



**Northern  
College**



**GCSE English Anthology**  
Class of **2020-21**

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## GCSE Anthology - Class of 2020-21

### Notes on this anthology

Thank you to all the students who have given permission to share their work in this anthology. Copyright is retained by the writers. Any editing has been done with a light touch; students' choice of words was very much left intact, unless meaning or handwriting were unclear, and very little abridging was needed. Not every student's Tutor Assessed Grading pieces have been included; where these were unavailable, alternative work has been substituted.

Northern College is very grateful to Michelle, Craig, Georgia, Michaela, Lisa, Danny, Hayley, Lily, Joshua, Shannon, Leon, Philip, Francisca, Kerry, Sian and Michael for all their enthusiasm, innovation, resilience and adaptability, and to Joe for his unwavering support throughout the course. Congratulations to all of our wonderful students on gaining their GCSE in English Language and many thanks once again for making this academic year so special.



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## Introduction

In the usual course of events, you wouldn't be reading this. Normally, in the GCSE in English Language exams, students must complete two pieces of writing: a story and a piece of non-fiction writing, which could be a letter, a speech, an article or something else along those lines. Every year, students practise and practise their skills in organising their ideas and writing accurately and creatively, developing their spelling, punctuation and grammar and also their "writer's craft" - how to write so that they grab the reader's attention and hold it for the entire piece. Then they walk into the exam rooms in May or June and give it their all.

In January 2021, however, all GCSE and A Level exams were cancelled due to Covid-19 and we learned that tutors would be grading students' work. One of the surprising benefits of this for me as a GCSE English tutor was that, unlike in an exam year, I actually got to see the final written work that my students would produce at the end of their long and arduous journey through their one-year course. In a "normal" year, the writing that students produce disappears into the exam system, never to be seen again. This year, I had the utter privilege of seeing this excellent work for myself.

Northern College students come from a wide variety of backgrounds, sometimes without recent formal schooling. For adult students, the difference between the way that English was taught when they were last in school and the new standards can be a huge challenge. Our students come from all over the world and they all have responsibilities outside college. In the context of Covid-19, this year's group also experienced the additional stresses that lockdown put in their way: online classes, children to home-school, isolation, financial worries, illness and more.

Through the hard work and commitment of our students and their tutors 100% of them achieved grade 4 or higher (equivalent to grade C or above). At Northern College we run English and Maths courses for adults, to support them to re-enter education to gain employment, retrain or access university. These run at flexible times to suit learners' needs, including during the day and at weekends.

GCSE English and Mathematics at Grade 4 or above are considered to be the 'gold standard' for English and Mathematics qualifications for entry into University and by employers. This achievement by our students gives them a competitive edge when applying for jobs, as well as supporting them in their studies.

When you read the stories and letters in this anthology, you are not only benefiting from the massive personal commitment that these students made to the course, the college and themselves in order to gain this qualification. You are also going to read some of the most moving, entertaining, thought-provoking and, above all, well-written work that I have ever had the honour to mark. Settle down for a good read with a cup of tea: you are in for a treat!

Ruth North, lead tutor for English and maths Northern College, August 2021.

## Transactional Writing

Transactional writing builds a relationship between the reader and the writer. When we create a piece of transactional writing, we ask our readers to respond to us. Sometimes we challenge the reader, outrage them or annoy them, but more often we subtly cajole, persuade and flatter them to get them to think as we do, adjust their behaviour and even change the world.

For their tutor-assessed grading tasks this year, I asked the students to imagine that they had read an article in their local newspaper with the title, "Is it more expensive to eat healthy food?" and to write in to the letters page with a persuasive response. Our students took on this challenge, raising many personal, social and environmental issues in the persuasive and thought-provoking letters they produced.

## *The Passionate Campaigner* by M Chambers

Dear Editor,

I really enjoyed your article. "Is it really more expensive to eat healthy food?" about the availability of a vast array of fresh produce in our supermarkets and I agree that we are fortunate. However, this is not widely accessible and does not apply to everyone.

I am a parent and a foster parent and look after children, predominantly from poorer backgrounds. As a result I have first hand knowledge of the eating habits of some young people in the UK and generally it is not great. Having read and digested the article a number of times, I felt compelled to write to you with my feelings and ideas on the subject.

As a nation we are fatter than ever; it's a fact! Coronary Heart Disease (CHD) is responsible for over 63,000 deaths in the UK every year; that is one death every 8 minutes! One of the main contributory factors of CHD is high cholesterol; it has been medically proven that poor diet and lack of exercise are the leading factors of this. Childhood obesity is at an all time high and legislation has been changed, out of necessity, in recent years. In extreme cases, such as when their immediate health is at risk, it can be cited as a reason to bring a child into care.

Our supermarkets are neatly laid out with a rainbow of mouthwatering, exotic, tasty fruit and vegetables, but these often come with a hefty price tag. I do not believe this to be accessible, yet fast food drive through, deep fried, cheap, nutritionally poor food outlets are practically on every street corner. They entice people in with their low cost delights and leave them wanting more. It is a perfect storm of affordable sugar and fatty food addition, and in my opinion is one of the greatest tragedies of our time.

This vicious cycle of convenient, cheap, comfort eating leads to poor sleep and impaired performance. The consequence of this can have a negative impact on mental and emotional wellbeing and can trigger a destructive, downward cycle of eating fast or processed food, poor sleep, weight gain, bad skin and low mood. This can be overwhelming and a really hard pattern of behaviour to break. We are making failure appear affordable and so easy. Instead, we should be screaming from the rooftops, because there is a solution and it is within everyone's reach.

If we are all honest about the amount of money we spend on fast food, chocolate, crisps and fizzy drinks, it is astonishing, isn't it? Yet planning meals and cooking from scratch with fresh health produce is not nearly as expensive or difficult as it may appear. There are so many great books available like "A Girl Called Jack - 100 Delicious Budget Recipes" that demonstrate it really is possible to eat well on a budget. Jack's story mirrors so many families in the UK today. Her ability to turn her life around is inspiring and possible for anyone willing to give it a try.

We are sitting on a ticking time bomb of obesity and poor health if we continue. Our town centres and high streets are changing with many once busy independent shops now being empty. Surely they could be constructively utilised, for free if necessary, to provide cooking classes for low income families? Couldn't the government grant exemptions on business rates for independent traders promoting fresh food and healthy lifestyles, thus enticing healthier choices and making it even more available to those constrained by budget?

The way I see it, we either pay for it in mental health, heart and diabetes specialists in the future, or we make common sense and better choices now. Education and affordability are the key if we work together. If we shout loud enough, make the government listen and take action now, then we have the power to change the course we are on. That is a legacy I would like to pass down to future generations!

Yours faithfully

M Chambers

## The Resourceful Father by Craig Connell

Dear Editor,

I am writing to you regarding your article, "Is it more expensive to eat healthy food?". I am a father to five children, who still manages to ensure that everyone in his house eats reasonably healthily. This is largely due to the amount of home cooking I do. I realise that this is not something which everyone is comfortable with, or skilled at. But with websites such as BBC Good Food, and bloggers such as Jack Monroe, I feel that anyone willing to follow the simple instructions has the ability to create delicious, delightful dishes and desserts for their family.

I myself have recently begun renting an allotment, where I am currently growing a wide range of fruits and vegetables. This is something which I believe could benefit many families, as the rent and the seeds/plants are fairly cheap.

However, for those unwilling to get their hands dirty, a change in their shopping might help them to eat more healthily. Because, although supermarkets such as Waitrose, Marks and Spencer and maybe even Sainsbury's make eating healthily seem expensive, a trip to Aldi might just change this perception. Their produce is just as good as the bigger stores and it is a fraction of the price! In addition to this, people ought to try their local, friendly farm shops. They have an incredibly surprising array of produce, provided by some of the loveliest people you could ever wish to meet, at very satisfying prices.

It is because of all which I have stated thus far, that I do not feel it is more expensive to eat healthily. In fact, I feel that it is entirely conceivable that eating unhealthily might be more expensive. I feel that people have merely become accustomed to throwing some processed, poor tasting rubbish in the oven, sitting back and waiting for the timer to go off. But do they know how to cook? Do they realise just how much damage they are doing to themselves and their families?

The U.S. Center for Science in the Public Interest states that "[un]healthy diet contributes to approximately 678,000 deaths each year in the U.S.". This statistic is shocking! It is quite clear that there is an urgent need to educate people when it comes to both cooking and eating. There are serious benefits to eating healthily, and serious risks to not doing so. If we don't want to end up in the state which the US is in, then we must enact change now!

I feel that the government ought to step in and fund healthy eating schemes. This would give those with a low income the opportunity to learn how to cook healthily for less, and to learn how damaging eating processed rubbish can be.

I hope that more readers respond positively to your article, and that perceptions change.

Yours faithfully,

Mr Craig Connell



## *The Critical Thinker* by Georgia Dixon

Dear Editor,

My name is Georgia, I am a working parent and I am writing in response to your article, "Is it really more expensive to eat healthy food?".

Although I agree that some foods can be pricey, such as chia seed smoothies, avocado and sourdough bread, this is not what constitutes the basis of a healthy diet and it's not needed.

To call the notion that eating healthy is expensive a half truth is really to give it too much credit. It is, in fact, a lie that you could get away with believing or claiming, if it suited you. You could point out how a tray of sushi from a posh place compared to a burger from a fast food joint, or how a fruit and veg smoothie costs more than a coke, but again, different foods cost different prices.

You can clearly see that these ideas are objectively, quantifiably wrong. Yet it seems to some people to perpetuate the myth. People keep comparing the incomparable to solidify their notions, but educating people seems to be the best way forward.

We are conditioned to believe the lie that eating healthy costs more. The items that constitute the bulk of a healthy diet - whole grains, fruit, vegetables, lean meats, low fat dairy - are literally the cheapest in any supermarket.

Don't allow people to trick you into believing otherwise.

Kind regards,

Georgia Dixon.

## The French Chef by Danny Grant

Dear Editor,

My name is Julien and I am a frequent reader of The Barnsley Chronicle. I am a French citizen, but I have been living in your country for ten years.

On Thursday last week, I recently perused an article in the gastronomy section of your newspaper about healthy eating. In the article, you allege that it is extremely expensive for families on low incomes to consume a nutritious diet. However, I assure you that nothing could be further from the truth.

I am a nationally acclaimed chef and I have had much experience in educating people with limited financial resources how to eat nutritiously, while maintaining a budget. When I arrived in Britain I was unemployed and on a very reduced budget. However, I am a father of three lively children and I have always found it easy to find food at a low price and provide them with a healthy, balanced diet.

I have written a popular book on the subject of healthy eating, in which I have described simple recipes that anyone can cook from scratch. Enclosed with this letter is a copy of my cookbook, *A Thousand Budget Dishes and How to Make Them*. I would be happy for you to publish some extracts from my book in future gastronomy publications, alongside this letter. In fact, I strongly encourage you to do so.

I am sure you are suspicious of my motives for asking you to do this. You may be thinking, is this funny Frenchman asking me to publish extracts of his book to make more money? No, this is certainly not the case. I am not asking you to do this to promote my book or for my own self-aggrandisement. I am asking you to publish extracts from my cookbook in your newspaper, in order to re-educate British citizens on the negligible cost of healthy eating, so that impoverished people will no longer suffer the pangs of hunger and malnutrition from eating cheap, unhealthy foods.

Over the past ten years, I have noticed that foodbanks are becoming increasingly prevalent in this country. In my opinion, this is a tragedy. I contend that the only reason that foodbanks are needed is that people on low incomes do not know how to acquire healthy food while on a budget. I assure you that this is simplicity itself. I feel I must urge your readers to think twice before shopping at a supermarket. Instead, consumers should visit shops in their local areas. It has been my experience that this simple alteration of consumer habits would have numerous beneficial effects on society. I think this because people who shop locally would save money on food and they would no longer be forced to tolerate the deleterious effect that cheap, processed ready meals have on their health and wellbeing.

Furthermore, this change in consumer behaviour could have an advantageous impact on the local economy, as local sellers of healthy produce could increase their incomes and stocks exponentially if more people would buy food from them. Finally, this small change could alter the consumer culture of this country.



If everyone denied their custom to over-expensive supermarkets and bought nutritious food from local shops, this country's culture of cheap, unhealthy eating may be entirely forgotten. In its place a new culture of healthy eating could emerge.

My assertions are supported by my compatriot and fellow chef, Jean-Christophe Novelli. He argues "Healthy eating is about enjoying food and having the right attitude to the right foods, but equally important is to have respect and understanding for digestion." Novelli also says "Fresh produce is always available and we should use as much local produce as we possibly can." Therefore, I urge your readers to utilise three simple healthy eating strategies. Firstly, your readers should research budget recipes either in my book or online. Secondly, it is my belief that we should resist the impulse to do our shopping in supermarkets. Instead, we should embrace the opportunity to obtain low-priced healthy food at local shops. Thirdly, at mealtimes we should all chew our food slowly in order to encourage more efficient digestion. I believe that your readers deserve the gifts of healthy food and a healthy body. Do you not feel the same?

I hope your readers will respond positively and embrace these ideas,

Yours faithfully,

Julien Charpentier. (AKA Daniel Grant!)

## **The Busy Mum by H Grant**

Dear Editor,

As a loyal reader of the Sheffield Star for many years, I felt compelled to write to you after reading your article entitled 'Is it really more expensive to eat healthy food' on 7.6.21. As a single mother of two who works over forty hours per week. I found certain aspects of your article very helpful, but other parts slightly insulting and completely out of touch with modern-day living.

It is not the 1950s and mothers are not able to spend their days cooking and cleaning whilst their children play in the street. I arrive home at 6pm with two hungry children. I have a two hour window to feed them, bathe them, read with them and get them to sleep.

Whilst your suggestion of batch cooking is a great way to economise, it also does not take into consideration the limited time families have available. I want to make the most of our time together, not spend my weekends slaving over the stove.

I completely agree with your point that 'you are what you eat' and understand the importance of long term health and wellbeing. There are some excellent websites out there which help parents engage their children with healthy eating on a budget e.g. [cookingonabootstrap.com](http://cookingonabootstrap.com) and [cookingwithkids.org](http://cookingwithkids.org). Both of these offer quick, cheap and healthy meals. There are also some cheap and cheerful staples like jacket potatoes or beans on toast. These are some of my children's favourite options. It doesn't have to be fancy.

Throughout your article you refer to convenience food as being expensive and unhealthy. I beg to differ. Yesterday I bought a large chicken and mushroom pie freshly made at Cannon Hall Farm, for £4.50, and a floret of broccoli for 50p. That is a cost of £1.66 per person. My children and I ate a healthy dinner, and we still had our precious time together, without breaking the bank. Do you really think people buy convenience food because they are lazy? Or because they don't understand the financial benefits of batch cooking? People buy convenience food out of necessity.

Spending time meal planning and making pasta sauces, soups and pastries from scratch is not realistic for a lot of families, and you are in danger of alienating parents by making them feel guilty and inadequate. If you really want to help them, accept that modern day living needs to include convenience food and help us source healthy and affordable options, because they are available.

Kind regards,

Hayley Grant.

## The Thrifty Shopper by Lily-Anne Henbury

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am writing this letter in response to the article published in last week's Corby Chronicles - "Is it really more expensive to eat healthy food?".

I would like to share my difficult experiences of eating healthy food on a budget. Before I lost my job back in 2018, I lived a relatively healthy lifestyle and had a reasonably good diet. I never gave much thought to the cost of food and never budgeted for it. I'd often walk down to my local Tesco Express on my lunch break and buy a punnet of strawberries, raspberries and blueberries to snack on throughout the day and I would never give the hefty price of £8.40 a second thought. I did that at least twice a week, which worked out that I was spending a minimum of £67.20 a month on berries! Oh dear -oh dear. I can't even begin to express how sick to my stomach that makes me especially knowing that is now over half of my monthly budget.

My mental health deteriorated and eventually I was unable to work, I was no longer able to afford the luxury of those red, ripe berries and the natural blast of energy that came from eating them. Healthy and unhealthy foods play a massive part in mental wellbeing and eating well is essential for being well. Do you remember that documentary from years ago about the man who ate McDonald's for a month and became drastically poorly? It highlighted the biggest problem we have; fast food was cheaper and easier to access than fruit and vegetables!

Government guidelines advise that you should consume at least five fruit or vegetables a day. Do you know how difficult that is on a monthly budget of £100? Now, I am no fool. I do realise that there are cheaper places to buy fruit and veg but the difference in quality can be shocking. Down at Heron, you can pick up a punnet of small, hairy baby strawberries that have the nutritional value of a sock, for a pound.

As I said earlier, eating well is essential for everyone and I believe as a community we should know where to go for fresh, accessible, wholesome produce but not everyone does. When I lost my job, I didn't know any different to the eye-watering £2.80 punnet of strawberries, I just simply stopped buying them until I attended a farmers' fair last May. The farmers are desperate for local trade because at the moment, the farmers in Corby sell 95% of produce to supermarkets, who put a 80% markup on everything. This is a great opportunity for our local newspaper to spread the word about the local farmers that need our trade. Farmers markets run up and down the country and their prices are a lot cheaper than you expect. I urge you to reach out and advertise the resources that are so close to home and at such low prices too!

Eating healthy always feels difficult until you know how and what to do. I would be absolutely delighted to read more about cheap, healthy and local food in the coming issues of Corby Chronicles.

Kind regards,

Lily Henbury

## **The Nutritional Sociologist by Shannon Linaker**

Dear editor of the Northern Times,

I am writing to you in regard to your recent article "Is it really more expensive to eat healthy food?" As a nutritional sociologist, I put it to you that not only are your ideas on poverty and healthy eating a fairytale dream, they are downright degrading. I would like to extend my professional perspective to your paper in the hopes of educating you and your readers.

Firstly, I would like to discuss a view of what you consider healthy. You stated that "anything green is healthy and cheap enough". You may believe that eating vegetables is healthy, but it is not. In fact, a balanced diet which includes fats is healthy even though you stated "fats are why they are fat".

Secondly, you mentioned how cheap "healthy" food is. Everyone has different circumstances. Fresh food doesn't last even a week, therefore when it is all added up by the end of the month there is a large bill. Food that doesn't last also means extra trips to the shop. Some can only manage to get to their expensive local shop; some have no cheaper supermarket alternatives close by and some cannot leave the house.

When you take a step back and look at the wider picture, you realise it's not just about food choice. Please consider understanding a person's circumstance before judging them.

Best regards,

Shannon Linaker

## **The Encouraging Reader by Philip Neal**

Dear Editor,

I have been an avid reader of the Barnsley Chronicle for quite some time now and, as I was reading your latest edition, I stumbled across a topic that is very dear to me. It was the article about "Is it really more expensive to eat healthy food?". Healthy food is very important to our health and well-being. Recent studies in 2020 have shown us that 67% of men and 60% of women are either overweight or obese because of unhealthy or "junk" food. Over the years the country's vision about food has changed dramatically. We have gone from eating substantial and healthy food to eating more takeaways as people have found it easier and cheaper. It is true that going to a local McDonald's or KFC may be easier but it isn't considerably healthy.

Healthy food doesn't have to be expensive. People on a budget can still eat healthy and it won't have to cost much. Just a piece of fruit or some fresh vegetables, (even cheap frozen) every day could have some great benefits on your body, such as fewer heart attacks, fewer blood pressure problems and less weight gain. If more people try to cook healthy, beneficial food from scratch which would be less expensive than a takeaway or junk food it would put less strain on the National Health Service and save money for the UK government.

A lot of people in their local supermarket would bypass the healthy options of food as they could potentially be more expensive and look for cheaper processed food! More people than ever in the UK are suffering with diabetes. If people in the UK don't start changing to the healthier options then the number of people with type 2 diabetes could rise to over 5 million cases by the year 2030. I am hoping that by people changing their minds and switching to healthier options we can change the amount of people in the UK that are obese and lower the odds of diabetes. Also most people could have a better life and more energy.

So, I put it to you, Mr Editor, do we believe that people will see that eating healthier doesn't have to be expensive and persuade them to change their ideas and perspectives about cutting corners.

Yours faithfully,

Phillip Neal.

## The Self-Sufficient Mum by Sian Robinson

Dear editor,

I am a working mum of two, I run my own cleaning company and our lifestyle is pretty hectic, going from work to school, to after school club and back to work again, so cooking easy meals is crucial for us to find time to eat.

My children are five and eight and live a very active lifestyle, so they are always hungry and picking in the fridge. My weekly shopping bill can range from a hundred and fifty to two hundred pounds a week. Some weeks when I am low on money (being self-employed has its ups and downs) I sometimes have to put food on my credit card, causing myself debt for food, just so my children can eat health quick meals and healthy snacks.

Although I agree with points in your article, I also find myself disagreeing. For example, my sister eats unhealthy, has more children that I do and spends three times less than myself. One meal she cooks costs two pounds eighty-three pence and will feed her whole family - that's a bag of chicken nuggets, beans and a bag of chips, all frozen and processed food. If I was to buy a bag of potatoes, a full chicken and some veg to make a healthy meal for through the week you are looking at a cost of around eight pounds, so you can see why people choose the unhealthy option. My understanding of making healthy food cheaper would be to buy in bulk and make batches of food to be frozen in portion size, which you did touch upon in your article, but unfortunately people like myself can't afford to do this and some people don't have the freezer space to make this possible.

Maybe if you write an article like this again you could suggest growing your own fruit and veg? Maybe some backyard chickens? When my money is tight and I've already used my credit card for food that month, my chickens and home grown veg helps out massively. I can buy a bag of frozen prawns costing around two pounds fifty, go get the eggs from my chickens and pick some home grown veg and cook up a tasty healthy meal only costing me two pounds fifty. I can do egg on toast for breakfast for the week and only pay a pound for the bread. Having animals that can produce eggs and having a little bit of space to grown veg and fruit really does help me when I'm on a budget.

I would really like to see an article on how you can be more self-sufficient with growing your own food to help cut the cost of meals and I'd also like to see the article contain ways of doing this if you live in a little flat with no gardens. As you know flats are popping up like there's no tomorrow and I feel these people may benefit from something like this more than myself. I hope I will be reading something along these lines in the future.

All the best,

Sian Robinson



## Imaginative Writing

One of the challenges for many of our GCSE English Language students was overcoming their fear of writing creatively in order to complete the dreaded imaginative writing question. Far too many adults feel that they are not at all creative, that their writing will not be of a good enough standard or that they should be focusing on academic writing and other more serious matters. Many of our students were put off writing creatively as children in school. Grown adults often feel silly writing stories, as if they should be doing something more useful with their time.

At Northern College we believe that everyone is creative and that everyone is a storyteller; our students more than prove this here with their flair, imagination and skilful word-weaving on the following pages, in response to one of the following questions: "Write about a time when you met somebody new" or "Write about a time when something strange or unusual happened to you or someone you know". You are about to go back in time, to travel, to experience fear and dread, to be moved to tears and to have your faith in human nature restored.

### Lenny by M Chambers

Meeting new people is a fundamental part of the job we do, but not in the usual sense of being introduced or bumping into someone on a night out. As a foster carer, the first time we meet one of our little people is often when they are delivered to our door with little or no belongings and for an indefinite length of time. On the 4th April 2019 Lenny was dropped off at our house by his social worker. He was tall for his age, but skinny with scraggy hair and pale grey skin; there was a deep-rooted sadness about him. Children who have been immersed in the darkness of neglect, trauma and abuse often had a distant look about them. He immediately lapped up any attention and hungrily devoured any food he was offered: smiling broadly with the brightest and cheekiest face, he quickly settled into life in our house.

Lenny's was the most dejected and tragic of stories. The product of domestic violence and addiction, Lenny had ended up solely in the care of his father for the last four years. Mum had been incarcerated when Lenny was just a toddler and will not be released until he is an adult. His dad was wonderfully devoted, despite having been in the grips of addiction since his late teens. It was obvious he was not a well man; his eyes were small and deep set, his skin was grey and clammy. He too was tall, painfully thin and appeared older than his years; eye contact was not something he was comfortable with. This was a man who had fallen on desperate times but despite all of that he lit up when he saw his son. Love was never in question, but sadly love alone is not enough. He did everything in his power to provide the best care possible for his son, so it was a very sad day when his efforts were deemed to be inadequate and Lenny was removed from his care. In many ways, I believe this left him with nothing to fight for.

Three weeks after Lenny had been placed in our care, a social worker made an unannounced visit, something which is unusual but not unheard of. She appeared nervous as she sat Lenny close to her on the sofa. He was giddy to receive his visitor, as he loved attention. She looked directly into his eyes and spoke softly and slowly as she delivered the news that his father had been found dead at home the night before. He stared at her wide eyed like a startled owl, frozen in shock. There were no tears, no sound at all, he just stared in disbelief, processing those life-changing words that would undoubtedly stay with him and alter his life forever.

So we guided Lenny, our lost little soul, through the following weeks and months. We talked and he cried. He asked question and we listened, answering as honestly as we could, all the time wising and wanting to wrap this little boy up and make everything better, which of course we could not. As Lenny began processing he would ask questions like "So my dad is going to need a coffin, right? What do people wear in a coffin? Clothes, or are they naked?". I had never imagined having such candid conversations about death with a child. He was utterly remarkable and I will be forever in awe of his resilience and bravery, but also of his raw honesty and ability to just keep going.

On the morning of the funeral Lenny was in real turmoil. "I can't do it" he sobbed over breakfast. "I can't bear to see the coffin."

"I understand," I told him and we took one step at a time, and Lenny, in the knowledge he didn't have to, did his dad proud on an unbearably hard day. Having bonded so deeply with Lenny, now it was horrific having to watch him endure such pain, turmoil and uncertainty. Unrelenting grief prevailed, hope was in short supply and any moments of joy were quickly washed away on a tide of grief and guilt. We took one step and one day at a time until it was time to move Lenny on.

Moving a child on is always difficult, but letting Lenny go was by far the hardest. In the end, his aunt had come forward to care for him. It was permanence he didn't want, but was the right place for him. His family could share all the stories of his dad, his favourite places, funny stories and childhood tales. These precious memories were all things we could not offer him. A plan to move was put in place and when the day came, although it was a day we were dreading, Lenny went willingly, a bittersweet success.

As we hugged this precious boy for the last time, we were full of such mixed emotions. We watched as he jumped, smiling, into his aunt's car. When they left it felt as if he was taking a piece of us with him. Sorrow washed over us as we entered into our own period of grief and loss. We took comfort that he had been offered permanence with his kin, but he remained never far from our thoughts.

Two weeks later we took a call late one Friday evening. Another little boy was in need of emergency care, so once again we sprang into action and welcomed the next frightened little stranger into our home. Often the arrival of another child is the only cure for the pain and loss of one moving on. Every now and then we cross paths with a child that is so special that they imprint so deeply that they become a profound part of our own lives forever.

For Lenny, whose name has been changed to protect his identity, who without doubt is the bravest young man we have ever met!

## ***My Marvellous Magic Memories of 1977 by Lisa Dundas***

The golden glistening sun streamed softly through my pretty pink bedroom curtains as I gradually gained consciousness from my sumptuous slumber. This certainly was a date in the diary for our country to celebrate but little did I know what waited ahead of me...

Have you ever had that fluttering feel of butterflies in your tummy? I did on this occasion because of the exciting events due to happen. It was the joyous Silver Jubilee of our Queen Elizabeth II. I couldn't have imagined in my wildest dreams what wonderful, unimaginable happenings lay ahead.

"Brrrring brrrring!" shrilled my annoying alarm clock, whilst I tossed and turned, making my mind up whether to get up or just ignorantly ignore it and surrender back to my desirable dream. "Lisa, are you awake, dear darling?" my mum suddenly shouted up from the kitchen where the awesome aromas of buttery, fruity toasted teacakes wafted into my nostrils, making my taste buds tingle tantalisingly.

"Mmm..." I thought to myself, this was enough to entice me out of my daydreaming docility. "Yes, I'm up, raring and ready for breakfast, Mum," I shouted back, wondering whether or not she'd heard, due to her bustling busyness downstairs.

"Andrew, get ready now," remarked my mum to my bored constantly faced brother. "Our Lisa's on her way down so the bathroom is currently free".

"Oh, if I really have to," grumbled back my miserable, moaning brother. Brushing briskly past him, I noticed his face was like thunder. I hastily hurried into the kitchen as my belly felt like my throat had been cut and my mouth was as dry as the Sahara Desert!

"Lisa love, here's your favourite fruity teacakes, cereal, juice and tea on the table," said my mum, whilst multitasking as normal. "And try to eat it all, as we've got a busy day ahead and need to get you glammed up in your Gypsy gear straight after breakfast."

"Oh dear," I silently thought to myself. "Do I really have to enter this fancy dress competition? I feel like a duck out of water, compared to what Maxine will look like." Maxine, by the way, was a forever friend of mine, who was also entering the competition and guess what? As a Gypsy too, would you believe?

Maxine had looks like Goldilocks, perfectly pretty with cascading, sun-kissed luscious locks of hair complemented with crystal sea-blue eyes. Oh, not to forget her bright bubbling personality - ever-effervescent to say the least, whereas I was more of a shy little Red Riding Hood sort of a girl who kept quiet as a mouse, well most of the time anyway!

Mum suddenly stopped me in my thoughts when she shouted out, "You'll be fine, sweetheart, and will stun them senseless: it's the Silver Jubilee and everyone's going to be as happy as hyenas today!". This comment certainly lifted my sinking spirits and things started getting beautifully better.

Red, white and blue flapping flags hung from pillar to post down the avenue, bobbing in the breeze over the pretty party tables which were fancily filled with Jubilee memorabilia, all awaiting us to feast on the fantastic fayre of food. The sun shining, children chattering, neighbours nattering - oh the delights of close community spirit on such a prominent patriotic day.

Twelve noon arrived like a flash of lightning out of the sky, my head was whizzing round like a whirlwind, my heart beating ten to the dozen, my forehead frizzled from perspiration, and all because the fancy dress was about the commence. The exciting aura faintly faded away and was replaced by trembling, terrifying thoughts. I shakily stood onto the stage, frantically fretting, wishing the judges would just get their judging done and dusted so I could secretly slide away and no longer feel like a circus clown.

"Errrr errrr screech!" the testing of the microphone went through me like a jagged knife, the cacophony of it all made me creepily cringe.

"Third place goes to Callum the cowboy!" bellowed out the cheery cheeked judge. An uproar of clattering and clapping reverberated all around, making my eardrums agonisingly ache; then all went scarily silent.

"Oh no, this is going to take forever and a day," I thought to myself.

After what seemed an everlasting, endless few minutes, the judge annoyingly cleared his throat to announce "And next in second place is Sally the sensational superstar". Chaotic clapping commenced yet again to be interjected with "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, after lots of deliberation, a final decision has been made, which leaves the first prize going to..." then he hesitated, everything went deadly silent, not a murmur could be heard and suddenly "BANG BANG!" the drum boomed out "Our winner is the one and only gorgeous Gypsy!".



Well, that was that! A sigh of relief. I was forever thankful that the party could now go on and as I anticipated Maxine had dutily done her bit and yet again was the belle of the ball.

Just as I was stepping daintily down from the stage steps, to my sudden surprise, an unexpected, unnoticed hand slowly crept onto my shoulder. "Lisa, where are you going in such a rush, sweetheart?" I heard a voice beckoning behind me, only to attentively turn around to shockingly see the cheeky, cheery faced judge, pensively placing the rosy red rosette upon me.

I was absolutely gobsmacked, shell-shocked, lost for words and astonishingly amazed at what had just happened. That day ended with little Lisa lost for words. I was perfectly proud and although little in size, I felt as big as a bear. A super Silver Jubilee celebration to cherish. Mum was crying, big brother boasting and me as proud as punch!

These were my marvellous memories of that day!

## **Famous Family by Danny Grant**

I will always remember my first out of body experience. It was the most unusual and magical experience of my life. When you read of the following events, you may be forgiven for believing that I was suffering from hallucinations, but I assure you dear reader that the adventure I am about to relate was very real.

It was four o'clock in the morning when it began. One moment I was slumbering peacefully and the next, I woke up in agonising pain. It felt like my stomach was on fire. I was being lashed with burning waves of agony. In fact, the pain was so severe that I began to scream. My dad came running in to my room. "Danny, what's the matter" he said panic stricken.

"Dad, I'm in agony" I yelled. "There's something very wrong with my stomach. I need to go to the hospital."

"Ok son" said Dad reassuringly. "We'll get you there don't worry." Dad tried to help me to get out of bed, but every time I tried to walk I was hit by an excruciating wave of agony which made it impossible for me to move. Dad ran downstairs to get his phone and called me an ambulance. He ran back to me and stood anxiously by my bedside. "Don't worry Dan" he said. "The ambulance will be here soon." He seemed to be trying to reassure himself as much as me. Ten minutes later, the doorbell rang. As my dad opened the door, I could hear him having a rapid conversation with two people. Then I heard swift footsteps on the stairs. Dad led two men into my room. Dimly, I supposed that the two newcomers were paramedics as they were attempting to ask me questions. However, at that point I was almost delirious with pain and I struggled to respond to them coherently.

"Oh dear", said one of the paramedics concernedly. This doesn't look good. But don't worry, we'll get you to the hospital in a jiffy. You're going to be fine. The paramedic then gave me a canister of pain killer gas. I put it in my mouth and inhaled. As I inhaled the pain-killing gas, I began to feel a sense of complete peace, calm and tranquillity. It was then that something amazing happened. I began to feel a sensation of weightlessness, as if I was lighter than a feather. Then I heard an extremely sonorous buzzing all around me. It was like being in the midst of a beehive with a thousand angry bees. I found this unnatural buzzing sound very disturbing and endeavoured to roll my body away from it, but the more I tried to escape the buzzing sound the louder it became. As I struggled to escape this nightmare, I felt myself rising up off my bed into the air. I heard a terrifying popping sound which scared the living daylights out of me, then something seemed to give way and I was floating six feet in the air. I glanced down at my bed. To my utter shock, I saw my physical body lying there. The body on the bed was motionless and as white as a sheet. For a terrible moment I really believed that I was dead.

"Oh god he's passed out" said Dad in a horrified voice. The paramedic who had been talking to me lent over me and put his hand gently on my shoulder.

"Danny, can you hear me?" he asked. "Can you open your eyes for me?"

"Yes I can hear you. What's happening?" I said loudly, but no one heard me. I made several attempts to attract

attention, but my efforts were in vain. I yelled my head off, but nobody took any notice of me. It was like talking to a brick wall.

“He’s still breathing, but very shallowly” said one of the paramedics quickly turning to his colleague. “we need to get him in the ambulance sharpish. Help me get him on the stretcher Frank.”

“It’s not going to be easy Tom” said the other paramedic, “He’s a big lad this one.” With a lot of huffing and puffing, the two paramedics manoeuvred my unconscious body on to the stretcher and walked to the ambulance. My dad ran after them and I was left completely alone.

For a while I floated in the darkness of my deserted bedroom. I felt a complex plethora of emotions, from terror and hopelessness about my outlandish situation, to curiosity and excitement. I had read a vast amount of books about altered states of consciousness and I knew that I was having an out of body experience.

I then perceived a most peculiar sound. It was a sound of such enchanting beauty, that I was completely captivated. It was a song, which sounded like an old Celtic ballad.

It seemed as if I had heard this melody a long time ago. The song was quite faint, as if it was being sung from far away. Nonetheless, it pulled at my being in an insistent, urgent way. I could tell that the song was being sung by a man. He had a melodious, lilting voice and he was singing entirely in a foreign language. I was sure that I had never heard the words the man was singing in my life and yet, it sounded familiar. The urgency and power of the song began to lift me up towards the roof. A distant part of my mind suggested to me that I should be alarmed by what was happening to me, but I felt no anxiety at all. I felt calm, serene and completely at ease.

With the assistance of the magical melody, I flew straight through the roof. It was a most incongruous sensation, like swimming through thick molasses. Then I soared up into the early morning sky. For a few minutes, I hovered there in absolute amazement, surveying my surroundings. Above me, I could see a deep, blue sky and white, fluffy clouds of many shapes and sizes. I could also see the pale light of dawn breaking out from behind the clouds. Below me, I saw cars moving like children’s’ toys and the beetle shapes of pedestrians walking wearily to work. I felt as cut off from human concerns up amongst the clouds as if I were in another world. However, I did not have long to contemplate the perfection of this peaceful, arial landscape as the song was pulling at my spirit and I knew that I had to move on.

The song pulled me onward faster and faster, like a fisherman reeling in a reluctant fish. As I flew ever onward, I glimpsed many magnificent marvels. I saw the shapes of huge trees, whose fingers reached towards the sky. I saw immense mountain ranges clothed in snow. I saw vast oceans teeming with life. Then, I began to see things that I had never seen before. I saw gigantic castles and armoured knights on horseback. I deduced from these spectacular sites that I had left the world I knew and that I had travelled not only through space, but also through time.

Gradually, I began to slow down. As I descended through the clouds, I could perceive below me a verdant landscape of hills, valleys and trees. I landed in a valley of long, fragrant-smelling grass. I looked around in astonishment. I was no longer in my rainy, windswept town. This place was green and vibrant. The sun was shining brightly and the sky was a bright forget me not blue. As I gazed around in delight, I realised that all my assumptions about out of body experiences were erroneous. I always believed that the spiritual universe was a misty and incorporeal environment, but the area I was in showed me that I was wrong. There was nothing incorporeal about the grass I was standing on. I could feel it cushioning my bare feet. There was also nothing incorporeal about the trees around me, or the sky above me. My surroundings looked and felt as real as anywhere on earth, except that this place was far more beautiful than any earthly location I had ever visited in my entire life.

Directly in front of me was a green hillside. Cut into the side of the hill, was the entrance to a cave. Issuing from the cave, I heard the notes of the enchanted song which had summoned me to this distant place. It was more sonorous than ever before and I knew that inside the cave I would find the answers to all my questions. Why had I been summoned here? Who was the mysterious singer of the song?

I knew that these questions and more would be answered if I entered the cave. I felt an overpowering compulsion to go through this mysterious aperture and enter the cave. I have always been afraid of confined spaces and one part of my mind tried to warn me against doing what the song was urging me to do, but the melody was so beautiful that I was desperate to locate its source. So I overcame my reluctance and stepped resolutely into the cave.

When I entered the cave, I instantly saw that it was full of rainbow hued crystals. There were crystals all around me. There were crystals on the floor. There were crystals imbedded in the walls. There were even crystals on the ceiling high above me. In front of me, a forest of multi-coloured crystals met my eyes. Enormous crystals of every colour imaginable grew up naturally from the floor. They formed the shapes of trees, with crystalline branches twenty feet high.

For over an hour, I walked through the crystal forest. All the crystals in this place were large and garish. It was like walking through a rainbow. At last, I came to a vast chamber. I saw a green light emitting from it. I could hear a man's voice coming from the chamber and I knew then that he was the one who had plucked my spirit from my body and summoned me to this enchanted place.

"Enter, Danny" the man called cordially. "Enter and be welcome." Apprehensively, I entered the chamber to face my summoner. As I entered, a magical sight met my eyes. The chamber was covered completely with lapis lazuli crystals that were as blue as the sky outside. In the centre of the chamber, was a fire which was blazing merrily. It was no ordinary fire however, because it flickered with a bright green light. Tending the fire was an old man. He had a careworn, weather-beaten face, with emerald green eyes which shone with ancient wisdom. The man looked up as I approached and said affably, "Ah, you are here at last. Welcome to my crystal cave."

"I don't mean to be rude" I said shakily, "but who on earth are you?"

"I have many names" said the old man pensively. "The Romans called me Merlinus Ambrosius. The Welsh called me Merthyn Emris, but you may call me Merlin."

"What?" I exclaimed, "You're not the Merlin from the legends are you? The one who taught King Arthur?"

"Yes, I am the same Merlin from your legends and yes, I taught Arthur all he knew and aided him while he was King of the Britons. Come now and sit by yonder fire. I would have words with you and we do not have a great length of time in which to converse."

I was completely flabbergasted and awed to be in the presence of such a legendary figure. Slowly, I walked over to the old wizard and sat down beside him. The floor of the chamber was a carpet of leaves and animal pelts which cushioned me as I sat.

"Why did you summon me here" I asked?

"I summoned you here to give you healing. One of your internal organs has burst and you will die if you are not healed swiftly. Your mortal vessel is currently lying unconscious in a hospital bed. The healers of your time - you call them doctors do you not? - are attempting to discover the reason for your ailment, but my visions have informed me that they will not remove the route of your malady in time. You will die if I do not act now."

"But why me?" I enquired. "Why do you want to help me so much?"

Merlin looked at me contemplatively. "Yes" he said thoughtfully. "I think you have the right to know that at least. Danny, you are a distant descendant of Arthur Pendragon. It was not widely known but Arthur, good king though he was had many mistresses and many offspring come to that. Over the centuries, I have taken an interest in Arthur's descendants and try to aid them where I can. Lay down by the fire now. Remain still and silent. If I am to heal your physical body I must have complete silence"

"But how can you heal my body if it isn't here?" I asked sceptically.



"Ah" said Merlin, a knowing glint in his eyes. "There is a law of enchantment which I can manipulate. It is the law of sympathetic magic. This law states that a magician who possesses a part of a person's body or soul, can create changes in their body for good or ill. In my time, this law was used for great evil. Once, a sorcerer took some of Arthur's hair and burnt it. It gave him the most horrific headache.

I had a devil of a time tracking the sorcerer down and dealing with him I can tell you. But that was a long time ago, a mere footnote on the pages of history. I will now use this law for good."

"But how will you do that? I asked inquisitively.

"I will use the connection between your spirit body and your physical body" Merlin replied patiently. "Do you see the silver cord above your head? It is like a rope that binds your spirit to your body. Some who possess the aptitude can leave their mortal shells and travel into the spirit realms. Therefore I will heal your spirit body and the power of my spell will be transferred to your physical body. Now enough talk. Time is short and I must act now if I am to save your life.

I lay down and stared at the gently flickering flames. Merlin started to chant in a deep, rhythmic voice. As he chanted, the fire blazed hotter and hotter until the colour of the flames changed from bright green to a bright, dazzling purple. Then the ancient enchanter reached into the fire, withdrew some purple flames and draped them over me. The purple flames wound around my form like hungry snakes. Suddenly, I felt myself dissolving and the crystal cave became less tangible, as if I were perceiving it through a dense fog. I knew that I was leaving the crystal cave and returning to the physical world.

"Farewell young man" said Merlin faintly. "Live well." Then, the cave and its occupant completely disappeared. I found myself in a hospital room floating above my physical body. A crowd of doctors were congregating around it, talking grimly. As I looked down at my physical self, I felt an intense tugging from my silver cord. Then, quick as a flash I fell back into my physical body.

It has been a week since my spectacular out of body experience. I refrained from telling my dad or the doctors about it, as they would have wondered about my sanity and kept me in hospital for quite a different reason. But for as long as I live, I will never forget my meeting with Merlin in the crystal cave.

## ***Escape to Freedom by H Grant***

I gazed up at the woman standing in front of me, expecting to feel some kind of emotion. I felt nothing. She smiled awkwardly and held her hand out towards me. I shook it briefly and took a step back.

She was a striking lady with dark brown hair and a porcelain complexion reminiscent of a pot doll. Her clothes were unremarkable yet today, and her appearance was well kept. She didn't look like a 'fallen woman' to me, whatever that was anyway.

I wanted to speak to break the uncomfortable silence, but I couldn't think of any appropriate words. What does a thirteen year old boy say when meeting his mother for the first time?

"You can go and get your things together now, Alfred; you're going home," said Mother Superior haughtily.

"Home?" I repeated. I felt completely overwhelmed. I had hoped all of my life for someone to save me from this godforsaken place, but it was still the only home I had ever known. I couldn't understand why this woman had suddenly come for me now, after all these years.

"We need t'get a move on, Alf, we've got a train t'catch." My mother spoke softly, interrupting my thoughts.

"A train to where?" I asked in a daze. Before she had a chance to reply, the booming voice of Father Blaine came from behind me.

"Stop asking silly questions, Alfred, and get a move on." That was enough to get me to jump into action, and I scuttled off like a mouse being chased by a cat, without a second glance.

The dormitory was empty when I arrived, which wasn't surprising, as I could hear the familiar sounds of cutlery clattering and children chattering in the distance. Usually I would be devastated to be missing lunch, but I didn't give it a second thought.

It took me less than ten minutes to gather all of my possessions together. I had very few items I could call my own: a teddy bear, which I had arrived with twelve years previously, a pack of cards, some underwear, and my bible, which is given to every child who lives at the children's home, and which I definitely wouldn't be needing. I tossed it back into my drawer and slammed it shut, as my last act of defiance. I had decided years ago that if these monsters were serving God's will, then I hated him as much as I hated them.

I made my way to the vestibule and found my mother was already waiting for me. She smiled at me warmly. Her demeanour had completely changed and the awkwardness disappeared now that we were away from Mother Superior and Father Blaine. She pulled me into a tight embrace, my heart swelled into a sea of tears and I swallowed hard to hold them back. When she pulled away and looked into my eyes, it was evident that she was also fighting back tears.

"Let's get ya home," she whispered in a thick voice. She gripped hold of my hand like a vice, and walked me out of St Vincent's Boys' Home for the last time.

## Warping Drain by Joshua Lapworth

Have you been annoyed when you tried to take a short cut, but it turned out to be a dead end? This time I learnt not to be, and how two bad events can lead to something good.

The sky was bright blue and the sparkling sunlight was bouncing off the squishy mud and the dazzlingly bright beehive roofs. The flashy yellow flat fields around were alive with the buzzing of hundreds, no, thousands of insects that were all collecting honey.

I was checking on the health of my beehives and whether they were thinking too much about swarming. How was I checking on how the bees were thinking, you may ask? Well, by examining each comb closely, and the cells they were building on them, I could know what they were planning on doing next. It had been a successful day so far, but the bees were not very happy when I had finished looking at them that day. I packed my smoker, which I used to calm them down, my smoker fuel and my hive tool, which is only a piece of metal but, as its name suggests, you cannot do beekeeping without it, all into my backpack ready to go.

I didn't want to cycle the five miles on the designated tracks to get home when it was only three miles away: one problem, there is a dyke called the "Warping Drain" the width of a house that I would need to cross, but I'd heard there were some little bridges, so I thought I'd give it a try. I hopped on my bike and headed down this old, overgrown, deserted railway line in the direction of home. When I got to the Warping Drain there was no way across, so I had to turn around and cycle all the way back down this railway line that was miles from the nearest houses, back the way I came.

As I was getting near to my beehives, I could see a person in the distance near to the beehives, walking towards them. I thought, oh no I hope they are not going to sting her. I increased my pace to see what was happening, then I saw her flapping her medium-length brown hair around as if she had a bee stuck in it. I pushed the pedals down hard, trying to increase the speed my bicycle was going in order to reach her faster. By this time I realised she had a big, golden brown and black German shepherd dog with her, running as free as a bird off the lead, and I thought, oh, I need to be careful as I come up to her, otherwise I will be the one who might get seriously hurt here. By this time I could see she was tall and thin, with denim shorts. I slowed down as I got near, hoping not to scare the dog as I came up to her as quick as I could.

"Sorry, is a bee trying to sting you?" I asked.

"It's stuck in my hair," she replied.

"Shall I get it out for you," as I pulled up closer to her with my bike so I could reach her but trying not to let the handlebars of my bike swing and hit her as I let go of them.

"If you can, please," she said. I started rummaging through her hair in the area I could hear the buzz coming from.

"I'm Joshua," I said as I will still trying to find the bee that seemed to have buried itself deep into her soft, smooth, straight hair.

"I'm Jasmine, and this is Max", pointing to her dog.

"I've found it; it's already stung you, I'm sorry. They are my bees; are you okay?"

"It doesn't hurt very much."

"Do you want a jar of honey?"

"Don't worry about it, I'm fine," Jasmine said. "Come over here, Max, say hello to your new friend." Jasmine tried to get Max to come over, but he was too busy sniffing the grass to be too interested in the likes of me.

"Really, are you sure you are okay?" I said, being a bit concerned.

"Yeah, it's only a little sting".

"Where do you live?" I asked., wanting to give her some honey anyway. Jasmine pointed to the trees in the distance and said, "I live at College Farm".

"Oh, the one on that track as you come off the main lane on the right?", wanting to get some clarification.

"Yes, just round that corner."

"Will you be okay then?", posing to leave.

"Yeah," Jasmine said, so I hopped fully back on my bike and rode off down the track, leaving Jasmine there having just been stung. I couldn't stop thinking about her that day as I was concerned about her having been stung out in the middle of nowhere, and me just having left her: what if she did have an anaphylactic shock?

The next day I went to give her a jar of honey, and wrote a little note on it for her, thinking she's not going to be in. I go to knock on an old door that had lost half its paint, round the west side of the house, and I see Jasmine inside, and she waves at me to come to another door that is much more glamorous at the other side of the house. Jasmine opens the door, that is a bit stuck, with a beaming smile and says: "Do you want to come in for a drink?". I was excited and nervous, and went in.

I asked Jasmine, "How is your head today, where you were stung?"

Jasmine said, "It's fine, not bothering me today," as she rubbed her head where she had been stung, showing a face of insignificance. We sat down to have drinks and talk, and in a weird turn of events a month later, Jasmine was beekeeping with me. I never thought that two disappointing events could lead to something good.



## A Meeting of Minds by Shannon Linaker

Finally! The device was ready for human transportation. As the machine was initiated a blazing thunderous blast of energy enveloped the lab. Electric blue flashes with rapid bursts of fluorescent red illuminations lit up the teleporter, producing a majestic vortex of colour. The building trembled as if an earthquake had been upon us, and ears rang as the grumbling vibrations bounced off the walls. I was ready, I had studied and worked my whole adult life for this moment, the very moment to travel between dimensions. Legs trembling with fear, and heart thumping with nerves, I unhurriedly clutched the door handle and cautiously stepped inside the chamber. Gradually, I moved towards the vortex, took a deep breath, made my departure and shifted into the light.

All of a sudden, the background noise had stopped, the light was steady and the aura was calm. With my eyes tightly shut, I felt a warm tingle radiate across my body as if the sun was tickling me. A soothing breeze danced around my limbs, and an indescribable smell drifted into my nose.

"You have finally arrived! I have been waiting for you," a soft voice chimed.

Gently I opened my eyes. Stunned at the sight I beheld, my words were trapped in my gullet. "Be calm. I am you, just another version. I am the one that has been sending the letters and items through the void," she said.

A swift calmness came across me as I gazed into her deep brown eyes. She was right, well, kind of. She resembled me, but there were visible differences. Her hair the same golden blonde as mine, but decorated in a way I had never seen before, she had two horn-like structures wrapped in hair with long flowing braids adorned with precious-looking gemstones. Her body was decorated with coverings of colourful cloth hugging her torso, arms and thighs.

"Hello, so you're the one who has been communicating with me; this is amazing! How did you know we were the same?" I questioned.

"Yes, I was also conducting the same experiment, but I stopped when noticing this wormhole appearing and realised you had beat me to it. That's when I knew an alternative version of me must have beat me to it. She laughed as her eyes glistened and a pearlescent light reflected from her teeth.

At that moment I had felt the true nature of the universe. There were worlds of life, just not on other planets, instead, a different plane altogether.

There I was, conversing with another version of myself as if it was everyday life, and just as I gathered my thoughts my watch shook as my alarm sounded.

"Oh no! I have to go: the machine is not yet fully stable for human life. I must go now and return another time," I cried out. A sad expression drew upon her face, and she threw her welcoming arms around mine. I reciprocated, squeezing her tightly.

"I will be here when you come back. I too will work on stabilising the machine so that we can meet again. Here, take this," she explained as she handed me a small device,

"Goodbye for now!" I replied. Before it was too late, I rushed into the light of cosmic colours and in a moment there I was back in my lab. I stood still, staring at my work colleagues in shock as they glared silently back. I opened my clenched hand and observed the device. Just at that instant, a vibration took hold and the same soft voice came through.

"Hello! Can you hear me?" she shouted excitedly.

"Hello! I can! Can you hear me?" I asked, grinning ear to ear. She could hear me. She had made us a communication device so that we could continue to work on the project together. That day was the first time I met her, well, me, I guess, and it was a meeting that flourished over many more as we continued to interconnect and bond together.

## New Job by Leon Monfort

I was seventeen when I got my first summer job. I thought it was the bomb! I was going to be paid to go to a music festival. I didn't have to pay the tickets' exorbitant price, and, most importantly, I was going to be partying twenty-four-seven, even while I was working! Or so I thought.

I had found the job advertised online just days prior to the event, which was going to go on for five whole days and therefore required some sort of preparation, including finding myself essentials like a tent and a strong bag, but I didn't care. I was as excited as I could ever be. Suddenly, the world was a happy place, and I was reckless as I had never been. For the days prior to the event nothing mattered; I felt like I was about to hop into a new world... But there was one issue. Apart from the first call I had received, I had not heard from them since, and who were they, anyway?

A quick Google search revealed it was some security company based in a town near the location of the festival. "Ah," I thought, "I'm going to be security". Then I realised that I didn't know the role of the job until that moment, which could have been the first of many red flags. But I still didn't care; all I could think about was all the partying that was about to go down and in terms of their lack of contact, it was just a matter of awaiting for instructions. And instructions did arrive.

I had packed everything that I needed and I was ready to go. It was the day when I was supposed to start working and yet, still no signs of life from my employers. Suddenly, I heard my phone ringing. "Hello?" I said.

"Hi, is this Mark?", someone asked at the other end of the line.

"Yes, that's me! Who am I talking to?"

"Hi Mark, I'm Robert from Secureworld. I'm calling to remind you the location and time of the shuttle bus that will pick you up and take you to the festival". Remind me? I hadn't heard from them at all!

"Of course," I replied. "Where is the location and what is the time again?"

Robert paused for a few seconds...

"You will be picked up at the big Tesco car park at around twelve, is that okay?"

What do you mean, if it's okay? Do I have another choice? "Big Tesco" and "around twelve" - what kind of location details were these?

"Yes, that's fine. I'll be there then", I replied and hastily ended the call. The lack of suitability was obvious even to a seventeen-year-old. Nevertheless, soon enough I found myself on the way to the festival. As we approached the grounds of the festival all I could see was rows and rows of tents covering what only hours before was fields of grass full of sheep.

When we got there, the situation was chaotic, to say the least; the site exclusive for staff was a mix of half-built tents, staff buses and administrative encampments where we all had to check in in order to get registered. The security was minimal and everyone was untrained and unprepared for the job, with the exception of a few security veterans, who were easily recognised by their blue coloured wristbands and the fact that they wouldn't stop telling people their crazy job stories.

For me, this absolute chaos mixed with the uncomfortable friendliness of people on their first work day, as well as the good weather, was ideal. The idea of getting paid for listening to music and running around drunk was only becoming more inflated with this perception of disorganisation, but the truth was that sooner than I thought, things would get much too lairy.

After a day of partying and getting to know my co-partiers, it was time to start the first of these twelve-hour shifts. My job was to control the flow of people through the gates to one of the events; essentially, whenever I opened the gates hundreds of drunk, dehydrated and fun-thirsty teens would pour into the events, so I had to be careful. As well as this, I had to assist medically whoever collapsed in front of me. Somehow, I had found myself in a position of authority for which I was not prepared, with the job of overseeing the wellbeing of hundreds of festival attendees the same age as me as well as making sure my co-workers inside the events were not overwhelmed with the hordes of festival goers.

## Down in the World by Philip Neal

I had recently moved to a new area in the past. I remember walking round this strange place; it looked like nowhere I had seen before or could have imagined. It was a built-up area full of buildings large and small, and also some parts that looked more derelict. I found it quite strange, but was also intrigued to find out more about this unfamiliar territory. It only had one road going in and out and not many cars.

During the night time there were various noises to be heard, like the sound of foxes rustling through the bins for food or the noise of owls hooting in the cold, dark night sky. One morning, I was awaked by the bright beam of sun in my room, and as I tried to open my eyes I was momentarily blinded. I put my hand up to my face to shield myself from the sun. When I went downstairs I could hear the sound of the wood beneath my weight as though it could give way at any moment.

In my half asleep state I didn't notice a nail that was protruding from one of the bottom steps. As my bare foot came into contact with this, at first, anonymous object, I let out a loud shriek of agony and almost fell down the rest of the staircase, well I was definitely awake at that stage and was no longer in dire need of the morning caffeine. I hopped the rest of the way to the living room to bind the injury with a plaster. Most of the morning I was limping from the sustained injury, but by early afternoon the pain subsided. I dressed in a pair of bright blue jeans and my favourite Thundercats t-shirt and decided to explore the place that I had got myself into.

Despite the tall buildings, the area seemed quite deserted, and I could hear the sounds of birds making nests in the trees and searching for the morning food. I could feel myself turning in circles just trying to look at different aspects of the surrounding area.

Suddenly I noticed an old metal bench, which looked as though it had started to rust away over the years and an old man just sitting there in a green waistcoat, trousers that had different coloured patches at the knees and a long grey beard. The smell of old eggs and strong body odour made my eyes water.

"Hello?" I said in a weak trembly voice actually not knowing what to expect from this strange person.

"Hi there," he answered back.

As he smiled he showed off some missing teeth and the teeth he had were back like tar or treacle. I had to hold my breath while he was talking. I exhaled and then asked in a faint voice, as I had to hold my breath again, "How are you?"

"I am good" he replied still showing off the blackened teeth.

"What's your name?" I asked, slowly backing off a little to avoid the strong stench that this person was giving off.

"My name is Walter," he said, "Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too!" I exclaimed between breaths. "My name is Phil, I have just moved here, but now I am wondering where I am and what has happened round here." I actually felt faint and thought I was going to pass out. If this was what the guy was like outside, I seriously didn't want to be inside with him.

"This place is called Brainy Borough" Walter replied. It once used to be quite a fun-filled area, but now everyone seems to have left for other regions."

"So, what do you do round here?" I asked. At this point I had to put my hand to my nose and mouth to breathe.

"Well actually..." he started saying, a rather large line of drool dropping from his mouth onto his long grey beard. "I used to be Lord Walter, but then a few years ago I lost the big house I used to have and all the friends I had and have now been reduced to the old, weakened, feeble state that you see before you." The old man became quite teary by this stage and I started to feel a lump in my throat.

"Why was it that everyone left?" I asked.

"I may have been using state taxes to fund my gambling habit at the local casino," Walter answered. "I swear I thought that no one knew.

I didn't tell anyone, but when my accountant looked over the numbers that I should have had, there was

less money and I was confronted!" I had a look of horror on my face. I was flabbergasted, it was as though someone was using me as a puppet and had left my mouth open.

"What, how did, why, what?" were all the words I could muster.

"At first..." Walter started again, "it was all just a bit low key, but then it got out of hand and I was doing it more and more, I didn't realise how bad it had gotten until I was confronted and the news spread like wildfire!" My eyes were wide like coins and I was just listening intently to this now crazy story.

"There are still a few people around" Lord Walter continued "but none of them are my friends any more. I guess that I let the power go to my head a little and I really regret my actions." Even though I was quite taken aback by this shocking revelation I was now feeling sorry for Lord Walter. "Would you like to see my previous residence, Phil?" asked Walter.

"I would love to" I replied, feeling quite excited by what I would observe.

"I don't stay too far away from it, as it reminds me of a better time before I selfishly threw it all away" Walter acknowledged. As he tried to stand up his legs became shaky as though he was going to fall down. It looked like he hadn't eaten in days. He grabbed his stick and led the way down a long, narrow path. I was following him, but still had to keep two metres apart due to the strong stench of this man. At the end of the path I noticed a large building made of stone; it must have been at least 3 storeys high and looked like a house from the Victorian era. It had a lot of windows and a large metal door with a big round gold knocker. The upsetting thing was that now the door had a chain on it in a criss-cross action and a huge padlock firmly holding it in place, and also the acres of ground were beginning to look shoddy and unkempt.

"This house is amazing, Walter" I remarked.

"Well... it was" replied Walter with a huge sigh "until I got into gambling." This feeble man now started to cry. I felt so sorry for him that I held my breath and put my arm round him.

"I'm really sorry" I said between breaths, "it looks like you had a good life."

"Well I did" said Walter wearily. "I had people that worked for me and at one stage of my life I was respected and admired by a lot of people."

We started to head back to where Walter was originally sitting, though every now and then he would stop and turn his head back to look at his old house and try to reflect on the good life he once had. When we got back to the bench I helped him to sit down again. In the back of my mind I was thinking about how much I now needed to shower.

"Thank you for showing me your house, Walter" I said. "You are welcome to come and visit me any time".

"Well thank you for talking to me" replied Walter. He actually started smiling, showing off those black lumps of coal in his mouth.

I said goodbye to him and walked back to the house that I was not to call home for the foreseeable future. I felt like I had made a friend that day in Brainy Borough, and that is when I met someone new!

## ***Murder on the Dance Floor by Francisca Nzyimi***

I am the last child in a family of four. My elder siblings have all ventured into the traditional career paths of the law or medicine, just as my father had always wanted. He would always remind us at the dinner table that we had a family name to protect. He is an ex-official soldier in the military, and trust me, we always get to experience the extremes of his toughness even at home. My mother is a teacher in the local academy, and she has always helped me go around my studies even though I had no interest in the professional paths taken by my elder siblings. I found joy in dancing, ballet, playing chess and any other co-curricular activities besides being buried in books in school. My performance was average, not because I was dumb, but because I had better things to do in school. You know how they say about the last born, spoilt.

That was not as much, but I can vindicate myself that my parents were getting old and were not as focused on being tough on me as they were to my siblings. After all, those three had moved out, and I had the big old house all to myself. However, discipline was paramount in our home and I dared not cross the line.

The second term of my second year in high school had just commenced. I had decided to major in film and arts because this was next to close to my hobbies. Then the best thing happened in my life. An internal ballet school came to solicit good ballet dancers who would join their school to do ballet and still carry on with their studies. This was a fully-funded scholarship, and the best students would get a chance to join the prestigious institution. The inters candidates were subjected to different forms of interviews to get the best. I had participated in such competitions before, and this was not new. I knew luck was on my side when I emerged the best in their own opinion. This means I would stop attending my high school and join the ballet.

There was a mixed reaction, happy about my new move and nostalgic about leaving the friends I called home. I knew that I would miss school, regardless. My mother was married entirely to the idea of me joining the new school, but my father still wondered why I was different from my siblings.

On Monday morning, I had arrived at the gate of my new home. My mother and my teacher had accompanied me, as had been requested. The gate was more extensive than that of my former school, with the name embedded in it. The entrance was serene, with a front yard; post stones were placed side by side around the manicured lawn. It had tall buildings, and I could see myself already practising ballet on the rooftop while having an aerial view. The Principal and the matron accorded us a warm welcome at registration, and I officially joined as the newest member. I bid the two goodbyes, and the matron went to show me my cubicle, where I would keep my belongings.

I shared this with another lady who was, of course, out for classes. The morning section would attend our classes and in the afternoon go to practise ballet. The matron made it clear that discipline was paramount and, in the same breath, warned against any romantic relationships as this was equivalent to being expelled.

It was two o'clock by my watch, which meant that I was due in the practice room. There was no time to play mediocre, and so I had to catch up with the rest. The ballet teacher was the swiftest I had ever seen! How about the students? The music was sensational, to be honest. I was asked to purchase new attire, but I still did not match the rest, so I had to do this now with the help of Marcus, a tall, slender gentleman whom I later learned was the best in the school. You know the ego of being the unbeaten champion - you talk less, and carry yourself with an esteemed decorum.

The second day was equally good; I had begun getting the guys' attention while the ladies were keen to ask where I was from. Ballet was so prestigious that some parents had forced their children to attend the school. I also learned that I could secure a chance because one girl had left the institution unceremoniously and I was benefitting from the replacement process.

The second week I was no longer a visitor. Every morning the matron would remind me that my being here was a privilege and this statement was irritating - the reason I did my best to prove that I was equal to the task. We were then informed about competitions at the end of the month by our ballet teacher. Every day therefrom, we had vigorous training. Do you know of the seven ballet moves? Plié, sauter, tourner, glisser, extender, relever and elancer. And the five positions one had to master?



We were paired up, I with Marcus as I replaced Jane, the lady who had left the institution. This, of course, stirred up some uproar amongst the ladies who wished that they had a chance to dance with the lad.

Come the competition day, and everyone had their eyes on the prize, participating in the National Awards title and dining with the famous ballerinas from across the world. It was every man for himself and God for us all. In the spotlight, during the competition day, I stretched myself to do my best. I don't know about the rest, because when the result came out, not only was I in the top best three, but I had beaten them all at their own game, even Marcus, who thought he was the best.

You know what they say about passion; this was a day to remember. My star was bright so early, and most of the girls envied my glory. As the night of the competition rested easy, I took to the rooftop to get fresh air and to marvel at my success so far. The next thing was me screaming for help at the top of my voice. Marcus and his friends had conspired to throw me off the building, for I had posed a threat. It took the intervention of the matron else my life would have been cut short on that fateful evening. Marcus's father is a major sponsor of the institution, however, and I guess this is how the event is now water under the bridge.

I am now on a flight to the national competition with the two other best students, but I am scared to win. What else will he do?

## ***The New World by Kerry Roller***

The once-crowded gallery was now deserted, but the art still inhabited the walls, where once many would have feasted their eyes upon and agonized over the poignancy and emotions demonstrated through the creations of the artistic work. Drawn to a landscaped watercolour, peaceful at first glance, I reached out and touched the coarse material. All at once I heard a monstrous grumbling and gurgling sounds, and felt the ground shake violently.

I must have passed out. As I opened my eyes, my nostrils are engulfed with an overwhelming scent of the ocean, and I was more alert now at observing my surroundings. I glimpsed through the trees a magnificent panoramic view of hill formations and rocks, shimmering in an endless variety of colour. The sight of a waterfall plunging down the rock face, resting at the bottom in a lake of aquamarine, is breathtaking.

The edges are covered in a blanket of exotic plants and greenery untouched by civilization. This is extreme beauty with no signs of any dwelling places, unexplored and untraveled. Gaining momentum, I set off, knowing the feelings of a frontier settler like Christopher Columbus when he set out to prove the world was round.

## ***Brothers in the Desert by Michael Rose***

As I stepped through the doorway I looked up to the pale blue sky. The midnight wind must have blown the clouds away leaving the sun behind. I knew this was going to be a balmy summer's day.

I had left my apartment with my brother to look at hot ash formations in the Dead Sea. We had got out of the courtyard and saw the hustle and bustle of urban life, street vendors luring morning commuters with pita bread and falafels, cars lining up and down the road stuck in traffic.

We walked up the tarmac pavement towards the outskirts of town. I had packed a map and sandwiches in my backpack for the long journey. We knew we would be out all day walking under the summer sun. We side-stepped people who walked past in the opposite direction. We were followed by the odd stray cat wanting to get into the shade and away from the crowd.

After what seemed like hours I said to my brother "We will stop here for a bit". My brother stopped as I crouched down taking off my backpack; in one quick movement I pulled the zip opening my backpack looking for the map.

"Here it is," I said in triumph and unfolded it. I glanced at the street sign by the wall then looked at the map.

"Are we heading the right way?" my brother asked as he mopped his brow with the back of his hand?

"Yes, it's just a few miles in that direction." and I pointed my hand south east towards dry land covered in sand and scattered with rocks. I put the map back in my bag and continued walking.

The desert had replaced the town by late morning, with the sun bearing down on top of us. The heat was starting to have an effect. I could feel my forehead dripping with sweat, my lips were dry. I looked over my shoulder to my brother, who was a few steps behind with his head drooped lower than an apple dangling from a wilting branch on a small tree, dragging his feet and carving the desert with every footstep.

"How far away are we?" he moaned. I pulled my backpack off my shoulder and consulted the map carefully.

"It's still far away," I said, trying not to sound pessimistic. Looking at my brother's worn out face I knew we had to stop for a break.

We had walked a few more miles until we found a giant rock that could shield us from the burning sun that was staring down on us like demons firing red hot arrows at us as we stumbled away from its line of fire. We had collapsed in the shade. Desperate, I rolled to my left side and saw my brother laid spread eagled on the ground. I placed both hands against the sand and pushed myself off the scorching sand. I looked down on him.

"Water," he grumbled. To my horror, I realised I hadn't packed any drinks. I clasped my hand to my forehead and uttered a curse word. I scrambled to my backpack and consulted my map again to see the nearest source of water that could be found. Using the position of the sun I worked out it was three miles north-west of where we were.

Without delay, I set off in that direction, leaving my brother behind. After what seemed like a long time, I saw what looked like a stream. I had come across a wadi. But, there was a spring of water flowing on the other side. I stumbled across the wadi feeling the disturbed earth under my feet, but something didn't feel right. However, I had got to the fresh water. I then slung the backpack off my shoulder and pulled out a metal contained and filled it to the brim.

When I had got back to the wadi, I saw a broken sign on the ground. I bent down and picked it up. The writing had faded but it was still readable: Warning - Mines. I had not realised the wadi was a minefield. I could feel my heart thumping against my chest, my mind racing like a runaway train not knowing when to stop.

Suddenly I saw my footsteps, in the sand where I had previously been. I tiptoed across the wadi as carefully as I could, without thinking about anything else but my safety. Before I had got to the end I was about to put my foot down on the soft sand when I saw a wire and gently pulled my foot away from it. After a few more paces I knew I had got away from the minefield. I legged it back to my brother, running away from the minefield as fast as I could.

At last I got back to the rock. I told my brother what had happened. We decided to go back to the apartment, and call it a day.





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