wait outside Mr Lindman's management office, and he would soon be ready to call.

It didn't take long before he was ready to call her in:

'So it's you,' Mr Lindman said, greeting her. He shook her hand, but he made no eye-contact:

'I presume you are the woman who refused to publish the news involving the crimes committed by our state.' Mr Lindman still wouldn't

make eye-contact.

'Oh, indeed!' announced Miri, feeling stupid, 'I could never help give it up.' This was a bluff from Miri's part, and it wasn't by any means how she felt, but only dedaring what she thought Mr Lindman wanted to hear.

'Well, it's admirable,' Mr Lindman continued. Then he stopped, and poured himself some whisky:

'But you know what I think, Mrs...'

'Mellow,' she informed him.

'You know what I think, Mrs Mellow?' he said. 'I think that the reasons you held that information from your local newspapers was in order to prevent this regime from getting any more excessive, and not because you were protecting it.' Miri swallowed, for he had hit the truth.

'And, Mrs Mellow,' he said, 'The truth is what it is about it that I find even more admirable.' She gradually realised that he thought her real reasons for censoring the stories were agreeable, and the ends of her mouth curved into a victorious smile. He had hit the truth, and not only had he hit the truth, but he was still an advocate of her actions:



'Mrs Mellow, I would thus like to let you in on a little secret. As you're aware, I am the head of the City National, and a few other leading newspapers too. I am of high authority within these auspices, and a hugely influential figure both within the media and within broadcasting.' He stopped briefly, and then continued. 'It has been called to my attention, Mrs Mellow, that our country does not like the new regime, and it is not possible that they could have been elected fairly. Thus, I have come to the conclusion that it wasn't elected fairly,' he said.

'Please correct me if I am wrong, Mrs Mellow, but your decision to censor the news items *was* a protest against this new regime, and you are not an advocate unlike some would assume. Alongside the city's protest groups, there is outright outrage,' he said. Miri was careful not to respond too quickly, just in case it got her into trouble with Mr Lindman, and, momentarily, she did not want to reveal too much too soon.

'Mrs Mellow,' he said, as he stared into her eyes for the first time, 'I am proposing to boycott all our media and broadcasting, until it forces this government to step down. I'm going to make sure that they understand that our media channels are no longer on their side.'

Without us, they cannot proceed any further. As long as this regime continues, we will refuse to be the means that keeps them in power.'

Miri was absolutely elated. To think that her censoring the news at the local papers would inspire Mr Lindman in this sort of way. A man so very high up the media authority:

'I do not have any objection to that, Mr Lindman,' said Miri pleased.

Two weeks after Miri's confrontation with Mr Lindman, Miri woke up one morning, remembered it was the weekend, and tucked herself comfortably back under the bed covers. She wanted to lounge in bed a little longer, but just then, the doorbell rang. When she answered the door, it was Vincent, the neighbour next door.

'You won't believe this!' Vincent announced, 'There's no television! I went to the local news agents today, and there were no newspapers or magazines. Apparently media and broadcasting are trying to boycott our government!'

Miri was wearing her short-sleeved, black pyjamas, and it was patterned with frills down the sides. She put a hand to her face to stifle

a yawn. What she didn't tell Vincent was she was amongst the very first informants of this news:

'Come in, Vincent,' she said as she let him in. They walked into the sitting room, and Miri picked up the remote, and turned on the television, to verify that what Vincent was announcing was true. She turned it on, and true to his word, there was not a single network channel operating. Not even on Sky. No morning programmes, either. Miri was awakening, and realising that this was, indeed, a big deal. How long would the situation go on like this?

Maybe she should contact Mr Lindman. Maybe she had to know.

'You're not looking too surprised, Miri,' Vincent said, observing her astutely.

'No I'm not. I'm just tired,' said Miri.

'Let me get out of your way, then,' said Vincent. 'I only came over here because I wanted to inform you of this.'

'Thank you, Vincent,' said Miri.

Miri wondered how long this was going to go on for. No newspaper, no television. No media, no broadcasting.

'This is really cool!' exclaimed Sam, as he strode downstairs, and waved Vincent outside the door. Miri knew that Sam had no further

political information beyond the result he witnessed. He didn't know about Mr Lindman. He didn't know about her own enactment to censor the stories.

Miri picked the telephone up, and closed it. The phone lines was working, she observed. The telephone and the broadcasting networks was not exactly the same thing, she realised. How many more weeks would this go on for? Miri knew she had to be patient.

A couple of weeks later, the problem was over, and the media and broadcasting channels were back on. Miri listened closely to the channel news, and she couldn't believe her ears. It worked! Miri, who had been out of work while the Hampshire newspapers also refused to print. Now it was all back on, and it worked! It couldn't have worked out any more perfectly:

'What happened is when the foreign governments were informed of the news that our country's media stations were being boycotted,' explained Miri to Sam, later on, around the dinner table, 'They realised that our stations were crying out against an outrageous, unpopular government. Thus, those foreign democratic governments helped us replace this unpopular government of ours with someone more

democratic. Without the intervention of these foreign governments, we would never have been saved. By boycotting our broadcasting, they realised how urgent the situation was, and the foreign governments strode in to help us.'

'That's fantastic, mum!' said Sam, 'This means it's a new government! This means I could go back to school again!'

'Yes! This means I could get letters from my darling Josy again!'

'Can we go up and see Josy, mum? I'm missing her too,' said Sam.

'Certainly, Sam,' said Miri elated, 'I was thinking we could both travel up and see both her and John next weekend.'

### **A Day in the Life of Malcolm**

As the night gets colder and stormier Malcolm seeks refuge away from the open spaces of the city park. He raises a hand dressed in a dirty glove and he scratches the beard on his grimy face. His face becomes a lot sootier. Even the falling raindrops can't clean away the permanent muck stained on his face. Those unwashed gloves. He hasn't had a shower for months and even then it was the public toilets. A sort-of shower.

The wind begins to howl as Malcolm wanders around urgently seeking for something with a roof. He has wandered out too far today and arrived at a location he doesn't know very well. The park is pleasant but not while it's cold and raining. Malcolm resigns and he's tired. He opts to sit a while under a dense tree. He rests his back upon the thick bark of the tree. Bumpy. Uncomfortable.

His clothes absorb a fresh new grime of mud and stench. The winds blow and it is still cold but the denseness of the tree branches shelter him from the rain. Somewhat.

His eyes scour the views in front of him. Hoping to see something. Someone. But there's no one around and why would they be? They've all got homes to go to, he thinks enviously.

Suddenly a moving figure materialises into viewpoint. It's blurred because the figure is so far and yet it was moving nearer and nearer. Soon he would be able to see it more clearly. Yes.. it is a woman and she's dressed in red. She has an umbrella and she holds something else too but he can't quite make out what. She was coming towards him. Malcolm doesn't think the lady's seen him. Not yet anyway. Not while he's concealed behind the branches. She's heading his direction. He watches.

Seconds later the woman has arrived so near that she's noticed him. She hesitates. Malcolm is now sure she's seen him. My, she was beautiful. Her golden hair looked striking against her long, red coat. She carries an ordinary bag and a plastic bag and carefully holds an umbrella to shelter her from the rain. What's she doing in the park on a rainy day like this?

'Hi,' the lady calls out. Was it to him? He slowly raises his eyes and meets her sparkling blue ones.

'Aren't you cold?' She asks.

'What's it your business?' He growls. She hesitates.

'Well, I was just in the park. I was going to feed the ducks.

Because they're hungry, see?' She says nervously.

'And so am I!' He responds rudely.

'But then it started raining, so I didn't,' she explains. 'The ducks. They're all gone.'

Malcolm belches. He doesn't need to be confronted.

'Don't you have a home to go to?' He says gruffly.

'So I've been left with a bag of fresh sliced bread,' she says. 'I feel you might need this a lot more than the ducks.' The lady approaches Malcolm and lays beside him the bag of fresh sliced bread. It's wholemeal.

If Malcolm's grateful now he doesn't show it. For he doesn't need her pity. He makes no eye contact as he waits for her to walk away. She goes away.

The woman's right. Malcolm is hungry. Starving actually. And he hasn't seen a gesture like this done for days.

Malcolm takes off his dirty gloves and he reaches out for the bag of bread. It was enough. He makes sure not to eat all of it so he could have more for the time ahead. Tomorrow will be another day but he's feeling grateful for this one and for all of the small generousities it has brought. He sets himself carefully within the grime of the mud and the



grass and he sleeps.

**Lord Medley**

Ellie throws some twigs into the fire. The giant flames licking as far up as the sky. There is a glow over Ellie's face as she stares at the tall flames, licking up high and burning the Guy.

There's always something evil about this occasion but she doesn't know what. It's something to do with the spirit of burning this man. Sure, he's a puppet, but even he doesn't deserve that. *Why do we even celebrate this?* Poor puppet.

A cold wind blows over as Ellie pulls her jacket closer and shivers. She stares at the burning effigy. There's a movement. Ellie turns around momentarily distracted by the children laughing behind her. She turns back around and there it is again. A movement. Over the sound of the strong-blowing wind, Ellie thinks she hears a murmur. Or is it mumbling? And it's coming from the effigy.

"STOP THE FIRE!!" Ellie screams. "There's something in there!"

"Huh?" A couple of guys burning the fire turn around. "I said stop the fire!" At that moment one of the boys who's part of a group swears and suddenly takes off running.

"Sh\*t!" says Ellie. "I'll deal with him later." In the meantime she

runs for the nearest fire-extinguisher, which isn't far from the back of the building where the toilets are. As soon as Ellie gets back to the Guy, she releases the clasp and lets out the air. There are two or three people in the crowd who begin helping.

Once they get the flames out, Ellie runs toward the puppet. She could hear the sound of choking coming from it. There's someone inside.

Ellie moves forward trying to figure out how to open him. There's a crowd behind her. Eventually, Ellie figures out that his head comes off first. Ellie takes off the costume and there's the choking man inside. His face blackened from the soot of the fire. He's sweating, beads falling from across his face.

"Get back everybody," Ellie commands. "Are you okay?" She says addressing the guy in the costume. He coughs and splutters. She carefully gets him out of the costume.

"Yeah, thanks to you," he coughs. Ellie waits for him to let it out. She checks his chest to make sure he's breathing okay. Thankfully, he seems to be recovering.

Ellie didn't notice before but now she sees the man is an old guy and has something wise about his dull, blue eyes. "Who are you?" asks

Ellie. The guy coughs out a gust of air. He raises his blue eyes toward Ellie.

"I'm Lord Medley," he says, "Pleasure to meet you."

"Hold on," Ellie says. "You're a Lord?"

"Pleasure to meet you," he says. Ellie takes in a deep breath then releases. "So what's going on here, Mr Medley?" she says. Lord Medley har-humphs.

"Those... insolent little fools," he says pointing a finger toward some direction, "have tried to burn me to the stake," he says, his eyes soften. "But you, my love... Well, you saved me."

"They tried to burn you. But why?" asks Ellie.

"Why?" says Lord Medley. "Don't you know? They tried to kill me so they could make... what's his name... *Kanye West*... President."

"Kanye West?" asks Ellie, "But.. how?"

"They know I hold the ranks in Parliament," he says, "Don't you see? This is no different to what happened when... *Guy Fawkes*.." he begins to cough.

"Guy Fawkes? When he tried to blow up Parliament?" "... When tried to take over," Lord Medley manages.

"They want to make *Kanye West President*?" Asks Ellie. "And you hold the reins on that?" Ellie stares at him blankly for a moment. Then, in a passing second, the first signs of laughter begin to erupt in her throat

"Of course," Lord Medley says, " .. for they know my rank." "They want to make Kanye West President?" she repeats. This time she doesn't hold back and falls over the floor laughing.

"And almost killed me at that!" "Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Madam! Calm down! Please!!"

"Oh, this is the funniest thing I've ever heard," says Ellie. "But, come on, let's clean you up." She lifts him up and guides him out through the crowd. "Where do you want to go?" Ellie asks after a while. "To Parliament, if you please." "Okay, sure," says Ellie. "We can go with my car. Um... I've got it parked there up the road." Ellie and Lord Medley walk slowly toward the car. "Ow, my ribs," says Lord Medley. "Careful," says Ellie. There's still soot on his face and his clothes seem pasted to his body but at least he's OK.

"So what exactly did they say they were gonna do?" asks Ellie.

"Well.. you see.. we Lords... pass bills so... what they wanted was me... to draft that Bill here in England that would open the door to

making Kanye West the President of America."

"Can you do that? That's genius," Ellie says.

"Madam, where there's a will there's a way." After a pause: "I flat out refused, of course."

"Of course," replies Ellie.

"Now I can see exactly why you think this is amusing, young lady."

"No, not at all," she replies. "You're just like... a modern day Guy Fawkes, that's all."

"Oh, spare me the irony," he replies.

"Well.. okay.." says Ellie, "Um.. Lord Medley.. why don't you take a rest for a while and we'll deal with the situation better tomorrow morning, huh?"

"You don't believe me?" he says.

"Oh, of course I believe you," says Ellie. "But you just need to take a rest. You've been through a lot for one night."

"A rest? A *rest*? While those pesky fools are out there trying to take over."

"Just for the night," Ellie intercedes. "You need it. I mean.. we both need it." Lord Medley stares at Ellie briefly, before giving in,

"Okay, I suppose that would be the most sensible thing to do." Ellie parks the car over the back of the Houses of Parliament. "That's right, it would be." He hastily gets out of the car and shuts the door. "Good night, Mr Medley," she whispers.

On the drive back home, Ellie takes a right-turn heading back to the ground where the fire was. Ellie shivers, wishing for something warmer. Across the playground, Ellie makes out the blurred shape of a couple of boys huddled together. Isn't that them? The boys who broke away? She can't quite make it out. Who else would be hanging around here at the dawn of night? She approaches.

"Do you get paid to look this conspicuous?" she calls out. The boys turn round. Ellie gets closer. Yes, that's them. "A little birdie tells me you were planning to takeover Parliament today? On bonfire night? How original."

"We're not doin' nothin'," a guy says, "Just mindin' our own business." He takes a puff of his joint and passes it through the group.

"It's none of your business!"

"Nobody ain't tryin' to take over nothin' " someone says.

Ellie notices a small radio drumming rap music in the back. A

guy comes out of the shadows. "Hey, aren't you the chick who rumbled us today? You know she was fly," he looks her up and down. "hmm... So are you," he murmurs. Ellie blinks. This is unbelievable.

"A Lord was nearly burnt to a crisp today and you're hitting on me? "

The guy takes a drag of his joint. He fiddles with the knobs on the radio. The rapping gets louder.

"Do you like music like this?" he says.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"No do you?" he asks. "Of course she don't," someone else says, "She's too prim and prissy for it!" "Shut your mouth!" shouts another.

"Am I missing something here?" Ellie says. "Yes you are," says the boy. "You see, we *like* this music." "So?" she says. "So? Do you think they want us listening to this sh\*t? You think they represent us? Respect us? Hell, no, we're the *underdogs*." Ellie takes a step back.

"You know what we want? We want a government who *lets* us listen to this sh\*t. We don't want trouble, we want our *sound*."

"So?"

"So?" the guy says, "We want recognition from *World Leaders*."



Guns, knives, drugs," he gives Ellie a sleazy look, "Sex.. alcohol.. all of it."

Ellie lets it sink in. "Well you're deluded."

"No, we're not b\*tch!" he says. "We're gonna make Kanye President." Ellie laughs. "Jeez, I thought you guys were out of your minds but this is taking it to new levels." "Miss, he can't do nothin' about it. Don't take him seriously."

"Well.. You tried to kill a man today." Ellie pauses. "If that's not enough to report you I don't know what is." "Aw, miss, really, we mean no harm. We just want to be understood."

"OK, look," Ellie strokes her chin. "You give up your little conspiracy plan and I'll let you guys go, OK?" "We never thought nothin' would come by it," the boy says, "We just don't want to be the underdogs, that's all. We want to be represented." Ellie gives the mob one last long look. "Alright you pack it all in and I'll pretend it didn't happen. Is that fair?" "Yes, ma'am, very fair." The boy balls his hand and reaches toward Ellie, "Touch?" he says. Ellie stares at the fist and touches.

"Now git!" she cries. The boys quickly break away.

Ellie calls into Lord Medley's office the next afternoon. "Hello? Lord Medley?" There's some static on the phone. "Who's this?" he says. "It's Ellie. The girl who saved your life yesterday?"

"Oh! Ellie, yes," he says. "How are you Ellie?"

"Well, I'm calling to check up on you." She pauses and inhales. "What I want you to know is... those boys?... they won't be bothering you no more."

"Blasted! *Those pesky little brats!* Well I've gone and done it now."

"Er.. You've gone and done what?" says Ellie.

"I've drafted the Bill," says Lord Medley. "Those pesky brats won't lay a finger on me ever again."

"You've gone and done it?" says Ellie. Oh God.

"Yes.. and if everything goes to plan it should be passed with the Queen's approval tomorrow."

"What! When?" Ellie asks. "I mean when will he be President?" She hears papers rustle in the background.

"Well.. I should imagine.. sometime within the next two seasons. Er... he'll stand as Presidential Candidate, of course. Then.. well it's only

a matter of time after.. he wins on the basis of a popular vote. He has fans, you know.." Lord Medley notices things are rather distant on the other end. He swaps the phone onto his other hand.

"Er.. Ellie, are you there?" But Ellie's already passed out and lays sprawled across the floor. The phone a few inches away from her fingers.

"Er.. Ellie.. Hello... Ellie?... Are you there? ... Ellie? Are you there?.. Ellie..."

## About the Author

**Deniz Besim** is a thirty-two year old lady who lives in London and used to teach creative writing to adults. She enjoys reading fiction and sometimes enters short-story competitions. She self-published two poetry books in 2014 (<http://poetry-heaven.my-free.website>). She enjoys walking, swimming and playing tennis in her spare time and sometimes attends author readings.

