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The New Gothic Review

stories that rot from the inside out

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WE DIDN'T HIRE MOLLY

Catherine Wilson Garry

Illustration by Andre Poise

Personal Information

On Thursday, we met Molly. Molly had a neat fringe and two perfect rows of clean white teeth that she touched with her tongue when she answered all the questions we asked her. She gave a presentation on an iPad that included colour-coded highlights and two graphs. She brought copies of her resume on paper that felt like silk. She had worked at three other marketing companies and had seen some noteworthy success with an Instagram campaign for cucumber and elderflower sparkling water. She showed it to us on one of the graphs on her iPad.

We asked some anecdotal questions, and she provided a list of hobbies that showed she was hard-working and upstanding: running, learning new languages, listening to podcasts. We made sure that at least a third of the podcasts related to Business and Management before we continued with the interview.

Molly seemed to really want this job, and that made us feel good. We smiled. We took notes. Later, we laminated and filed them so what she gave us would be perfect forever.

Interests

When we spoke with Molly's references on the phone we made a note of the adjectives used to describe her and created a dynamic Word Cloud in the shape of an

arrow pointing upwards (because success is paramount to us and an arrow pointing upwards is a clear symbol for success). The most common words that came up in our conversations were:

- "Friendly"
- "Funny"
- "Hard-working"

Molly's mother told us that when Molly was a child she once put her younger brother on the front of her bicycle and cycled them both all the way to the hospital because he had broken his arm. It took her over an hour and her feet blistered but she got him there. Her brother still has a scar on his elbow he would show when prompted. This added a sense of self-sacrifice to Molly that we approved of.

Molly's morning alarm was one she set on her mobile phone, using the default Samsung ringtone "Retro Beep." Her normal waking time was 6:00 a.m., and her standard time to get out of bed was 6:14 a.m. She would eat a nutritionally balanced meal and perform roughly thirty-six minutes of yoga before showering and dressing for her commute.

We agreed we found yoga as a morning activity heartening. One of us mentioned that yoga, as a form of exercise, has been shown to extend the average worker's time in the workplace by roughly 2.5 years. If Molly retired when she was 67.5, she would faithfully give us 38 years of her life. We took a moment to think of those 38 years. They stretched ahead of us like a laden buffet table.

However, when we dissected her later over co-working coffee and team tear-and-share, we agreed that—if we are being picky—we wished she would rise more quickly after waking. We do have a poster in our office that says "The Early Bird Catches the Worm" after all. It's our mantra. We decided to put a cross next to her name for that.

Achievements

We went to Molly's house and assessed the décor. Aside from her sofa and wardrobe, her taste could mostly be described as mid-century modern. We analysed a sample of Molly's hair we found on her pillow. The results indicated she was exposed to an average level of air pollution and used Head and Shoulders shampoo.

When we scrolled through Molly's Facebook profile we found a mixture of photographs.

- 23% involved her on, or near, the beach.
- 45% involved some sort of food stuff.
- A further 14% contained romantic partners, though it was hard to ascertain if they were past or present and what Molly's particular preference, or "type" in a partner was.
- The remaining 18% we filed as miscellaneous.

Molly's profile also indicated some of her favoured locations: businesses that served combinations of food and alcohol, quiet running spots, a particular brand of coffee shop that served cold drinks with swirled whipped cream on top.

When we called Molly and offered her the job she was very excited and made a joke about having earned herself a takeaway that night. We let that one slide. She posted a photograph that weekend on her Instagram holding a glass of champagne. She seemed happy to join us. We liked that. We like Motivated Team Members.

Work Experience

Four weeks later, a woman showed up for her first day at work. We thought that it was Molly—but by the end of the day, we noticed something had come over her. She had the same neat fringe and two rows of perfect white teeth, but she didn't look quite right. It was as if someone had put a photograph of Molly at the bottom of a swimming pool, or behind a pair of test lenses at the opticians. It was hard to look at Molly. We all concluded, via our Friday Fun Google Hangout, that our eyes naturally slid off her, as if they couldn't examine her for too long. Throughout the office we could hear her talking to herself in low, harsh tones. We made a note of that but shredded it later. It was probably just first day nerves.

The next day at lunchtime she heated up a "foul smelling meal," according to Molly From Sales. Allegedly, it dripped black off the plate and melted through the inside of the microwave. Molly From Sales told us she showed her the fridge full of complimentary drinks—that had raised employee satisfaction by 7.8% in our last survey—and offered her a sparkling water. Molly From Sales said she wrinkled her nose.

"Oh no," said the New Molly. "I can't stand the stuff."

And then she laughed a very deep laugh that sounded very strange and very not like her. Or at least Molly From Sales claims.

We put up a poster in the break room about Communal Kitchen Etiquette. Molly From Sales probably has a limited palette—she only ate two types of sandwich at the last Team Away Day—but we can all agree that fish in the microwave is not really acceptable. We have faith that Molly will learn and adapt.

Skills

The New Molly, as a general rule, worked in silence. She didn't talk about her weekend or past holidays or share anecdotes that made others laugh. She would just sit at her desk in almost a trance-like state. Eye-tracking software indicated her pupils rarely, if ever, left the screen. We noticed and we approved.

Outside of work, Molly still seemed to visit her favoured businesses to acquire food or alcoholic drinks or coffee with whipped cream, or run in her quiet spots in the woods. and, perhaps, we imagined, scream for release. She had friends and went on dates and phoned her mother once a week. There was no trace of work Molly in personal Molly's life and vice versa. We liked it that way.

Sometimes, when Molly sits at her desk, we notice that her eyes roll back into her head. When Molly From Sales asked her if she was okay, she said she was just thinking. She was working on the caption for a new pair of shoes on the website. We understand finding the precise wording can take a lot of concentration. We made a note that perhaps Molly should present her unorthodox method of focus at our next Wellness Wednesday.

We cannot argue with her productivity. She doesn't get up from her desk and meander over to a colleague to answer a question, she merely turns her head all the way round. She doesn't take notes during meetings, but can precisely repeat back what was said—in the exact voice someone else said it. Sometimes her lips didn't even move.

Education

A couple of days later, Molly arrived in her standard outfit of all black—a colour we had assigned to all employees as our research indicated it was associated with productivity—but we noticed that as the day went on her hems became damp. The

sleeves on her jacket, shirt, and the bottom of her skirt were all damp. The wetness crept up the fabric as the day went on until Molly was soaked. When Molly From Marketing offered her a lift home so she could change, she narrowed her eyes for a couple of seconds before turning back to a spreadsheet. Molly From Sales said she touched her on the shoulder and the wetness touched her back. She submitted a formal complaint.

Molly went into the break room last week and put a bowl of salt in the microwave. Then she sat with a wooden spoon and ate it all, gagging occasionally. Small mounds of salt and spit crusted onto her keyboard. She cried afterwards, as if it hadn't had the intended effect. We made a note, but we do respect all employees' dietary requirements. We ruled this was probably just a new form of body hacking tailored to optimise her work performance.

Molly looks tired. We approached her desk for a chat and offered her a cup of tea, which she knocked off her desk. She screamed "What have you done to me?" before her eyes rolled back again and her tongue poked out of her mouth in a sharp triangle. She used its point to drink the tea drop by drop from the carpet.

Molly went for three bathroom breaks yesterday at 11:17 a.m., 2:51 p.m., and 4:31 p.m. This seemed a little low for our projections of a normal adult female. Molly From Accounting said she went in after her and found a dead raccoon floating in the toilet, but she didn't have sufficient evidence that the New Molly put it there. Perhaps a raccoon had already been living in the bathroom. We did some research and discovered raccoons aren't even native to this country, so it was a complete mystery how Molly would even acquire one to put there. We didn't want to push it any further, as Molly could have easily turned around and claimed it was our raccoon and we'd have nowhere to go from there. We asked Molly From Accounting to submit her concerns in writing and left it.

Molly seems angry. Anger can drive people—when sharpened to the right point.

Qualifications

Molly's life at home changed. She now had no alarm on her phone, seeming, in fact, to no longer need sleep. She didn't cook nutritional meals any more, preferring roadkill or whatever she could find in the woods. We ruled this showed problem-solving and resilience. Her energy seems higher now. She has thrown off whatever she

was fighting against. This is the exact kind of character development we like to see in the workforce.

She no longer performed yoga but still meditated. She would spend hours in her bedroom, sitting perfectly still as if waiting. As if in conversation with someone.

She no longer visited her favoured businesses—she was too busy with work. Sacrifices do have to be made. We used a pie chart to calculate when would be a good time to promote Molly. We wanted to strike the perfect balance between keeping her before she upskilled and moved onto another company and not letting her ego inflate too much.

During her appraisal, we phoned her relatives and friends again and turned their responses into a Word Cloud. The most common words used in conversation about her had changed from "friendly," "funny," and "hard-working" to:

- "distant"
- "odd" and
- "help"

The last one was often pronounced with an exclamation mark—"help!"—before the phone line would promptly go dead.

A week later, Molly From Accounting complained, again, about dead animals in the bathroom. Now, it wasn't just one racoon but six deer, six street dogs, and six squirrels. We were forced to point out that Molly only ever brought in a smart handbag and lunchbox into work, so it would be very difficult for her to transport a so-called "menagerie of death" into the bathroom. We don't use those bathrooms anyway, as we have our own floor of the building. But, we don't like conflict between Molly and New Molly. This case has proven that Molly From Accounting can be unfocused, and could learn a lot from Molly.

Community Engagement

We had booked such a lovely Team Away Weekend for the whole company. First, we gathered together to draw a big chart containing lots of words we thought were really important for our working. Some of our favourites included:

- Communication
- Enterprise
- Progression

- Focus
- Excellence
- Functionality
- Competency
- Impact

In the evening we shared a meal together at a nice restaurant, which we covered twenty percent of, not including drinks. Molly ordered red wine and poured it down her face until it pooled like blood in her lap. She ordered a steak blue and then sent it back for being overcooked. The waiter brought back some raw meat and she swallowed it whole.

Molly From Marketing looked tired at the breakfast buffet the next morning, so we asked why. We were concerned because tiredness can reduce productivity by up to 64%.

"I didn't sleep a wink," Molly From Marketing broke down, tearfully. "New Molly was screaming in her room."

We patted Molly From Marketing on the back in a comforting manner and explained Molly was probably just celebrating the end of year accounts. We agreed it was good to see Molly let loose and engage with her peers.

That afternoon, Molly pushed several colleagues off the Teambuilding Rope Course. We admired Molly's determination, zeal, competitiveness, and energy, but we made a note she may have to develop her teamwork. She didn't even apologise for Molly From Customer Satisfaction's broken leg, even though the bone poked through her trouser leg and she needed stitches.

Despite her flaws, we think Molly will make a fine addition to our management one day. It is a dog-eat-dog world, after all.

References

Molly came in to work today and, we can all agree, it went downhill from there. We shut ourselves away in the back office when the chanting started. The last thing we heard was Molly From Sales screaming, Molly From Accounting running out the door, and a drip of some kind of liquid on the company-branded linoleum.

The company branded linoleum cost us £2.81 more per square metre than the default option because it displayed our logo, so we regretted every drop we heard hit

the floor. Between the pile of animal carcasses in the bathroom, the new pictogram murals, and what sounds through the wall like an unconventional form of mass staff restructuring, we're not sure what to tell Molly The Cleaner, although we hired her expecting a strong stomach.

When we found her a few hours later, Molly's hair was thick with blood. Her eyes completely black. Bodies lay crumpled in odd shapes. She had taken everyone's computer monitor and put them together to make a huge screen which was automatically running the accounts through a series of algorithms. Numbers flowed down the screen, thousands of cells knitting themselves together into the shape of arcane symbols. She was painting a large flow chart on the wall with Molly From Marketing's blood. She was chanting our Motivational Phrases over and over again: "Vision!"—the photocopier spat out a death mask of everyone in HR—"Togetherness!"—blood dripped from the end of her nose—"Brand story!"—the computer screens howled and screamed in unison.

We held an Emergency Manager's Meeting to discuss mass recruitment for the now vacant positions. We all agreed that Molly's performance, whilst promising, had an unfortunate ending and we won't be keeping her past her probationary period. On reflection, she wasn't equipped to keep up with our fast-paced work environment.

We have learned from our mistakes. We have a new strategy now and know exactly what kind of candidate we're looking for.

We can't wait to work with you.



THE DICTATOR'S BRIDE

Rebecca Ferrier

Illustration by Jana Galushkina

It is always 32°C. The reptile house at Edinburgh Zoo maintains this temperature through heat lamps, rinsing us—the snakes, lizards, turtles, and me—in red. The light sweats across each tank, feeding station, the hygrometer device (for measuring humidity) and the collar to my would-be-cream-now-red blouse. I slip the security key into my Burberry jacket and hook the garment beside the door. A corn snake heaves its curls against the palm I offer, turtles straw their necks into corrugated submission, and a chameleon blooms its throat (called a gular) at the morning's rhythmic disturbance.

Last to be greeted is the crocodile.

All scientists love the dangers under their cultivation. A virologist admires the virus raging his cells to ruin, while a volcanologist sees beauty in the venting magma-ash that binds her lungs to stone. It is closeness to power. A good poison to open a vein, to become poisonous yourself. For this same reason, I adore Gabriel and through adoration I am as dangerous as he is.

We arrived at the zoo two months ago, simultaneously, as though fate had tied our paths. He is a Florida native. Sightings had been reported for more than a century, each one describing a reptile with a horizontal split down one marble-milk eye. After terrorising the inhabitants along the Myakka River, the half-blind beast was apprehended by the same crew famed for documenting Gustave (a Nile crocodile, reported to have killed three hundred people along the Ruzizi's muddy banks).

Gabriel's name means "strong man" and—*Oh*—he is. He could swallow me whole. Quite neatly, in fact. I see death in his head, terror in his jaw, and charisma lying as duck fat on his tongue. And I see success, a scientific wonder to be discovered in his muscled mass. Indeed, he takes a starring role in my research on post-venomous evolutionary cell structures. As a woman, I need a male subject if I wish to garner praise. Shoulder-pads, heels, and a pantsuit does not quite cut it.

Gabriel's teeth are sharp and cut through everything.

His tank is parallel to my office. It is large enough to allow him room to move, pace and slink below the water. Through the glass divide, I can see his favourite rock to lounge upon, the brackish reed-whipped corner where he sleeps, and the torso-sized hatch where I feed him. Each time I glance his way, which I do, often, I swear he smiles. One good eye creasing, teeth on show, too many teeth to broach correction.

"Beautiful," I call him.

His snout comes to meet my palm on the tank's other side and his muzzle leaves a latticed-skin mark. Although there are other reptiles and amphibians within the hot house, there are none like Gabriel. He is the only one I have not touched, cannot touch. The glass stands between us. I hate it and I think he knows that I hate it. I think he knows more than I give him credit for.

I was not always a herpetologist. Before I studied his kind, I held palaeontological tendencies. A child in a lime green diplodocus tee-shirt eating watercress at the dinner table with a herbivore's slowness (I had patient parents—academics, naturally). Later, I learned about raptors, took falconry lessons, and wore talon marks upon each wrist as a symbol of commitment. From fossil bones to birds, I soon turned to their living relatives: *Crocodylia*. Alligators, caimans, gavials and, of course, the crocodile. An evolutionary miracle of streamlined propulsion, brackish-built glands, and a triangular snout pointing—always—to hunger.

Sometimes, to me.

FIELD NOTES, 2ND SEPTEMBER 2019, REPTILE HOUSE, TANK #7.

THE DAILY ROUTINE BEGINS AND ENDS WITH FEEDING, USUALLY CHICKEN, FISH AND OFFAL. HOWEVER, THE ZOO'S USUAL SUPPLIERS HAVE RUN INTO DISTRIBUTION ISSUES AND I SUPPLEMENT GABRIEL'S RATIONS WITH SUPERMARKET MEAT (TESCO'S FINEST).

I give the best cuts to Gabriel. He would know if I didn't. I am certain of this. We eat breakfast together, he in his tank and I on a chair beside it. Granola for me, herring or perch for him. In the evenings, I prepare chicken for us both. Gabriel takes his time with each meal, though only if I watch him eat it. Alone, he is monstrous. Scythes a whole carcass, blood clouding in a lazy peony below the waterline.

FIELD NOTES, 7TH JANUARY 2020, REPTILE HOUSE, TANK #7.

WHEN OBSERVED, HE CAN BE GENTLE.

Today, we have been together six months. I have no assistant for my research and do not want one. This way, it is only Gabriel and me. There is a habit I have developed. At feeding time, I place my whole arm inside the hatch, rather than using the mechanical gripper. It brings me closer to him. Gabriel is tentative when he takes a bite, tame as a dog. Have I domesticated a crocodile? Perhaps, though I would not be the first.

I buy a mattress for the facility. It allows me to watch Gabriel without end, for I can sleep and work and never leave him.

When I change into my night clothes on the first evening, I find scales pressed onto sock soles and freckle-flicked along my arms.

FIELD NOTES: 25TH FEBRUARY 2020, REPTILE HOUSE, TANK #7.

HE WATCHES ME UNDRESS. IT MUST BE THE MOVEMENT THAT TRANSFIXES HIM

HOW CAN I EXPLAIN CLOTHES TO A CROCODILE?

If ever I cannot sleep, I watch him dream. His back legs twitch when he muses on swimming, while his mouth clicks when he fantasises about eating (he does this often). There are other rhythms I look for.

One night, however, he does not dream.

FIELD NOTES: 26TH FEBRUARY 2020, REPTILE HOUSE, TANK #7.

GABRIEL IS SICK. HE WILL NOT EAT.

I call the specialist vet. He cannot visit until tomorrow. I cannot wait that long. With coaxing—bullying, I suppose—he gives me advice. Tells me how to obtain tranquilizers. Provides the dosage needed to sedate the crocodile. And the one required to kill him, should I need to. Gabriel listens to the last part on speaker and I swear he grins.

I do as instructed and, despite my concerns, there is a thrill. I finally get what I crave. Now, I stand at the volcano's edge: I touch Gabriel for the first time. He is hemp-rough and cold. Patiently, I lure him into a pen and hide drugs inside a *Tesco: Finest* chicken. It takes an hour until he is sedate enough. After that, I slide the pen onto a wheeled platform and navigate him to the Reptile House's main chamber, where there is ample space. Fifty tanks surround us, stacked against the curved walls, their red lights constant and humming encouragement. The pen unfolds around us in a star and Gabriel is its centre, blinking slowly. I carry out tests methodically and quickly. I fear with each passing moment that I did not get his drugs right. Although I am not strong, I manage to take his temperature. His bulk shifts as easily as though he were still in water, as though his barely conscious form knows, somehow, that I endeavour to help him.

We have grown close, Gabriel and I.

Ah, he is *big*. Plated, cool and shelled in thick armour. No, he is *huge*, with a muscled back and snap-crack brutality, sleeping. I had forgotten, with the glass between us, how impressive he is. Gabriel lies upon his spine, docile as a lamb. I lean against him to take his temperature, hips over his, straining across a wide, wide stomach. This is *power*, isn't it? Straddling a century-old beast who lies within the mercy I grant him.

In goes the probe to his cloaca. It is wired to a unit which reports his temperature in seconds, lest my own mammal warmth affect his cooler blood. Cloaca means 'sewer' in Latin. It is the outlet where a reptile's intestinal, urinary and genital tracts open.

Huff.

His nostrils quiver.

Huff.

A breath against my thigh.

Hu—ff.

All tests come back negative and his illness, if ever there was one, vanishes overnight.

FIELD NOTES: 27TH FEBRUARY 2020, REPTILE HOUSE, TANK #7.

I FOUND TRANQUILISERS, THE PILLS I THOUGHT I'D FED TO GABRIEL, UNEATEN IN HIS ENCLOSURE THIS MORNING. EACH ONE WAS SPAT OUT BESIDE THE FEEDING HATCH.

Several white pills, marred with tank scum, mock me. As does Gabriel. He winks (I know he cannot wink, though he does) with his one good eye. It dawns on me: during the long hour we spent together as I drew his blood and stroked his tail and palmed the dip between his nostrils and pressed against him—belly to my belly—he was awake.

He could have killed me. He didn't.

I tell a friend and she mistakes me. Assumes I'm talking about a man and uses the words "narcissistic relationship" and "manipulation tactics" and I do not correct her.

Instead, I wonder if she means me or him.

I cannot sleep and drag my mattress to Gabriel's tank. We lie there, he in the water and I on the floor. Our bodies are split by a thick translucent barrier. I cannot tell you what we talk about, as we do not talk in words.

Curiosity,

with a tail tilted, head tilted, question tilted, asked by him

Gabriel

all in italic.

FIELD NOTES: 1ST MARCH 2020, REPTILE HOUSE, TANK #7.

I UNDRESSED FOR HIM.

I deem it unfair to lock Gabriel in a tank. In warmer months, he is moved to a large outdoor enclosure, an open lagoon, where he rolls and writhes and moans his superiority to an audience. *Exhibitionist*. It is barely beyond winter and he is restless. What else can I do? I open the feeding hatch, angle in a ladder and watch him scale it with a grace I would never have given a crocodile. Then again, he is more than that. Gabriel is not as reptile as a reptile should be. Perhaps it is his age, advanced, which has given him humanlike characteristics.

He roams the Reptile House as I work. Bellies the corridors, easing his frustration along the polished cement floors. If ever I close my office door, he bumps his tail to the frame and lips his nostrils to the keyhole with a sound like breathing sand.

I learn not to close the door.

He rests his head upon my lap during online meetings and warms his throat against my legs. When he is hidden beneath the desk, no one need ever know what we do.

Huff, he says. *Sniff*, he says.

I find another salmon scale between my thighs and I shut him in his tank after that. It is a betrayal and he hates me for it. Ripples widen our distance as he paces and swims and paces. I do too. I take to marching beside the other tanks, whose occupants are much less interesting than he is. Always, Gabriel's one good eye watches me as I watch him.

I take two moorhens from the local pond to offer as an apology. I leave them in his feeding hatch and he keeps them alive for days. One evening, while I watch, while he knows I am watching, he eats them. Using his conical teeth, Gabriel leaves feathers in the feeding hatch for me to wear. White ones, the colour of his broken, creamy eye.

It is a peace offering and I take it and I release him.

FIELD NOTES: 28TH MARCH 2020, REPTILE HOUSE, TANK #7.

YOU CAN READ THIS, CAN'T YOU, GABRIEL?

I stave off inspections through frantic emails. Invent a rare disease and isolate us. Alone, in the Reptile House. I avoid calls and texts, decline invitations to eat out: I cannot eat unless he watches. By this time, I think I am amphibious. He is rarely in his tank now, he is always with me. By day, we swim, forming a circle, a tail-eating Ouroboros.

Still, he hungers.

All I have given is not enough.

His tail slaps the door's frame even when I do not close it.

One night, I hear him. Crawling to the mattress I sleep on, leaving his favourite rock to come to me. He is heavy and his three-lidded eye—the good one—works open and against my own. I pull up my nightdress.

All the mercury he swallowed in Florida waters has turned his tongue to mirror shining. In it, I see myself, naked. His belly is a mosaic against my soap-softened skin, cloaca to cunt. Afterwards, I wear the same netted marks he leaves against the tank.

There are fish scales—hundreds—glittering over me.

It is always 32°C. The reptile house at Edinburgh Zoo maintains this temperature through heat lamps, rinsing us—the snakes, lizards, turtles, and me—in red. The light sweats across each tank, feeding station, the hygrometer device (for measuring humidity) and the collar to the crocodile's would-be-cream-now-red blouse.

Gabriel slips the security key into my—no, his—Burberry jacket.

When he returns from the outside, a place I cannot recall, he will feed me *Tesco's Finest* chicken, stroke my back, fuck me against the dirty glass and call me, "Beautiful."



THE CHIMES OF GRAIG TREWYDDFA

Rhys Owain Williams

Illustration by Joseph Gough

Sometimes Jamie thinks about what he'd do if he inherited his nan's house, which walls he'd knock down. He'd probably have them all go, strip the wallpaper and put that laminate flooring all the way through. Make the downstairs open plan, like they do on those TV shows where the people have too much money. He knows it's not nice to think like that because it's imagining what he'll gain after his nan has passed away, but sometimes your mind just goes there. He would never inherit the house anyway, must be about seventh in line after his father, uncles and older cousins. Still, all this dog walking can't be hurting his chances.

It's been six months since Grandad died, the day he finally gave up the fight feeling both like yesterday and years ago. Nan seems to be doing alright though, says she's glad of the nights getting lighter again—the reflected sun staying a bit longer in that dark living room at the back of the house. Jamie's started visiting more often these last few months, now he can drive himself. She tells him he doesn't need to come by so much but he can see she appreciates it, especially him taking the dog out at night. It's a chance to see his Uncle Peter too, who always seems to be there fixing something or emptying the dishwasher. Jamie's dad is happy to just send Nan a text to check if she's alright. Even Jamie, with his generation's aversion to phone calls, knows that's not on. Not for someone of Nan's age, who can't make out the words on the screen with her bad eyes.

He calls in every Thursday after football training up the AstroTurf—it doesn't finish until eight but Nan doesn't seem to mind, she's always been a night owl. Has

some microwave meal warmed up waiting for him, or homemade soup from the freezer. Then three desserts: fruit and ice-cream, a piece of cake, and finally a bar of chocolate to eat while he takes the dog for a walk. A yappy little Yorkie named Ziggy: the name given to him at the kennels they got him from two months after Grandad died. Nan said the house was too quiet, that she kept listening out for Grandad moving around upstairs. Uncle Peter sings lines from the song whenever the dog walks in the room: 'Ziggy my boy! *So where were the spiyyduzzz...*' Nan doesn't really get the reference but as soon as Ziggy starts howling she smacks Uncle Peter with the paper, tells him to stop winding the poor dog up. You can see the grief hasn't left them yet though, even in these lighter moments. Jamie's felt sad, but he reckons it sits heavier on Nan and Uncle Peter. You sort of expect to lose a grandparent, most of his friends are down at least one. He can't remember crying, not even when his father sat him down to say that Grandad had finally gone.

As soon as Jamie finishes the last bite of his microwave lasagne, Ziggy starts jumping up at him, his claws scratching across his bare leg. The little dog hasn't been around very long but already the Thursday walk has become a ritual, and Ziggy knows that as soon as Jamie puts his knife and fork down it's time to go. Nan tells him to let his food go down a minute, so he watches a programme about some posh flower show with her before finally giving in to the yapping, scratching dog.

Bored of the same circular route down to Vicarage Road and then back up past the school, tonight he turns right, drags the dog past some unfamiliar scents to a set of steps that leads to the housing estate behind Tan-y-Lan Terrace. Nan still calls it the 'new estate,' but it must have been here at least fifty years now, if not more. At the top of the steps he's met with a row of pebble-dashed houses, a terrace of sorts but not like his nan's. Joined together in groups of five, these houses stretch the length of the quiet road, continuing around its curves at each end. He guesses there's forty or so identical houses, with more beyond them. Old enough to remember it not being here, his grandad held a grudge against the estate being built on Graig Trewyddfa until the day he died. Used to go rabbiting up there, he said, when it was all fields—'catch something for my mother's pot.' But then the diggers came, dug up the rabbits and made a human warren instead. Jamie never really understood what his grandad meant by that—a 'human warren'—but walking through the estate now he begins to see what the old man was getting at. It's a maze, he thinks, every house and street looks the

same. Dark too, the old streetlamps not yet replaced by new LED ones. The whole estate is washed in a dim yellow glow.

It's not *late*-late, but there are barely any lights on in the houses—just the colours of television screens bouncing around darkened living-rooms. Through an open window Jamie hears the beeps of the ten o'clock news intro and realises he should get back soon. Ziggy only needs a short walk at night, and Nan worries if he's out with him for too long. He can hear her saying 'I thought something had happened to you'—the same line every time, never clear if she's being serious or not. Jamie wonders what she would think if she knew about him coming home from town in the early hours of the morning. She couldn't though, not even his mother knows what time he really gets in. He's mastered the quiet turn of the key in the lock, the climbing of the stairs using only the outer bits of the boards.

Him and his mates are meant to be out again tomorrow, so he checks the group chat to see if anyone's posted any plans. Just a link to a football quiz from Lloyd, and an audio message from Lewis. He'll play it when he's got his headphones in later, not wanting to subject the quiet estate to whatever Lewis has sent him. It's probably that sex-noise prank again, the one he once tricked Lloyd into playing out loud in Geography class. He posts it in the chat at least once a month. Lewis knows Jamie visits his Nan on a Thursday and he wouldn't put it past him to be that sick. He gets off on the embarrassment of others. Jamie opens the football quiz and answers the first few questions before getting bored and closing it down. He'll have another go when he's in bed later.

When he looks up from his phone Jamie realises he's kept walking in the opposite direction from his nan's house, so he turns around and starts making his way back towards the steps. As he does, the sound of an ice-cream van's chimes echo across the estate. It's gone ten o'clock. He stops in his tracks and finds himself saying 'bit late for ice-cream' out loud, before feeling stupid when the only response is Ziggy's identity tag clinking against his lead. The little dog looks up at him expectantly, before turning away and exhaling loudly through his nose. Do dogs get exasperated? The chimes continue playing at intervals, somewhere behind him towards the top of the estate. Jamie knows the song is 'Yankee Doodle' because his grandad used to sing the words as the van went past the house when he was little: *Yankee Doodle went to town, a-riding on a pony, stuck a feather in his cap, and called it macaroni.*

He expects someone to come out of one of the identikit houses, see what's going on. He knows Grandad would have been straight out on the doorstep, ready to have a go at whoever was disturbing the peace. But nobody on the estate seems bothered. In fact, the houses are in complete darkness now, the television screens turned off. Jamie suddenly feels very alone, exposed. As he starts walking again the chimes get slightly louder, as if the van is descending the estate toward him. He feels the muscles at the base of his neck contract, each downy strand of hair standing on its end. This is stupid, he thinks, it's just an ice-cream van—its driver returning home after a long day at some event. But still he finds himself picking up the pace, Ziggy breaking into a run to keep up.

Then the chimes stop, right in the middle of the verse, and the estate takes on a deathly silence. Jamie thinks of the chapel of rest he visited his grandad in, the way the cushioned walls dampened any sound. Just him and Grandad in the room, his younger brother waiting outside the door for his turn. The way that he felt silly talking to the shrunken, jaundiced man laid out in the coffin, the man who couldn't talk back. And not wanting his brother to hear what he was saying, so each word coming out quieter than a whisper—so quiet that the words were barely being said at all. He feels it again now, that absence of sound. The whole world on mute.

Jamie reaches the steps back down to Tan-y-Lan, or at least where he expected them to be. But as he turns the corner towards them he's met by a chain-link fence instead, stretched across fir trees and fly-tipped plastic. He brings up the Maps app on his phone, but only the square he's currently in will load. No signal. All of the houses around him look the same, there's nothing he can use as a landmark. He retraces a little up the road, hopes to see the steps jammed in between two groups of houses. But they never appear, the gaps only leading to pitch-black back gardens. He must have walked further into the estate than he thought, not realising the winding route he was taking. He decides to carry on past the fence and the fir trees, walk round the curve at the other end of the road and hope it spits him out somewhere helpful.

Around the curve the street extends steeply upwards, until it ends with another street crossing it at the top. It feels wrong to be heading up an incline when he knows Tan-y-Lan Terrace is below him, but he can't get back down to it without the steps. He keeps checking his phone to see if the signal has returned, but it's still only showing the tiny square he's currently in, little uniformed blocks of houses either side of his

pulsing blue dot. He stops to see if he can zoom out on the map, but outside of his square it's just an infinite unloaded screen. He turns the phone off to see if that'll fix it.

As the phone powers down Ziggy lets out a low growl. At first Jamie thinks the dog is just tired, that he's ready to go home, but as he looks up the street he realises it's because there's a man stood at the top, facing away from them. Jamie begins walking towards him, thinking he'll ask him for the way out, but the estate is silent and there's no one else around. Those ice-cream chimes have put him on edge. He hangs back for a minute, weighing up the pros and cons. There's something odd about this man, about the way his silhouette looks just beyond the yellow lamplight. He's wearing a hood for sure, but it's oddly-shaped – a baggy triangle. . The man's sleeves billow out, and as he begins walking Jamie sees the lower half of him trail behind like a long skirt. He can't help but think of the stories his grandad used to tell him about the robed monk that haunts Graig Trewyddfa, how Grandad and his friends would see him walking towards the old church in Llangyfelach if they stayed out rabbiting too late. Used to be a monastery up there see, Grandad said, built by Saint David himself.

Jamie watches the strange man walk across the top of the road and disappear behind the house on the corner. He realises he's been holding his breath. Fucking ridiculous mun, he thinks, it's just some bloke in a tracksuit that's too big for him. Still though, he isn't sure if he's glad or not when he reaches the top of the street and the man is nowhere to be seen. He must have gone into a house, he thinks, but just like the street below there isn't a single light on. Jamie imagines the man crouching behind a garden wall or an electric box, waiting to jump out at him, and so walks off in the opposite direction. He turns his phone back on but the map still looks like the blank grid paper they give you in school. At the end of the street is another curve—upwards again, away from Tan-y-Lan. It's almost half-past ten now. Nan must be readying a search party.

Just as the road he's walking up begins to plateau out, the ice-cream chimes spring back into life, resuming at the point in the verse where they'd abruptly ended: —*a pony, stuck a feather in his cap, and called it macaroni*. They're below Jamie now, and somehow ahead of him, as if the van is coming towards him from a different angle. The jangling chimes echo down the gaps in between the groups of houses, amplifying the thin tune. He isn't really sure why, but Jamie turns to walk back the other way,

disregarding the hooded man who might be hiding in wait for him. But as he turns the chimes seem to move too, and now they're above him again, somewhere at the top of the estate. *Yankee Doodle went to town, a-riding on a pony, stuck a feather in his cap, and called it macaroni.* No matter which way he turns the ice-cream van seems as if it's coming towards him. Jamie has this odd unshakeable feeling that he shouldn't let the van find him. That if he sees it turning a corner, driving towards him, something awful will happen.

Just as he's about to pick a direction and start running, the chimes stop as abruptly as before. Only this time they aren't followed by a deathly silence, but instead by the sound of the final note reverberating across the estate, breaching each opening it can find. Jamie isn't sure how echoes work, but this elongated sound feels wrong. Out of place. Suddenly he wishes he'd paid more attention in Physics class, tries to remember something—anything—about sound waves that can help him. Does the long note mean the van is moving away from him or towards him—or that it's stopped moving altogether? Does it mean anything at all? Hoping his subconscious will come good with a key bit of info, he decides to keep on in the direction he was heading before the chimes returned. If the street he's on doesn't dip down again towards the steps then surely it must climb up and out of the estate. There has to be another way out of here, some link to a main road. He doesn't care how he leaves the estate, just as long as he leaves it.

As he reaches a fork at the end of the street the note finally stops reverberating against the houses. The deathly silence returns. Jamie isn't sure which is worse: a sound that feels wrong or no sound at all. There's no time to decide though, his need to leave the estate is beyond desperate now. He lights up his otherwise-useless phone, sees it's almost eleven o'clock. He's been out for over an hour. Nan must be going frantic. Jamie wonders if she's worried enough to ring his mother, admit to her that she's lost her little boy. Still a baby at times, in both his nan's eyes and his mother's eyes, despite the fact he's old enough to drive, drink, vote—even move out on his own if he wanted to. He has to find a way off this estate, can't stand the thought of the drama he's causing in the house somewhere below him. But each street he walks down looks the same, the only difference being whether it curves up or down at its end. There's still no sign of the steps. As Jamie frantically strides across the estate in search of them, Ziggy starts whining, pulling back each time he jerks the lead to hurry him

along. He knows he should pick the dog up really, but remembers the little nip he gave him when he carried him past that big Alsatian a few weeks ago. Ziggy will just have to put up with this for now, he'll make a fuss of him later.

Jamie's legs begin to feel hollow, two empty stalks carrying him past rows upon rows of sullen houses, an unabating stream of pebble-dashed yellow. The repetition of checking down each dark gap is making him feel sick. Still no signal on his phone, but each time he checks it another chunk of minutes have disappeared. 11:08. 11:14. 11:21. Ziggy pants heavily at his side. The situation feels hopeless. As he turns down another curve he begins looking at houses rather than gaps, deciding which one looks the most welcoming. He's seriously considering it now, knocking on one of the darkened doors and asking whoever's inside for directions, or to use their phone to call his nan. As he settles on a front door flanked by rainbow pinwheels and garden gnomes—the first burst of colour that's penetrated the dim tungsten glow—he spots them. Suddenly, finally: the stone steps emerging from a larger gap between houses. His escape from the dark estate. As he powers toward them the tinny nursery rhyme strikes up again—louder, and somehow quicker than before.

Yankee Doodle went to town, a-riding on a pony, stuck a feather in his cap, and called it macaroni.

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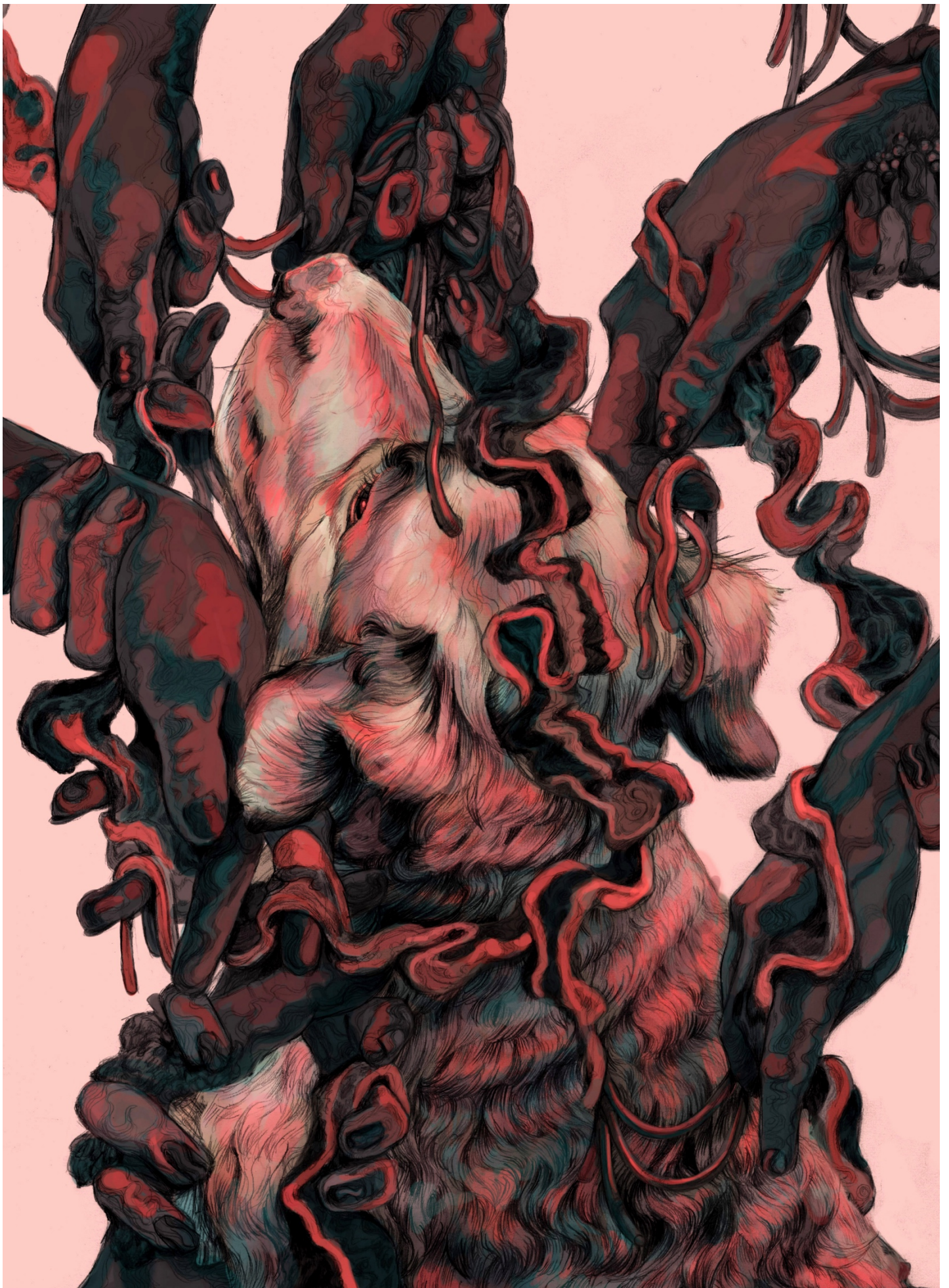
The song surrounds him, echoing off each flat surface of the estate. The distance between him and the steps seems endless. And he hears another sound now too: the low rumbling of an old diesel engine. He doesn't need to look around to confirm that the van has finally found him. He can hear it turning slowly onto the street, the sound of its squealing axles tightening the muscles in his chest, making the follicles on the back of his head prickle. Then, as the van's headlights hit the curve at the other end of the street, he sees him. The hooded man. Illuminated briefly, Jamie catches a glimpse of the face beneath the hood. It's shrunken. Jaundiced. Familiar. The man begins walking towards him, towards the steps, slowly but deliberately. Jamie considers

turning around, facing the ice-cream chimes head on instead, but the safety of Tan-y-Lan is so close. He can outrun him. He picks Ziggy up, the small dog whimpering in his arms as he runs full pelt for the steps, the hooded man and ice-cream van closing in on him from opposite ends of the street. He reaches the steps just as the man's face is about to come into better view beneath a streetlight, races down them as the sound of a diesel engine rises above the deafening ice-cream chimes behind him. He doesn't look back, keeps running down the steps and up Tan-y-Lan Terrace until he reaches his nan's house and only when he's on her doorstep does he stop to put Ziggy down, try to catch his breath and compose himself. The song has stopped playing, or at least he can no longer hear it. Neither of his pursuers have made an effort to follow him down from the estate.

Tan-y-Lan is quiet, but not silent. Jamie can hear a television somewhere in the terrace, see lights on behind drawn curtains. When he finally opens his nan's front door she's standing there waiting for him, and that's when the tears come. Pouring out of him, an unstoppable flow. Nan puts her arms around him, asks him what's wrong but he can't get the words out. Doesn't actually know what started him off crying. And getting lost on the estate, the ice-cream van, the hooded man—it feels like it didn't happen now. Or that it both did and it didn't. He drops the dog lead and Ziggy walks off into the house with it trailing behind him. Uncle Peter must have gone home because Jamie doesn't hear him singing David Bowie as the dog trots into the living room. He can't stop crying—the tears seeming to come from deep within him, rising up his back and collecting in his shoulders. His nan just keeps holding him. 'It's OK love, it's OK,' she says finally, 'I miss him too.'

Eventually the tears come to an end. Nan makes him a cup of very sugary tea and he drinks it in silence on the sofa. 'You should go home now *cariad*', Nan says, 'Your mother will be wondering where you've got to.' Jamie nods, tells her he'll just use the toilet first. At the top of the stairs he opens the bathroom's airlock, steps into a room filled with the smell of lavender soap and talcum powder. And, ever so faintly, the scent of a man's aftershave. While he washes his hands his phone lights up, the signal finally returned. A message from his mother checking if everything is alright, and another from Lewis asking what the plans are for tomorrow. As he dries his hands he avoids looking at his swollen face in the mirror, though as he turns to leave he catches his reflection in the bathroom window. The window is closed and double-glazed, but

as the toilet cistern finishes refilling he's sure he can hear it above the bathroom's new silence. Faint and strained, yet unmistakable—that familiar song still playing somewhere behind the house, on the darkened mass of Graig Trewyddfa.



ENORMOUS WEIGHT

Simon Ewing

Illustration by Julia Plath

Content Warning: Themes/ Images of Disordered Eating

Mary's stomach growled all through the funeral. After the service she drove straight to a McDonald's and ordered two Big Tastys with bacon, two portions of large fries, a box of chicken nuggets, and a large Pepsi. And then, in order to make it seem that she was ordering for more than just herself, she ordered a second Pepsi. It was her right. After all, it was *her* boyfriend who had died. On the floor of their remarkably expensive kitchen, fitted with an Aga cooker and beautiful granite dining table, it was *her* boyfriend who had writhed, gagging and contorted, before giving out completely.

That was in the spring, and by early summer she still found herself buying food for two. She would cook for two and eat it all. Cooking was not the right word. Cameron had been the cook. Mary could only overcook and undercook. She was unable to retain measurements and conversions. She boiled when she should have simmered. She often found herself looking blankly around at the various appliances Cameron had left behind—at the curry station and bread maker, the popcorn machine and the three-tier steamer—as though they might tell her what to do.

But she had been happy to sit on the kitchen step while Cameron cooked. He would bring her teaspoon samples of sauces, fillings and mixtures, as if her judgement

was that of a ruthless monarch. When she smiled and called it delicious he would clasp his hands together and offer thanks to the ceiling. And it was always delicious.

Now that he was dead, she bought tins and oven meals he wouldn't have allowed in the kitchen. This is what he used to say at the supermarket, when she tried to place such items in the trolley: "Not in my kitchen." So often did he say it, and so much did it amuse her, that whenever he did or said anything she found disagreeable—whenever she found him urinating with the door open, or yawning without covering his mouth, or reaching for one of his awful '70s records—she would say it too: "Not in my kitchen."

But now he was dead and she could eat what she wanted. She moved into a smaller flat where she ate canned spaghetti for breakfast and cereal for dinner. She ate when she wanted to, and sometimes when she didn't. Her appetite had no respect for conventional mealtimes. It required a constant vigilance for which she didn't have the effort. Often she got up in the night to eat a chocolate bar or a pastry she had bought during the day. It confused her, because she had always guessed you would eat less, not more, when you were desperate, when you were grieving, when you were desperately grieving. It was not the hunger of one who has not recently eaten, because the eating was so constant that she had always recently eaten. Beyond her understanding, she could eat an entire tub of potato salad during an advert break, and often did. Neither was it the hunger of someone craving comfort, because since Cameron had died she knew she could never again experience comfort. And it could not be the hunger of the carefree and happy, because she could not be carefree, could not be happy, now that Cameron was dead.

By the end of summer she had gained enough weight that she could take hold of herself with both hands—her belly, her sides, under her chin—clutch the flesh and pull it away from her body, let it go and watch it quiver. She would do this in private whenever she could, first out of fascination, then through habit, and finally as an activity on which she depended, one which she could stop only when the skin became tender and raw.

For many years before Cameron's death she would have described herself as curvy, but her weight gain until that point had been a protracted campaign, a pound-by-pound siege of the lean form she'd known in her teens. In comparison her current

situation was relentless warfare. It consisted of midnight ambushes from crisps and varied dips, dawn raids of the fridge for delicatessen meat, evening skirmishes against slices and then loaves of bread loaded with honey or jam.

Food packaging piled up. To avoid judgement she took her bin bags across the street in the early hours, depositing them in the bins of strangers. Soon after returning home from one of these expeditions there was a frantic knocking at her door. She opened it to a neighbour she sometimes saw pulling her children down the street. She was clutching Mary's bin bag.

"I watched you," she said. "You thought nobody could see, but I was waiting behind the blinds. I know this neighbourhood. I have three children. What will you say for yourself? Will you apologise?" She shook the bulging bin bag. "I have a good mind to empty this all over your floor, leave you with quite a mess. Watch you pick your rubbish off the floor. My little ones watching, too. It would set quite the example. I've seen some things around here. I've been attacked on this very street. I had to defend myself with a set of car keys."

One morning in October she woke to find someone had posted a message through the letterbox. It said: "HOW DID YOUR BOYFRIEND DIE, U EAT HIM?" She sat by the window until noon. Whenever a car slowed on the street below she would press her nose to the glass in case it was Cameron, here to collect her at last.

She now needed only to angle her head downwards by the slightest degree for her chin to disappear among smooth rolls of neck fat. She was receiving looks in the street and had begun muttering apologies to people who sat next to her on the bus. Sometimes when alone she muttered too.

At the supermarket she found people unconsciously veering their trolleys around her when they passed. The supermarket in general had become more intimidating. Mentally she divided the shop into the "safe" aisles, containing ready meals and snacks, which she hoarded, and those containing "ingredients": oils and sauces, beans and pulses, herbs and spices that could not by themselves constitute a meal, which needed imagination and energy and skill to form into something acceptable. It was not long before she avoided the supermarket altogether and began ordering online.

She tried a weight loss group, which met in a room of her local leisure centre. Before entering the first meeting she ate six breakfast bars to ease her anxiety. Then she went inside, where the group sat in a circle. Although it was a sunny day, the blinds were shut. They were hidden away here. Some were massive, some not. Some leaned forward, apparently believing that proximity to the group leader might improve their chances. Others reclined as though they wanted no part of it, but couldn't quite pull away completely. In the artificial light, each looked exhausted.

"It's the autumn," said one woman. "Things dying. It bothers me in a big way. Something existential. I eat more. A lot more."

"I scare my children," said a man with a rusty beard. "When they see me coming out the bathroom in a towel, they run away."

"I sweat all the time," said a young man, hardly twenty. "I eat meat all the time and I always have meat sweats. I wish I ate less meat."

When Mary's turn came, she said, "I just get so hungry."

Then began the taking of weights. Each in attendance stepped into a curtained cubicle for a brief meeting with the group leader, an elderly woman in large glasses whose skin hung loose around her cheekbones and elbows.

"What you're going through? Each of us has gone through the same. Myself included. Do you want to know how bad it got? I used to eat butter out of the dish. I did it with a spoon. Do you know the feeling of butter between your fingers? It was like that feeling, but under the skin. I overcame it though. I'm not saying it was easy. It involved a lot of dedication and a lot of planning. I want you to take this exercise book and next week I want to see your personal weight loss plan. It takes less time than you would imagine. You can do it with the television on."

At home she read through her exercise book. On the cover a group of cartoon fruit and vegetables spoke in chorus: "Overweight? Your wait is over." She applied a post-it note to the recipes that appealed to her. On a colourful graph she placed a small dot at her current weight. She found testimonies of those whose lives and marriages had been saved by the programme, and also a page listing non-scale victories. A non-scale victory was any weight-related progress not directly related to the number on the scale. Perhaps you received a compliment from a stranger, you could once again comfortably cross your legs, or you were now able to move your wedding ring from your pinkie to

the finger where it belonged. Or perhaps you simply woke up one morning to a greater sense of wellbeing.

On a page headed “My Weight and I,” she was asked to describe in the frankest terms how she regarded her weight. She quickly filled the page with sentiments she felt were appropriate and of which her group leader would approve. “I am ready for the challenge. I am ready to change. Regularly I look at photographs of my slimmer younger self and cry.” And it was not wholly untrue. Regularly she looked at old photographs, and she did cry. On the television, a young man described an out-of-body experience he had undergone while in surgery: “All of a sudden, I felt an enormous weight lift from me.”

Later that night she ordered a Feast for Four from the nearby Indian takeaway. She did not use cutlery. Her hands felt thick with grease the rest of the evening, though she scrubbed them with soap and scalding water. She hauled herself into the empty bath and waited it out, listening to the noises of her digestion, which sounded like feet pulling free from deep mud. She did not attend another meeting.

Online she discovered a community of men keen, even desperate, to feed a woman like her. Some were very particular about what they wished to feed her. Clotted cream. A favourite childhood cereal. A rotisserie chicken. Others were less specific.

She responded to some of their messages. On the whole, they seemed sweet, slightly baffled, and shy of their desires. Some had been alone for a long time. Others were married. One November Sunday, Mary visited a web developer called Craig who lived on the far side of town. He left her in his living room while he reheated a Chinese takeaway. Listening to the slam of the microwave door and the clatter of cutlery and plates, she decided that if she never saw Cameron again but knew he was always just in the next room, that would be enough.

Finally Craig brought through the food on a tray and set it on the coffee table. He laid a napkin over her chest. There was only one spoon and only one plate. Mary’s heart wrestled in her chest so violently she worried it would come unstuck.

When the meal was over he cleaned her up then spent a while in the bathroom. She could understand such behaviour. At a birthday party long ago, the father of a childhood friend had found her in the kitchen, where she had been hiding from the other children. He had dipped a finger into a bowl of whipped cream and asked her to

lick it off. It had made her feel better, and she had since persuaded several boyfriends to let her do similar things. She had known it was Cameron she loved and had been waiting for the night he had asked her to eat strips of ham from his bare chest.

She looked at Craig's ceiling and took rapid shallow breaths. She felt the strain on her stomach lining stronger than ever before. She imagined it like a bin bag ready to split, spilling its pollution. That was what she was made of now.

When Craig returned he sat on the other sofa and placed his hands on his knees.

"My doctor says I am in a pre-diabetic state," he said. "If I go any further down the road I am on, I will become fully diabetic. At first I told myself I have bad blood. But it isn't my blood. It's me. I've done my body no favours. You have to wonder what the body thinks. I'm sure it's got a question or two." He removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. Mary closed her eyes as some matter or gas shifted horribly within her.

"That's enough now," she said. "Quiet now."

In this state, it was all she could manage.

She did not enjoy the winter. In her future relationships, this winter was the final detail of her life she would reveal. She became increasingly irritable. Although she found a seasonal position in a shop selling greetings cards and gift wrap, she was cautioned and finally fired after losing her temper with customers and staff. Several times she walked into her living room certain that Cameron was crouching on top of the chest of drawers. He was coiled, ready to pounce. In a recurring dream he trimmed the fat from her and threw it in the fire. The smell followed her several hours after waking.

Crossing the high street one afternoon, she heard a dog barking. As it grew louder she cast around, suddenly frightened it was coming at her. When she couldn't spot it she began to feel where it was.

Car horns were blasting, drivers and pedestrians were screaming at her. Of course they were: she had a dog trapped in her lower stomach. Why had nobody told her before? She could feel it writhing and kicking. Its paws scrabbled at her stomach walls, drawing blood. It snuffled and slobbered at the openings of her tracts.

She made it to the other side of the road. Strangers approached to catch her. She pushed them away and began undoing the buttons of her shirt, but collapsed before

she could manage them all. A black paw forced its way through her belly button, then another. With little effort they parted the skin so that the creature's head could push through. The animal heaved its way out, a large black Labrador glistening with stomach acid. Children gasped and approached to pet it. Their parents pulled them back but did not themselves step back. They watched speechless. It shook itself off, retched onto the pavement and resumed barking. The children screamed with delight. Mary lay on her back, empty. The dog padded over and licked her face, grew bored and loped off along the street. She wanted to call after it but could not summon the energy, and besides, she didn't know its name.

In the hospital she ate very little. The idea of chewing and swallowing matter of any kind made her gag. Her dreams were of a revolving shapeless mass of grey meat.

She began a gentle but regular exercise regime. Loose skin slowly gathered around her bones, useless and deflated. It chafed and bled, so that she had to carry tissues. In time, though, this would disappear. When it did, she realised that all through this last long year she had clutched the hope that one day the weight would fall away to leave behind an irreducible version of herself: white-hot with fury, and tiny enough that she could be stored in a pocket. She was bemused to discover no such thing. There was no sense of relief, of having conquered something. There was no sense that her body was any longer a place where she might locate herself at all.

She spoke with the nurses, who talked mostly of themselves, problems with their marriages and children.

"Aren't we supposed to be talking about me?" Mary asked more than once, before realising that in discussing their problems, she had spent an hour distracted from her own. She guessed it must be part of their training.

She met a woman who had convinced herself that every day was her birthday, so every day for several months she had baked and eaten a large iced cake. She began each day insulted that nobody in the hospital had remembered her birthday.

Another patient was in the habit of saying, "It's like the food goes in through my mouth and ends up in China."

Another maintained his problems stemmed from the time when, as a boy, he had been dared to eat his sister's hamster.

In turn, Mary told of how her boyfriend of seven years had choked to death on the stone of a cherry she had fed him. She told them how confused he had looked at first, when it must have dawned on him he was now choking to death.

She joked that her first reaction had been offence: how rude of him to choke on a cherry she had given him! Some of the patients laughed at this. Others simply stared. When she admitted that her initial reaction had actually been to sit wide-eyed, unable to speak his name or conjure any movement in her hands and feet, she began to cry so heavily that she was taken to a quiet room where she was left alone. The crying was so violent and constant that she felt the ache in her muscles for several days afterwards, whether she was calmly knitting in one of the common rooms or lying as still as possible in her bed. It was at the same time dull and piercing, like you might feel if you had overexerted your body during exercise or had just been beaten to within an inch of your life.

Contributors

Authors

Simon Ewing is a writer and bookseller based in Edinburgh. His work has previously been published in Gutter, Razur Cuts and Extra Teeth.

Rebecca Ferrier won the Bridge Award in 2020 and was shortlisted for the Tibor Jones Page-Turner Prize in 2015. Her novel-in-progress won her a place on the All Stories development programme and funding from Creative Scotland in 2021, while her short stories, poetry, reviews and articles have been published by Gutter, Channel, For Books' Sake, Leeds University's Land Lines Project, Lighthouse and The Toast. In 2021, she was a UNESCO City of Literature virtual writer-in-residence at the Melbourne Literature Festival, hosted by the Emerging Writers' Festival. Twitter/Instagram: @rmlferrier

Catherine Wilson Garry is a Scottish spoken word poet and writer based in Edinburgh. Her writing has been published by Extra Teeth magazine, Gutter magazine and The Scotsman. Her debut poetry pamphlet is forthcoming from Stewed Rhubarb in early 2023.

Rhys Owain Williams is a writer from Swansea, Wales. His short fiction has appeared in magazines and anthologies, including New Gothic Review, The Lonely Crowd and A Flock of Shadows: 13 Tales of the Contemporary Gothic (Parthian Books).

Illustrators

Jana Galushkina is an illustrator and designer from Brest, Belarus. She is currently studying and living in Poland. Her favored techniques are circulation graphics and digital illustration. At the same time, she often experiments with techniques by uniquely combining watercolors, computer graphics and various types of handprints. She is madly in love with complex patterns, eccentric color schemes, prints, and ethnic motifs.

Joseph Gough is an illustrator based in New York. His illustrations have appeared in a number of online and print publications such as The New Yorker, The Poetry Foundation, The Believer, Hellebore Magazine and many more.

Julia Plath is a freelance illustrator from Hamburg. She finished her master's degree in 2022 but has already been working for a couple of years in editorial, book- and cover illustration. Her work is often described as surreal and melancholic, dealing with psychological issues and having a fairytale-like feel to it. She is currently working on bigger book projects and a short animation film.

Andre Poise is an illustrator and graphic designer based in Batumi, Georgia. Andre creates digital illustrations using a lot of textures, gradients and noises. Nature, sci-fi, modern digital illustration and vintage posters melt together in artworks by Andre Poise. In general, he uses the digital airbrush technique for illustrations and gains inspiration from various plants and life forms.

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