

**Representing Reactive Attachment Disorder in Contemporary Fiction:
Creating New Paths for Neurodiverse Characters**

Natalia Liebnitz, MLitt; MEd

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(Creative Writing)

Department of Literature and Languages

University of Stirling

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ABTRACT

The first element of this work is a novel titled *June in the Garden*, which follows a neurodiverse protagonist with a diagnosis of reactive attachment disorder. The next section of the exegesis will provide insight into her atypical profile, particularly her traits of social disinhibition, an absence of emotion, affected cognitive processing and reasoning skills, and an inability to initiate and maintain relationships with others. The second element will include two parts: (1) a critical analysis of key diagnostic terms used in the clinical field to describe disorders relating to social-emotional detachment and disengagement, specifically reactive attachment disorder (RAD); (2) discussions on the current depiction of social-emotional detachment and, more broadly, of neurodiversity in contemporary fiction. This second part will argue that the two main pathways to depict a detachment disorder, like RAD, is heterogeneous characterisation, defined by common patterns that are exhibited in the novels selected, and typography, defined by unconventional text arrangement or a presence of visuals on the printed page. Aspects of typography will include deconstruction of the standard print form to allow for creative formatting, such as increased spacing, incomplete sentences, blank pages, and bolding of words. Another aspect will include the addition of specific visuals, such as conceptual word sharks (*The Raw Shark Texts*, Steven Hall, 2007), black and white photographs (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Jonathan Safran Foer, 2005), and mathematical formulas and blueprints (*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Mark Haddon, 2003).

These two methods, heterogeneous characterisation and typography, will explain my creative process for developing a neurodiverse protagonist, showing connections between my work and the work of other fiction writers. However, primarily this research will convey a new pathway for an atypical protagonist with a disorder relatively unknown in the wider community, to recontextualise the presentation of social-emotional detachment in fiction. I also hope to highlight the gaps in RAD research, particularly at the adult level, and to show how RAD can be portrayed realistically in a contemporary novel, without being too 'gimmicky'.

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This thesis is dedicated to my two children, both of which I had during this research degree and who inspired me to keep going.

DECLARATION

This thesis — and the work to which it refers — is the result of my own efforts. Any ideas, images and text resulting from the work of others (whether published or unpublished) are fully identified as such within the work in the footnotes and bibliography. This thesis has not been submitted in whole or partially for another other academic degree or professional qualification.

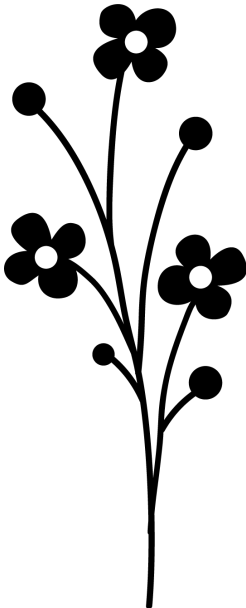
Natalia Liebnitz

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The images and symbols used in this manuscript are intended for purposes of illustration only, to further my discussions of visual representation, for submission to the University of Stirling, and have not been approved for copyright for a wider distribution.

June in the Garden



'The Prologue'

The blood drips from my fingers, trickles down from the open slits along my knuckles and pecks at the tiled flooring around me. The backs of my hands throb and vibrate. I don't like the sensation. I never do.

The light above me flickers and buzzes, running up my spine and twisting my insides. I wish they'd fix that. It wouldn't take much, perhaps just a new lightbulb. Maureen at my work says T8 fluorescent tubing is the best, but these look like those energy-saving LED ones. Environmentally-friendly doesn't always mean efficient.

"June?"

I look up slowly and see two policemen sitting in chairs opposite me, a cold metal table between us. A paper cup of black coffee teeters on the edge of the table, steam no longer billowing and rising. I blink hard, squeezing my eyes shut and opening them wide until they water.

"June?" one asks again, a woman with brown wavy hair and wide set eyes, not much older than Mother.

"Yes?" My voice sounds strange, like it's been pinched and plucked from my throat, separated from my body.

"You were telling us about yesterday?"

"I was?"

"Yes, you had gotten to the part where you'd arrived home early from work, which is strange for you, isn't it?"

Yes, I had arrived early from work. Baby's breath sat on the kitchen table, clipped and arranged into a ceramic jug as milky white as the baby's breath itself. The kitchen had been cleaned, the breakfast dishes already washed, dried and put away. The morning rays had been streaming in

through the lace curtains, making dust motes dance in the slices of sunlight. The house was quiet, so incredibly quiet. I made my way through to the living room and—

“June?”

The baby’s breath had been clipped nicely, approximately one inch above ground so they grow back for the second bloom in autumn. Not many people know baby’s breath blooms twice in one year.

“June?”

Yarrows, roses and salvias are also repeat flowerers. There is a term we use for that, a word I learned from my RHS encyclopaedia, one that rolls off the tongue like a foreign language only spoken in black and white movies.

“June?”

Remontancy. An incredible word, it impresses me still to this day.

“Miss Wilson, please answer the question.”

I blink again, shifting my focus between the two officers. “Yes?”

The female sighs and collapses back into the chair.

“What happened next? After you got home? What happened between you and your mother?” quizzes the other one, a stocky middle-aged man who reminds me of the bus driver who takes me to work on Fridays. He raises his eyebrows causing his face to contort.

“I don’t know,” I slowly reply. What were we talking about? Oh yes, the baby’s breath. The fluorescent tube above me splutters and flickers again.

“You don’t know?”

“I don’t remember,” I clarify.

“You don’t *remember?*”

I gaze down at my bloodied knuckles, as they *drip, drip, drip* onto the floor, like raindrops. Deep bruises blossoms all around my fingers. I press one of the swollen lumps beneath my left index finger, pushing down until the purple and crimson turn to white. It doesn't hurt. It never does.

A loud knock at the door startles all three of us. Seconds later the door opens wide, and a woman in a grey trouser suit stands at the entrance, her arm propped up on the door frame.

"We found a body," she says, eyeing me.

I don't think Mother put enough tepid water in the jug for the baby's breath. It'll be dehydrated by tomorrow.



June and the Social Worker



<i>Gardener's Almanac</i> Mostly Sunny High of 7° SW Winds 10mph

4:12PM.

The waiting room in Maryhill Community Centre is cold, at least five degrees cooler than what we keep our house thermostat at. Mother doesn't like the cold.

I can feel the sharpness of the chill nipping at my cheeks and bare hands. It's only just turned May. It would have been better turning off the air conditioning altogether and opening a window. Certainly more cost-efficient anyway.

The backs of my thighs are already numb from the metal seat and my feet slightly tingle with pins and needles. My knuckles are healing quickly, thanks to the concoction of aloe and calendula I had ground into a fine paste using a mortar and pestle. The nurse at the local practice had offered me an anti-inflammatory gel for it, but I had refused. Why resort to lab-made medications when the landscape outside offers free and natural treatment?

I sigh and look at my watch. I had requested a milky tea at three o'clock like I always have but the receptionist reminded me that this is not a cafe and she is not a waitress. I hadn't assumed either was true, I had simply asked her for a cup of tea while I wait for my social worker, who is late again. Knowing Aileen, she'll have stopped off at a *Tesco* on the way from the office to get ingredients for her dinner then probably a *Costa* to get herself a latte of some kind. Punctuality and reliability are not her best traits. Mother soon learned to clear our entire afternoon on days of visits, never knowing when and sometimes *if* Aileen would come.

She'll not have thought to get *me* a cup of tea.

The entrance flies open, startling the old woman beside me out of her seat. Aileen stands in the doorway clutching a large brown file folder in her hand and a *Costa* takeaway cup in the other. I stand and follow her into the room behind the vaccination centre. She doesn't say anything as I trail

behind her, clutching my translucent umbrella. Her heels drag lazily on the tiled flooring and I want to ask her to pick up her feet a little more, but I don't.

She collapses into a large armchair and takes a swig from her coffee cup. She wipes the latte foam from above her top lip then sets the cup down by her feet. She gestures for me to sit too, so I edge into the chair beside her, leaving one seat between us for space. Bubble space is very important. I have a bubble and she has a bubble and they can not overlap. I only ever let my bubble overlap with Mother's.

SOCIAL WORKER: (Sighs loudly) June, I'm so sorry for your loss.

JUNE: (Pauses) Okay.

SOCIAL WORKER: I talked with the police again yesterday. The autopsy doesn't show any drugs in your mother's system—

JUNE: (Interrupts) Mother doesn't take drugs. Not anymore.

SOCIAL WORKER: However, there was a noticeable gash on the back of her head.

JUNE: Okay.

SOCIAL WORKER: (Frowns at my response) June, you've known me for years—

JUNE: Twenty-eight years, eleven months and two weeks.

SOCIAL WORKER: Yes, well, you can trust me.

Trust is a strange word. Abstract and somewhat incomprehensible. I trust my 2012 *RHS Encyclopedia of Gardening*. I trust my *Gardener's Almanac* for long range weather forecasts. I trust Mother. I do not trust short-range weather forecasts on television or on mobile phone apps, nor do I trust the 'Google' for their horticultural suggestions. Once I used the computer in the staff room at work to research organic at-home composting and was incorrectly advised to add fresh pine needles to balance out the matter in the mixture. Truth is, pine needles are far too acidic and need to be

completely dried out before usage and should only be incorporated if the matter contains solely non-acidic materials. I would never trust the internet after that.

SOCIAL WORKER: Is there anything you want to tell me?

JUNE: (Sighs) Um...

There are lots of things I want to tell her, particularly because without Mother, I have not had an opportunity to practise my social skills in real-time conversation. But I also think that she is referring to something else, something that pecks at the edges of my mind. Without Mother, my head feels like a thousand-piece puzzle that has been broken up and flipped over and turned upside down. Now nothing fits together. Maureen at work likes to do those large puzzles. She often sets one up on the back table and encourages everyone to have a turn. I'm not allowed anymore. I can't just do one piece. I have to finish it, all of it, even if it takes me the rest of the work shift. Therefore, I don't look at the back table of the staff room. I simply sit at the first table, facing the door, and eat my packed lunch until the timer beeps on my watch, then I clean up and go back downstairs to the shop floor.

SOCIAL WORKER: June? Is there anything you want to say?

JUNE: Yes. When can I collect Mother? She'll want to be home for my birthday.

SOCIAL WORKER: (Sighs and crosses legs) As you've been told, since there's no evidence of any wrongdoing the investigation has been closed and you are free to bury your mother whenever you want.

JUNE: Good.

SOCIAL WORKER: This might feel sudden but we need to discuss *arrangements*.

JUNE: Arrangements?

At first I think she is referring to funeral arrangements, which is natural to discuss after the death of someone. However, Mother has already written down how she wants the disposal of her body to be ‘arranged,’ which includes a navy dress from the autumn 2017 range at *M&S* and her favourite cobalt blue suede heels, a reading of Burns’ *To a Louse* if there is a small gathering of neighbours and/or former *Royal Mail* colleagues, and a buffet lunch that will consist of miniature prawn cocktails, triangular cheese sandwiches and salt & vinegar crisps. There are no other arrangements to be considered. Mother has been very clear.

SOCIAL WORKER: Your neighbour has kindly offered to look in on you daily, once in the morning and once in the evening, until we can find more suitable accommodation.

JUNE: I already have accommodation, but thank you.

SOCIAL WORKER: (Coughs and wriggles in seat) Accommodation was allocated to you and your mother as a family unit. However, since her passing, we might need the house for a...*larger* family.

JUNE: Where would I go?

SOCIAL WORKER: We’re still looking into options.

JUNE: What neighbour?

SOCIAL WORKER: Mrs Maclean at number 26.

JUNE: But Mother doesn’t like Mrs Maclean. She leaves her bins out for days after collection. It clutters the pavements.

SOCIAL WORKER: Have you considered how you’d like to bury her?

JUNE: Mrs Maclean?

SOCIAL WORKER: No, your mother.

JUNE: Oh, yes, Mother told me her wishes.

SOCIAL WORKER: (Hands me a leaflet from the brown folder) Well, just in case you have any questions. Here is more information.

JUNE: (Stands)

SOCIAL WORKER: June—

JUNE: (Sits)

SOCIAL WORKER: It's important you call me if you need anything.

JUNE: Okay (Stands again)

SOCIAL WORKER: (Picks up coffee cup and drinks, while checking phone)

JUNE: (Walks out)

The bus journey home is long and by the time I arrive back at my street, it is past six o'clock. I haven't even started peeling the potatoes or slicing the carrots. And who will put the chicken in the oven? That was Mother's job and it was always done on time.

A wave of heat surges through me and I strike, kicking over Mrs Maclean's glass recycling box. The small jam jars roll down the pavement, following close behind each other like little well-behaved soldiers. One drops onto the road and shatters, fragments spilling out onto the asphalt. That reminds me, we need more strawberry jam. I'll go past the shops tomorrow after work.

June
and
the 'Maisonette'

It's my birthday today.

29.

I sit at the round kitchen table, a cup of milky tea beside me because it's five past three in the afternoon. Mother sits opposite me, in her usual chair. I've tied a cobalt blue ribbon around the neck of her urn as I wasn't able to cremate her favourite pair of shoes alongside her.

Rather than a tea, I have poured her a glass of Cava as it's a special occasion. Mother always said sparkling wine was for special occasions and I consider my birthday one of them. I found a brown envelope in the top drawer of her dresser, beside a letter I had put somewhere safe weeks ago, although I don't remember where now. Inside the brown envelope was a birthday card addressed to me. On the front of the card was a large sunflower with a slim green stem. I only ever received one birthday card a year, and that was from Mother.

I did get a letter in the post today but it was not a birthday card. It was a letter from Aileen, a follow-up on these 'long-term arrangements'. It explained that due to 'a recent change in my situation' the house in which I currently reside in is to be reallocated to another family like she had mentioned. I have less than a week to pack my belongings. I have been 'less' of a few things over the years — *restless*, *jobless*, *friendless*, and, according to the bullies at school, '*useless*'. But never *homeless*. Until now.

My options are limited. Due to the circumstances, Mother's life insurance policy had been null and voided two weeks ago, leaving me with even less options.

Aileen had indeed talked with her colleagues as she said she would and would like me to meet her tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock at the council office to view two possible properties. I have doubts whether either of them will be appropriate for me as I enter the next stage of my life, and inch closer to thirty, but I will try to be 'flexible' for Mother and because it is my birthday and on special occasions we do special things.

After I finish my tea, I offer Mother a top up on the Cava and watch it flow over the lip of the coupe glass as I pour, spilling onto the wooden table and dripping onto the tiled flooring beneath. Then I clean it up, wash the dishes and return to the garden to finish the weeding before dinner preparations.

The freezer is stocked with chicken Kievs from *Iceland*, bags of frozen sliced carrots and pre-chopped potatoes. I don't need to use the frozen potatoes as I clean and slice them fresh myself, having stopped by *Asda* on my way home from work this afternoon. I had meant to finish my shift at 5 o'clock as I usually do, but my supervisor had insisted I leave early to 'rest'.

It had only been one carton of eggs. I hadn't meant to throw them and I had cleaned up the mess immediately, but a customer reported me.

The dinner is ready at exactly 6 o'clock and by half past I have finished my meal and poured Mother a Chianti. I am in my pyjamas and dressing gown for *Escape to the Country* to begin at 7 o'clock, and in bed for 9. I had considered staying up a little later since it's my birthday but routines and schedules exist for a reason. Without them we would grow wild and run in all directions like mint shrubs.

The sounds of night do little to soothe me to sleep and I lie awake for most of it, with a churning in my belly. I doze somewhere between midnight and dawn, and rouse before my watch alarm.

The bus into town is familiar, as the council building is not far from my workplace. I contemplate popping in to say hello but dismiss it after I recall Maureen's expression when I catapulted the empty egg carton off her shoulder. I shall visit tomorrow instead. Maureen's off on Wednesdays as she has her grandkids Rosie and Reuben then while her daughter goes off with her new boyfriend.

Aileen is twenty-two minutes late and again arrives with one takeaway drink. She waves at me even though we are the only people on the street.

“You found it ok?” she gasps, already noticeably out of breath from the short walk here.

“Yes,” I reply, although if I hadn’t found it then I wouldn’t be standing here, so Aileen’s question didn’t really need an answer.

She balances her coffee cup, a beige folder and a large slim mobile phone in her hands and thunders on a red door. The paint has chipped off all around the iron knocker and the doorbell has two pieces of black duct tape across it in the shape of an X. That doesn’t bother me though as Mother disconnected our doorbell years ago so this actually suits me just fine.

She knocks again, this time louder, spilling her takeaway drink in the process. She swears again and drops the beige folder. Papers scatter across the dirty tarmac around our feet, some upside down and others with typed font and headings in bold. On the one nearest my wellies, I see a photo of a much younger me, possibly back when I lived in foster care. My hair is matted and split into two side pigtails, strands poking out from the loops, and my face is pale and gaunt. I have a sliver of a bruise running alongside my face from my temple to my jaw. There are many things I no longer recall about that time in my life, the taking of this photo being one of them.

Aileen gathers up the papers, shoves them back into the folder and mutters a weak apology. Before I can reply, the red door swings open and a man with long dark hair and a plaster on his eyebrow answers, “Yeah?”

“My name is Aileen Macdonald from the council. I’m here to show a tenant around the property.”

He grunts and opens the door wider, but by the time I shuffle inside, he’s gone. The hallway is covered in browning wallpaper and smells like the inside of my welly boots after a hot day in the garden. Aileen pretends she doesn’t smell anything but I hear her choke on an inhale. She leads me down the hallway, counting the numbers until we come to number six.

“It’s a ground floor flat,” she begins, “close to your work as you probably know already, and has a fully-equipped kitchen, a recently repaired shower and a single bedroom large enough for one person.”

I edge inside the space, my feet brushing against the shaggy carpet which is stained beside the coffee table. Red wine it looks like, or perhaps coffee. I wonder if Aileen has been here before with one of her takeaway cups. There’s a brown sofa next to a small rectangular window that looks out onto the block of flats beside it, a TV unit with no TV and a tall free-standing lamp with an upside down lampshade with tassels. I can see the kitchen from here, through a carved out hatch in the living room. The door to the kitchen is beside that and propped open with a grey rubber doorstop. I walk over to the window and gaze out. There’s a little boy sitting at the open window opposite me. He waves. I don’t wave back.

“How do you access the garden?” I ask Aileen.

“Oh sorry June. It doesn’t come with a garden.”

“What do you mean?” Don’t all houses come with a garden or do you have to pay extra for that, like it’s an add-on like how you can sometimes add on a bottle of Prosecco to the *Marks & Spencer* Dine In deals.

“There is no garden here,” she clarifies.

I stand back, mouth agape. My fingers twitch and tremble as the heat bubbles within me. I can feel the warmth spread to my cheeks in seconds.

“I have another property to show you that does come with a *shared* garden,” she quickly adds.

I sigh deeply and close my eyes. I nod and follow her out of the ground floor flat with the fully-equipped kitchen and recently repaired shower, to the next property.

It's a flat, much like the one we viewed before, even though Aileen tells me it's a 'maisonette', apparently French for—I don't remember now. It's not much bigger than what we just saw and is still close to work, walking distance certainly. The room is smaller, this time with a single bed although I never saw the last bedroom. The lack of garden was all I needed to know. The living room rug is stained too, but the sofa is green here and comes with a matching armchair.

I shimmy Mother out of my handbag and place the ceramic urn on the armchair, slightly tilted towards the TV. I sit on the sofa and imagine watching the new season of *Strictly Come Dancing* here with her.

I can't imagine it.

The image of us together but not home is impossible to conjure in my mind and when I try, it falls apart like the broken puzzle, each piece unhooking and tumbling down to the ground. This is not my sofa, that is not Mother's armchair, the one she always sat in, and this is definitely not my house.

The world tilts and I hear someone scream. I feel a warmth inside my veins, a heaviness in my legs and thighs, and a tightness closing in around my body. A crushing, suffocating tightness. Then, nothing.

I blink once, twice, and see Mother's urn still sitting in the green armchair.

Aileen is gone.

June
and the
Attic

The attic floor is thick with dust, disturbed only by a narrow track of my own footprints. I came up here occasionally when I was child, when I first returned to Mother. The attic reminds me of the one at my last foster home, where I would be sent if I got angry or if I disagreed with anyone, which happened frequently because people are often wrong. Now the attic reminds me only of Mother as many of her things are up here, and because it oddly smells like Merlot. The ‘everyday wine’.

The afternoon sun spreads fragments through a small window somewhere behind me, the rays stretching along the dusty wooden floorboards like little fingers. Reaching. Searching. I huddle into myself, pulling my knees into my chest. I gently rock back and forth, finding some movement to soothe. It does not work. My belly still churns, my veins still pulse. I begin doodling on the dust-covered floor, circling and looping and etching flowers and vines all around my bare feet. The dust collects at my fingertips, some particles mixing with the air and tickling my nostrils. I hum, verses deviating from the true melody, never quite remembering how Mother sung it.

Downstairs the phone rings again.

Aileen called this morning too. At first I thought it was to ask me how I was feeling which is a standard follow-up after someone’s mother passes away and when someone has a strong reaction like I had yesterday at the “maisonette”. But instead it was to discuss “supported adult living services” — shared housing with individuals similar to me, supported by the occasional visit from a carer or social worker, such as Aileen. I thought she was joking, particularly because comedy tends to confuse me. Why would I want to live with other people *like me*? Surely that’s not safe? But then she called again, and finally there was a knock at the front door, which is why I came up here, to hide in the attic with Mother. It may not have been Aileen at the door, but Mother and I don’t usually have visitors or parcel deliveries from online shopping companies who require credit card details, so who else would it have been? Mrs Maclean? No, she popped by on Monday. The

milkman? No, he doesn't come anymore, not since March when Mother stopped paying him. Now we get our milk from *Asda*.

I can't sit up here all day. It will be 3 o'clock soon and I'll need to go downstairs to boil the kettle, and then dinner prep will be upon me. But perhaps, just in case there's another knock at the door, I'll sit here for a few more moments, in the dust and the must, surrounded by the cardboard boxes and heavy wooden chests.

The phone rings again.

I untangle myself from the corner and scoot over to one of the chests, sliding through the doodles in the dust until they are nothing but smears and gaps. I slowly open the chest, a smell of sandalwood and lemon trickling out, and press my hands deep into Mother's fabrics. Linen dresses, suede trousers, soft satin skirts. Mother dressed so well. I tend to dress appropriately for garden work — loose-fitting khakis, sometimes shorts, a cable-knit cardie, welly boots and a raincoat, and of course my gloves. There's always gardening gloves in my pocket. I wish I had inherited Mother's style. I wish many things, some things I cannot quite remember right now as I sit here, cross-legged, soaking my hands in her dresses.

I press deeper, until my hands reach the bottom of the chest and my fingers graze something sharp. When I pull back, there's a thin scrape across my thumb, like a paper cut. I press it with my index finger and a globule of blood oozes out. It drops to the dust-blanketed floor, gradually percolating and spreading. The phone rings again. I return to the chest, looking for whatever cut me. It's an envelope — two actually, both paper-clipped together. The first is a large brown envelope, ripped open at the back and filled with heavy contents, making one of the sides split slightly. Inside are letters, a few photos and a newspaper article dated from two years ago. The letters are from much further back, all addressed to Mother from someone called 'Robert'. Many of the letters ask something of her — to call him, to write him, to visit him. 'Robert' seems very demanding; no wonder Mother ignored him. I return the letters to the envelope and hold up the newspaper clipping

to the sunlight streaming in. It illuminates three figures, well, four if the animal is counted. It's stained with red wine circles, each overlapping the next like a rather complicated Venn diagram. The black and white image of a family standing in a garden is nestled beneath the headline: "Local Businessman Raises £200,000 for Care Homes in Clapham." I don't recognise anyone in the photo and therefore, don't understand why Mother kept it. She must have held on to it for a while as the ink has mostly faded from the edges and her thumbprint lines are permanently etched into the picture. I shall now keep it too.

The man in the picture stands tall, although he's almost half the height of the woman beside him who has the whitest teeth I have ever seen on a person. She rests a hand on a stocky boy's shoulders, her skinny fingers curling slightly at his collarbone. I shiver. I wouldn't like to be touched like that. A shaggy dog sits on the ground in front of them, his thick mane in desperate need of a good trim.

'Robert Wilson, Judith Wilson and Henry Wilson, of Lansdowne Road, Notting Hill,' I say aloud. My voice sounds strange again, separate from my throat. The phone rings again.

They all share my surname, but why?

The second envelope is much lighter but still rather bulky for a regular post. It's addressed to Robert, although I'm unsure why because it appears it was stamped but never sent, and Mother would never needlessly waste a stamp. She was a loyal *Royal Mail* employee. Until she was fired in 2021.

It seems she intended to send this envelope but either changed her mind at the last moment, or simply forgot. Inside is a small cloth bag filled with a child's teeth. My teeth. Although they look far too weak to have been able to cut and chew through food effectively. There is also several drawings, a feeble attempt at 'art' — sketches of daisies and daffodils, paint splatter suns and sequin-adorned gardens, stiff with dried-up glue patches that crack and flake off as I rifle through.

June Wilson, May 2001

June Wilson, September 2002

June Wilson, January 2003

These are my 'art'. Pictures from almost every year of my childhood, thankfully getting progressively better over time. It doesn't surprise me that Mother kept all of these as she always was a sentimental person, proudly displaying each drawing on the wall in the kitchen like it was the best thing she'd seen all week. Even back then I loved the garden. Florals and vines inching their way up the edges of my mind. Did Mother think in colour and stem too?

I gaze at Mother in the urn, sitting by the window in the last slivers of sunshine, and suddenly the world around me is far too heavy. A warm tingling sensation under my skin itches and spreads like the droplet of blood on the dust.

It's nightfall before I wake. I'm lying on the cold floorboards, a thick speckled cardigan around my shoulders, the stack of sketches and paintings still in my hand. The newspaper clipping sits a little further away, near Mother who still huddles under the window, this time shrouded in shadow and an inky darkness. My knuckles throb again. The scabs have been disturbed, re-injured. Blood drips onto the fabrics beside me, and onto the small cloth bag that holds hollowed teeth and partially-forgotten memories. I crawl along the dust-covered floorboards to Mother and cradle the urn.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to her.

Downstairs the phone rings.

Or does it? Sometimes I just can't tell.

June
and the
Biological Relatives

<i>Gardener's Almanac</i> 60% chance of rain High of 16° SE Winds 3mph

The milk has curdled. It's thick and gloopy and floats on top of my morning coffee, circling on the surface, occasionally hitting against the sides of the mug. I thought I'd bought a new carton yesterday but this one has an expiration date on it that was three days ago. Wasn't it just yesterday I went to *Asda*? What day is it today? Has Mrs Maclean come already? No, she didn't come this week. She hasn't come in two weeks now, not since I yelled at her and told her to bring her bins inside after collection. There's no reason to not bring your bins in once they've been emptied by the council. It's just laziness.

"Is that right, Mother?" I say.

Mother sits at the kitchen table, a black coffee in front of her, cold now. It's officially June. My month. Mother said she'd picked out my name because my due date was meant to be today but I came early. I've always been punctual. I think it's an important trait to have, and I wish more people possessed it.

Two letters sit beside Mother's cup of untouched coffee. One is from the electricity company demanding payment again and threatening to shut off the power, and the second is from Aileen. She has secured me a shared room in the residential home. Apparently I would be happier — and 'safer' — in this home. A home that locks but has no key. Not for those inside anyway.

Staff from the assisted living programme will be here on Monday morning at 10:00 to support my 'transition.'

I reach for my *Gardener's Almanac* on the chair beside me and retrace my days. Yesterday must have been Saturday as it rained in the morning and had winds blowing from the north-east, which means today is Sunday, with a forecast of afternoon rain and a predicted humidity level of

90%. The gardens will be needing the rain. I shall leave a letter for the next tenants with instructions on how to tend to the flowerbeds.

Because I have decided that today is my last day here.

The envelopes from the attic sit on the kitchen table next to Mother. I remove the top one and shimmy out the newspaper clipping of the family, and while I wait for the milk to drain down the sink, I practise saying his name, rolling my R's like all good Scots do. Mother had talked about a Robert once or twice in conversation, murmured his name many times while she slept off the Merlot on the sofa. Could this be the same man she dreamt about?

I press my face against the article, the smell of earth and sandalwood filling the small space. Robert Wilson has my crooked nose, thin lips and even a faint dimple exactly where I have one. He has to be a relative of ours, and relatives have to take you in if you're homeless. Unless you're a relative by marriage like a brother-in-law or a sister-in-law, or a cousin once or twice removed, then they don't count. What about the boy? Is he also related to me? I suppose if the boy has my surname and is a direct descendant of Robert Wilson then yes, the short stocky boy is also a relative.

I prod the remaining lumps down the sink drain, wash out the mug then place it next to my bag as I will bring it with me on my journey to 16 Lansdowne Road in Notting Hill, London, England. Because that's where the Wilsons live, and if they live there then there must be a place for me because I'm also a Wilson and that's how it works.

I get to the bus stop a little before lunchtime, stopping to wheel Mrs Maclean's bins round to her back garden one last time. She taps on the kitchen window and tells me to stop, but I don't. Today is not a bin day and there is no need for her bins to litter the pavement. This will be my parting gift to the street.

The river thrashes and churns behind me, and a cold shiver snakes up my spine to the back of my head. I shiver as the bus pulls around the corner.

The bus chugs to a slow and clunky stop beside me and the doors spring open. “Not like you to work a Sunday, June?” says the driver.

I did not expect to see Mr Frank today. All of the drivers know me by name now and I know most of theirs, but I don’t know the weekend drivers because I never come into town on weekends. I work on Mondays to Fridays. The weekends are for the flowers and the soil.

I’m taken aback slightly at this unpredicted situation and I don’t immediately get on the bus. Behind me two people shift and shuffle and tut.

“June?” he prompts, gesturing to the seat behind him where I always sit.

“You work Sundays?” I question.

“Yeah, I work Sundays.”

“But you work Thursdays.”

“I also work Thursdays.”

“Oh.”

He raises any eyebrow. “Are you coming on?”

My bag is heavy on my shoulder and if I wait for the next bus I will surely miss my train, so I slowly climb the stairs, closer to Mr Frank.

“Where are you heading?” he asks.

“Somewhere different.” I show him my disability card for the discount, even though he knows me, and drop two pound coins onto the curved yellow tray.

He shifts in his big chair and squints at me. “Does your mum know where you’re at?”

I suck a breath in. I can’t give him too much information because he isn’t a stranger. Strangers you can tell anything to because you’ll never see them again, but people you know and tell things to will always know your business from then on. That’s why Mother never had friends,

never had neighbours over for tea in the afternoons, never joined any book clubs or craft groups or darts teams. It was always just the two of us.

I nod slowly. I don't usually lie. In fact, I have never lied before but perhaps not *saying* the words counts as not lying. Technically.

"Goodbye Mr Frank," I quickly add, before hurrying to the back of the bus. I sit in a different seat so he can't ask me more questions, and immediately feel wrong in doing so. The chair is stiff against my spine and one of the coils on the base is broken and splinters into the seat cushion beneath my thighs. I perch on the edge and draw flowers on the empty seat beside me with my finger, looping up for the stem and out for the petals. I recite all the flowers I can remember that start with the letter J until we're over the thrashing churning rivers, then I slowly unclench my hand, stretch out my fingers and sit back, watching the streets and houses and lights of Maryhill whizz past, never to be seen again.

I forget what stop I'm meant to get off.

June
and
Edinburgh Waverley Station

Gardener's Almanac:
Afternoon Clouds
High of 14°
SW Winds 5mph

It's busy here, much busier than I'd expected but perhaps this is standard for train stations. Mother and I didn't often need to take one as we had very few occasions to venture into the city centre, let alone to one as big as the capital.

Men in suits hurry past women in trainers, who carry high heels in their hands with handbags that look far too small to fit a cheese sandwich to fill their bellies and a book to occupy their minds for a journey. I never leave home without a sizeable bag for these items, even if I am just taking the bus into town for work or to *Asda*.

Today I travel with more than a sizeable bag. I carry a duffel bag that hangs heavily on my shoulder and makes me walk slower than usual. I may have slightly overpacked it, but after several repacks I decided I absolutely could not part with any of the items, especially my books and gardening equipment. As Mother and I never spent overnights in anywhere other than our own house, we did not own a backpack or suitcase of any kind, so I had to go to *TK Maxx* yesterday and use some of the money I had accumulated from the recent sales. The assistant on the shop floor had talked me into purchasing a 'duffel' which she explained was half backpack, half suitcase. A hybrid, she termed it. A lovely word.

Hybrid.

So I had relented and bought it. But I had brought the items I wished to pack in it to the shop in a black bin bag to test it out before any purchasing was to commence. I had sat criss cross on the floor and attempted three different packing styles. After settling on the tried and tested 'fold and roll', I was quite satisfied that it would do for my journey and had completed the sale. It was only when I'd returned home for my 3 o'clock tea and biscuit that I remembered about the pillow, which

I had failed to count. So now it sticks out awkwardly from the edges of the zip, threatening to burst my new hybrid on the first day of use.

The *TK Maxx* assistant had said duffels were excellent for camping, weekend ‘getaways,’ and short breaks. I’m not embarking on any of those. I won’t be camping where I’m going and I certainly won’t be participating in any ‘weekend getaway’, which sounds illegal. What exactly is the difference between a weekend getaway and a short break anyway? Does a getaway strictly have to occur on a Saturday and Sunday? What if I want to leave on a Thursday evening? What if I enjoy myself so much that I decide to extend it to a Monday? Does that then turn into what’s termed a ‘short break’? And what about a ‘holiday’? Is this duffel not equipped to handle the length of a ‘holiday’? Which is what — seven days? Ten? Fourteen?

Did I remember to lock the door before I left the house today?

I itch at the strap on the bag, which pokes into my shoulder. I had managed to squeeze in all of my clothes as I don’t have many — I prefer to wear one of three outfits — plus two of my favourite books, my pillow, a toothbrush, toothpaste, face wash, lotion with a 15SPF in it, *Vaseline* in case my lips dry out with the London sun and some important gardening tools.

And of course, Mother. I have thankfully remembered to pack my mother.

I touch the zipper pocket on my coat and feel the bundle of cash inside. I need to make sure I keep an eye on that. Mother always said to be careful and, “Don’t trust anyone. Especially men.”

The main hallway to the station is even busier than the entrances/exits. There are narrow barriers, black rubber ramps, and backpacks and cases strewn across the tiled flooring. The surrounding shops offer takeaway coffee, hot pies and a variety of sandwiches, chewing gum and newspapers. I don’t need to stop anywhere because I’ve also packed a digestive biscuit and thermos of milky tea for the late afternoon, a double-walled insulated food flask with a chicken Kiev, a few boiled potatoes and a tablespoon of peas for dinner, and a bottle of water.

Thankfully I ate my sandwich waiting for my connection to Edinburgh so that's one less item to carry. Sandwiches in shops are very expensive, even if you work at the *M&S Foodhall* and use the staff discount, so I always bring my own regardless of the situation. A person needs three meals a day, plus a good cup of coffee in the morning and a perfectly-brewed tea for the late afternoon. I always carry my favourite mug for both because I don't like using other people's mugs nor will I ever drink from a cardboard takeaway cup. I just don't understand that, and neither does Mother.

"Isn't that right, Mother?" I say, patting the bag where her urn rests.

I've never been to Edinburgh City before, but there are no trains to London from Glasgow today because of "overhead line equipment failures" according to the station attendant. I had wanted to ask her more but she seemed more preoccupied with helping a woman in a wheelchair.

Mother said Edinburgh is full of hills, foreign tourists and 'hippie vegan cafes.' Linda at work told me there is a castle here, up one of those hills Mother was talking about. Had I more time, and more tolerance for crowds and foreign tourists, then I may have visited it as castle gardens are wonderful, always so immaculate and full of bright colourful flowers. I watched a *Countryfile* special once on the gardens at Cliveden Castle in England, which has been nicknamed 'the Versailles of the UK,' whatever that means. Three hundred and seventy-six acres of pristine flowerbeds shaped into triangles, hedge mazes and grass cubes. Exquisite.

Linda at work also said there's a big festival here in Edinburgh every summer with theatre shows and comedy performances, but I wouldn't like that. Too many crowds and too much noise. And I don't find 'jokes' funny like other people do.

Did I say goodbye to Linda?

A surge of commuters whizz past me as an announcement blasts on the speakers about a departing train from Platform 6. I grip the shoulder straps on my duffel and cradle Mother tighter in my arms, then I head for the ticket desk, which is nestled between *Boots* and the toilets. The queue

is long and snakes back onto the floor and around towards *Costa*. The queue there is even longer. I hope those people have brought their own mugs too, otherwise they'll be drinking out of cardboard cups soon. I take my place in the line and slip out the envelope to Robert Wilson that was never posted.

"Next."

I shimmy to the wooden box with a glass window and holes to speak through. "London, please," I call through the air holes.

"Where in London?"

"To Mr Robert Wilson's."

She stares at me. "What?"

I clear my throat and read out the address on the envelope, "16 Lansdowne Road in Notting Hill, London, England. I saw a newspaper clipping of the family standing in front of the house. It appears to be a white house with a small pebble driveway and a garden path up the side that I hope leads to a spacious garden in the back. Is that enough detail?"

"Are you trying to be smart?"

"Pardon?" I ask. 'Smart' is not something I am regularly called.

"King's Cross or Paddington?"

"Are they both in London?"

"Yes."

"Oh, ok. Um, either then. You choose. It'll be a surprise." I don't usually like surprises but Mother does. It'll be a nice treat for her.

She sighs loudly. "King's Cross from Edinburgh has no changes so one return ticket for that?"

"I don't need a return. One-way, please. I'm going to live with my biological family, the Wilsons. That's also a surprise."

June
and the
Train Journey

Gardener's Almanac:
Light Evening Showers
Low of 9°
Sunset: 21:29

My seat is very difficult to find. According to a woman clutching a half-eaten Snickers in carriage D, all the 'sleeper cabins' are in carriage B. When I do finally locate my seat, I see that it is not a seat at all but more of a tiny bed for infants or hobbits. It fits my size just fine but what about people bigger than me? My neighbour at number 19 is at least two times my size, and that's just horizontal.

As it's only 7:25PM I am not quite ready for sleep so I contemplate my options to pass the remaining two hours:

1. Stare out the window at the countryside beyond Edinburgh City.
2. Doodle florals and vines on the napkins that the previous person has left on the side table.
3. Read, which I can do as I have 2 books packed with me.
4. Go for a walk and explore the train as it may be my last time on one if I am to live in London with the Wilsons.

After much deliberation, I select the last option while it's still light outside. I slide my duffel onto the metal rack above the bed and scoop up Mother, as she'll also want to explore. Mother always was an 'adventurer'.

The hallway outside is long and narrow, with similar cabins branching out on the left and a row of windows on the right, each depicting a fast moving image of grass and field and farmland. Each cabin is filled with people, families, solo businessmen, and I wonder if we are all going to London. One cabin has its curtains drawn completely making it impossible for me to see inside, which is quite rude, whilst the one beside it has three little children wearing Mickey Mouse ears on

their heads and clutching various electronic devices that buzz and beep and blink, and make my vision flicker.

Past the toilets, which aren't particularly pleasant-smelling, is the carriage for 'Food and Drinks Services'. Intrigued, I press the **PUSH** bottom and dart in between the sliding doors before they close on me and Mother, potentially impaling us. I don't intend to buy anything, because I already have my snacks and beverages sorted for the journey, but I am of course curious about the set up of this carriage, and whether there is a television that passengers can access. *Strictly Come Dancing* isn't due to commence until this weekend, but I will likely find an episode of *CountryFile* or perhaps a nature special of some sort on BBC2.

The Food & Drinks carriage resembles the cafe at *M&S*, with rectangular tables and chairs, and the odd brown leather seated bench that faces into the middle, forcing people to have to look at each other while sipping and munching, which is quite unfortunate. I wouldn't like that at all.

Above a silver hatch is a menu plaque. 'Cold Snacks' include: sweets, chocolate, crisps and nuts; 'Meals' such as cheese and ham toasties fall into the 'Hot Food' category. However, the beverages on offer to travellers baffle me.

Beer

Cider

White wine

Red wine

Sparkling wine

Gin

Vodka

Whisky

A person could get very intoxicated on a train! I can see why trains are far more popular than buses. I am slightly apprehensive about serving alcohol on a moving vehicle but I can now see

why there are so many sleeper cabins on a train — to accommodate the customers passing out in carriage A. I couldn't wake Mother for hours after she enjoyed a few of these kinds of beverages. I'm not a drinker myself, for fear it will interfere with my Paroxetine medication, although I have not taken that in a while now, not since spring.

“Can I get you anything?”

A woman appears before me, dressed in a white shirt and navy trousers, all well-ironed. She holds a laminated paper copy of the menu in her hand and a money belt around her waist. “Anything you fancy from the menu?”

“No,” I quickly reply, before turning around. I shimmy back through the carriage, through the door that almost impales me again and return to my cabin. Mother perches on the small table that separates the two cabin bunks. She looks suddenly very small and I wonder whether I should have ordered a Chianti for her.

Outside, the darkness presses against the windows of the train, obscuring all the little towns and little fields that we whizz by. My breath fogs up the glass until I can't see myself anymore, then I crawl into the bottom bunk and fidget with the weathered strap on my waterproof rainbow watch.

8:24PM.

It's still too early to sleep, so I slide out *Peter Pan* and re-read the chapter where Peter returns to the now grown-up Wendy, wondering how time has passed by in such a way, leaving him both confused and saddened. I turn onto my side, away from Mother, and lightly touch the words on the page. My eyelids become heavy, and soon my fingers drop away and the words in the book slip into a churning, thrashing river of cold water and snake-like reeds.

Barefoot on the pavement, snowdrops on the riverbank. Blood drips

drips

drips

Past number 27

29

31

33

June
and the
Arrival into London City Centre

Gardener's Almanac:
Mostly Sunny
High of 20°
Precipitation: 0mm

The carriage stops hard and I bolt up, bumping my head on the top bunk frame. I don't remember falling asleep, but it's no longer dark outside. In fact, it's blindingly bright. Unnaturally bright. I try to shield my eyes from the fluorescents streaming in the carriage window from the platform outside. When I finally peel them open I see a thick queue of passengers standing outside my carriage. There's a loud beeping sound from somewhere outside and the crowd starts moving, trickling past me and flooding the platform outside, where a large sign reads **KING'S CROSS**.

I glance at my watch. 6:30AM. I'm here. I'm in London, England.

I'm in a different country for the first time in my life. My chest twists and tightens, and I spin around for Mother. Thankfully she still sits where I've left her, facing out to the views of the platform beyond. Then I see the man in bunk two. A large, portly man, in a grey suit, sleeping with his head on a laptop bag, the cable spilling out haphazardly down to the bunk below him. His chest rises and falls, patches of pig snorts spilling out of his mouth and nose.

When did he arrive?

No, I don't like trains at all.

I clamber out of bed and quickly gather up my things. I scoop Mother under my arm and yank open the carriage door to join the queue departing the train. As I slowly shuffle towards the exit door, a deep yawn escapes my lips and I groggily wipe sleep from my eyes. I didn't think I would sleep on the 'sleeper' as I've never been away from home before, not since the foster care days. Perhaps it was the movements of the train that lulled me into the darkness last night, coupled with the fact that I haven't slept properly in days with all that's been going on with the selling, packing and organising of the house. The restless nights have left me feeling utterly exhausted, like

I've come in from a long day out in the garden where things have had to be clipped, sheared, dug, dragged and laid. It reminds me of the time Mother suggested we completely overhaul the front garden to try to grow hedges to keep the prying neighbours out. After weeks of replanting, months of repair and years of regrowth, she realised she preferred the garden the way it was before, blanketed in yellow flowers that reminded her of the sun. So I changed it back.

We finally spill out onto the train platform, bags and maps and tickets in hand, all looking for exit or connection signage. I pass my window where I bunked and see the sleeping man still curled up on the hobbit bed. Maybe this is his stop too. I pause at the window, my tired reflection staring back at me. If this was me I'd want to be woken up and not end up in a completely different place, having slept through my intended destination. Linda at work says I'm not a good 'teammate' but today I'll prove her wrong and be a good 'bunkmate'. I slam my fist on the window and bang continuously until he startles and slips off the bunk. He disappears from the window. I rise up on my tiptoes and search for him. Suddenly he pops up from the floor, his glasses half dangling from his face. His eyes are wide like a dazed or a scared animal. He rubs his shoulder where he likely landed from the fall and finally focuses on my face. I knock on the glass again, this time softer as he is already awake, and shout, "King's Cross Station!"

He blinks at me, mouth agape, glasses still diagonal across his face. Perhaps he too is from the north and needs further clarification, so I follow up with, "London, England!" before turning around and rejoining the group looking for Connections.

On the escalator up, I realise I hadn't given him ample time to thank me, but I'm sure he is very grateful. What a misfortune it would have been for him otherwise.

People around me hold tickets and phones in their hand, so I reach into the side pocket of my duffel and pull out mine. Edinburgh to London. That's where I have journeyed. Well, technically, Glasgow to Edinburgh to London plus all the stops in between that I had slept through.

I grip the ticket in my hand until my fingers became all clammy, and look around for a station attendant of some kind, because all tickets should be verified. It's the only way to check that every person has rightfully paid for the appropriate fare. But there is no one, just metal barriers where I watch several passengers swipe their phones or their tickets across a screen on the right-hand side of the barrier. Everyone here seems to have travelled on a train before.

My belly flutters and my cheeks start to get quite hot. My fingers get even clammy and the ticket feels wet beneath my touch. I gaze hard at the ticket in my hand. It has a small barcode on it, like the items in the *M&S Foodhall* where I work, which means the screen at the barriers must be like a scanner at the till. I rejoin the queue and when it's my turn I step forward and swipe it like a box of biscuits. But it doesn't beep or blink green like the till scanner does. And it certainly doesn't open to let me pass through. It just flashes red. I swipe again. Behind me, a queue quickly forms and I feel the warmth of them pressing against me. I don't like it. I don't like crowds and I definitely don't like broken scanners that don't operate as they should do. If this was *M&S* there would be tape across the barrier to indicate to customers that it is faulty.

I step to the next lane and try to swipe my ticket there. It too fails to beep and open. I have been sold a defunct ticket like a foodhall item with a partially destroyed barcode. At *M&S*, we put those items off to the side to be recoded, which I often did myself as I'm good at that. But here there is no cart for defunct tickets and, as I've already established, there is no station attendant to manage this situation. Just barriers and gates and people now yelling from the back, "Hurry up, for fuck's sake" and "What's going on up there?"

I don't know what to do so I drop the duffel by my feet and stand frozen at the closed barrier with my noise cancellation headphones, waiting for assistance. Suddenly the world around me becomes very quiet and still. I can hear my raspy breaths and the thumping of my chest, as people press against me, trying to move around me. I can't hear them anymore but I loudly repeat, "I'm waiting for assistance!"

“Assistance!” I call out again, recalling a morning at *M&S* where that worked for an old lady who had dropped a jar of pasta sauce on Aisle 5. I responded immediately, asking her what she had done to the sauce.

After a few minutes, the crowds disperse and the air feels calm and still. I remove my headphones and open my eyes. A lady with blue hair immediately catches my attention for obvious reasons. I take a deep breath and swipe my ticket, this time the other way round. It beeps and the barriers open. I mentally note the correction, and carry on with my journey to the Wilsons’ residence.

The hallways of King’s Cross Station are lined with tiles, posters and buskers. I follow a small group of people until I see a kiosk and finally, a station attendant. It doesn’t have the words Information or Customer Service on the side or along the top, in fact, there are no signs at all; however, there is a small desk and a man in a uniform.

“Excuse me—” I start.

“Are you going to Heathrow?”

“Sorry?”

“Are you going to Heathrow?” he asks again, in an accent I recognise from Mother’s *Eastenders* show.

“What’s that?”

“Heathrow, the airport.”

“The airport? No, I just got here. I don’t have any intention of going back just yet, and certainly not on a plane. I’m not made of money,” I snort. Planes are for rich people. Mother told me that.

“I’m selling tickets for the Heathrow Express here,” he says, looking away from me.

“I’m not buying tickets for the Heathrow Express. But I do want to purchase a ticket to 16 Lansdowne Road in Notting Hill, London, England.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “Tourists, eh,” he mutters. “Try the Ticket Desk.”

“Aren’t you a ticket desk? You just offered me tickets a moment ago?”

“Only to Heathrow. I don’t sell tickets into the city.”

I sigh and rejoin the masses of people coming and going from different platforms, until the hallway eventually spills out into a large concourse with an odd metal netlike ceiling above my head. Shops and toilet cubicles branch out along the edges, with small clusters of travellers huddled in corners with coffee cups and mobile phones.

It takes me about fifteen minutes to locate another ticket desk. This one is properly signposted and has a queue forming outside it, which looks more promising than the last ticket desk.

7:18AM.

The queue is about the same size as the one at Edinburgh station and I wonder whether employing more staff would improve this system. I’ll be sure to mention it in the feedback form, assuming there will be one, which I very much hope as I like to share my thoughts and opinions, having worked in retail for many many years now. Three years to be exact. I used to remember the months and days too, but oddly I can’t recall that right now. Something scratches at my mind.

Number 27

29

31

33

Long hair on lace—

“Next, please,” calls the man behind the plastic glass.

I usher forward, glancing at my watch. It's fast approaching breakfast time and I will need to address that before embarking on the next leg of my journey. I never miss breakfast. It's always at 7:45AM.

“Good morning, I want to get to 16 Lansdowne Road in Notting Hill, London, England. It's a white house with a small driveway and some rose bushes in the front. Does that help?”

The silver-haired man behind the glass laughs, then appears to wait for me to laugh too, but I don't join him because I don't know why he's laughing. He slides a small piece of paper towards me, displaying an intricate map of coloured lines and station names. I don't know how to read maps. I found Geography difficult as a child, and Mother didn't explain this subject very well during my home school lessons because she said she also found it quite challenging, having never left Scotland.

When I'd asked her where she'd gone when she'd left me in a brown wicker basket outside Glasgow Royal Infirmary on the morning of June 17th 1995, when temperatures were 12° with South-East winds of 6 miles per hour (I'd looked this up on the *Google* at work), Mother's face had become all wet and splotchy. She finally answered, “Jura. I got the boat out to Jura and worked at the pub that sat on the edge of the sea, serving whiskies to tourists and pints of beer to fishermen.”

I knew it was my turn to respond with a follow-up question, as follow-up questions maintain a conversation so I asked her what kind of boat it was and whether she'd seen any ocean animals while on it, like sharks or penguins or eels. She didn't respond so I deduced that those weren't appropriate follow-up questions so I instead asked her about the weather and plant growth on Jura, as island foliage was not an area of horticulture that I was familiar with back then. I have read up on it since and now consider myself quite knowledgeable in that area too.

Mother didn't say too much about that either and requested that we change the subject, which we did. I instead told her all about the seventy species of flowers in the daisy family. She enjoyed this conversation, and of course asked me follow-up questions.

I had considered taking the urn to Jura after everything happened, but the boat trip over the wild thrashing seas scared me which is why Mother is here with me today in London. I also assumed she'd want to come with me, to visit and explore and adventure. I hope she's enjoying herself so far.

"I don't see addresses on this map?" I say to the attendant behind the desk, sliding the map back to him under the small gap of glass, which has large holes for speaking through. I lean in closer. "How will I know where Lansdowne Road is?" I ask through the holes.

"Do you see Notting Hill on the map?"

All I see are lines going across, up, down, in a variety of colours including yellow, pink, brown, light blue, dark blue and green. I still do not see 16 Lansdowne Road.

He takes the map from under the gap and circles something on it with his pen, then slides it back. "Take the Victoria line to Brixton, change at Oxford Circus to the Central line to Ealing Broadway, then get off five stops later at Notting Hill Gate."

"Then what?"

"Then ask someone at the station where, um...what was the road?"

I clear my throat, "16 Lansdowne Road in Notting Hill, London, England. A white house with—"

"Yeah, yeah, ask someone there at Notting Hill Gate to help."

"Ok. Can I buy a ticket, please?"

"Swipe your bankcard at the barriers to get through."

"I don't have a bankcard."

"No bankcard? It takes Debit too."

"No bankcard of any kind," I say again. Mother said never to give your money to a bank as they'll spend it all then claim they're bankrupt so they don't have to pay it back. I always requested bankers' drafts from work and cashed them immediately at the Post Office, then we hid the money

in the sugar jar by the kettle. After assessing the coffee jar, tea jar, fridge, freezer, cutlery drawer and the inside of a cookery book, Mother and I had decided that the sugar jar was the safest place. I hadn't considered that another room other than the kitchen might have been better.

“Ok, well we're still accepting Oyster cards at most stations, so you can add some cash to that.”

Oyster cards?

Sounds like a gift certificate to an expensive seafood restaurant, not a ticket onto a train.

“Can I add ten pounds onto the ‘oyster’, please?”

“That won't get you far in London if you're crossing zones?”

“After today I won't be travelling much. I intend to remain in Notting Hill with my biological relatives.”

I have plenty of cash with me, having struck good deals with the house items I'd sold and taken all of the cash from the sugar jar, thankfully before I'd sold it. However, I have always been good with understanding money and tallying coins and notes. I want to ensure I have enough to last me until I can secure employment at a Notting Hill *M&S*. Linda will give me a good reference if I ask.

“The oyster card is a fiver itself—”

“Five pounds!”

“Which you can get back if you return it on your way back to...back to...well, wherever you came from.”

“So it's like giving a pound coin to get a trolley at *Asda*? I'll get it back when I return the trolley?”

“Exactly.”

“That makes sense. Ok and then add ten pounds onto that,” I say, handing him fifteen in total, made up of one ten pound note and five pound coins. I also show him my disability card.

He picks it up and looks at me, then goes a little white. “Sorry, I maybe should have explained it a bit better,” he mutters.

“I think you explained it suitably,” I smile. “Well done.”

He offers me a half smile in return then types on his keyboard. “Do you want me to register you for a Disabled Persons Railcard?”

“What’s that?”

“It just means you’ll get a discount on off-peak travel for the underground.”

“I like discounts, so yes. And here’s a tip for you to thank you for your time: *M&S* offer heavily-discounted food items on the clearance shelves after 5PM.”

He smiles and nods. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

He slides my new Oyster card over. “Don’t forget to return it for your fiver.”

“I won’t forget,” I say, before giving him a wave goodbye.

I have an extraordinarily good memory, particularly when it involves money. I have a very good memory when it comes to other things too, such as how long it takes to boil an egg before it hardens, all previous contestants on *Strictly Come Dancing*, and all the names of flowers that begin with the letter J, because J is for June and that is my name:

Jaborosa

Jacob’s Ladder

Jewel Orchid

Japanese Bellflower

Jack-in-the-Pulpit

Jacaranda

Justica

Jewel Weed

June
and the
British Transport Police

Gardener's Almanac:
Mostly Sunny
High 20°
Precipitation: 0mm

I stand on the little bridge, balancing a mug of *Costa* coffee and a half-eaten buttered croissant in one hand and the underground map in the other. There are two sets of stairs at either side of me, one going left and the other going right. I look repeatedly between both. I can't remember all the stops the nice kiosk assistant mentioned or the station names, but there was definitely something about Victoria and something about a Circus.

The map is a little damp at the edges from my clammy hands as I grip it tight.

Victoria.

Circus.

There is suddenly a lot more people in the station than when I first arrived, all coming and going, and moving in different directions like during the *M&S* Spring Clearance Sales, or when you come off the M8 junction at exit 18 during peak traffic. Thankfully Mother and I never learned how to drive so we left the road politics up to the bus drivers. After a couple of horn beeps and some choice words, bus driver eventually just swing across a lane and wait for people to move for them. Glasgow bus drivers are very confident on the road.

I continue looking between each stairwell, contemplating the left versus the right, until my temples start to throb and my shoulders begin to tense. Mother was left-handed so I could take the left; however, because I am right-handed perhaps I should take the right.

“What do you think, Mother?” I say loudly to her. “Left or right?”

I don't want to go through the barriers to ask the information man again as I might have to pay to come back, and I don't want to have to add more money to the Oyster Card because I will be returning it very soon for my five pound note.

Suddenly someone clips me on the elbow and I stumble to keep my grip on the coffee mug, the croissant, the map and Mother. I drop the croissant.

“Sorry,” grumbles a man in a business suit darting down the left stairwell.

People are in a hurry in London, apparently. Thankfully, the croissant has remained in the brown paper bag and can therefore be consumed still. If it had fallen out onto the tiled floor I may have had a dilemma to figure out. I put the saved croissant in my left coat pocket and the map in my right.

“S’cuse me, you a’right darling?”

I turn to see another man standing a metre away from me, dressed in dirty dark jeans and a brown leather jacket. He has his hands in his pockets and his eyes peer out from under a football cap. I don’t know him, therefore he is a stranger. Precaution will have to be taken.

“My name’s *June*, not Darling,” I correct him.

He snorts, then clears his throat. “Where’s it you heading?”

“Notting Hill, to a white house with a—”

“So you want to take the tube to Brixton, then change at um...you got a map?”

I yank the map back out from my pocket to show him, seeing fragments of blue, brown and purple trickle through the air and land at my feet. We both stare down at the money, most of the notes still folded, scattered around my green wellies. I quickly scoop it up, clawing each note with my finger, likely dragging train station dirt and debris with me. Perhaps there would have been no croissant dilemma after all.

“Here, I’m going the same way, darling. I’ll show you which stop to get off at.” He gestures to the stairwell on the left and I follow him.

The platform is long and narrow with an edge that drops steeply down to a single track. In front of me is a white tiled wall with big framed posters advertising people singing in shows and new mobile phones that promise to take photos at a ‘professional standard’.

I immediately back away from the yellow line at the edge of the platform, remembering that yellow means take caution or go slow, but the man helping me takes me by the arm and pulls me closer until my toes shuffle past the safety line. I don't like it. Mother wouldn't approve either. Yellow means take caution and this is not being cautious.

"I don't think it's safe," I say loudly, my eyes fixed on the yellow painted caution line.

"You have to get close, otherwise people push on and you don't get a space," he replies, his heels on the line, his toes almost at the edge of the concrete ledge.

My stomach starts to churn. Suddenly something barrels out from the dark tunnel on our right, paired with a loud screeching sound that rips through my spine. I scream loudly as the ground beneath my wellies trembles and the framed images of advertisements shake against the walls. Is it an earthquake? Are we in danger? The train station at Edinburgh Waverley didn't tremble and shake and screech like this.

I'm still screaming and my toes are still over the yellow line as a slick bottle-nose train whizzes past us. Strands of my hair frantically and painfully whips my face, slapping me in the cheeks. Suddenly the train screeches to a halt, and I'm blinded with fluorescent lights bursting out from the open doors and large windows.

I heave in and out, not quite sure what I have just experienced, and gaze around at the commuters who gather around the doors. They don't look remotely affected by the high speed machine that has just whipped past us with only inches of 'safety distance.' This yellow line is here for a good reason, and I will never stand on it or close to it again.

We shuffle onto the terrifying high-speed train, my breaths still staggered and raspy, and shimmy through the crowd to the middle beside the metal poles. The man helping me encourages me to hold onto one. I wrap myself around a pole and hug it as tightly as possible. Are there not seatbelts on these fast-moving trains? Beside us a little boy eats an ice cream cone, his mother holding him as she grips a pole. The big mushy scoop on his cone is pink and I want to ask him

whether it's strawberry, raspberry or cherry flavoured, but then the doors beep and we start moving again. I'm relieved to find that it's much calmer and slower *on* the train than it is off.

This train is different to the one I arrived into England on. It's slimmer, with far fewer seats and no sleeper cabins with little bunk beds beside windows filled with images of grazing cows, green fields and the odd cluster of sheep. And there is likely also no food and drinks carriage, with hot and cold menus, and an array of alcohols. I smile, knowing I have now experienced two different train journeys and that makes me 'well-travelled' as Linda calls herself. When I telephone her for a reference I will tell her that we finally have something 'in common' which she said we would never have.

The train slows and finally comes to a stop. The man shakes his head to let me know that this is not our stop so I continue hugging the pole.

"Mind the gap."

I glance up at the speaker system where I just heard a woman's voice.

"Mind the gap," repeats an automatic voice on the train ceiling.

What gap?

Am I standing close to a hole that I might fall into like *Alice in Wonderland*, or worse, is there a hole that leads to the tracks below where I might become stuck and impaled?

As I search the floor around me for this poorly visible and not well signposted 'gap' in the ground, I suddenly feel something tickling my right hip. It's soft at first, then becomes heavier and more aggressive. It's deep inside my pocket now and lightly strokes my hip and bottom. I don't like this. I hug the pole tighter and close my eyes.

When I open them I see the boy beside me still licking his ice-cream, his mother who is looking intently at her phone screen, a man holding a big mint green storage bag with the word **DELIVEROO** on it, and then there's the man who has been helping me find Notting Hill. He has one hand on the railing, and the other hand is...where is his other hand?

And then it hits me.

It's his other hand that is inside my coat pocket, stroking me, touching my belongings. Touching Mother's yellow gardening gloves that I brought with me in case she wants to help me in the garden. His hand digs deeper, touches me harder, pulling me in closer. His breath is hot on me and I turn away from him, still wrapping around the pole with both arms. On the floor are drips of melted pink ice cream from the little boy's cone and a discarded train map that has pen markings on it like the one I have in my pocket that the nice kiosk man gave me.

That's *my* train map on the ground.

The carriage is stifling hot and I can't get a breath. I can't fill my lungs.

The train slows again and we stop. The doors beep and that same message of "Mind the Gap" blasts through the carriage.

What bloody gap?

Suddenly the man takes away his hand and I feel lighter. His hot breath is not on me anymore and now he's rushing out the door, pushing through the crowd and fleeing up the escalator. More people get on around me, cramming into me as the doors beep and close. My mug is upside down and the coffee that was once inside it is all over the train floor along with the boy's pink ice cream. Mother is thankfully safe inside my duffel.

I shimmy down the pole until I'm on my knees on the floor, avoiding the spilled coffee and ice-cream drips, and grab the train map. I shove it back inside my pocket which is open now. I had zipped it close before I got on the train. I reach my fingers back inside, searching for my packet of tissues but they are gone. And so is my money. All of it.

Other than the map, my fingers graze nothing but cool fabric lining. He's even taken my Oyster Card.

How will I get through the station barriers? I'll be stuck here, trapped, unable to get to Notting Hill to see my relatives. Unable to live there. I'll have to live here, in the station, amongst

these crowds. And Mother...I won't get to show her London now. Show her all the lovely flowers and blooms that flourish here down in the south where the climate is milder and the winters are less cruel.

My fingers tremble and I drop my coffee mug, hearing it break and roll away. Everything around me goes blurry. Passengers turn into a sea of distorted faces. The train becomes a collage of fragmented images of posters and slivers of silver from the railings. I hear yelling. Who's yelling?

Drip

Drip

Drip

When I blink my eyes open, the silence hugs me like I once hugged the poles. The quiet is thick and seeps into every corner and crack of the train. I'm on the floor next to the coffee mug that has a broken handle. My duffel is beside me, still zipped up, Mother still inside. My hands are red, bloodied along the knuckles. Like before.

They throb, as do my toes; I must have kicked something. I bring my battered knuckles up to my mouth and gently lick the cuts. A large space has formed around me as passengers huddle at the edges, some curling up on their seats. Everyone is looking at me.

"Mind the Gap."

The doors beep open and two policemen enter the carriage. One is holding a small black baton. They grip me underneath my armpits and pull me off the train.

"That's hers too," says one of the passengers.

The policeman with the black baton grabs my duffel, ignoring the brown bag of croissant beside it, and my mug.

"My mug," I say. But they don't listen. No one does. It lies on the ground, in a pool of murky brown coffee. The handle, the missing part, only inches from the ceramic body. As I'm dragged out, the duffel swings beside me on the policeman's shoulder. Mother only inches from me.

Passengers press their faces against the glass, watching me being escorted across the platform and up the escalator.

“I don’t have an Oyster card,” I tell the officers, but they pull me towards an Emergency Exit door, completely bypassing the barriers.

“Are they allowed to do that?” I ask a station attendant standing at the railings.

June
and the
Backseat of the Police Car

Vehicle Gauge:
Temperature: 17°

The temperature gauge on the vehicle's dashboard reads 17° which is three degrees lower than the expected high for today, although it's only 9:03AM. The sun pierces the car window and warms my face and the seat around me. I slide my palm against the soft leather, stopping at all the cracks that expose a sliver or a dot of the foam beneath it. Where the fabric is damaged or curls up is rough and jagged. I skim my fingertips over it, playing with one frayed edge as I glance around the interior. The back of a police car is not as I expected. Not that I have a lot of experience being stuffed into emergency response vehicles prior to today. But I do, however, have some earlier experience riding in the back of a car that has a fully functioning child lock on the doors, meaning I couldn't exit without someone's assistance. As an adult, car journeys have been rare.

This car is a lot smaller than I had imagined and smells distinctly like a fried egg, which I conclude is a correct guess as I can now see a *McDonalds* breakfast wrapper stuffed into the cup holder with the word **McMuffin** written in yellow. I am not particularly familiar with the popular franchise *McDonalds* although many of my *M&S* colleagues were, often coming back with those brown paper bags during lunch breaks. I wonder if all the items on their menu have a 'Mc' before it, like *McBurger*, *McFries*, *McWedges*?

Police Officer #1 is in the driver's seat, slowly inputting my details from the government issued ID I've given him. I don't drive so I don't have a licence card, we never travelled so I don't have a passport, and Officer #2 won't accept my *M&S* staff badge as formal identification. Apparently the little silver badge that states: **Hi I'm June! How can I assist you today?** Is an 'unacceptable form of ID' according to him.

I strongly disagree.

Officer #2 has a small black notepad resting on his knee and scribbles on it with a blue pen.

“Ok,” he mutters. “June. J-U-N-E.”

“Is there another way to spell June?” I ask him, truly curious.

He stops writing and looks at me through the rearview mirror. “Are you being cheeky?”

“No actually, I would like to know is there another way to spell June? I only know of one way. Although I suppose, one could spell it with two O’s as in J-O-O-N but that doesn’t sound as good as J-U-N-E, don’t you think? Or it could be J-U-N, no E — short for Juniper or Juno? What do you think is better?”

“What’s her last name?” he asks the other officer who holds my ID.

“Wilson,” I shout from the back to help out. “W-I-L-S-O-N. Although if there’s another way to spell Wilson, I’d also be very interested in that? I’m sure in your line of work you must come across many variations of first and last names. You must know them all.”

Officer #1 sighs and looks over his colleague’s shoulder to check the spelling himself.

“Where are you staying in London?” he asks me.

“At my biological relatives’ house,” I say, handing him the envelope with the address.

“Robert Wilson, my relative, lives here.”

Officer #1 leans into his colleague. “So, what do we do with her?” he whispers loudly. “I don’t fancy writing her up at the station all morning, do you?”

“We can’t just let her go.”

“Shift ends in an hour. I need my bed. Let’s drop her off at her relative’s with a verbal warning.”

Officer #1 leans back into his seat and turns around to face me. “Right we’re only going to give you a warning at this time, ok? No more public displays like that, alright?”

I respond with a half nod, because I can’t agree to something I can’t control. That’s what Aileen told Mother years back — “June cannot control her emotions.”

“Now, we’re going to drop you off at this address and have a quick word with them.”

“Yes that would be ideal, thank you, as I was having terrible trouble with the trains. 16 Lansdowne Road, Notting Hill. It’s a white house with a small driveway, a rose bush in the front, and hopefully, fingers crossed, a very spacious and complex garden—”

“Actually, should we take her to the hospital? She might have hit her head?” says Officer #2.

“Did you hit your head?” Officer #1 shouts back at me as I sit holding the bag that contains Mother.

“No, I don’t think so?”

“What’s the day today?” the other one calls back.

“Monday.”

“And where are you?”

“London, England.” I smile. I like quizzes. I’m often very good at them, particularly ones that involve questions about flowers and plants.

“See?” #1 says to #2. “Seems fine to me. Just take her to..uh...”

“16 Lansdowne Road, Notting Hill,” I repeat, wondering why memory recall is not a required skill of police training.

The car shudders and heaves into gear, slowly pulling away from the pavement. I turn and look back through the window, at the station that gets smaller and smaller the further we drive. Then I lean against the window, hoping to see a glimpse of London’s blooms as we pass by.

London is an odd place. A strange mixture of concrete, gravel and asphalt, with greens, greys and whites. Some of the streets offer more than just chipped doorways and broken fences. Green-saturated trees line uneven cobbled paths, while clusters of weeds and wild flowers sprout up from stonewall edges. Patches of grass sit beside brick townhouses and glass buildings, and birds frantically peck at marble bird feeders perched in tiny square gardens.

A meagre attempt at bringing the countryside to the city, but laudable nonetheless.

Most would have given up, like they have in Glasgow.

Everyone on the street is just as rushed as those in train stations, and cars are the same, with vehicles pouring out of slip roads and alleyways. Sleek black taxis, red double-level buses, compact cars. They dart frantically between each other, narrowly avoiding contact, and speed down side streets and one-way roads.

A big red bus with the words ‘*Hop On Hop Off*’ emblazoned on the side pulls into the lane beside us, slowing and matching our speed. I debate whether to alert Officer #1 and #2 as it appears to be suspiciously following us, but given the officers’ inability to remember a simple address, I doubt they will respond effectively. So, I mentally note the license plate of the bus and continue observations.

9:42AM: Hop-On Hop-Off bus aligns vehicle to ours

9:43AM: Hop-On Hop-Off bus turns on left indicator but does not take the left exit

“Left here,” Officer #2 grunts to his colleague. We take a left, appropriately using our indicator unlike the bus which disappears behind buildings and bridges. I cease observations.

Soon the road opens up and shop premises sit side by side, racks of merchandise and clothing spilling out from their open doors. Markets advertise payphone cards, Pay-as-You-Go mobiles and gold trading, whatever that is. Cafe awnings with round metal tables and chairs clutter the pavements as small clusters of consumers gather around searching for the perfect place to sit. Tourists wander mindlessly with maps in their hands and cameras around their necks.

We take a right and snake down a winding road that spills out into an intersection. Officer #2 taps the GPS system on the dashboard that appears to have remnants of his **McMuffin** smeared across it, which explains the lingering egg smell.

Where we turn next, the houses are different here. The gardens are a little larger than the street where I live — *lived* — and a little neater, catering to gardeners like myself. Pastel roses in

yellow and pink pepper the pathway up to brightly coloured front doors with iron knockers. I hope the Wilsons live in one of these, but then we quickly turn a corner and continue down another street where I see a dog trotting alongside the owner, carrying its own leash in its mouth. Even the animals in London act peculiar.

The morning sun is still penetrating the glass where I rest my face, and soon I feel a burning in my cheeks. The temperature may slightly deviate from the prediction in my *Gardeners Almanac*. I think it will be much warmer than 20°. Early June is the perfect month for gardens. In fact, according to my *Gardeners Almanac*, ‘There is no better month to be a gardener than June.’

Having spent a lot of time outside in the community patch and in our own garden, my skin has a slight tan to it even though I regularly slather on an SPF of 15 or higher. Mother said that Agnes on our street doesn't wear sunscreen and because of that she now looks like “a shrivelled raisin that’s got stuck at the bottom of the box and no one wants it.”

I don’t want to look like Agnes.

“Here we are, number 16.”

I grip Mother firmly, until the cool ceramic of the urn presses achingly into the pads of my fingers, as a surge of excitement shoots up my spine. I love seeing gardens for the first time.

I finally lift my gaze to the redstone townhouse beside us, immediately struck by how normal it looks. I know property in general is quite small in London, based on Mother’s television soaps and my gardening programmes so I knew not to have too high expectations for my new living quarters. However, I’ve still somehow got it into my head that my biological relatives reside in some manor like in *Downton Abbey*. I can see now that this is no *Downton Abbey*. It is just a plain old house. There are large bay windows that overlook a gravel driveway, wide enough for two cars and two cars only. A thin hedge frames the house, that needs a good tidy to be perfectly honest, with two large but ill-maintained rose bushes on either side of a rusty metal gate. There is a second

metal gate on the left side of the house with a path that snakes around the back, which I cannot see down properly due to the big blue car rudely parked in front.

“Number 16, yeah?” checks Officer #1.

“Yes, yes, that’s correct,” I confirm. “Number 16. But is this Lansdowne Road?”

“Lansdowne Road, yep,” he nods. “Is this not it?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been here before.” I press my nose against the window until my breath fogs the glass making it hard to see. Something beeps and I shift my face away from the door as it swings open.

Officer #2 stands in front of me, gesturing for me to get out. I slowly slide out, clutching my bag with Mother inside, and follow the two officers to the metal gate. It creaks as we open it, and I can see how rusted it is close up. It will need a little WD-40 which I did not bring with me. Underneath my wellies are stray browning leaves and dislocated moss. The rose bushes on either side are dry and bristly, lacking sufficient watering and pruning. Although roses thrive best in direct sunlight, they desperately need regular moisture and access to well-drained soil. These bushes have neither. I’m already disappointed with my new relatives.

The front door is painted a bright red, like the dying roses, the topcoat flaking off around the letterbox. The bay windows are empty, void of movement and life. From the one beside me, I can see a large living room with two sofas, an armchair and a big widescreen television that will be well-sized for *Strictly Come Dancing*. I am extremely relieved that they don’t have a small TV, or worse, they could be one those people who refuse a TV in the house altogether!

Officer #2 steps up, blocking me from seeing through the other window, and thrusts his finger into the side of the door. The doorbell sounds like an instrument used to wrangle escaped cattle and makes me shiver.

After a few breaths, it opens. Standing in the doorway is a slim petite woman that I immediately recognise from the newspaper article that Mother had held onto. Her hair is much

blonder now, but still pulled back into a small bun. She is dressed in work clothes with high black heels and a crisp white shirt that's tucked into the rim of a tight skirt that oddly gets tighter around her knees. She has the same pinched and painful expression as she had in the article. I shiver remembering how firmly she gripped the shoulder of the boy in that photo. I hope she won't try to hug me. I do not like to be touched.

"Mrs Wilson?" asks Officer #1.

"Yes?" she says slowly, looking very perplexed. "Is there something wrong? Is it my husband?" She squeaks, and clutches her chest very dramatically.

What has happened to her husband?

"Yes, hello Mrs Wilson. Sorry to bother you, but we got a call to come get your relative from the tube station at Brixton. Apparently there was quite a display on the tube, which scared a lot of the passengers. Screaming, kicking the railing, punching the doors—"

"Sorry?"

"I know, but you'll be relieved to know no one was injured. We didn't take her down to the station, but we do have to ask, does your cousin or niece have a history of this? I mean, has this happened before? You don't necessarily need to disclose this, no one is under arrest here, but perhaps she has a history of anxiety, bipolar...substance abuse...?"

Officer #1 leans in, "Maybe she forgot to take her meds this morning?"

Truth is, I hadn't refilled my prescription since Mother went away. She always did that for me and I didn't know what to do or where to go for it so I just stopped taking it. I feel fine so far. I assume the Wilson family will organise all that for me when I move in, along with a new doctor, a new dentist, a new social worker, and perhaps a new cognitive behavioural therapist. I'll also need a new hairdresser at some point but nothing too fancy. I don't care if it's London or not, a trim should never cost more than £12. After that it's just robbery.

"Sorry, Officers," begins the pinched woman, "I've never met this girl before."

“What?”

She throws a quick look my way, then turns back to them, whispering quite loudly, “I have no idea who she is.”

“You said you lived here,” says Officer #1 to me.

“What?” Pinched woman glares at me like Linda at work used to when I dragged my muddy wellies into the staff room on a Monday morning.

“Well?” he prods.

The conversation is taking longer than I expected and my bag is quite heavy, especially with Mother inside. I’m not saying she’s heavy, I’d hate to insult my mother, but she does add quite a bit of weight overall to the duffel. So I gently lower the bag to my feet, careful not to smash Mother, and straighten up. “I don’t live here *yet*,” I clarify to the officers, then turn to the woman still standing at the door, now with her hands on her hips. “First I need to inspect your garden space.”

June
and the
Tiny Porcelain Houses and Tiny Sugar Cubes

Tiny porcelain houses perch on narrow wooden shelves above our heads, with tiny porcelain doors and tiny porcelain windows. One has a robin nestled inside the chimney, its head poking out, while another has a little boy with brown hair standing at the window. I count eight houses in total. Three above Officer #1's head, two above mine, and three above Mrs Wilson's head. She clutches a cup and saucer of tea in her hands, mumbling under her breath. Occasionally she checks her watch, then her phone which sits on the arm of her chair.

In front of me is a small wooden side table with tea in a teapot, milk in a jug and sugar in a bowl. I've never had tea like this before. At home, we always had tea straight from the kettle. And our milk came from the carton in the fridge door, assuming it was still within date.

I reach for the pot and cradle it, the heat coming through and warming my hands. I often wear gardening gloves, so on the days I don't have them on I tend to feel the cold in my fingers more. The teapot is nice, comforting like the fluffy green hot water bottle Mother used to make for me on chillier evenings. At bedtime she'd refill it with freshly boiled water and place it at the bottom of my bed, under my covers where my feet lay. After bathtime, I'd climb into bed and my toes would search the covers for the warmth. I slept with the hot water bottle resting on my feet, waking in the morning to find it cold or discarded out of the bed.

Suddenly the teapot feels very hot, scalding my thighs through my raincoat and dress and I immediately stand up, letting the teapot drop to the floor. "Ow!" I squeal, my thighs still throbbing.

A small trickle of tea pours out the spout onto the beige rug.

Mrs Wilson springs from her seat, leaving the faintest indent in the sofa cushion where she sat, and rushes to my feet. She doesn't ask if I am ok, she simply picks up the teapot and puts it back on the tray, tutting loudly. She pauses for a moment, staring at the rug and I wonder if she's dropped something, like an earring or a brooch. I shimmy off my chair and stare at the rug with her.

“I think teapots are meant to insulate the heat, like those travel thermos mugs. This is perhaps broken. She should ask for your money back,” I suggest, sliding my hand over the stain. My palm is now damp so I drag it across the fabrics of my dress.

Mrs Wilson slowly turns to me, her mouth agape. She closes her mouth, rises and strides over to her armchair.

“Is your husband far away?” asks Officer #2, also checking his watch.

“He better not be,” she grumbles.

“London traffic, eh?” shrugs Officer #1, stuffing a second chocolate digestive in his mouth. He reaches for a third, but this time he dunks it into his tea. I sit up, straining to see what happens to the biscuit. Will it go all mushy or just melt the top chocolate layer.

“Tea?” ask Mrs Wilson, pointing to the tray beside me.

I forgot about the tea after the teapot incident. I thought she’d taken it away, but it’s here sitting beside me, untouched. I reach for the teapot again, feeling her eyes on me, and carefully pour a cup. Then I add a splash of milk.

“Sugar?” she asks.

Do I take sugar? I suddenly can’t remember.

“There’s a spoon for it,” she continues, pointing to the sugar bowl.

I lift it up and open the delicate little lid. It’s so light that I’m afraid I might break it. Inside is not what I expected. “Why is it in tiny squares?” I ask the pinched-face lady, prodding the metal tip of my spoon into the mound of white sugar, crushing some of the edges.

“It’s sugar cubes.”

“Cubes? Did you cut them like that? If so, how do you make the sugar stick together?”

“No I bought them like that.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” She sighs, checking her phone again.

“From where?”

“*Marks and Spencer.*”

“Oh lovely, that’s where I work.”

“That’s nice,” she mutters, gazing at the door behind her.

“I unpack cardboard boxes that come from the warehouse down south — although I guess I’m down south now — and I put the items from the box onto the shelves.”

“That’s nice,” she says again.

“I also clean up the aisles if anyone spills anything, sometimes there’s the odd milk or fresh juice that’s leaking, and if I don’t say anything ‘untoward’ to the customers then my supervisor lets me on the till where I’m allowed to handle real money.” I go back to prodding at the sugar, still wondering whether I usually take my tea with sugar. It was only yesterday. How could I have forgotten?

Assuming I do take one, I suppose I would have one teaspoon, as that seems average. But does that equate to one cube? No, perhaps I should have one half a teaspoon, just in case I’m not allowed to have sugar in my tea. “What do you think?” I ask Mother, who hides in the duffel by my feet. Mother doesn’t answer but the pinched-face lady does.

“About what?”

I have decided; I will have half a teaspoon. “Can I have a knife?”

“Sorry?”

“A *sharp* knife.”

“Um, no I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she says, looking over at the two officers.

I’ll just have to halve it without a knife then. I try first to cut the cube, but it pings off my spoon and lands on the rug near the tea stain, so then I pick one up and bite it. I spit the first half back into the sugar bowl and the other half into my cup. The lady with the tight skirt and pinched face makes an odd squeaking sound and her face goes pale.

The door suddenly swings open, hitting off the hallway wall. “Judith!” cries a deep voice.

“About time, Robert. We’re in here,” calls out the woman, rubbing her forehead.

“Judith, what the bloody hell is going on and why is there a police car outside—” He stops at the living room door, glancing between me and the officers.

So this is Biological Relative 2.

He wears a tailored navy suit, a crisp white shirt that is the whitest I’ve ever seen, matching the lady’s teeth, and a pair of very black, very shiny loafers. He’s broader than the photo, his face is a little older and his belly is a little rounder. His hair is greying, although it’s hard to tell because it’s quite fair, which must hide the grey better. This relative looks more like me. I can see now that we are definitely related. He has my crooked nose, thin lips, the slight dimple in the chin, and a faint spattering of freckles across the cheeks. His eyes are different though, dark and shiny like black marbles. His eyes fix on me. “What’s going on here? Who’s this?”

Mrs Wilson stands, her phone still in her hand. “This girl is saying she’s your *relative* from Glasgow,” she scoffs. “The policemen kindly escorted her from the tube station where she was detained to here, *our home*.”

He looks at me, then the lady then the policemen. He clears his throat. “I have no idea who she is. I don’t have any relatives in Scotland anymore, not since Auntie Anne died, you know that. And Auntie Anne didn’t have any children.”

The policemen both stand. “Mr Wilson, she gave us this address and said—”

“I don’t care what she’s saying. I’m telling you I don’t who she is. Now if she’s under arrest for something then she’s clearly dangerous, please remove her from my house before I call your supervisor—”

Now they’re all standing and yelling, each getting louder than the next until no one can be heard over the clatter. I lean back in my armchair and start dunking a chocolate digestive into the

tea. It doesn't disintegrate after all or go mushy. In fact, the chocolate top melts perfectly. What a great idea.

"Excuse me?" The pinched lady waves at me, trying to get my attention like those annoying shoppers in *M&S* who always have questions. "Who exactly are you related to?"

"Catherine Wilson," I say, dunking my biscuit in again. This time I linger and am most disappointed to find that when I pull it out that half of it has dissolved in the tea and disappeared. I gaze back at the group who is still huddled together in the middle of the room.

Mr Wilson has gone very white. His mouth is open and he looks quite frightened.

I squint at my tea cup. No, I don't think I do take sugar in my tea.

June and Mr Wilson

We sit outside the house watching the policemen drive away, in the car that has the **McMuffin** wrapper on the dashboard and the faint smell of fried egg on the seats. Mrs Wilson — not the Mrs Wilson that is my mother but another one — is in the living room inside, hovering near the window staring at us. Mr Wilson sits on the doorstep beside me, gazing out past the rose bushes and the rusted gate, to the street lined with dawn redwood trees and pink cherry blossoms. He is still very white.

After a much heated back and forth between the officers and my relatives of 16 Lansdowne Road, it was finally decided that no further actions would be taken with regard to the “train station scene” having concluded that it is a “family matter.”

Family.

A word that has always sounded very strange to me. I had looked it up once in a dictionary which defined it as ‘descendants of a common ancestor.’ I am still to ascertain who this common ancestor of ours is.

I wonder how similar we are, being that we’re ‘family’. Perhaps he too enjoys gardening, although judging by the front of the house that’s perhaps unlikely. But maybe he likes cheese sandwiches, tea with no sugar, and television shows about contestants dancing for the chance to win a glitter disco ball trophy.

Mr Wilson leans back and slumps against the bright red door that has flaked paint onto the shoulders of his tailored suit. I’m quite tired from my journey and from the train incident, and I’m feeling all sorts of funny sensations coursing through my body after ingesting a cup of tea with half a sugar and a chocolate digestive, so I slump back with him, maintaining as much space between us as possible. Mother is still safely tucked inside my duffel bag, nestled between my clothes and books and gardening socks. I haven’t reacquainted her yet with her relatives.

I'm not sure why Mr Wilson and I are sitting outside the house instead of *inside* the house. I hoped to have unpacked already, or at the very least been shown to my room. Like I said, I am quite tired.

I have by this point observed some 'red flags' with this new living situation. First, is the state of the front garden. What kind of people are they to leave rose bushes like this? Thankfully I can still remedy these mistakes, although it will take most of the summer and I haven't even seen round the back yet. Goodness knows what that looks like. Secondly, those porcelain houses have to go or be moved to another room. I can't have strange porcelain houses staring down on me while I watch TV, with strange porcelain children and porcelain birds. I'm all for a hobby; in fact, I occasionally partake in a collection of my own, 'borrowing' items along the way that hold purpose, for example, a ball-point pen, a napkin. But collecting porcelain people and small buildings is very odd.

The third red flag is the most disappointing. Upon rising from my seat and following the officers and Mr Wilson out of the house I found myself to be completely covered in yellow fluffy hairs which means only one thing — the dog in the photo from the newspaper cutout is still alive. I absolutely can not live with a dog, or an animal of any kind and that includes fish. The dog will simply have to be rehomed.

After a few more moments of silence, the lady starts chapping loudly on the living room window, trying desperately to get her husband's attention. He weakly waves her away and rubs his forehead. "Sorry...I, um..." he says eventually. Then he sighs deeply. "It's all just such a shock."

"My name is June Wilson and I believe we are all related—"

"I know who you are," he interrupts. "You look just like her. Exactly like her. It was like seeing a ghost."

I wonder if that's a figure of speech or whether he does know Mother is no longer physically with us, having been squeezed into my bag. I don't like 'figure of speeches.' I find them very confusing, especially metaphors.

IT'S RAINING CATS AND DOGS

SHE'S AS HAPPY AS A CLAM

I'LL BE AS GOOD AS GOLD

HE'S A NIGHT OWL

THAT TEST WAS A PIECE OF CAKE

Why can't people just say exactly what they mean? Why bundle the meaning into a metaphor or a simile making it hard for some people to decipher what they mean? That just seems like more work to me.

"You know, I had a feeling you existed," Mr Wilson continues. "But your mother was adamant that she wasn't pregnant and had never been. Then she just disappeared. I didn't know where she'd gone. Didn't even know she was still alive after all these years."

"Jura," I answer. "She went to Jura."

"Jura," he repeats slowly.

The lady chaps again.

"Listen, June. My wife and son don't know I have a daughter—"

"Daughter?" I repeat. It suddenly all makes sense. Mr Wilson is more than a biological relative. Mr Wilson is my biological *father*.

Father. Now that's a strange word. Do I call him Father now?

And if Robert Wilson is my father then the child in the photo might very well be my half-brother. *Half-Brother*. Half of a brother. A brother that's been halved. Not in the physical sense, of course, because that would hurt.

Mr Wilson continues, "Actually, they don't anything about that part of my life, and I'd like to keep it that way for now. Just for a little bit. Things have been...difficult for us recently and this would be tough for her to understand. Are you staying in London or will you be going back to Glasgow?"

"I was planning to stay."

"And your mother?"

I glance down at my bag. "She's here with me."

"Great." He sighs. "That's great. I was worried you were here alone. Well, look, why don't I flag down a cab for you and you can go back to your mother for now and we can keep chatting over the summer and see where things go."

The chapping gets louder, more insistent.

"I need to handle this carefully," he adds.

"Okay." I stand up and delicately carry my bag to the front gate, not wanting to bump Mother around and upset her. We have a lot to talk about.

"Let's exchange numbers so we can keep in touch."

"I don't have a mobile phone."

"Oh. Really? I thought everyone did these days," he says. "Okay, well. Here's my business card. Call me and we'll arrange something."

He steps out onto the street and waves furiously at a black cab passing by. It stops abruptly, the lightbox on the top turning off.

“I don’t have money anymore,” I blurt out, staring at the black taxi, with its engine churning and pounding. “Someone with an *Eastenders* accent took it all, along with my tissues and Oyster card.”

“Yes, no problem,” he mutters, pulling out a silver money clip laden with notes.

“Where to, mate?” calls the cab driver out to us. Oh no, he also has an *Eastenders* accent. Will he rob me too?

“Where are you staying?” Mr Wilson asks me.

“Um...I don’t know.” I want to say ‘Here,’ but that suddenly doesn’t seem like an option anymore.

“You’ve not booked into a hotel yet?”

I shake my head, my cheeks flushing and warming. I don’t understand. Why can’t I stay here?

“I know this great hotel that I think you and your mother will be comfortable at. It’s got a pool.”

“I don’t like water.”

“Well I’m sure there’s a sauna or steam room instead.”

He begins ushering me and I stumble into the taxi, hitting my head off the very low ceiling. I fall back into the seat. The cracked leather is warm from the sun.

“The Landmark Hotel on Marylebone, please,” he says to the taxi driver. Then he stuffs a bunch of notes into my hands. A couple fall by my feet and as I reach down for them, he slams the car door. The taxi pulls away abruptly, and I fall back against the seat again. With the money squashed in my sweaty palms, I turn and stare at Mr Wilson waving to me from outside the redstone townhouse on the street lined with dawn redwoods and cherry blossoms.

I have a father.

That’s our common ancestor.



June
and the
Big Fancy London Hotel

Observations: Still Sunny Taxi gauge: 21° Precipitation: Still Unlikely
--

There are two entrances to the hotel and a man in a uniform with a long black coat appears to be waiting for me to choose one.

I have seen this on the telly before — this idea of ‘tipping’. Giving someone money on top of the money that you have already agreed on. But an amount isn’t specified, and Linda at work told me it’s calculated using percentages. I am slightly familiar with the mathematical concept from charts in my *Almanac* and forecasts. For example, there is a **10%** chance of rain predicted for tomorrow. Humidity will increase over the course of the summer, potentially getting to levels of **95%** during peak heat. But the issue I have is how to calculate a percentage from zero. In this particular situation, entering the hotel is free; however, if the man in the uniform with the long black coat opens the door for me thus making my entrance easier and more convenient then I will be expected to tip him, but how much?

This is not a social situation that Mother and I practised; therefore, I shall do my best to avoid tipping him altogether. And that goes for all tipping situations. At least until Mr Wilson can participate in role playing games. Mother and I spent a lot of time doing this before I started working for *M&S*. She often played the role of the customer and I was the shop assistant. Sometimes she’d ask me to direct her to the dairy aisle, other times she’d ask for a Meal Deal recommendation. And we did this until my responses were, as she put it, “socially appropriate.” We practised a lot.

The man in the uniform gestures to the door beside him, partially opening it already. I slowly inch up the stairs, one step at a time. He opens his fully and smiles at me. I do not smile

back, I simply keep my head down, gaze towards my welly boots and rush for the exit door. The man in the uniform tries to speak but I hurry though, spilling out into the lobby beyond.

No tip = not failing at a social situation (and as a bonus: no money lost).

The lobby is larger than I expected, but I've only ever seen the interior of hotels in films and television. The floor is made of white marble with white draped silk curtains covering the walls. Fairy lights twist and coil around marble pillars that sprout up from the ground like sunflowers. In the centre is a large dining area that is both inside and outside with garden furniture, patio tables and a patch of astro turf. And palm trees. Real palm trees. I have never seen anything like it before. Palm trees are more indigenous to warmer climates. I'm curious to how they grow and thrive here in chilly England, growing inside a hotel lobby.

I shuffle over to one that grows beside a couple who sip pink wine from large glasses, and place my hands on the trunk. It's rough but smooth all at the same time. I tip my head back and gaze up to the top, following the rough bark all the way up to the large leafy green palms. I imagine this is what travelling to an exotic country is like. I've always wanted to know whether I could wrap my arms around the trunk of a palm tree so I do, and I can. How strange, and yet delightful.

A man coughs behind me. "Checking in?"

I drop my hands from the tree and turn around. "Yes, I believe I am."

"Great, just follow me. May I take your bag?"

"No, it's mine," I reply.

He smiles and leads me to a front desk where a short woman with curly hair and green-rimmed glasses also smiles. Everyone here smiles a lot. This isn't at all like the staff room in *M&S*.

"Good morning, welcome to the Landmark Hotel. Checking in?"

"Yes, I think I am meant to be doing that." But I can't remember why? Did Mr Wilson say why?

"Name, please."

Why does she want my name?

“June Tabitha Wilson.”

“Wilson...” she taps away at her computer. “I don’t have anything under a Wilson for today.

Would you have made the reservation in another name?”

“Oh I don’t have a reservation but I think I need to sleep here, please. At least until the Wilsons are ready for me to move in.”

“Any preferences?”

“A bed, please.”

“Of course,” she grins. “I mean would you prefer one with a view?”

“I suppose a view of a garden space would be nice. Please not a view of the river. I’m scared of water.”

She nods.

“And if it’s not too much work for you, then perhaps one that’s located fairly close to an emergency exit if a situation arises in which I need to depart immediately.”

She nods again.

“And one with a good-sized window to ensure adequate lighting for reading in the mornings.” What else should I ask for? What else would make my stay here resemble living at home with Mother? “And a toilet, please,” I add.

She smiles at me. She appears to like me. Most people tend to, I think. “Firstly, all of our bedrooms come with private bathroom and shower facilities.”

“Excellent.”

“And I can check if we have a room beside the emergency stairs or one near the elevator—”

“Emergency stairs, please. If there’s a fire the elevator won’t work. I learned that at work during Linda’s fire drill.”

“We have a room with a lovely view of Regent’s Park from the top floor, or I can offer you one with a partial view that’s also close to the stairs.”

“Ok.”

“Which would you prefer?”

A choice. Mother taught me this one well. “Choice A please.”

She nods and taps on her keyboard. “Would you like to add breakfast?”

I look at my watch. “No, it’s almost lunchtime.”

“I mean breakfast for tomorrow morning. Would you like me to add breakfast to your room rate?”

“What about lunch?”

“We have an excellent restaurant on site that opens in ten minutes.”

“Will they have sandwiches?”

“I’m sure the chef can do something for you.” She smiles. “Now, what about breakfast for tomorrow?”

“What is for breakfast tomorrow?”

“We offer a full buffet.”

“What’s in this buffet?”

“Everything.”

“Will there be coffee?”

“Yes.”

“Orange juice without the bits in it?”

“Yes.”

“Toast?”

“Yes.”

“Butter?”

“Yes.”

“*Real* butter?”

“Yes.”

“A toaster, a plate and a knife?”

“Yes, yes, and yes.”

“Croissants? It’s usually a treat but I suppose being here in London is a treat. And finding out I have a father is a treat.”

She frowns, then presses a smile back onto her face. “Yes to the croissants.”

“Perfect.”

“Breakfast is £25.95 but I can add it to your room rate.”

“Pardon?”

“I can add it to your room rate,” she repeats.

“It’s how much?” I gasp.

“£25.95.”

I take a sharp inhale and feel my chest tighten slightly. *£25.95?* Is the coffee being imported from Brazil? Does the orange juice have gold flakes in it? What warrants such an expensive first meal of the day? In *Marks & Spencer*, a loaf of bread is £1.10, a pint of orange juice is £1.60, and 250g of butter is £1.95. And that does the average person at least five days of breakfasts.

“No to breakfast,” I whisper, shaking my head.

She nods and types on her computer. “I just need a credit card for incidentals and deposit.”

“I don’t have one.”

“Oh.”

“I just have the cash that Mr Wilson gave me?” I say, showing her the notes.

“Well, there’s enough here to cover the deposit. But we’d have to keep it here behind the front desk.”

“Will I get it back?”

“Of course. We’ll just be holding it for you in the event of minor room damage. But we need you to indicate a person of contact in case this doesn’t cover the costs.”

She slides me a form and a black pen where I write down Mr Wilson’s house address and a phone number from the business card he gave me. A white rectangular card with navy geometric shapes. Visually, it’s quite busy but it doesn’t bother me too much.

“Your key is in there.”

I stare at the small cardboard envelope in her hand. How does a key fit in there? I open my mouth to ask her more but the man in the uniform that had been waiting for me at the entrance is suddenly standing beside me. I stare back at him. Is he here for his tip? But he didn’t open the door?

“Here, allow me, Miss,” he says, reaching for my bag.

“No, please don’t,” I reply. He takes it from the floor anyway and I see the outline of Mother against the fabric. The curves of the urn. Mother won’t like to be handled by a stranger, and certainly not by a man. I try to take it back, but he pulls away. I lunge for it, grabbing the handle and we struggle for a few moments before the woman behind the desk coughs and the man in uniform lets go. I finally regain control over the bag and Mother, and quickly depart for the elevator. The man in the uniform watches me go, frowning. I think that’s the expression anyway, which means the emotion will be Sad, Angry, Hungry or Confused.

Thankfully the elevator is straightforward. I am going to be sleeping twelve floors up from the lobby. I’ve only ever slept one floor up. This will be a first for Mother and I, unless Mother slept somewhere higher in Jura.

By the time the elevator reaches my floor, I can feel the sugar cube and the chocolate digestive from earlier floating in my stomach.

The hallway splits off into two directions. Much like the train station, I can go left or right. I go left but all that leads me to is an ice machine and a locked storage cabinet, so I try right. And after passing several rooms, I finally find room 1209.

I carefully lay Mother down on the grey carpeted floor, and open the cardboard wallet. But there is no key inside. All that's there is a card with a single black stripe up one side. I shake the wallet out, expecting it to fall to the floor. But the wallet is empty except for this card. How do I unlock a door with a piece of plastic?

I slide the plastic card it into what looks like a slot in the door, but it turns out just to be a shadow. So I try to 'jimmy' the door like I saw on Mother's television programme, but the plastic bends and almost snaps. I also try knocking, in case the man in uniform is waiting for me inside. If so, perhaps he can let me in too. But the door is still locked and Mother still sits on the grey carpet outside. Defeated, I collapse down on the carpet beside her and rest my head against the door. Maybe I should look for a room attendant to help me, or return to 16 Lansdowne Road in Notting Hill to ask Mr Wilson. Now that I've established he is my biological father, and therefore my primary caregiver, I suppose I can ask him questions now.

"Locked out?"

A thin woman with a blue apron stands at the other end of the hallway, beside a trolley piled with white towels and toilet rolls. She looks like Mary, our cleaner at *M&S* who came in before my shift ended on a Thursday. I liked Mary. She was kind to me and asked me how Mother and I are doing. Sometimes she gave me a banana off the shelf for my bus home so I didn't get 'peckish'. I was sad when she was fired for telling Linda to "fuck off back to England."

"Are you locked out, Miss?" she asks again.

"I guess so, although I was never really inside to begin with."

"Is your key not working?"

I hold up the plastic card and wallet. "I didn't get a key. This is all they gave me."

“That’s your key right there,” she says, walking over. “May I?”

I nod and hand her everything the desk has given me, including a ball-point pen. She taps the top of the key to the black box beneath the handle and a green light flickers. Then I hear a click. She thrusts the door open with her hip. “And there you are.”

I clamber to my feet and gaze at the black box. I hadn’t considered swiping at it like the contactless payment option at *M&S*. It makes sense now, especially that black stripe down the edge. As the towel trolley clangs and squeaks back down the hallway, I wave goodbye and slowly enter the space.

It’s a single room — specifically a bedroom. There is a toilet, as requested, but other than that it is *one* room. There is no living room or kitchen, no stairs or hallway cupboard to store extra shoes and coats, and definitely no garden, not this high up anyway. But there are huge windows that look all the way down a park, and if I press my face against the glass, I can just about make out that the trees at the entrance are Indian bean trees. Otherwise known as cigar trees, they’re named after the long cylindrical pods that hang off the branches like little silver clusters of beans. I can’t see past them as the glass starts to fog with my breath.

The room is bigger than my bedroom at home, and *very* white. White bedsheets, white pillows, white walls and a white desk with a white chair. Even the toilet is white — white towels, white soap and a white vase with a single white calla lily that is sadly artificial. Artificial plants and fake flowers confuse me immensely.

A chime from my watch tells me it’s 11:45AM, almost lunch. I place Mother on the white table beside the window so she can also see the Indian bean trees, and then pick up the receiver to call the front desk to enquire about lunch options.

“Front desk, how may I assist you?” cooes a female down the phone.

“Hello, this is June Wilson. I am in room 1209 overlooking Regent’s Park. The lady mentioned there were lunch options here, where would I find that?”

“Well our restaurant opens at midday and offers a wonderful lunch offer of a 2-course set menu for only £35.50.”

“Midday is far too late. By the time I’m seated and order, lunch will arrive late.” There’s a pause. “I always eat at midday,” I add.

“Ok, well our room service opened at 11:30AM. Would you like me to connect you?”

“What’s room service?”

“It’s a food service that’s delivered to your room.”

“Lunch comes to me? I don’t need to leave the room at all?”

“That is correct.”

“Like a takeaway?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent.”

“I’ll connect you now.”

A few seconds later, the phone rings again and a man picks up. “Hello, room service?”

“Hello, I would like to order lunch.”

“Yes, what would you like?”

“A cheese sandwich on white bread with real butter and the crusts cut off.”

“We only have the chicken club sandwich or the spicy halloumi sandwich on the menu, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t know what either of those are.”

“Well, the chicken club is roasted sliced chicken, smoked bacon, cheese—”

“Do you use real butter or fake margarine?”

“We have both.”

“White or brown bread?”

“Again, both.”

“So you have cheese, white bread and real butter. Do you have a knife to slice the crusts off?”

“Yes,” he laughs. “I will talk to the chef and see what we can do.”

“Lovely, thank you. How long?”

“Thirty minutes.”

“Oh,” I mutter, glancing at my watch and Mother. I want to ask her what I should do.

“We will try to get it to you as soon as, Miss.”

“Thank you,” I sigh. “It’s room 1209, in front of the park with the Indian bean trees. Knock three times so I know it’s you.”

“Will do. Bye.”

“Goodbye.”

After pacing the room several times, my sandwich arrives at exactly 12:06PM, later than I’ve ever eaten lunch before. I answer the door red-faced and panicky and quickly grab the plate off the silver cart. I don’t know if the person in the uniform is expecting a tip for bringing it up to me but I don’t have time to debate the percentage as I’m already so far off routine.

There’s salad on the plate.

I open the door to call the man back but he and his silver cart have disappeared much to my dismay.

I sit for another minute on the edge of the bed staring at the white plate of sandwich, crisps and salad, unsure of what to do next. I glance over to the desk by the window and wonder what Mother would do, aside from order a large glass of red wine. “What do you think, Mother?”

I nod. “Good idea.”

I bring the plate to the toilet and scrape the salad into the bin under the sink. Then I rearrange the sandwich and crisps like the salad had never been there in the first place, return to the room and eat my lunch by the window while admiring the Indian bean trees.



June and the Search for Dinner

Gardeners Almanac:
Sunny with Showers
High of 16°
NW Winds 3mph

At exactly five o'clock Mother and I go downstairs in search of dinner, which I'm worried will be a difficult undertaking in a city like London. But we're hungry and we always eat at six o'clock.

We hesitantly use the elevator and I'm relieved to see the man in uniform isn't waiting for me inside the lift or at the bottom. The lobby is busy, bustling with guests coming and going, some towing heavy suitcases on wheels and small children by the hand. It looks like a train station, a few people even carry small coffee cups. I see the man in uniform by the check-in desk, assisting a family with their luggage, likely receiving a tip at the end. I wait for a few moments to observe the tipping but he places their bags on a silver cart and wheels it over to the lifts. There is no tipping so far, so I sigh and leave as sourcing dinner is far more important.

Outside the air is mild and a soft breeze flows through my air. I cradle Mother in my arms like a small animal, and cross over to the park that I can see from my bedroom window. The Indian bean trees are even more magnificent in person. Tall, with a rough shiny bark. They're gathered at the entrance by the gates then dot around the space, lining the paths. All around me noise pounds my ears — traffic, conversation threads, laughter, music, restaurant sounds like screeching chairs and cutlery clatter. It's

too

loud

When I open my eyes, I'm sitting cross-legged on the grass by an Indian bean tree, Mother in my lap. I remove the headphones from my coat pocket and slip them onto my head, cupping my ears. The world is silenced. I breathe deeply and stand slowly. I huddled Mother under my arms and cross through the park to the busy streets outside.

5:07PM.

I see a neon lit sign advertising, “The best sushi in London,” but Mother and I don’t eat fish or food that’s been rolled up in any way, and an array of American burger places, pizzerias, Indian restaurants, Chinese takeaways and Italian taverns. I don’t, however, see somewhere where I can get my usual — chicken with boiled potatoes and mixed vegetables, not without all the fancy sauces and garnishes anyway. I carry on walking, my footsteps silent on the tarmac beneath me, the sounds of the city still dulled with my headphones.

5:18PM.

I pass shop owners locking doors and pulling metal shutters down, and restaurants carrying signs with specials and deals like ‘£5 Cocktails’ and ‘Kids Eat Free’.

5:25PM.

Plants beginning with the letter S trail across my mind as I rattle off as many as I can recall.

SALIX

SALVIA

SAMBUCUS

SAGE

5:32PM

I have somehow returned to the same street I started. And I am still hungry.

The man in uniform is back at his usual post and stands outside the entrance, his gloved hand ready to yank the door open for guests. He watches me approach, smiles and gestures to the door, but I don’t ascend the stairs. Instead I sit down on the bottom step. I tuck Mother inside my bag in case she’s cold and check my watch again: 5:35PM.

Dinner will be late, for the first time in my life. Breath gets stuck in my chest, like a blockage, unable to move up or down. My heart thumps loudly in my ears.

I feel a hand on me, a hand that isn’t Mother’s. It rests heavily on my shoulder, pressing me down, suffocating me. I brush it off and swing around, knocking my headphones to the ground.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you,” stammers the man from the hotel entrance. I don’t say anything. I don’t know if I can. The words are also stuck in my chest.

What time is it?

Where’s Mother?

I glance around for her, panic building then suddenly feel the heaviness on my hip. She’s here, in my shoulder bag. But what time is it?

“Are you ok, Miss?” he asks again.

“No, it’s almost dinnertime,” I say flatly. “And I can’t find anywhere to eat.”

“London has the best restaurants in the world,” he smiles.

“No, it doesn’t,” I argue.

“Well, have you tried our restaurant inside the hotel? It’s excellent.”

I sigh. “If it’s the same one that serves lunch then I doubt they’ll have what I’m looking for. It was hard enough to get a plain cheese sandwich this afternoon.”

“What exactly do you want?”

“Chicken.”

“Chicken?”

“Like a chicken Kiev or a boiled chicken, or a breaded chicken maybe. But with no sauces. And served with boiled potatoes and boiled vegetables.”

He frowns. “I’m sure they’ll be able to do something for you like that.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?” I ask him again, rising to follow him.

“Yes,” he says again, walking up to the door. He holds it open for me. “In fact, I’ll come with you and I’ll ask the host myself.”

At exactly 6PM I sit at a table by the window, gazing out at the Indian bean trees and all of the Londoners walking through the park, eating a dinner of grilled chicken, boiled potatoes and boiled vegetables while Mother sits opposite me with a glass of Chianti.



June and the Hotel Break-In

<i>Gardeners Almanac:</i> Evening Showers Low of 12° Sunset: 9:20PM
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Room Service is an odd concept. Food is brought up from the kitchen to your bedroom, completely free of charge. All they ask of you is to sign your name on a piece of paper, like a celebrity signing an autograph. I don't understand how establishments like these make money, although that's perhaps why rooms here are so expensive — to offset all the free meals.

Today I ordered breakfast and unlike the exorbitant cost I had been quoted downstairs upon check-in, this breakfast was apparently free. All it required was my signature. Mother and I didn't have much need to practise signatures as we didn't often sign our names — we didn't own credit or debit cards, have phone contracts or bank accounts, write cheques, complete passport applications. But sometimes, when work was very dull in the warehouse and I had been removed from the shop floor because of another customer complaint, I practised writing my name over and over again, each time twirling, looping or crossing the letters in a slightly different way, as I pondered the best signature for my personality.

June Wilson

June Wilson

J. Wilson

It's quite tricky. Nowadays I prefer to doodle florals and vines rather than letters and a name that I now partially share with some strangers in Notting Hill.

After breakfast, I call the number on the business card; however, a woman answers. When I ask her if she's Mrs Wilson from the day before, she giggles and says, "No, my name is Chloe. I'm Robert's personal assistant." When I ask her if Mr Wilson is available to talk with me, she tells me

that he is in a meeting with a client and will call me back. As I don't have a number to give her for the call back I tell her I will just call again another time. I call an hour later but he is in another meeting. I try again after that. Mr Wilson is a very busy man, it seems. Building a caregiver relationship with him will be challenging.

After lunch, I walk through the gardens again, this time delicately picking a bunch of bluebells to brighten up my hotel room. I use my gardening gloves and snip them cleanly, in a manner to simulate regrowth. It's very important not to damage the stems or roots when cutting flowers. I arrange them into a glass goblet that I find by the sink in the bathroom. Immediately the room feels warmer, more colourful, just how Mother likes it. 'The brighter the better,' she'd say as she sat out in a folding chair watching me in the garden. Mother liked to watch me in the garden a lot. She said it calmed her. I didn't mind as she didn't interfere with my flowerbeds and herb patches. She just watched, and smiled. And sometimes sipped Merlot that she'd chill on the warmer days.

At dinner, we request the same table as yesterday. I order her a glass of red wine and rotate her slightly so she has a better view of the Indian bean trees outside. A waiter approaches. "May I bring the dessert menu?"

"No, thank you. I'm quite full and I'm not supposed to have sugar," I say, gesturing to Mother who sits quietly.

He gazes over to the urn in the chair and frowns. His cheeks redden slightly and then he turns back and nods, leaving us alone once again. After I sign my name onto another piece of paper, I collect Mother and her wine and tread slowly across the lobby to the elevator. It hums with energy and sounds of suitcase wheels, high heels and polite conversations. The elevator is quiet, and I press 12 and feel it shudder as it ascends quickly. It beeps once, twice then opens to the hallway.

The carpet is soft beneath my welly boots, like warm grass, and I feel a strange sensation in my belly. I stop and imagine faces on the wall, that's covered in a garish gold-textured wallpaper. I

see a happy face, sad face, hungry face and tired face. I draw an imaginary circle around the sad face. I feel sad. Sometimes I have a difficult time labelling my feelings so the faces help. Yes, today I feel sad. I don't know why.

My bedroom makes an odd noise as it unlocks with the plastic card and when I open the door, I gasp. Someone — other than Mother and I — has been in my room.

I have had an intruder enter my room.

The first thing I notice is that my main light has been turned off and the two lamps at either side of bed have been turned on. I certainly did not do that before dinner. I also realise my bedcovers are no longer up and tucked underneath my pillows, but are now folded down at the top revealing a crisp white fitted sheet underneath. A small wrapped milk chocolate sits on my pillow.

Why would an intruder leave chocolate?

I immediately return downstairs to the front desk.

“How can I assist you this evening?” a woman smiles.

“Someone has been in my room,” I whisper, gazing around. The intruder might still be here, waiting, lurking.

“Really? Well we'll call the police immediately. Has anything been taken?”

“No, I checked the entire contents of my bag and everything is still there.”

“Ok, so you're certain nothing was stolen?”

“Very certain.”

“How do you know your room was broken into?”

“Well, the light was off, the lamps had been turned on, my bedspread had been folded down, the pillows had been fluffed, and a small milk chocolate had been placed on my bed.”

She raises her eyebrows then looks at the man beside her. They smile. I may not be fully versed in emotion expressions but I think a happy face is an inappropriate reaction to a report of a crime. “That sounds like our turndown service, Miss.”

“Your what?”

“At this hotel, we offer a turndown service to all our guests between 7PM and 8PM.”

“Why would you do that?”

“A lot of our guests enjoy this service. It makes the room ready and comfortable for a good night’s sleep.”

“And the chocolate?”

“Just a little treat to say Goodnight from us.”

“Oh.” How odd, a turndown service?

“I’m not supposed to have sugar, especially at night. Can I have something else instead? Perhaps a bag of crisps or an apple?”

“Unfortunately we don’t have a selection for guests to choose from.”

An apple would have been nice, or maybe some berries.

“If you don’t want the turndown service then just pop the **Do Not Disturb** sign on the door handle,” she adds.

I nod, and return to the elevator.

First a woman in a white apron entered my room while I was in the shower this morning, shouting “Housekeeping” repeatedly through the door while I hid behind it in a towel, and now this? How many people in this building have access to my room? How many will enter?

It’s bad enough that I was kept awake all night with the voices, slamming doors, footsteps and giggling from guests coming home late, but now this? At home, no one disturbed us so there was no need to hang a sign on a door handle.

“What do you think Mother?” I ask her in the elevator.

She’s not happy.

We can't stay here. Tomorrow we will return to Lansdowne Road in Notting Hill, examine the garden space and make a final decision on our living arrangements. Otherwise, it's a residential home. But tonight, we'll watch *DIY Gardens* together in bed. With some crisps. Do I eat crisps?

June
and the
Spacious Back Garden

<i>Gardeners Almanac:</i> Partially Sunny High of 21° NW Winds 2mph
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My duffel has transitioned from being a ‘weekend getaway bag’ to a ‘short break bag’ since I have packed it full with a free blanket and a free robe that I was kindly gifted by the hotel. It was left in my room, nicely folded at the bottom of my bed with a glossy tag that read: ‘Enjoy your stay Mrs Wilson.’ Mrs is Mother’s title but she doesn’t like robes, or ‘housecoats’ as Linda call them. Mother prefers pretty things like silk dresses and suede heels. I could barely get the zipper closed after and now I fear I have done damage to this duffel, but I couldn’t turn down free items. That just seems wrong.

What is lighter in my bag is the envelope of cash Mr Wilson gave me. I was shocked to discover on my walk over here that money had been deducted for my meals! I thought dining in hotels is free because no cash is requested, just a signature. But it turns out, hotels — even ones with lovely palm trees — charge guests for food. I only discovered this when I remembered to count the cash and found a printed invoice detailing my food orders, and shockingly, with a further deduction of a **12.5% gratuity!**

12.5%

A part of me is grateful that the percentage has been calculated for me and I have gained another vital life skill here in London with Mother. However, after tallying up all the gratuities, that’s an awful lot of money that’s been extracted for tipping alone. I could eat for a week on that! If hotels want a tip, I can easily offer them a few suggestions on hospitality since I am a bit of an expert on customer service having worked at *Marks & Spencer*.

I walk to Notting Hill as I don’t want to spend more money on taxis and tipping, and trains aren’t safe. It only takes me 42 minutes. My feet are quite warm in my welly boots with my thick

blister-preventing gardening socks and my shoulder itches under the strap which is pulled taut with the new weight of the robe and blanket. Mother is rolled in the blanket.

Even though I am an early riser, by the time I get to 16 Lansdowne Road, it's empty. I knock three times and even call out through the letterbox; an animal barks at me. The Wilsons have left. I stand in the empty driveway, heat building under my skin. What do I now?

I can't go back to the hotel. And I can't go home. If I go home they'll lock me in a residential home with other people like me. They might take Mother from me too.

Mother...

long reeds caught in the pull, floating, knotting...

...Blood on the knuckles

drip

drip

dr

When I open my eyes, I'm curled up on the crushed gravel on the driveway, stones pressing into my moist skin. It hurts to sit up. I pick stones from my skin and watch them fall. All I smell is asphalt and sulphur. I long to smell petunias, bluebells, hydrangeas; my fingers long to touch wet grass and warm soil.

I clamber up to my feet and heave my bag over my shoulder, and head through the rusted metal gate. It squeaks as I enter. There's a small path ahead, paved with large slabs of stone leading to the back of the house. Beyond that is the garden.

And it isn't spacious at all.

It's certainly bigger than our garden back home and of course bigger than my flower patch at the community centre. But it isn't as big as, say, Kelvingrove Park or Kew Gardens, not that I've been there. Too many crowds.

The garden at Lansdowne Road is enclosed, with high white-washed fences and the occasional branch leaning on them from the neighbour's dawn redwood trees, which is a positive because I prefer my privacy. You can never get enough privacy these days. People just don't respect it.

I make my way to a large yellow shed in the middle of the garden, which looks like it has been painted in the past year. The yellow hue really pops against the green in this space. It's a good choice. A bold one, but good. Surrounding the shed and the exterior of the grass are ceramic pots of all different sizes and shapes, filled with perennials, which confuse me immensely. A gardener tends to *pot* annuals and *plant* perennials. But pot perennials? The thought of it makes me laugh out loud. How silly. Clearly my new relatives know nothing about horticulture. That's Londoners for you. Mother used to say only Suits, Hippies and Manicures live in London.

Potted perennials.

After another few belly laughs, I clear my throat and make a mental note to plant the perennials and switch the annuals to the pots when I move in. I also add:

Oil the hinges in the gates

Restore the rose bushes

Suddenly something tall and luminous glints from the corner of the garden, delicately touched by the morning sun. Is that a Persian silk tree? I quickly move, my hands already outstretched. The bark is smooth under my palm, and cool given the warm weather today. It's a delicate hazel colour that reminds me of Mother's eyes, not quite green and not quite brown. That was Mother, never one to be labelled easily or slotted into one category. She was many things.

"Isn't that right, Mother?" I ask her, as she sits by my feet, still hugged in an expensive hotel blanket. I sweep my fingertips over it one more time and smile. Another good month and this will be in full bloom with cascades of fluffy pink blossoms resting on feathery green that stretch wide.

What if I'm not here to see it?

My head pounds and I press my hands against the bark harder, rougher, to take the edge off the thoughts that hurt. When I turn around the yellow shed shines bright in the morning sun.

I find myself walking towards it, my bag still sitting at the Persian silk. It's open, the key left in the lock for anyone to take. I'm curious what the Wilsons have in their yellow garden shed so I glance around one last time then open it wide and step inside. It's dusty, like it's not been occupied in a very long time. There's a blue kids bike in the back corner beside a lawnmower and some folded tarp. There are shelves on my left, large enough to hold plastic storage boxes with black lids, each marked with a label.

- *Christmas Ornaments*
- *Christmas Wrappings*
- *Christmas Tableware*
- *Shoes*

I'm struck by the amount of Christmas-themed decor they keep stored in here. I immediately open all of them, lining the boxes side by side to inspect the various items, colours and textures that this family enjoy at Christmas time. I half expected them to not celebrate it at all given the sharp minimal interior of their house, or if they do acknowledge the holiday then for the decorations to be quotidian, mostly matte and white to match their rooms and personality. But in my hands are magnificent plummy garlands with ivy scattered along the edges, sparkly holly wreaths with ruby red berries, brightly coloured glass ornaments with jewels and even lace fabric. Some ornaments tinkle like wind chimes. I like wind chimes. Mother hung one in my bedroom by the window when I struggled to sleep. I'd crack the window open slightly and let the breeze drift through the chimes and lull me to a dream about forests and flowers. It was only after she hung one that I was able to come off the Zolpidem. I haven't needed it since. I gaze at Mother who still sits under the branches

of the tree. I wish I had brought the chimes with me when I left. How will I fall asleep in this new place without them?

My fingers fumble inside boxes and find more ornaments, candle holders and small 'Tis The Season door plaques, and a wispy strip of silver tinsel at the bottom of one tub. Mother's favourite. We didn't decorate much for Christmas, we weren't really 'Christmas People', she liked to say. We prefer the summer with real plants and organic scents, and trees that grow from soil and live outside. But we partook in the societal tradition nonetheless and put up a small artificial tree in the living room beside the wine rack and the books we never got around to reading. And when the fairy lights broke, we never replaced them, we just blanketed them in more tinsel to cover the wires and translucent bulbs. Mother liked tinsel for some reason. She'd take it from the *Royal Mail* staffroom at the end of her shift when everyone else had gone home. And when they'd replace it, she'd take it again. We had so many ribbons of tinsel by the end, in all varieties of colours. I'd considered wrapping one around the neck of the urn, but I was worried that would look cheap and tacky, two things that Mother was not.

I reorganise the contents of the plastic storage tubs then place them back on the shelves, pulling inspiration from my days of stacking at *M&S*, and continue browsing the contents of the shed. On the floor is a small toolbox, an even smaller gardening kit, and a box of newly bought but unopened camping gear. Clearly three areas not of interest to my relatives.

Overall, the garden shed is a fair bit larger in size than what I was expecting, especially from the outside. Not that much smaller than my bedroom at home in fact. The foundation seems solid, well-constructed, with minimal moisture from the grass getting in, and the walls are strong, and can probably hold tight against the rare bout of wind and rain that blows through London.

I am impressed. If I don't like my new bedroom at the Wilsons, I might very well just sleep here.

June
and the
Exploration of the House

Observations:
Sunny
Around 22°
NW Winds — low
Humidity — high

Around ten, I'm hit with a sensation that I can no longer ignore. In fact the feeling itself is building and becoming crippling.

I need the toilet.

Mother always said, "Know where your nearest toilet is." Wise words. I, however, have not adhered to that rule and now I stand outside the yellow shed staring desperately into a house that I can not get into. Unlike the shed, this door is actually locked.

I wander around the garden like an indoor cat let outside for the first time, sniffing out all the hidden corners and edges; but as the need grows greater, and far less manageable, I have to make a rather unfortunate choice. First I select the area sheltered by the Persian silk as it's private and I can hide my mess in the soil, adding further nutrition to the vastly growing tree. But as I dig a shallow hole around the base I see the Wilsons' dog staring at me from inside the kitchen. Can I really toilet in the same place a dog does?

I cover up the small hole I've formed and dart over to the pots instead. I position myself neatly over a cluster of black-eyed Susans looking in much need of a watering and squat down. Something shiny flickers in my eyes from the flowers and when I stand to examine it I see a single house key. I turn it over slowly in my hands. A spare key. One just for me.

Cautiously I edge to the back door and stand facing a set of glass sliding doors. The dog stares back. I slide the key in and turn. It clicks and the dog goes crazy, leaping from side to side. I yank one door open and the animal explodes out, knocking past me and circling back around. Mother had taught me to be wary of dogs, instilling in me that all animals with teeth can bite and

kill. This animal however, wishes to lick me to death instead, pushing its wet snout into me and getting my clothes covered in slimy drool and golden hairs.

“Bad dog! Sit!” I shout, pushing past him.

I can not wait a moment longer.

The first door in the hallway is a storage cupboard, and the second on the left is the living room which I am familiar with, having sat in it with the transport police. I trudge up the stairs in my welly boots, past a kids’ room and a very white guest room that resembles the hotel room I just left. At the base of the stairs, which seems to lead up to a third level, is another door.

The toilet.

I run in, closing the door so the animal can't follow me, and breathe a deep and loud sigh of relief as I sit on the toilet.

All is well again.

Afterwards I wash my hands, pocket a tiny bar of soap that sits on the shelf in a white wicker basket, because it smells like daisies and dew, and climb the last set of stairs.

The first room on the right is the master bedroom where my biological father and his wife sleeps. I know that because there is a pair of tartan slippers on the left side of the oversized bed, whilst the other side holds a glass bottle of Evian, some multivitamins and a stack of books with titles such as, *Take Control of Your Destiny*, *Veganism is the Future* and *How Not to Die: Discover the Foods Scientifically Proven to Reverse Ageing*.

Beside their room is a large toilet with a deep bathtub and a glass-lined shower, with more baskets of tiny soaps and lotions. I take a miniature hand cream as my hands often callus and sting under the summer sun, thorny bushes and thin gardening gloves, then I walk into the last room in the back corner. Beams of sunlight stream in from the large windows that surround an old wooden desk that holds three computer screens, a stack of file folders and lots of thin ceramic vases filled with different colours of pens. The blue vase collects all the blue pens and the black stores all the

black pens, but the green cup has red pens, which is very confusing. The chair shifts under my touch, swaying from side to side. I collapse into it and swivel around and around until I feel lightheaded. When I catch myself to stop I find I'm staring into a framed photo of Mr and Mrs Wilson on their wedding day. He's a lot younger, and surprisingly has hair here. Mrs Wilson looks very much the same, although her hair is down, loose and carefree around her shoulders, like how Mother used to wear hers.

Beside is another frame, a holiday picture of them with a child, somewhere hot and sandy. In it, Mr Wilson sits beside a poorly-constructed sandcastle whilst a young boy stands behind it holding a shovel up high, identifying himself as the incompetent creator. Mrs Wilson crouches next to them with a pearl-white smile and a sunset-hued drink, garnished with speared fruit and paper umbrellas.

I've never been on a holiday before, certainly not one like this where the sun shines all summer long, people wear minimal clothing, and you can eat ice cream if you're hot. I'm not sure if I'd like that. I don't like ice cream or minimal clothing, and although I am a summer girl, I prefer a landscape of lush greens not sandy yellows. And if there is a time difference, which I heard from Linda at work is very common when you travel to exotic places, then my mealtimes would be all off. Would I eat lunch at midday UK time or midday local time? What if I am far away and it's lunchtime where I am but dinnertime back home? How would I navigate such challenging times? And without Mother.

Long, knotted reeds

Hair on rock

Blood on the wall

I push the frames away, and begin opening the drawers in the desk one at a time. I don't know what I'm looking for, but I'm just curious. I always have been. I've only ever been in my house. What do other people keep in their drawers? What secrets do *they* hide?

The top drawer is only papers, the middle stores envelopes, a stapler and a punch, and the bottom appears at first glance to be a large stack of brown file folders. But when I prod them with my finger, there's a crinkling sound. Curious, I poke them again, and a crackle and rustle of plastic breaks through the silence. When I lift the top folder, I see that there are no more folders underneath, just packets of crisps, chocolates and biscuits. Mr Wilson has a secret snack drawer!

I wonder why he doesn't just keep his snacks downstairs in the kitchen cupboards where most people keep their snacks, however, perhaps being three flights of stairs up makes this necessary. Although gentle exercise is essential, travelling up and down a multi-level townhouse several times a day for refreshments is maybe too much for some. That I understand. I get my daily workout from gardening — all that squatting and lifting and reaching. Gardening is a wonderful form of aerobic exercise, and free. No expensive gym memberships needed.

Satisfied with my regular intake of cardio, I liberate a bag of crisps, a *Wispa* bar, even though I don't eat chocolate, and half a packet of digestives from the drawer to create my own snack collection, which is currently located in the side pocket of my duffel bag.

It's getting close to morning teatime, so I wander back down the stairs to explore the kitchen which I didn't see the last time I was here. It's a large open plan room that faces out onto the garden. A white dining table is positioned in front of the double sliding doors, with an excellent view of the Persian silk tree and the neighbour's dawn redwood. In the centre is a rectangular island made from what looks like dazzling marbled stone with iridescent swirls of black. It's immaculately clean, not a speck of crumb remains from breakfast which is commendable. Definitely a preferred trait. Above the island is a rack of cast iron skillets and copper pots that hang precariously from the ceiling waiting to fall on someone's head. Do all Londoners hang their cookware like this? Will I find a floating utensil jar somewhere above my head too?

The dog sits at the patio doors, projecting an annoying high-pitched whine through the glass doors and into the kitchen. For hygiene reasons I would prefer to not have him in here while I make my tea so I ignore his pleas and leave him outside.

The cabinets are well-sized and extremely organised. Some hold glass jars of odd-coloured pasta shells and grains, whilst others are practically empty bar a couple of boxes and trays. I slide one plastic box out and read the contents.

Dehydrated Chickpeas

Chia Power Bars

Quinoa 'Puffs'

Lentil Cakes

Gluten-Free Flaxseed Crackers

Sulfur-Free Dehydrated Papaya

Cacao Goji Berries

Dehydrated Kale

Soya Bites

Hemp Clusters

Apparently these are classed under Mrs Wilson's 'Snacks' as she has attached a label to the box. These are snacks? Why is everything dehydrated? There is nothing in the cabinets that I recognise or even understand, and I work at *Marks & Spencer*!

My fingers hover over the fridge handle, afraid of what I will find in there. I take a deep breath and swing it open. Cartons of hemp milk are pressed tightly against pots of chia pudding, tubs of vegan margarine, and plastic packets of soya 'bacon' strips. And there is something white and curdled called 'probiotic kefir drinks'. Who are these people?

June
and the
Chocolate Bar

After my morning tea, I read a few chapters from my *Almanac* on how to protect summer blooms from wildlife like foxes and birds, and wander through the streets of Notting Hill searching for lunch options. I want to give myself plenty of time to explore and choose wisely, given the Wilsons' questionable kitchen ingredients. Lansdowne Road is more like one of those strange isolated forest 'retreats' on reality TV where people sign up to be dared into eating peculiar foods like fried beetles and donkey testicles. Mother used to watch those shows, like *I'm a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here!* and laugh heartily as she poured another Merlot and sucked on a strawberry sherbet lace.

Thankfully by 11:37AM I have located a small cafe offering 'light lunches' and 'speciality coffees', squeezed between graffiti-covered bus stops and second-hand clothing boutiques. After much negotiation, I manage to get the girl behind the counter to make me a plain cheese sandwich on white bread with real butter. After paying her an astonishing £4.40 for the sandwich, I hurry back down the cherry blossom-lined street to the house, where I sit cross-legged in the garden by the yellow shed. I eat facing the Persian silk tree with Mother by my side. I consume three chapters of my encyclopaedia before trimming the grass. I don't cut it too short in case anyone notices but just enough that it looks neat.

Around 3PM, I go back inside for afternoon teatime and as I wait for the kettle to boil I reach into my duffel for a digestive from Mr Wilson's stash. My fingers tickle a purple crinkly wrapper. I shimmy it out and hold it up. It's the Wispa bar. I don't know why I took it, but it interested me at the time. I make my tea and go back outside. I sit at the patio table, steam rising from my mug, and slowly peel open the purple wrapping, exposing the brown chocolate beneath.

I hold it up and turn it over gingerly, assessing every edge and corner and bubbly dent. It's creamy, dense but also light. Airy, with tiny pockets visible in the centre. I snap it in half and watch as small shards tumble out onto the table like crumbling soil and scatters of stone. It smells sweet,

milky sweet like lily of the valley, with a slight aroma of an evergreen coffee shrub, specifically the *coffea arabica*. The robusta shrub is a tad too bitter to be likened to such a caramelised and nutty scent. Vanilla can be detected, like the delicate white star-shaped flowers of a clematis vine in spring, with a hint of white jasmine and English lavender. Both of which grow exceptionally well at this time of year. June really is an exquisite month for blooming and blossoming — two terms commonly misunderstood to mean the same thing. While blooming refers to finally being ‘in flower,’ such as gardenia jasminoides, blossoming speaks to the peak of a plant’s bloom. For example, bell heather blooms late July but doesn’t fully blossom until August. Bell heather is very popular with the bee population. I saw a few in the garden today, even though the Wilsons don’t have any bell heather in the flowerbeds. The silly dog tried to eat one and then got chased around the Persian silk by it. Animals are not smart.

Have I tried chocolate before?

I press a finger into the chocolate bar and bring it up to my mouth for a lick. It tastes odd. I contemplate a larger taste. Early on, Mother and I had found that sugar affects my moods, leading me into a heightened state of animation and ebullience, and then stripping me almost immediately of that energy, sending me hurling down in a fitful rage followed by a restless groggy sleep. That’s how the paediatrician described it to us anyway. So after that we decided to avoid sugar. Mother still ate it as a treat from time to time, usually a chocolate praline or a sherbet lace, but it didn’t bother me. I have never wondered about the taste, until now. Since I am no longer taking my medication, I wonder if a small sampling will still affect me.

I hold the chocolate up to my mouth and am surprised that my tongue waters. I glance at Mother who sits quietly beside me. “What do you think, Mother? Should I?”

I bring my mouth closer, my lips parting—

A car door slams and the dog immediately starts barking wildly from inside. I drop the chocolate bar on the stone slabs by my feet and check my watch.

4:20PM.

Surely it's too early for the Wilsons to return from work? Unless Londoners work fewer office hours than us back up north? We Scots are hard-workers.

A cackle of shrill laughter rings out and I freeze. Then I hear a child's. A young boy, but not too young. Maybe around eight or ten.

I don't know what to do. I had hoped to talk with Mr Wilson first, as he will be my primary caregiver and if we are biologically related then he can speak to Aileen and tell her that Mother and I will not be staying in that residential home and that I don't need medication anymore. He'll vouch for me. And Linda at work. They'll tell social services that I'm fine to live by myself or at least live here in London in the Wilson's strange house. Those food choices have to go though. I eat normal food.

But it's Mrs Wilson that's here, not him. I don't know what to say to her. She might use language that I don't understand like idioms and figures of speech. I could perhaps hide over by the Persian silk tree, but I've just witnessed the dog toileting over there and I don't fancy accidentally stepping in anything. Perhaps I could make a dash for it along the side and out the garden gate while they come through the front door. I grab my duffel and Mother and walk briskly to the side, but then I hear voices and footsteps coming closer. They're coming in through the back! Why don't people use front doors anymore?

I dance around the patio, unsure about where to go. The yellow shed sits open, blanketed by the heavy afternoon sun. I dart inside and quickly close the door. Seconds later I hear them in the garden.

I press my face into the thin gap down the side of the door, straining to see them. A small child marches into the garden, a tight-bunned and frown-wearing Mrs Wilson follows close behind, carrying both his schoolbag and her large oversized handbag. They chat for a few moments about trivial topics such as homework, politics and someone called Boris, then finally go inside.

I take a deep breath and crack open the shed door, letting a small breeze trickle in along with the scent of neatly-potted petunias, but as I shimmy a leg out to make an escape, the animal comes lunging towards me.

I stumble back in and shut the door again.

“Tilly!” coos the young boy. “Go pee.”

But Tilly doesn’t go pee as instructed. Tilly presses her annoying little snout against the shed door and sniffs wildly.

“Tilly! Tills!” calls the child again. The dog lunges at the shed.

“Tilly! Toilet! Now!” screams the woman, her voice threatening to shatter the glass sliding doors and all of the windows. The dog scampers away, a loud whine echoing around the garden.

I turn back to the shed and gaze around, the shelves now neat and organised, thanks to my earlier efforts. I hadn’t expected to return to the shed so soon. I had hoped to be standing inside the house, not *outside* it. But here I am.

“What do you think, Mother?” I whisper to her. She’s nestled underneath a Christmas ornament box, her favourite.

I nod slowly, she’s right, the shed is comfortable, warm. We could just hang out here for a bit, read, and soon they’ll retreat inside for a bath and some TV time, and we can quietly make our own escape. But to where? I’ve left the hotel so where would we go? Perhaps we’ll hang out here and wait for Mr Wilson to come home and then I can have a conversation with him alone. He’ll then call Aileen, tell her to stop looking for me, and Mother and I will live here for the rest of our life, together. Caregiver and child like it’s meant to be. Even though I’m technically not a child anymore. I’ll be thirty soon. So, I guess — caregiver and adult child.

“It’s such a lovely evening,” sighs Mrs Wilson, “we should have dinner outside.”

I roll my eyes. Perhaps getting out of here will be harder than I thought.

“What is this?” she suddenly shrieks, her voice scraping down the walls of the shed.

“Henry!”

“What?”

“What is this?”

“Chocolate, I think.”

“I know it’s chocolate, but what is it doing *here*?”

“I don’t know.”

“Tilly could have eaten it and died! And you know I don’t like this kind of junk food in the house.”

“It’s not mine. Maybe it’s Dad’s?”

“It’s not your father’s. He knows better,” she snaps.

“Maybe it’s those kids from school again?”

Another sigh. “If this doesn’t stop, I’m talking to the headmistress again. First the eggs off the front door, now this. Disgusting,” she says. “Come on Tilly! Don’t eat that!”

A collection of clatter breaks the silence that follows and their voices get muffled. They must be inside preparing dinner. My chocolate must be gone. I press my face through the gaps. Yes, Mrs Wilson has removed it. That’s a shame. I would have only taken one bite. No more.

After a while, they’re back outside, this time with silverware and dishes, making a loud noise. The dog whines and begs and is shooed away periodically from Mrs Wilson. It hadn’t taken them long to prepare dinner so I wonder what it is that they’re eating as they were very efficient in the kitchen. I squint and just about make out a salad bowl and some silver tongs. Of course. They eat salad for dinner. I don’t see or smell a chicken, which is unfortunate. I hope they are prepared to change their eating ways for me.

As they scrape the last of the salad into a third plate, presumably for Mr Wilson, my legs begin to get tired from standing and staring out, so I head deeper into the shed. I unfold a large sheet

of tarp from the back corner onto the floor, and place the hotel robe and blanket on top for extra padding. Then I lie down on my back, staring up at the shed ceiling, at the tiny slivers of early evening sun seeping in. It's warm in here, but I don't mind the heat.

I let my knees knock together and close my eyes.

Cold, cold water.

Green reeds snarling on sharp stones.

Skin peeling away from the knuckles of my right hand, as the blood drips, drips, drips.

Number 27

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31

33

June
and the
Night in the Shed

Gardener's Almanac:
Night: Low of 9°
Sunrise: 04:40AM

I awake groggily, not sure where I am. I'm shrouded in a deep darkness I haven't seen before. I know I'm not at home in bed because where I lie now is much harder and firmer than my usual mattress. These aren't my bedsheets and the feeling of whatever is on top of me is an unfamiliar weight. The air is silent, with no gentle tinkling of wine chimes to lull me back to slumber. And instead of the usual breeze that floats in through my open window, there is a noticeable smell of musk, sawdust and birdseed.

"Mother?" I call out.

Wherever I am, the room is small and cramped as my voice sounds contained, like the walls are padded or lined. I slowly lift myself up to a seated position and rub my eyes, adjusting to the darkness that surrounds me. Then I see my duffel on the floor near my feet, a small bike tyre, half a bag of birdseed, and finally a small brown vase with a lid.

Mother.

I blink hard and remember the snowdrops and dew under my feet on the last day I saw her. I remember the blood on my knuckles, the marks on the wall, the shouting.

I squeeze my eyes shut and open them again, Mother still sits quietly on the floor.

I turn to the shelves laden with boxes, cloaked in shadows and sleep haze. Then I know. I am in the shed. I must have fallen asleep on the floor of the yellow garden shed at 16 Lansdowne Road where I'd come to see Mr Wilson. But he wasn't there when I'd arrived, no one was so I had waited for him to return. But I don't recall him ever returning. I don't remember anything after lying down on the floor and closing my eyes except for all the horrible fragments of memories that scratch at the inside of my mind.

I rub sleep from my eyes and carefully open the door. A wonderful breeze flows in, filling my nose with a crisp freshness. I gulp in the air and sluggishly stagger out into the garden. My feet are bare, and the moist grass slides over them, cooling them like a puddle in a wide open field. The sound of traffic has dulled and all that remains is the distant chatter of nocturnal birds, the wind in the branches of trees and the odd hum from nearby houses.

16 Lansdowne Road is different at night, as most places are. Less bright, less harsh. In its place is a softer side of London, one akin to the countryside living back home. All the smells come out at night. After the buds have warmed from the day's sun, the aroma trickles through the grass and mixes with the moonlit air. I can smell the petunias again, but also the rosemary and mint from the back by the Persian silk. Although muted, the colours of the garden can still be seen. The pearly pinks of the petunias and sunshine yellow of the black-eyed Susans cut through the nighttime.

I walk to the centre of the garden, and sit cross-legged on the grass facing the house. It's completely black, all the rooms are empty except those where they sleep. I can just about make out a hanging mobile of sorts from the window on the left. That must be where the boy sleeps. I didn't go in there today — or rather, yesterday. I wonder if the animal sleeps with him. I hope not because then it might be expecting to sleep with me when I move in and that will not be happening. Animals are for outside, not inside. Although I'm outside at the moment, so maybe *I* am the animal.

Everything feels different out here in the garden, with the grass and the flowers and the trees and the soil. Everything is suddenly less complicated, simpler, easier for me to understand. My brain doesn't hurt, I don't feel foggy and my thoughts aren't muddled. The garden speaks to me and it's finally a language that I understand, when most do not.

I stay out there for another hour or two, just sitting on the grass, listening to the quiet of the city. And when sleep clouds my vision and presses on my eyelids, I return to the shed, close the door and let the darkness swallow me once again.

Number 27

29

31

33

Blood

on

the

wall

*June
and the
Big Plan*



Gardener's Almanac:
Cloudy
High of 22°
N Winds 3mph

It's a garish sign. A deep dark blue set within a coral and gold rectangular frame, with a partially painted in 'A.' It resembles more of a cheap plastic photo frame than a shop sign.

I've never been to an *Aldi* before, Mother and I got most of our shopping needs fulfilled at *Asda* or *M&S* because of my staff discount and my knowledge of when certain perishable items were going on the reduced shelf. Thursday evenings are the best as produce sections are being cleared for the weekend meal deals and dine-in offers. This is no *M&S*, especially with that sign, but for today it will have to do.

After a surprisingly adequate sleep in the shed last night, even without chimes, I awoke early this morning with a genius idea. As I still have not managed to have a conversation with Mr Wilson about the accommodation/residential home situation, I thought why spend the money on a hotel in a city that offers many garden spaces? I could camp in a park or garden somewhere! Then it occurred to me that I am in a garden already, and one close to Mr Wilson making it easier for me to grab him when he walks by, so why not live in his shed?

Of course there will still be some issues we need to address before I formally accept the request to move in. There are many differences between my relatives' London lifestyle and my preferred routines in Glasgow, particularly their eating habits; and the dog simply has to go. But if I am to avoid being sent away to a residential home with people who also think like me, then residing with my biological father would be the ideal arrangement. In Aileen's eyes anyway. I understand that it perhaps sounds a tad unusual for a grown woman to be living in a garden shed. However, I need somewhere to stay for the interim, somewhere physically close to my biological father, and I love gardens, so it makes perfect sense. Mother agrees too.

It's not like the Wilsons use it, judging by the dust that has accumulated on the shelves and floor. It's not Christmas for another six months so they won't be needing their boxes of decorations. They don't seem like the camping or biking type. And in my professional opinion, they're definitely not gardeners so they likely won't be visiting the shed for any 'tools', none of which are even suitable for a simple gardening task. I had a look in her kit this morning before I left and found a pink polka dot hand shovel. Therefore, I am fairly confident that I have the shed to myself for at least the next week. And that's all I will need. At that point, Mr Wilson and I will have come to some sort of a living agreement and we'll have notified Aileen back home so she can reassign my room at that home to someone else. Someone less capable than me, perhaps. I am functioning very well in the world, on my own, and without my medication. My social skills are progressing well and I have not hit anyone recently.

Even though I don't anticipate being in there for more than a week or so, I still need to make it more liveable. I can't continue sleeping on the floor on some tarp and a hotel blanket.

So here I am to make some basic alterations:



First, I need to address the sparsity of the decor, then I can focus my attention on the overall 'vibe' of the inside. Mother talked a lot about 'vibe', eventually delving into books about room psychology and feng shui, most of which she had to specially order through the library's online catalogue as our local carried none, which did not surprise me in the slightest. Miss Anne, our librarian, is often distracted getting caught up with the more trivial demands of the library, like banning my mother after she failed to return the feng shui books.

I listened intently while Mother talked about ‘essence’ and ‘energy’, held her ladder while she dismantled a light fixture that gave her ‘bad vibes’ and painted alongside her as we went from room to room. The living room was repainted as yellow because she said, “yellow makes people cheery,” and the kitchen became a vibrant red to “engage the senses and stimulate passion,” whatever that meant. When she asked me what colour I wanted for my bedroom, I answered quickly needing no additional time to gather my thoughts. “Green.” Green like zinnias, mint chrysanthemums and limelight hydrangeas. Green like a garden in June.

And so we painted it green.

And it was beautiful, peaceful and looked exactly how I’d pictured it. The following spring, we etched small flowers onto the wall with permanent markers and acrylic paints, that grew from the baseboard and flourished up the green walls.

I am here today for that. Not just the paints to decorate the shed walls, but for everything else that I had in my bedroom back home. I am here in *Aldi* to inject some ‘positive energy’ into the shed.

As I wheel my trolley down the kids’ aisle I mentally tally up my findings to be sure I have enough money left over from Mr Wilson’s hotel fund to cover me.

1 foldable yoga mat in forest green... £4.99

1 plain white pillow... £7.99

1 lamp with tassels on the shade... £12.99

1 rug (striped, again with tassels)... £10.99

1 slim bedside table in white oak... £15.99

Estimated total..... £50 ish

It comes to **£52.95** so I wasn't far off, but still it is a bit more than I intended to spend and as I slowly walk back to Lansdowne Road I can't help but wonder if I have enough to last me over the next week or so, especially if I also have to buy my meals given that the Wilsons are incapable of stocking their cupboards like a normal family.

"Can I give you a hand?"

I stop and slowly turn to face a young man pushing a green bike down the street.

"Pardon?" I ask, not quite sure why he's offering me a hand. Certainly I look like I am struggling a bit, dragging a bedside table for two and a half miles isn't the most fun a person could be having on a sunny summer's day. And the bag with the remaining items keep swinging off my hip. But he is wheeling a bike with both hands, so where is this *spare* hand he is offering?

"The table looks heavy, can I help you?" he says again.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why's that?"

I pause and think back to the tragic train situation on day one. "Because if I give it to you, you might not give it back."

He laughs. "You think I'm going to steal it?"

"Possibly. And you have the means to do it. I won't be able to keep up with your bike."

He laughs again, like I'm purposefully being funny even though I am very serious. How can I chase him if he's on a bike and I'm in welly boots?

"Ok, how about I promise *not* to steal it?" he says, holding out his hand to shake mine.

I gaze around at the crowds as they march up and down the street, each with their head down, eyes on phone screens. Surely he wouldn't get very far with this foot traffic if he did try to make off with it?

I nod and eventually shake his hand. We have made a pact, and I intend to take it very seriously. I will not have another train situation. I don't know if Mr Wilson will give me more money if so.

He gingerly takes the table from me and positions it under an arm. He starts to walk alongside me, pushing his bike with the other hand. He balances the items well and I am initially impressed.

“Good finds in *Aldi* today?” he asks, stopping to awkwardly scratch at his shaggy dark beard which hides the bottom half of his face. His hair is long and could do with a trim. I might suggest that.

“Yes, I found what I needed.” I frown and gaze at the bags — did I find what I needed? I suddenly can't remember now what I came for and why.

“Glad to hear.”

His bike squeaks beside us and I wonder why he isn't riding it like most cyclists do with a bike.

“What's your name?” he asks.

“Um...” I want to ask Mother if I'm allowed to give my name to strangers because I can't remember.

“I just thought we might engage in a little conversation while we walked?”

I don't typically enjoy engaging in idle small talk, especially with people I have just met. I find it slightly tedious and a bit of a waste of time, because no conversations can be followed up on as I'll never see the person again. If the person is to quote a fact from something he or she has read and it turns out to be wrong, then how can I dispute it if I never see them again?

“My name is June,” I answer eventually. I hope Mother won't be cross with me for sharing that information. We like to keep to ourselves usually.

“June?”

“Like the month. And yours?” I don’t really care but I ask anyway because Mother raised me well.

“William or Will for short.”

“I don’t get called anything ‘for short’. It’s just June.”

“Like the month.”

“Like the month,” I nod.

“You’re not from London, are you? Scottish?”

“Glasgow.”

“Ah, so properly Scottish?” he laughs. I don’t know what he means by that so I don’t laugh with him. “What brings you to London?”

“I’m going to live with my biological relatives.”

He frowns slightly then nods, “That’s cool. Family’s important.”

Family.

There’s that word again. I thought all I needed was Mother. But now I need a place to live. So yes, I guess in this particular circumstance, family is important.

We carry on walking in silence after that, the way I would have preferred it in the beginning, but as we wait to cross the road, with the tour buses and taxis whizzing past us, he strikes up conversation again.

“So, June, what do you do?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what do you do with your spare time? Do you play any team sports, or maybe you enjoy horse riding, swimming, stuff like that?”

“I don’t play any sports because my PE teacher once told me I’m not a ‘team player,’ I don’t horse ride because I don’t like animals, and I don’t swim because...” I swallow hard. “...Because I don’t like the water.”

“Why not?”

“I just don’t,” I say firmly.

“Well, I enjoy swimming. I also play cricket and as you can see I love to cycle.”

“Don’t most cyclists *ride* their bikes rather than walk them?”

He laughs and stops to shift the table to the other arm. “I got a puncture just before I saw you. Typical, first time out on the bike this summer and I get a puncture within the first ten minutes.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“It certainly is.”

We head down towards the little shop that sells tea-stained antique maps and the coffee place that advertises overpriced beverages. The sun pokes out from a cloud, momentarily shining down on us, then slips away again.

“So how are you enjoying London?” he asks as we passed the coffee shop. I gaze in and see a small cluster of people cooing over a vintage chalkboard adorned with latte specials such as ‘Summer Berry’ which sounds very unappealing for a coffee flavour.

“It’s ok,” I answer. “It’s different to Glasgow, and the people are odd.”

“*We’re* odd?” he scoffs.

“Yes.”

“Well I hope it grows on you. London’s really fun in the summer. There’s a lot going on. There’s a great festival in Hyde Park coming up and —”

“This will do,” I announce, stopping under the Lansdowne Road sign.

“You live here?”

“I live nearby here but if I go any further then it might give away my exact address and then you’ll know where I live.”

“And?”

“And stranger danger.”

“Right,” he grins. “Stranger danger. Very responsible of you.”

“Thank you.”

“Well, ‘June like the Month’ it was lovely to meet you. If you ever need a tour guide to show you a bit of London, I can give you my number?”

“I don’t have a mobile phone.”

“Oh ok. Really?”

“Really. I never had a need to call anyone other than my mother and I used the landline for that.”

“Well, I work down at Canary Wharf at the aquarium, not that you’ll be spending much time there since you don’t like water, but come find me if you want a friend.”

Friend.

I’ve never had one of those before. What does having a friend entail? Frequent conversations, regular meet-ups, a sharing of one’s secrets? I am intrigued by his offer, of course.

“I’ll think about it,” I say, placing the *Aldi* carrier bags down by my feet. I hold out my hands to take the bedside table from him, hoping he hasn’t scratched it against his bike frame on the walk here. “Thank you for your help.”

“You’re very welcome,” he smiles. Then he waves and ambles alongside his bike up the road, heading back in the direction of *Aldi*. He must have forgotten something there perhaps.

June
and the
Boy in the Window



Gardener's Almanac:
Night: Low of 13°
Sunrise: 04:41AM

I know I shouldn't have napped this afternoon because now I can't get to sleep, but after tidying, rearranging, lifting, dusting and sweeping, I was so physically tired that I thought a quick power nap would help take the edge off my unsettledness. It did not. I awoke groggy and grumpy and hungry, and now it's affecting my bedtime.

There's a definite change in the air tonight, compared to last night where I slept so soundly. First, there is a small stone underneath the yoga mat I am using as a thin mattress and it's causing me great discomfort. And then there are the sounds from outside. The new noises I didn't hear last night. Cars on the road, late night buses pulling in to the stop across the street, voices from gardens, couples sitting outside and clinking glasses, dogs barking, cats meowing.

Our street at home is quite busy at times but those are noises I am accustomed to. These are *new* noises, and along with a new bed, a new room and a new city, there are a lot of *new* factors affecting my sleep. And I don't do well with new. Mother told Aileen that when she tried to relocate us to another property in Shawlands.

Still restless, I stagger to my feet and open the shed door to the garden beyond. Perhaps I just need to feel the moist grass beneath my toes and the moonlight on my face again. It's cooler outside the shed, and it's a full moon according to the lunar chart in my *almanac*. It shines bright on the grass, and on the Persian silk tree and the potted plants. I can even see some street lamps over the top of the fence and a couple of outdoor bulbs accidentally left on. Perhaps I need a nightlight in the shed to aid my REM cycle, but I don't know where I would find one. Mother got me my last one, which I annoyingly left in the plug at home. I don't know where I'd plug it in here though. There is an outdoor socket by the patio table near the back door which I run the lamp from after

everyone has gone to bed inside, but I can't plug the nightlight directly into that. I will perhaps need an extension of some kind to bring the socket in with me.

For now I'll sleep with the shed door slightly ajar so that the moonlight, street lamps and general city light can seep in. It will also let some fresh air flow in; it gets very stuffy over the course of the night and will only get worse as the summer warms.

I sit cross-legged on the grass facing the house like before and gaze into the dark windows. The blinds in the kitchen haven't been drawn and I can still see the remnants of dinner on the dining table. A bottle of wine, two glasses, a vase of flowers, a couple of small candles, some unused silverware and a water glass.

I had stood at the side earlier when the meal was occurring and glanced into the house to observe what was happening. It had been an odd sight — my newly-found biological relatives all sitting at a table mundanely passing white dishes back and forth while I sat outside unnoticed. I couldn't hear the little conversation that passed between them unfortunately. I would have liked to hear what they talked about whilst eating dinner. Mother and I often used the time to practise social conversations; for example, she'd ask me about my day and I would reply then return the question and wait for her reply, sometimes nodding to indicate that I was listening and engaging. Dinnertime was very productive in my house, whereas this exchange looked less constructive.

The child had his head in a book for the whole dinner, setting his fork down to turn the page every so often, while Mr Wilson regularly glanced at his phone before being reprimanded by the stern-faced woman who sat quietly beside him staring at her manicure. He had put the phone down eventually, but he'd hid it on his lap and was glancing under the table at it every so often until he was caught by Mrs Wilson. She took the phone completely off him and carried it over to the kitchen counter where he couldn't reach it. I've never participated in a dinnertime ritual quite like that one.

Mother and I cooked together, beginning at exactly 5:15PM. I sliced the potatoes and vegetables while she put the chicken in the oven. While the potatoes simmered in a pot on the stove,

she poured herself a large glass of Merlot and put the radio on. We listened to Radio2, the soft rhythmic beats trickling out the speakers while tiny water bubbles danced above the potatoes, soon turning to a roaring boil. At 6PM, when everything was ready, Mother would top up her glass and we'd carry our plates to the living room, balancing them on our knees while we watched telly. There we would engage in our social lessons during the adverts. We only ever ate one meal at the small round dining table we'd got from the *Salvation Army* shop, and that was breakfast, purely because we needed the table space for the butter, jam, coffee mugs and so on. Lunch we had separately on our respective work breaks.

Dinnertime was *our* time.

Now it is a confusing time for me, where I watch *them* partake in dinnertime while I eat from a plastic Tupperware box of cold potatoes and carrots that I have boiled in the afternoon, before the Wilsons return from work/school, with a packet of snack chicken that I get from the *Lidl* in Shepherd's Court which is a 17-minute walk from the shed. I have considered walking across the street from *Lidl* to that *McDonalds* place to check if they sell chicken, but I'm slightly worried that I will see those transport police officers from the train station as they had *McDonalds* wrappers in their car that day and might frequent there often. They might ask me questions and if I don't answer correctly then they might return me to Glasgow, to Aileen.

I wonder when I join them if I could persuade them to bring their plates through to the living room so we can watch telly at the same time. I wonder a lot of things now. New thoughts press into my mind until my head pounds. And when I ask Mother questions, she doesn't answer like she used to. There's just silence. A deep heavy silence that hurts.

Where is Mother?

Where am I?

I gaze around and remember she is inside the shed, and that I am outside in the garden.

The moisture from the grass tickles my knees and shins as I wrap the blanket around my shoulders. My bedtime clothes are thin and do little to keep out the cool night air.

Suddenly something moves in the top left window.

I freeze, my breaths shorten. If I run back to the shed now, perhaps they will see me. And then they will know that I am living in their shed. So I stay as still as I can and hope from up there that I blend in with the grass and the trees and the fence.

But I don't. Because seconds later a face presses into the glass, a face with round-rimmed glasses and hair that sticks up. It's the child. He appears to be in red pyjamas. He stares at me intently, at this stranger in his garden in the middle of the night also dressed in pyjamas.

I stay still, not sure what to do now that he has seen me. Will he tell his parents? Is my time in London already over and I will be immediately bussed back to Scotland? After all that cleaning and organising today too. What will I do now with the bedside table, rug and lamp?

The boy in the window continues to stare, and then slowly lifts his hand to the glass. I wait for him to start knocking and yelling for his mum who will certainly tell me to leave. But instead he *waves*.

I blink hard and stare back.

He waves again, this time more enthusiastically and with a smile.

I wave back.

*June
and the
Croissant*



Gardener's Almanac:
Sunny
High of 23°
S Winds: 3mph

A small golden bread roll sits on a silver-rimmed white ceramic plate, with a generous dollop of some strange yellow emulsion that's pretending to be butter but clearly isn't butter.

I heard footsteps outside the shed earlier today. The crunch of grass blades bending and snapping under boots. The steps were too slow and controlled to be the animal, who erratically bounds around the garden like it has consumed too much sugar. I think the dog is female, with a name like Tilly, but really I don't know with this family and their modern city lifestyle.

After the footsteps left, followed by car doors slamming, I had unlocked the shed door and peered out. It was then I noticed it. Had I not, I may have stood directly in it, and got the lemon-coloured artificial margarine in between my toes and under my nails.

At first I assumed someone must have left it there by accident whilst hurrying out the door to work and school. But when I saw the note underneath it, scribbled on a white disposable napkin, I knew that this was a meal not forgotten, but deliberately left.

It read:

For the Person in my Garden

The note and plain roll has to be for me unless there's another person living out here, and it has to be from the boy at the window from last night. He's the only one who knows I'm here. I assumed he'd be telling his parents this morning not making me a roll, but I'm not one to turn down breakfast. It's not my usual, but it's bread so it falls under the same category as Toast or Croissant.

I step out into the garden. The morning sun touches only the top half of the garden while the trees at the bottom are still blanketed in darkness. It's an odd feeling to wake up in someone's

garden, more so in someone's shed. But it's a feeling I'll have to get used to, I suppose. The alternative is a residential home in Glasgow with other adults who can't name their feelings.

The bread roll tastes strange. It's unnaturally dense yet slightly doughy in the middle, as if it hasn't baked properly. As if it's not real flour. Is this one of the Wilsons' trick foods, like non-flour bread or dehydrated something?

It makes me flush warm and I throw it down. I want my usual breakfast. This is different and I don't like different.

"Isn't that right, Mother?"

She sits underneath the bottom shelf beside my welly boots that I hosed down in the garden yesterday and wiped clean.

I throw the roll in the bin at the side marked 'General Waste', let myself in using the spare key, wash the plate and place it with the others, make a coffee and use their bathroom. After 'breakfast' I go for a brisk walk to stretch my legs and engage in a bit of exercise which is good for the heart and lungs. I haven't been particularly active in the garden much since coming here. I'm slightly worried I'm going to start to look like Mora, my old neighbour at number 19. She waddles when she walks, and her clothes look incredibly tight and uncomfortable on her body. She lives alone now that her husband George has passed away. Mother said Mora must have eaten him. I asked Mother if we should call the police and she just laughed, then hugged me and said, "My sweet June, don't ever change."

When I return to the garden, radiant sunlight fills the space between the patio doors and the redwoods, and spreads to the herb patch in the far corner. It nourishes the buds and warms the grass under my bare feet. I hold my sandals in my hand, having slipped them off a couple of streets away. I had thought with a neighbourhood this rich in green shrubs and vibrant perennials that the concrete just beyond that paradise would feel warm and clean underneath my feet. I was wrong. In the two streets it took me to walk back here, I'd stepped on someone's chewing gum and had to

avoid a shattered beer bottle. The pavement is warm, sure, but clean? Absolutely not. London is a *dirty* place.

I eat lunch in the back with a book on my lap, under the branches of the Persian silk and in the shadow of the neighbour's dawn redwood. Afterwards, I go inside to clean and dry my dishes. I tend to the rose bush in the afternoon, clipping back the dead and stimulating regrowth of the healthy stems, then return inside for my afternoon tea break. As the kettle steams and boils, my fingers skim the glass cabinets on the other side of the island. Inside are rows of neatly placed wine glasses, goblets and flutes. *Marks & Spencer* have a good selection of glassware which is where I learned the difference between a tulip and a coupe, but these are lovely. Heavy with thick crystal stems and sturdy bases. Some flicker and dazzle in the afternoon sun when I hold them up to the window. Mother would like these.

On another shelf are teacups and saucers, and a beautiful teapot with yellow roses. Mother and I had a tea party once in the garden. We sat on blankets with the sun on our backs and ate small triangular sandwiches from tiered trays using small paper plates and butterfly napkins. I had cheese in my sandwiches but Mother thinly sliced cucumber onto hers, pressing it gently into the butter. She asked me to take a bite, to try it. I said no, but she asked again and I pushed the plate away. I hadn't meant to thrust it into her so forcefully. I hadn't meant for it to hit off her bottom lip and make her bleed. I hadn't meant to ruin the tea party. After that she didn't ask me to try any new foods again.

Something presses at my mind again. A memory. A fragment or a broken image. Then it's gone.

I make my tea and wander into the living room. The sofa is well-proportioned to the space and the coffee table is adequate to hold cups of tea and glasses of Merlot. There are coasters. Small circular marble coasters. I've never used one before. I wash a palm over the coffee table. The wood must be expensive if there are coasters. The porcelain houses are still here, as is the small boy that

still stares down from the window of one of the houses. Beneath that is a shelf of books with lovely untouched spines and crisp hardbacks. I slide out one in the middle and turn it over in my hands. *War and Peace*. I thought my RHS encyclopaedia was gigantic but this is even bigger. It looks unread though, and immaculately persevered. All of the books on our shelf at home were frayed and their spines broken. Mother was a fervent reader. She had read all of them. She preferred stories about forbidden romances and tragic fates, but sometimes she read ones that made her laugh aloud. I open *War and Peace* as wide as I can, bending the pages back until I hear the spine crack and break, then I close it again and place it back on the shelf with the others. Lines run up the spine, like branches on a birch. Now it's perfect. I smile and take a seat with my tea.

A television guide is open on the table, beneath the remote controls. I shimmy it free and skim this weekend's highlights. Suddenly my hand quivers, splashing hot tea onto my thumb. Shakily, I place the mug down on the table, forgoing the coaster, and bring the TV guide closer to my face. A familiar warmth fills my belly and spreads to my cheeks. In all the busyness of coming here and setting up the shed for my stay, I've completely forgotten that there's a new series of *Strictly Come Dancing* starting this Saturday.

That's our show.

Mother and I would watch it together every Saturday evening, and then of course the results show on Sundays. We never missed it. If it was cancelled or delayed due to a breaking news special or a sports game that ran into overtime I was *extremely* upset. Things would get broken, thrown. None of which I would remember after, but nonetheless it wasn't particularly pleasant for either of us. And now I won't be able to watch it at all because there's no TV in the shed, and even if I can source one in the next forty-eight hours there's nowhere inconspicuous to plug it into. And there's no-one to tune it, to find the correct channel at the correct time, to position the screen so very minimal head movement is needed to take in the whole screen.

No. This won't do at all.

The heat and anger floods my body.

thump-thump-thump

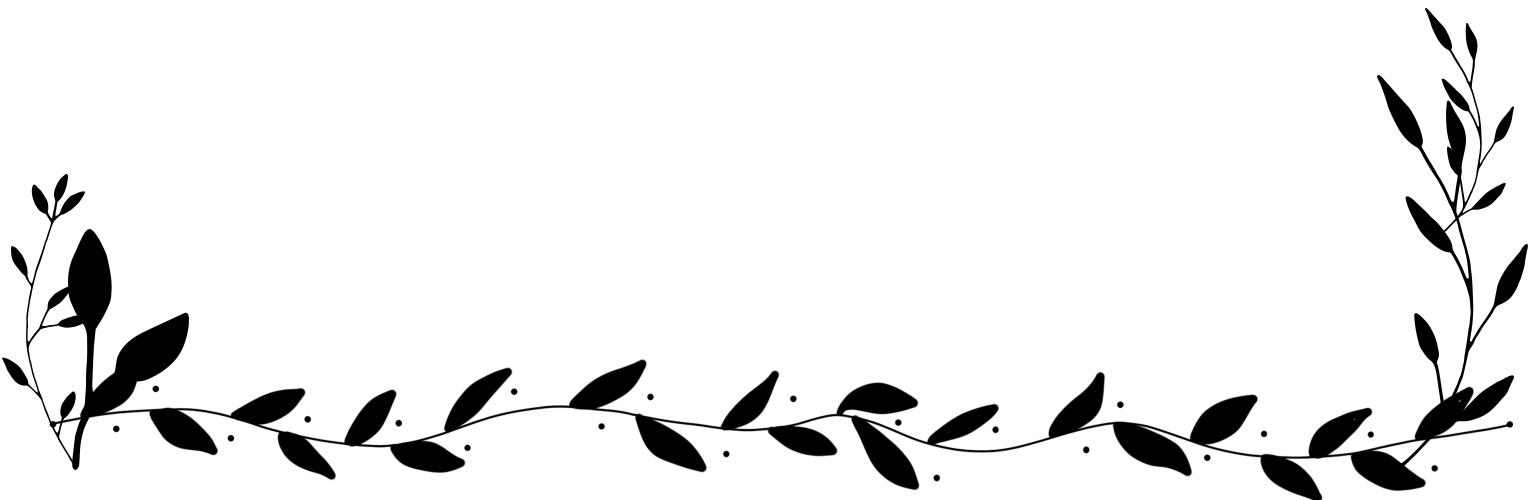
Blood on the wall

Blood on my knuckles

"My sweet June"

It takes me a few moments to realise I'm wet. And that I'm standing in a puddle of milky tea and broken ceramic. The hot water scalds my skin through my sundress, and I stand there for a few moments longer to feel it burn. Then I clean it up and return to the garden.

June
and the
Letter Exchange



Gardener's Almanac:
Partially Cloudy
High of 23°
NE Winds 4mph

Huddled in the shadows of the shed over the pages of my Royal Horticultural Society Encyclopaedia titled '*Assessing your Site and Soil*,' somewhere between dusk and evening, I hear the crunching of shoes on gravel.

The tiny hairs on my arm prick up as I wait in silence, unsure of what exactly I am waiting for. The footsteps become louder, closer, until a dark blanket of a silhouette appears under the door. The small brass knob shifts slightly but doesn't turn as it's locked from the inside with the key, which now sits on the edge of a shelf beside a box marked *Christmas Ornaments*. I quietly close the book. I had expected this to happen at some point, though not quite this early on in my stay. Aside from today's 'disturbance' over the TV guide, I have been rather careful not to disturb too much inside or outside of the house, aside from some light gardening and grass cutting. I am very confident that Mrs Wilson will not have noticed that judging by the state of the flowerbeds, her poor choice in gardening tools and her decision to *pot perennials*.

I clutch my *almanac* and encyclopaedia to my chest and wait for the door to swing open and the Wilsons to be standing there with Aileen and the police. But instead a loud knock cuts through the silence. I am no expert on the ways of Londoners, but nobody knocks on a garden shed unless they know it's not empty. Still, I let the silence build a wall between us and bite my lip to stop myself from saying 'Hello,' which is what a person does when someone knocks on their front door.

After another very uncomfortable moment of silence, I hear more rustling. A folded-up piece of white paper suddenly shoots under the door towards me. It lands at my bare feet, smearing dust in its path. Then the footsteps leave and I hear the whoosh and click of the kitchen sliding doors as they close. I exhale deeply, not realising I had been holding my breath. That explains why I suddenly feel so lightheaded. I sit down, pulling my legs into my chest and unfold the note.

Dear lady in my shed,

How are you?

I just wanted to let you know that tomorrow's forecast shows heavy rain and that shed is known to leak.

Yours Sincerely,

Henry

(The boy inside the house)

I know this, of course. The long range weather forecasts in my *Gardeners Almanac* are quite accurate, and I've been reading the newspaper in the morning while I wait for the kettle to boil after everyone leaves for the day. There's a weather section in there too, along with a TV guide and a column titled 'Ask Helen Anything'. Yesterday someone asked Helen if she should leave her husband because he's gained weight. The day before someone asked Helen for advice on removing a pet stain on an antique rug. Helen was quite knowledgeable in both areas. I don't tend to read the headlines or main articles. I find politics very confusing.

Does the boy not mind that I'm in here, sleeping in his garden? Is he going to keep my arrangements here a secret? He must want something in return. There's always a 'but' or an 'if' when it comes to random acts of 'kindness'. Mother taught me that.

June
and the
Rainstorm



*Gardener's Almanac/
London Times/Boy:
Heavy Rainfall
High of 19°
Possible Flooding*

It is indeed raining. In fact, ever since I woke up this morning, it has been raining and raining, and raining some more. And just when it seems to ease off, it starts again.

Rain batters off the sides of the shed and pelts off the yellow roof, like angry fists above my head. I don't mind the rain, it's never bothered me before. I've always quite happily popped on my wellies and gone outside regardless of a few showers. Gardens always need tending to, and I can't afford to be known as a 'fair weather gardener' in my community. I'm aghast even thinking about it now. Sunshine or rain, or sleet in some cases, I am out there — pruning, shearing, clipping, planting, fertilising, plotting and planning. As long as there isn't any standing water, gardening in the rain is quite fun and can be time-efficient if I'm planting new seedlings. It saves me having to loop back around with the watering can, particularly the rusty one at the community patch that Elsbeth Hope sliced her thumb on in the autumn before Mother died.

But I'm not home, and this isn't my garden or the community patch I share with ten others. This is someone else's garden, which I am reminded of regularly by the old black rubber wellies that sit untouched in the corner of the shed next to the equally untouched gardening equipment. Wellies in a ladies size 9. I'm not pointing fingers, the owner can be anyone, but Mrs Wilson does not look like the dainty-feet kind.

At home I keep my wellies beside the door on the white rack next to Mother's high heels and work boots. Mother wore brown water-resistant walking boots, frayed at the rim and with the rubber traction on the soles slightly coming away, for her long days at the Sorting Office in town. On the occasions she had to take Mr Pete's postal shift, the boots suited her just fine and provided enough comfort for walking up and down the streets. And they were light enough to manage a quick

dash out the front gate in the event that someone had let the dog out in the garden. Mother didn't enjoy the company of animals and, therefore, nor do I.

But on the days of her long shifts, she'd come home, shimmy out of her boots and place them on the shoe rack beside mine, and then rather than slide sore feet into soft slippers, she'd slip on a pair of heels for the evening. I'd got them for her at *M&S* during the Boxing Day sales when staff got an additional 15% off. Cobalt blue, like delphiniums or asters. When I asked why she'd change into heels for an evening spent bathing in TV light and Merlot, she said, 'Because when else would I wear heels?' She loved pretty things but she was always barefoot in the garden. Like one should be. Unless they're working in it.

I wanted to cremate her in the heels but I wasn't allowed and they'd been too heavy to pack to bring here, much to my dismay.

Mother was a ladies size 5, just like me. Those welly boots in the shed corner are a better fit for a mountain bear. They're also very plush for a rainy day such as this. On the side is a small crest of two swords and a lion's head which seems very bizarre to me as lions are mostly found in the continent of Africa not in the suburb of Notting Hill.

They are useful for something though — I use the boots as a makeshift seal, lining them along the bottom of the door just in case the water starts to seep in underneath. Around 7:20AM it does. Not a lot but enough to spill around the boots which hasn't worked well as a seal, and warrants the upheaval of my bedding onto a shelf and the relocation of other floor items, including my books and the alarm clock. I have already come to the conclusion that the thickness and height of the foundation of the shed is to blame for this.

Around 7:45AM, everyone finally leaves and I am able to open the door and release some of the humidity that has built up inside the shed. Rain lashes down on the patio and washes away any remnants of the chocolate bar. I slip on my raincoat and go inside to make my breakfast and shower. I block the animal from getting too close and manage to guide her outside into the garden and the

rain. I check the newspaper while the kettle boils — ‘heavy rainfall’ and ‘chances of flooding’.

After my usual breakfast of toast and coffee, I take a quick warm shower, and dress accordingly for the day. I go outside and examine the flowerbeds. There is a slight accumulation of standing water in the herb pots so I drain those and shift them back slightly, under the shelter of the shed roof. The planter box at the edge of the garden is too heavy to be lifted, so I tip it instead and let the moisture run out onto the grass by my feet. It trickles through the blades like a river, passing over a daisy and reminds me of the small white flowers that grow wildly on the river shingles by our house. The small white flowers are not native to the riverbank, nor are most blooms around water edges. They are called ‘garden escapes’, because their roots spread far beyond the fences that struggle to contain them. That was Mother — a garden escape. She could not be contained.

I gaze up at the child’s empty window and see a grey bunny rabbit sitting on the sill staring down at me in his absence. It reminds me of a task I want to complete this morning before my tea break so I return to the shed and start writing him a reply using paper and a pen that I took from Mr Wilson’s study. While there, I also took a pack of gingerbread biscuits for my tea break.

Dear Boy in House,

Thank you kindly for your weather warning, it was much appreciated and allowed me time to prepare for the challenges ahead. In the event you are keeping tabs of the shed’s longevity and durability, please note the roof is holding up well. There is a minor drip from the back lefthand corner, but it is easily managed so far. However, water has entered under the door, which I believe is a construction fault. Upon entering the shed initially I estimated the foundation to be only 5 inches high and typically garden sheds are around 8-9 inches to avoid weather-related issues such as this.

I understand that I am in no position to ask, as I have nothing to offer in return, but I have a couple of minor requests which are as follows:

A. Next time you leave out breakfast for me can you leave something a bit more edible, like toast or a croissant with real butter and real flour? Strawberry jam would be lovely too for the weekends

as a treat, but sugar-free and seedless please, as I find the seeds terribly annoying to remove from my teeth and it makes the bread taste grainy like I'm eating sand.

B. Tomorrow evening is a big night for me. I'm not sure if you're aware of this, but it's the opening episode for the new season of Strictly Come Dancing. I have noticed that there is an interior sliding door between the kitchen and the living room. Can you please leave it open at 6:55pm so that I can see the TV screen from the kitchen patio? This will mean you'll need to have your dinner eaten and cleared away by 6:50pm at the latest. I have made the decision to fully support KONNIE HUQ, the Blue Peter presenter for the following reasons:

- She has a kind face
- She read out my letter about conservation and environmental growth back in 2017 on air on a Tuesday afternoon. I did not win the green badge due to being significantly older than the 9-15 years old entry requirement, which I was most disappointed about. However, to be recognised nonetheless was a joy and I wish to repay her.
- She looks like she could tackle a Paso Doble and certainly a Viennese waltz. She may not be robust enough for a jive but only time will tell.

I have contemplated where would be the most efficient place for our letter exchange and have concluded that the plant pot with the lemon thyme would be ideal. I will place all future correspondence under the pot. You are free to do the same or slide your letters under my door. Either way, I will receive them safely.

Thank you greatly.

Yours Sincerely,

Girl in Shed

After completing the letter, reviewing twice to ensure there are no spelling errors, I fold up the paper and let myself in through the back door. I am immediately assaulted by the dog once again who does not seem to get my nonverbal cues. Perhaps the animal and I have more in common than I first thought.

“Shoo! Shoo!” I yell at her, but that seems to excite her more.

“Do you want a gingerbread biscuit?” I ask.

She yelps and wags her tail exuberantly against the kitchen table leg.

“Follow me then.”

Being the loyal but stupid mammal that she is, she follows me blindly into the living room, while I fist my hand pretending that I suddenly have a biscuit inside. “Sit,” I command. To my complete amazement she sits. Then a big sticky oozy pool of saliva bubbles at her lips and pours over onto the carpet beneath. I walk out and close the door, trapping her inside. I have no biscuit.

Since it’s raining, I slide my letter inside the boy’s trainers, which I assume are his as the others are women’s heels or men’s loafers.

I pick up the pair of red heels closest to me and flip them over, exposing the soles: **Ladies Size 9.**

I knew it.

*June
and the
Coffee Lesson*



Gardener's Almanac:
30% chance of rain
High of 20°
NE Winds 4mph

The next morning, sunlight pokes through the gap under the shed door and stretches towards me, like long spiky talons of a dracaena plant. It strikes me in the eyes, waking me from a rather restless slumber on the yoga mat and hotel blanket. I rub my eyes and yawn, then rise to look at the clock.

6:02AM.

It's far earlier than my usual waking time, and I wonder if it's because of the absence of wind chimes. I feel quite dazed and confused about what to do. Should I rise? If I do, will this become my new wake time?

I have tried hard to readjust to the new routine since arriving here, pushing back my breakfast time by a whole five minutes while the last of the Wilsons trickle out the door to work/school. But at home I was always downstairs for my breakfast by 7:45AM. I'd make my own coffee, which I had to learn from an early age due to Mother's early work shifts. Over the years, and after many mistrials, I came to realise that my ideal coffee was 1.5 teaspoons of *M&S* Gold Instant Coffee, of a number 3 strength, with a generous splash of milk. I'd tried it several times in the staff room at lunchtime and had become familiar with the taste. Breakfast was usually one slice of white toast with butter or the occasional croissant with a good dollop of seedless strawberry jam. I would be done with breakfast and showered by 8:25AM, ready to get the 8:40AM bus into the High Street for work. My shift began at 9:30AM and I was never late for it, not once. Some staff members would saunter in way past their start times, and some even took a lunch break longer than the designated time, blaming it on the queue at Greggs or the slow-boiling kettle in the staff room, which is why I always took a packed lunch from home and a thermos of tea. I had suggested that be made compulsory for all staff, but Linda had dismissed my suggestion.

I glance at the clock on the shelf again: 6:12AM.

Confusion still clouds my thoughts and hurts my head. I roll over and grab the notepad from beside my boots and make a list, drawing a vertical line down the middle to separate the Pros and Cons. ‘Changes to an established and proven successful routine’ goes under the Cons and ‘More time in the day to tend to the garden’ goes under Pros.

Routine

Routine

Routine

Routine is so important according to Mother and my social worker, who rarely agreed on anything except that. But it’s not 7:45AM, and this is not my usual clock or the mattress I sleep on or my bedroom. This is not my house, and when I go inside to make my coffee it won’t be *my* kitchen. This is all different and my routine is getting lost. Heat churns in my belly, bubbling and boiling loudly like the kettle in my old house. The cream quick-boil kettle with the missing top handle because I’d thrown it against the wall one morning. I’d awoken one day, at my usual time, and come downstairs to find blank clock faces on the oven, the microwave and the dishwasher. There were no lights, no electricity, no breakfast. Everything was wrong with the day after that, and so I didn’t make it to work for my shift and they’d called Mother at work. She’d come home to find the kettle on the floor and me under the kitchen table drawing chrysanthemums on the wall with a black marker. After that, we had to fill the kettle with water directly through the spout and not through the top, as without the handle it was sealed shut, which at first was terribly annoying and an inconvenience but I did get used to it after seven and a half weeks.

Mother made sure the electricity bills were paid on time after that.

I take a sharp inhale as fragments of memories in my old kitchen and Sunday coffee mornings with Mother become heavy in the space behind my eyes, distracting me from my wake-up confusion. I gingerly inch open the shed door, and gaze to the kitchen beyond the glass. It’s empty. The Wilsons don’t tend to rise until closer to seven and for the forty-five minutes after that, the

sounds of breakfast dishes, barking and hurried conversations about homework and PE kits vibrate against the sliding doors and into the shed.

I gaze up one more time at the dark vacant windows then stagger onto the moist grass, sleep still in my eyes. Dewy blades poke at my palms and the smells of summer and sunlight fill my nose. The neighbour's lavender bushes are now in full bloom and the scent wafts in through the slats in the tall fence. I can't go back to sleep, not now, so I pull on my boots and my long raincoat, only partially covering my ladybird pyjamas. My hair is still knotted into a scrunchie at the top of my head like a pineapple. As I can't go inside to make myself a coffee at this time, I have to go elsewhere for it. I take Mother, even though this is early for her too, and walk down the street, eyes flitting between the drawn curtains of sleeping neighbours and the glossy serrated leaves of the Japanese yoshinos, which line the other streets of Notting Hill. Sadly, I have missed its short-lived bloom, which is usually no more than the first two weeks of early spring.

Most gardening enthusiasts love spring, but I am more partial to summer's long days and short nights, the higher temperatures and the blooms — geraniums, bee balm, hydrangeas and hibiscus. Winter, on the other hand, is not my favourite time of year at all. In fact, it's not particularly kind to me. The dark mornings confuse me and make me tired even though I go to bed at the same time and get up at the same time. And the cold biting wind destroys my summer efforts in the garden. Winter is a time for trimming back the dead and the withered. Winter is also a time when Mother became small and quiet, choosing to spend most evenings in her bedroom with a bottle of red wine, her pills and her photo albums. Winter wasn't kind to Mother either.

Clutching her tight, I stop at the beginning of the next street, gazing down at the array of brightly-coloured shop doors and cafe canopies. I pass a little antiquarian dealers with more tea-stained maps in the window and a printing shop that boasts a motto of, "We print everything under the sun." Surely this is a figure of speech because everything that exists under the sun cannot be *printed*?

Beside the all-encompassing print shop is a small café. Its door is wedged open and scents of cinnamon and vanilla waft out onto the concrete around me. I wiggle my hands into my pockets and find a crisp five-pound note. I hold it up to the morning sun to make sure Mr Wilson has not given me a fake note, and push open the door, which tingles above my head. The sickly sweet aromas are even stronger inside, and they tickle the inside of my head and behind my eyes. I resist an urge to sneeze.

A young woman around my age approaches the counter, a mint green apron around her waist. “Good morning, can I help you?”

“Good morning,” I say back, pleased I remember my manners even at this time of day. “Can I have a coffee, please.”

“Sure, we have: latte, cappuccino, Americano, espresso, macchiato, mocha, flat white or just a filter? We also have an excellent selection of cold brews and Nitros?”

I blink. “Pardon?”

She names them all again, each word an exotic concoction of consonants and vowels. Is she speaking to me in a different language? Italian, perhaps. I do enjoy a bite of pizza every now and then, but I am more of a chicken and potatoes type of person, none of this European stuff.

“What’s a Nitro?” I ask tentatively.

“It’s our classic cold brew coffee infused with nitrogen.”

“My God, nitrogen? Why?”

“It gives the beverage a smooth and velvety texture.”

Eyes wide and mouth agape, I glance around at the empty café wondering if the lack of customers is due to a significant safety concern over the nitrogen use.

She clicks her tongue and points to an old machine behind her. “Are you more of a filter person?”

“Susan at work says I have no filter?”

She clears her throat. “How do you take your coffee normally?”

I rattle off my tried and tested formula, emphasising the milk *has* to be made into a paste with the coffee granules *before* the water goes in, and take a seat. A couple of minutes later, she appears with a green speckled ceramic mug, hot liquid steaming out. I thank her and transfer the coffee into Mrs Wilson’s floral mug. Aromas of chocolate and oak seep into the air around me. I choose a small round table by the window that looks out onto the street lined with yoshinos and aspens and gently position Mother on the table opposite me. I take a long slow sip of coffee and check my watch again.

June
and the
Season Opener of Strictly Come Dancing



Gardener's Almanac:
Night: Low of 15°
Sunrise: 04:43AM

That evening, with the sun still high in the sky, I get a full view of everyone eating dinner inside the house. Dinner in the Wilsons' household appears to consist of a large leafy green salad better fit for a garden animal, like a rabbit or mouse, the kind that are bothersome when composting or growing strawberry patches. Sometimes the Wilsons have a red pasta of some sort. Yesterday, it was spaghetti.

Londoners really seem to enjoy Italian cuisine and coffees. It might be difficult to convince the Wilsons that a frozen *Birds Eye* chicken Kiev and some boiled tatties will be equally satisfying. Mrs Wilson in particular will be hard to persuade, assuming she is still around come my move-in day.

When I first tried to envision life with my new caregiver, which was extremely difficult to do, I saw Mr Wilson and myself out in the garden tending to the seedlings and the soil while the sun bathed us in its warmth. I did not see a pinched-face woman, a boy and an animal in my vision. I saw me and Father. And Mother too. But I will have to allow some leeway perhaps. Be 'flexible' as Aileen told me to be once after another incident at the foster home with the other kids. I told her I was very flexible, that I could touch my toes with my pointer fingers, unlike the other children in the house. She told me one day I would understand what she meant, but I'm almost thirty years old and I still don't fully understand. But I can still touch my toes with my pointer fingers.

I got another note from the child inside this morning. I have not opened it yet as I have had a very busy day. I had to clean-up the mutt's business over by the Persian silk. I may need to put a fence round that at some point if it will keep going over there. The animal will eventually destroy the soil around the roots.

The paper crinkles in my hands as I unfold it and begin to read.

Dear Girl in Shed,

I received your letter safely, and was not aware that *Strictly Come Dancing* is showing on TV tonight. Usually we watch Ant & Dec's *Saturday Night Takeaway* unless there's a good movie on. Tonight Channel 4 is showing *Jurassic Park*, however, I have seen it once before and found it quite scary, so I'm fine to give it a miss and instead insist we watch *Strictly*.

I've had most of the day to give a lot of thought to the best TV angle and I think if I turn it to the left (my left) you'll get a better view of the screen from the patio. The only problem is if Dad sits in the armchair in front of it then his big head will block the bottom left of the screen so I'll need to make sure I get there first.

I'm not allowed to use the internet so I'll see who the contestants are tonight and then pick my favourite after, if that's ok?

I have a favour to ask in return — I'm doing a survey for a school assignment but I don't know who else to ask except for myself, Mum, Dad, and our neighbour Camille. Will you do it too? I've included it below if you can.

And if you can, then thank you very much.

Yours Truly,

Henry

I gaze at his survey, perplexed at the question choices and the means of keeping score. I can only assume that the questions are not his idea nor is the expectation that he use only tallies to count and not real numbers. Mother and I didn't study tallies much in our home school lessons as she thought they were 'pointless' and 'annoying to rub out if wrong.' But the boy must be covering tallies in maths so I play along:

This or That		
2. Summer or Winter?	Summer: IIII	Winter: I
3. Water or Juice?	Water: IIII	Juice: I
4. Chelsea or Crystal Palace?	Chelsea: II	CP: II
5. Television or Cinema?	TV: I	Cinema: IIII

I don't answer question 1 because I dislike all animals and question 4 because I have never heard of either of those political parties. I add my name to the list of participants, next to someone called Camille Hargreaves, draw a flower beside it, fold the survey back up and slide it within the pages of my *Almanac* for safe-keeping.

It is now 6:52PM. I want to ensure a good viewing spot for the season premiere, so I quietly leave the shed and tiptoe across the grass. It's still wet from a day of rainfall and mist, and I am glad for my usual wellies. I've considered investing in a pair of slippers for the shed, but perhaps I'll save that purchase for when I move into the house so they don't get dirty or dusty being outside.

The kitchen is empty, and the dining table is stripped clean of the meal. The chairs are tucked back in and the placemats have been wiped down and stored back in the middle of the table in the wire rack, along with a large stack of frilly napkins. A very efficient clean-up. A dim bulb shines over the cooker still, potentially draining energy, and a red light flickers on the dishwasher.

I kneel beside the potted plant to the side of the glass patio doors. Above, a small window is propped open, likely to allow me to hear better. Tucked behind the ceramic pot is a tartan cushion from the living room. I am impressed. The child is exceeding my expectations for tonight's viewing. The cushion is a nice addition. I place it under my bottom and sit cross-legged, Mother beside me. I check my watch again. 6:59PM.

Through the kitchen is another set of sliding doors, which the child has thankfully pulled all the way open. As promised, the boy sits in the armchair facing the TV which has been angled towards the patio doors. Mrs Wilson perches on the sofa opposite him with a book in her lap and a

glass of white wine on the coffee table. She checks her watch and glances behind, to the hallway and front door. Mr Wilson is nowhere to be seen. The living room chandeliers are dimmed, and the light from the TV screen illuminates the room and Mrs Wilson's face. The image of the silver disco ball spins and spins on the TV, as the opening music trickles out the open window into the garden space. I smile and glance down at Mother. First up are the judges' introductions. Mother's favourite. And then the professional dancers saunter on, twirling and leaping in sequins, tulle, glitter, hardened hairspray and sparkly make-up. And finally, the contestants. All twelve of them, some I know from Mother's soaps and others I have never seen before, likely coming from sports or politics, both of which I do not follow or particularly care for.

I watch them all, each parading across the screen with their assigned dance partner. All twelve...but where is Konnie Huq? My eyes dart between the contestants, wondering if my selected favourite is styled beyond recognition, but even through the orange make-up and hair extensions I can not see her.

I press my face harder against the glass. I don't recognise anyone else, and no one has so far wowed me with their quick step or winning smile. I had spent time choosing Konnie when the contestants first got released to the media earlier this year. Mother and I had picked her *together*.

And now Mother is not here to help me pick again.

Everything is wrong about this evening, suddenly.

A warmth builds in my belly, as familiar as the silver glittering disco ball on the screen. My hands grip the edge of the terracotta pot beside me, fingernails digging into the soil that sits beyond the lip. A loud beeping in the corner inside jerks my head to the left. A sound of churning and a hiss of rushing water rips through the kitchen and the garden.

It's the dishwasher.

They have put the dishwasher on, right as *Strictly* is starting!

The chugging and sloshing sound drowns out the voices and music from the TV. I can't hear anything.

I can't

There is a flicker of grey in the hallway and suddenly Mr Wilson is standing between the kitchen and the living room, his back to me, hands in his pockets chatting to his wife — blocking the TV screen. I fight the urge to scream through the glass, 'Move!' But instead I bite down on my bottom lip until it nips and stings and pierces through. A twinge of metallic trickles onto my tongue. He does not move. In fact, he turns and closes the sliding doors, the TV screen disappearing behind a wall of oak and frosted glass. Then everything goes dark and quiet. A swirling swishing sound like a dishwasher fills my ear drums until they throb. My finger pads stung, my palms red, and I become aware of a gritty pebbly residue on my hands.

When I open my eyes it's all down my front, and on my knees and on the cushion I once knelt on beside Mother. Beside me the terracotta pot lies on its side, cracked and split open from where it has collided with the concrete patio stone, soil everywhere. Roots of a small conifer exposed.

Torn.

Raw.

Ruined.

The kitchen is empty, silent except for the chugging of the dishwasher. And I am outside, alone.

Cold, cold water

June
and the
Boy in the Garden



Gardener's Almanac:
Rain Showers
High of 19°
Sunset: 9:21PM

I remain in the shed for most of the next day as the rain starts again. Beads of water tap against the wood outside as if someone is gently knocking. The air inside has become stuffy and suffocating. I wish for nothing more than a small window to crack open to let a breeze in to wash away the mugginess, and the heaviness from last night. But no air flows in under the door, and the walls become increasingly warm and claggy.

Because of the rain, or perhaps because it's a Sunday, the Wilsons have also remained inside. I have had to source my meals and tea breaks outside, at cafes on streets. If it rains like this often in London during the summer then the money Mr Wilson gave me will not last long. I now have a loyalty card for the *Coffee Project* so I can look forward to discounted coffee from now on. Staff were most disappointed that I don't have a phone to download 'the app'. If I had, I would have got a free coffee. That's a shame. Mother would have said it was a scam though, and if I had a phone and downloaded the app then the government would steal my private information and use it against me to sway political votes. Mother is more experienced in the world than I am, so she would have probably been right.

Around 4PM it finally stops raining, and a sliver of sunshine seeps in under the crack in the door. It tickles my fingers as I dance my hand in front, casting small shadows on the shelves beside me. The air outside is quiet, still, as if everyone has gone out for the day. But as I reach up to unlock the shed, I hear the back door slide open. The shrill voice of Mrs Wilson erupts through the garden, likely shaking the branches of the Persian silk in the back.

"My conifer!" she screeches. "What happened out here? Robert, did you see this?...*Robert!*"

I listen to her clean up the pot that I knocked over last night. The scraping and dragging of broken ceramic on wet stone. I wonder if her brush will be wet now because of the rain on the patio.

“You know, it’s those bloody kids again, Robert.”

“What was that, dear?”

The tiny hairs on my arms bristle, as heavy footsteps slap down on the patio stone. I haven’t heard Mr Wilson’s voice since the day he bundled me into a taxi with a handful of money and his business card.

“I said, it’s those kids again, vandalising the gardens. I’m calling the police again. I’m not having this. Look, Robert, my favourite pot — ruined!”

“I could try gluing it?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You can’t glue this. Besides, you’d see all the white bubbly glue lines afterwards and people would think we just couldn’t *afford* to buy a new one.”

“I don’t think people care that much about our plant pots, Judith.”

“Of course they do — it’s London!” she snaps.

The door clicks open again. “What’s all the shouting about?”

Now the child has joined us, all out in the garden. The only one missing is —

“Tilly, down!”

The sound of an aggressive tail wag thumps through the air, followed by a scraping of metal on stone. I think the patio furniture is being rearranged. I shall have to move it back as I’m used to its position now and any change may affect me.

“Henry, get Tilly inside. I don’t want her getting shards of this smashed pot in her paws.”

“But she has to go to the toilet,” he argues.

It seems that the animal and I have that in common.

“Ok, quickly, then. Take her over to the back corner.”

No, not by the Persian silk tree again.

Mr and Mrs Wilson continue discussing the possibilities of gluing the terracotta pot back together, as they head back inside. There’s a swift thud of the door as it closes behind them and their

voices soon fade. Suddenly a rustling of bushes and a snapping of twigs cuts through the silence. A small silhouette covers the opening in the door, extinguishing the light from the sun that had once trickled in. From the size of the shadow it appears to be the child so I shift closer and wait for his note to slide under the door, but all I hear is heavy breathing.

“Did you do that to the pot?” he asks, his voice seeping in through the tiny cracks in the yellow door.

“Yes,” I reply because Mother told me never to lie.

“Why?”

I don't answer.

“I won't tell anyone.”

I press a finger into the dusty wall of the shed and draw three faces, one with an upturned mouth, one with a downturned mouth and one with an open mouth, teeth bared. I circle the last face.

“Because I was angry,” I finally say.

“What were you angry at?”

“Konnie Huq wasn't on and she was my favourite. I didn't know the other contestants, except for that TV presenter who was arrested last year for indecent exposure so I didn't know who else to choose.”

No one except Mother has ever asked me why I am angry. Not even my old teachers at school. All they were concerned about was the damage that had been inflicted as a result of that anger. It was Mother who made me write down on paper why I was angry and what would help me next time so that I didn't become angry again. And then she started with the faces — a smiley face, a sad face, a hungry face, a tired face, a confused face — and she'd ask me to circle the one that best represented how I felt inside. That was easier and so we carried on with that.

But Mother is not here to draw those faces, so I have to do it myself. At least until I move in, then Mr Wilson can do it for me. That will be much quicker and increase my response time to questions about my emotions.

“The presenter said—”

“Claudia or Tess?” I question. If the boy is to be my new *Strictly* viewing partner then he must learn the names and the dances and the judges and the meanings behind the scores.

“Um, the lady with the black hair and scary eye make-up.”

“Claudia,” I nod.

“She said Konnie Huq had broken her leg in rehearsal—”

“I knew she wasn’t robust enough for the jive,” I sigh. Perhaps Konnie had been the wrong choice to begin with, even if Mother and I had chosen her together. We did doubt her jiving strength even back then. The jive isn’t for everyone. It takes a certain level of stamina and flexibility.

“There’s Aled?”

“No. Not him.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t know his songs and because his name is spelt incorrectly.”

“How about the chef then?” he suggests, his feet shuffling closer. I can see a sliver of his blue trainers through the crack at the bottom. “His waltz looked quite good, not that I’m an expert like you.”

I stand up straight. I *am* an expert. I knew all the dances, the correct techniques and I can usually guess the judges’ score based on the performance. Just because Konnie had let me and Mother down, it doesn’t mean the entire season is unwatchable. I can choose another like the child is suggesting. I can be *flexible* as my social worker used to say, unlike Konnie Huq apparently.

“Ok. The chef will do. Sometimes I watch his Sunday morning cooking shows. He looks like he makes good pancakes.”

“Ok, the chef it is. We can support him together.”

Together.

The child sounds pleased. His dog sounds hungry, her wet snout sniffing the door.

“I have a couple more requests for next week’s episode.”

“Ok.”

“The dishwasher was on last night so I could barely hear the TV over it. You have a very loud dishwasher.”

“Oh, sorry about that. That was Mum.”

“Of course it was,” I grumble.

“But I’ll ask her not to put it on until after the episode.”

“And then when my biological father came in he closed the door, completely blocking me out,” I snap, sounding a bit too similar to Mrs Wilson.

“What?”

“You were probably so engrossed in the show you didn’t notice. It’s understandable given that I often find myself completely captivated, especially when it’s the opening episode. Don’t get me started on the season finale. Sometimes I forget to eat that day, or go to the toilet.”

“You called my dad your ‘biological father’,” he says, drawing even closer.

“Yes, I believe he is my biological father as does he. Although perhaps one day we should take a DNA test just to be sure as that does not seem to be my nose. And it’s not my mother’s either.”

“Oh...so does that make you my sister?”

“I suppose, but only *half* of a sister as we share half of a parent,” I emphasise, not wanting to lead him on into thinking we are one *whole* of anything.

He doesn’t speak for a few moments after that. He just stands there, his mutt loudly rummaging around the herb pots behind the shed. She better not be defecating in the lemon thyme.

I'm hoping to use it in a fruit salad. The fragrance is lovely when it's sprinkled on watermelon and green apple slices.

"Cool," he finally says.

"Cool," I reply, the corners of my mouth pulling up. I press a fingertip into the shed wall again and this time circle the face with the upturned mouth.

June
and the
School Bullies



Gardener's Almanac:
Sunny, 5% chance of rain
High of 23°
Sunset: 9:20PM

The next morning a real croissant is sitting out for me, and even better, it has been warmed and wrapped in tin foil, with a good dollop of seedless jam. It's not seedless *strawberry* jam but it is of a berry origin and is certainly better than the flourless bread roll and fake margarine I had been given the previous day. Someone must have gone shopping yesterday. If I had known I would have requested *M&S* Instant Gold coffee of a number 3 strength.

I've continued to rise earlier than my usual time, and without my usual coffee things have been slightly hazy and confusing. I make coffee inside after everyone leaves but they seem to be leaving a few minutes later each morning at the moment. On Sundays they don't leave until after 10:30AM which means I have to sneak out of the shed and out the garden and head over to the *Coffee Project*, which even with my discount card is still expensive. And I'm not sure why they term it a Loyalty Card as it seems that every person who enters has one or is offered one.

Back home I never just hung about the house on the weekends. If the sun was shining, I was outside in the garden or at the community patch. I certainly wasn't 'lazing' around or being a 'sofa potato' or whatever they call it.

I haven't seen much of Mr Wilson over the past couple of days, except for a brief glimpse of him this morning as he let the dog out. He was dressed in his work clothes already, his tie untied and hanging off his collar like a leash, and he held a coffee mug. I could smell the coffee through a crack in the shed door where I watch the unfolding of the household on most days. He moved slowly, his shoulders slumped and sagging. He kept checking his phone, then he went back inside, the door slamming behind him.

At 11:50AM I enter the house with the hideaway key, make myself a sandwich with a packet of cheese slices that I hide in the bottom fridge drawer under the bag of kale. I sit outside in the garden, cross-legged in the middle of the grass with the blades poking at my shins and a mug of milky tea cradled in my hands. The sun is high in the afternoon sky, a cloudless canvas of clear blue. Afterwards, I wash and put away my dishes, tend to the lemon thyme in the planter box and clip back the clusters of mint. Mint can be both an enemy and a friend, giving the garden a wonderful cool scent yet growing more rapidly and wildly than any common weed in just the blink of an eye. Mint always has to be scaled back, always clipped and trimmed, never allowed to wander freely, otherwise it's the end for the garden.

Around 3PM, my typical afternoon break time, I make myself another cup of tea inside and again sit on the grass to enjoy it, beneath the shade of the Persian silk and the street's dawn redwoods. If I close my eyes and let my mind wander free like the mint I can bring myself back to my old garden at home in Glasgow. I can feel the same breeze across my cheeks and shoulders, hear the same birdsong floating from the trees. For a moment, however fleeting, I am home. And if I close them really tight and pretend really hard, then Mother is home with me too. I can faintly hear her inside the kitchen, rustling food shopping from bags or clinking dinnerware over the sink. I can hear her humming too, that same song over and over. Eva Cassidy. That's it. *Songbird*. She hummed it while cooking, tidying, and sometimes while sipping her red wine in front of the TV during the adverts.

Songbird.

I can still hear it, even over the neighbour's wind chimes and the afternoon breeze, and —

The laughter. The cruel laughter, and the taunting of school kids. I flicker my eyelids open, the garden of 16 Lansdowne Road coming back into focus and the familiarity of home fading fast. Her humming abruptly disappears. It trickles out of my ears and away from my memories, and I am left with an odd sensation in my chest, a sort of coldness perhaps.

I slowly climb to my feet and edge to the bottom of the garden, where grass meets crushed stone. There, I hear their name callings and whistles, their taunts and jibes. I peer round the side of the wall and see a group of schoolboys laughing and pointing, while the Wilson child hunches in the middle, his face red and his eyes low on the ground as they ask him if his mum and dad are “spastics” too, whatever that means.

I listen to it go on for a bit, curious but not concerned. Concern is for full siblings, not for *half* brothers and *half* sisters. I wait for the child to get angry and scare them off, throw a plant pot or a shoe, or swing his backpack at them. The things that normally work. But he doesn't do anything other than stand there and idly receive their insults. I wish he had someone like Mother. When I was bullied like this, Mother stormed out the house, her nightgown flapping in the wind behind her, screaming murderous threats while she swung an empty wine bottle at them. The kids never came past my house again, and I was never bullied again. I was also removed from school, Mother suddenly favouring the benefits of home schooling. Aileen, my social worker, came around more often after that too.

Eventually it becomes quiet and the sounds of the breeze in the branches trickle back in around me. I glance at the shed, the door swinging open to let the wind in and the smells out, wondering if I should dart inside. But then the stones crunch and shift as the child meanders down the garden path. He startles when he sees me, his cheeks reddening. He stands rigid like a garden statue, hands down by his side, eyes wide, barely blinking. He wears a school uniform, a very boring combination of dull navy and matted beige. The collar has a little bit of a red trim, but all in all it isn't exactly a very summery outfit fit for the month of June. But perhaps ‘dull’ is London's dress code. All I've seen Mrs Wilson wear is beige and black, while Mr Wilson regularly opts for navy and black. Most of the dresses or capris I own are either patterned in florals or brightly coloured like the buds I tend to in the garden. Mother was the same. Even though the summer did not suit her temperature-wise, she adhered to the colours and patterns of the season like most.

“You look different to what I imagined,” he eventually says.

“You look the same,” I shrug, “Although I have seen a photo of you already.”

“You’re out of the shed.”

“Yes, I’m out of the shed.”

He walks slightly closer and glances around. “What are you doing?”

“Standing on the grass.”

“Why are you in the garden without shoes?”

“Because it’s soft and warm on the grass, and it smells nice out here.”

His eyes twitch, and he comes closer again.

I take a step back and he stops. Then I sink down to the grass and sit cross legged, the fabrics of my green dress splaying out on the ground.

“What are you doing now?” he asks, his eyes wide.

“Now, I’m sitting on the grass.” I lean back on my hands and continue staring at him, a strange familiarity between us.

He walks a couple of more steps towards me again, his hard shiny black school shoes crushing the blades of grass. He slowly sits down opposite me. He crosses his legs and leans back like me. I don’t say but I’m immediately taken aback by how similar his eyes are to mine. Dark green and shaped like almond blossoms. He has my nose too, but most certainly his thin pursed disproving lips come from his mother.

We spend the rest of the afternoon like this, neither of us in the mood for further conversation. Occasionally he sweeps his palm over the grass that is thickly blanketed in the afternoon sun, confirming he also agrees that it is both soft and warm. He watches me lie back, eyes closed, face tilted up to the sun, and soon joins me, our heads slightly touching.

Surprisingly, it doesn’t bother me.

When my rainbow watch reads 4:55PM, I stand up and go back to the shed, locking the door behind me. I don't say goodbye or glance back at the child. A few minutes later I hear his mother car pull into the driveway, the *5 o'clock news* blasting from her radio, followed by the unnecessary slamming of a car door. I curl my knees into my chest as I sit quietly on the floor, on top of my bedding. Moments later Mrs Wilson's sharp voice cuts through the once peaceful air, the shrillness slicing through my door.

"Henry, what on earth are you doing out here? Why are you sitting in the middle of the garden? We do own chairs, you know?"

June
and the
Return of Mother

The social worker said it must be fragments of a conversation I had overheard later on, but I swear I remember the first time I met my mother. Not the *first* first time, when I was born but after that, when I was given back to her when she returned from ‘finding herself’. I’d been with my second foster family for about three years by then, and had apparently made quite a name for myself in the home. I must have been very well liked.

Aileen, my social worker, had orchestrated a meeting in a park opposite my foster parents’ house. I was never one for noise and chaos, two characteristics closely associated with the average playground, so by the time Mother had arrived to meet us I was being dragged out of the sandbox by Aileen for apparently striking another child with a toy truck.

Mother stood under a Weeping Willow tree, her hands clasped in front of her, and watched as I was led away from the sandy pit of destruction, through the gates, and out to the grassy field. I remembered how slow she walked from that tree to where I stood and how fast she blinked her eyes as she gazed down at me. I remembered thinking there was something wrong with her eyes, that perhaps she too had had sand flicked into them by some nasty little boy with red hair and a toy truck.

She weakly greeted Aileen, then crouched down to her knees. She held out her arms, her palms up to the blue sky above us that was suddenly filled with blackbirds. Aileen nudged me forward into her embrace, and before I could stop it her arms tightened around me. I didn’t like hugs, even back then. As I wriggled in her bony arms that struggled to hold me in place, she said to me, “I’m better now, June.”

Then she held me tighter.

That was the first and only time I wet myself. The warmth spread through me and over me in seconds, and trickled down my leg onto my white socks and yellow trainers, the kind that lit up and sparkled when I walked.

I hadn't even realised that Mother had been away until the day she returned.

That was the first day of summer, 21st of June. It was a Thursday. I looked it up when I was much older and when I became interested in forecasts, long range and short range. It was overcast with low winds and humidity, and the temperature didn't get over 14 degrees that day.

We didn't talk about that day again, and had only brief mentions of her years away from me. I asked minimal questions and she gave me minimal answers. We were strangers to each other for a long time, but then we become something else. Something akin to what I'd seen on television shows or from watching the kids at school greeting their mothers at the end of the school day.

We become friends.

Mother didn't have any family she still talked to, and didn't make friends easily. For me, she was the only family I had, and the only friend I could make too. We had our work, I had my gardening and Mother had her television soaps and her red wine, but we spent evenings and weekends together. And I even grew to not mind brief hugs from her, not that she gave them as freely as she did in the beginning. She typically reserved them for special occasions like Christmas Day, birthdays, raffle days at her work, and new seasons of *Strictly Come Dancing*.

I had missed her hug at the weekend for the opening episode, missed the smell of her perfume, the tickle of her long wavy hair against my cheek, and the sound of her voice as she said my name.

And no matter how hard I try, I can't stop those memories from fading, like a stained cloth left out in the afternoon sun.

June and the Garden Chat



Gardener's Almanac:
Cloudy, chance of rain
High of 17°
Low of 15°
Sunset: 21:21PM

Today is an odd weather day. Only seventeen degrees, much milder than the previous one. It's more of a spring day than a summer one. I wear a cardigan over my floral dress, and a thicker pair of socks inside my welly boots.

I've spent most of the early afternoon prodding the earthworms around the Persian silk, to make sure the soil-dwelling detritivores are doing their job. A build-up of decomposing plant matter around the roots of Persian silks can be very detrimental to its growth. Thankfully, the worms are behaving so I let them be.

Around 3PM I make my way back into the kitchen for my tea break, this time sampling the Wilsons' gluten-free dairy-free digestive biscuit that is very much bordering on being taste-free too. Being slightly colder, I drape a blanket over my shoulders before I sit on the grass, again needing to air out the shed. Around 3:25PM, the child returns and joins me in the garden. Once more, he sits cross-legged facing me, eyeing the mug I cradle in my hands.

"How often do you go into the house when no one's home?" he eventually asks, after twelve whole minutes of silence.

"Four times on weekdays. Weekends vary, depending on the weather and your sleep patterns. Sometimes I need to source my meals and teas at the cafe at Notting Hill Gate. It's incredibly inconvenient."

"What do you do when you're inside my house?"

"I make breakfast in the kitchen in the mornings or teas later on, I make a cheese sandwich in the afternoon. I also use your bathroom."

“I knew it,” he says, shaking his head. “You don’t wipe down the sink after you wash your hands, and Mum blames Dad for it. Why are you living in our shed?”

“Because it’s warm and sheltered from the rain. It’s also free.”

“Do you not have any money?”

“I have some.”

“I have £8.57 in my piggybank upstairs if you want it?”

“That’s not going to get me very far.”

“I can get more.”

“We’ll see.”

“How do you know for sure that my dad is also your dad?”

“I don’t but he seems to think so. I also found an envelope addressed to him by my mother that had my things inside: old drawings, some teeth—”

“Teeth?”

“Baby teeth.”

“Right.” He scratches his nose, drawing my attention to the freckles around it, also like me.

“Will you live with us one day, *inside* the house I mean?”

I suddenly become aware of the birdsong over my shoulder, the sound of the breeze in the branches and the passing of a large vehicle of some kind on the roads behind. I want to ask him if he wants me to live inside the house one day. But instead I say, “My turn for questions.”

He shrugs. “Ok.”

“Why would I wipe down a sink after I wash my hands?”

“To dry it.”

“Isn’t the point of a sink to *wet* it?”

He shrugs again.

“Why do you own an animal?”

“Tilly’s our pet.”

“So?”

“She’s part of our family.”

“She can’t be. She’s an animal. Only humans form families.”

“I disagree.”

“Noted.”

“Any more questions?”

“Favourite colour?”

“Blue.”

“Favourite flower?”

“Daisies.”

“That’s a weed, not a flower.”

“I disagree, again.”

“Noted, again. Who tends to your garden? I haven’t seen anyone come out here in the three weeks I’ve been here.”

“You’ve been here for three weeks?”

“It’s my turn for questions, remember?”

“We had a gardener, Sally. But then Mum called Sally a cow and she stopped coming round. Mum says she’s better at gardening than Sally anyway.”

“Sally must be *really* bad then.”

“Anything else?”

“Why does your mother buy sugar in cube-form?”

“I’m not sure. You’d have to ask her yourself.”

I take a final slurp of tea, that's now cooled beyond the point of taste and comfort, and gently place the mug down in a nest of grass and daisies. *Weeds*. "Why do you let those boys call you names and make fun of you?"

He shrugs again, and plucks a daisy from beside the mug. "What else can I do?" he mutters.

"Hit them."

His eyes flickers up, a smile forming on his face, then it fades as he realises I am very serious.

"Hit them," I say again.

"Mum says just to ignore them and they'll go away."

"My mother told me that's stupid advice. They don't go away."

"I know."

"When I was called names, ridiculed for my interest in flowers and plants and insects, and my passion for brightly coloured jumpers and summery accessories, such as visors and sunglasses even in the winter months, I tried ignoring them too. It only made them shout louder. The only thing that silenced them was Mother swinging a bottle of Chianti Reserva at them. That shut them up."

"Your mother sounds cooler than mine."

"She was." That coldness in my chest is back, tugging and pulling at my insides.

"Only three days left of school, then it's the summer holidays. Hopefully they'll find a new target by August."

"Doubtful."

He uncrosses his legs and rises to stand, blocking the light from the sky.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"It's almost five o'clock. Mum will be home soon."

I glance at my watch. The child is correct. I haven't even noticed the passing of time, which is very unusual for me.

“Goodbye then,” he says.

“Goodbye then.”

He walks away, then turns when he gets to the patio. “One last question. What’s your name?”

“June.”

“June like the month?”

“June like the month,” I smile. The child and I might get on after all.

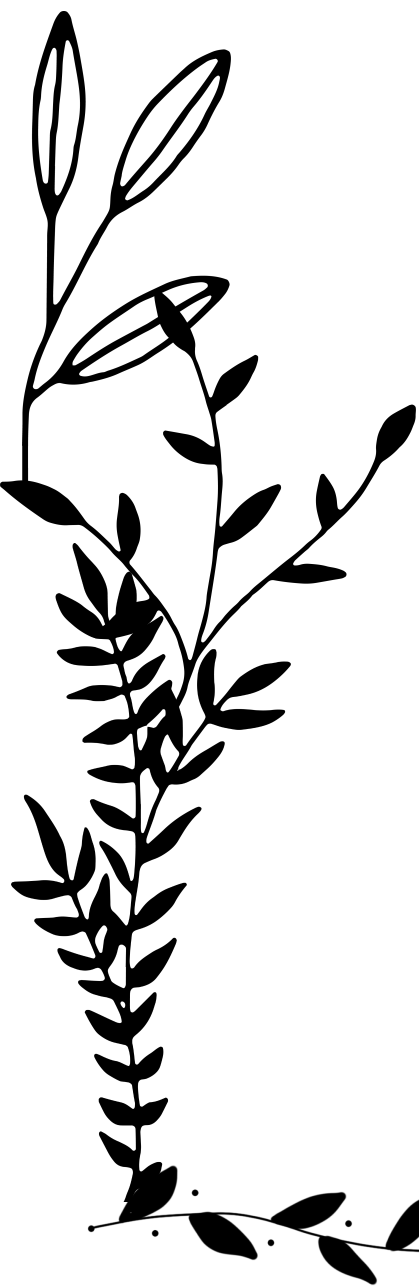
“I’m Henry.”

“I know.”

“Well, bye for now, June.”

He leaves through the sliding doors, closing them with a click. Then he walks through the kitchen and disappears around the corner, into the hallway. His mother’s car pulls into the driveway about three minutes after that.

June
and the
Ready Made Birthday Cake



Gardener's Almanac:
Light rain showers
High of 19°
Sunrise: 04:43AM

It's been another restless night, with sleep coming but never quite staying. I have already awoken several times to find the shed still blanketed in nighttime. This time I roll over. The hands on the small analog clock moves slowly, reluctantly edging forward. When sleep comes, my dreams are a fog of old beginnings and new endings. I dream of the day Mother died, and of long grass and knots of weeds, muddy river banks, flashing police sirens and blood on my hands. Then I wake and stare at the clock hands again. And it continues on like this for most of the night.

I consider wandering the garden, perhaps even entering the house to make myself a cup of warm honeyed milk like Mother used to before the wind chimes, but my body feels too heavy to rise from my bed on the floor. And I worry the Wilsons will hear me from their bedrooms. I wonder how they sleep. It can't be deeply. All that dehydrated kale and probiotic kefir must be very difficult to digest.

When I finally do surface from the shed, the house is quiet, empty, all traces of human chatter and breakfast clatter gone. I hadn't heard them leave this morning, having been too engrossed in a chapter about soluble aluminium and stunted root growth. I unlock and slide open the patio doors. The dog bounds out into the garden. It immediately circles and squats by the Persian silk, a look of triumph on its furry face. I sigh loudly. The grass around the roots will never be the same.

When I turn back to the kitchen, I pause, surveying the space before me. Brightly coloured streamers and balloons explode from corners and wall edges and even from the fridge door. Above the living room archway is a long silver banner emblazoned with red lettering:

Happy Birthday Dad

It appears to be Mr Wilson's birthday, although I have not been informed of this fact. Birthdays are a very big deal in my house. Mother and I would dress in our finest and bake a cake. We wore no aprons, just dresses made of satin and tulle that we'd found for next to nothing at the second hand charity shop, wedged beside the old VHS tapes and mismatching glassware that only Mother bought. She said a single wine goblet for 40p was a bargain not to be ignored, even if it didn't match anything else on the glass shelf. So there we were, 'dressed to the nines' as she said, whipping egg yolks and folding white sugar into yellow butter. I never ate the cake in the end. I didn't like to stray too far from my everyday dietary choices as sometimes the slightest upset didn't agree with my stomach, or the medication. So Mother ate it herself, washing it down with a bottle of sparkling wine that she'd won in the staff raffle earlier that year. Mother always seemed to win in the raffle. Mother was very lucky. Sadly, her colleagues didn't see it that way and re-assigned the task of organising the Royal Mail raffle to someone else. After that she was forced to source her own sparkling wine, which she was most upset about.

When is Mother's birthday? I suddenly can't remember.

The decorations the Wilsons have hung are very over the top and the streamers hanging from the cooker hood are certainly a fire hazard. Each balloon is tied with a thin ribbon and secured to a surface with thick strips of gift wrapping tape. And it continues through to the living room, around the TV, into the hallway and up the stairs, winding along the bannister. It's everywhere. Every wall corner and available edge is occupied with a glittery shiny decoration of some kind, which strangely makes me desire a strong mug of coffee even more.

As the kettle splutters and roars to a boil, I swing open the fridge door, the balloons on it bouncing around. I hide the real butter where I hide the real cheese, but behind the fake butter is a white plastic bag encasing a box inside. Always the curious one, I slide it out and onto the table for further inspection. Inside is a cake — a square buttercream-lathered sponge cake with the same basic and somewhat predictable lettering: **Happy Birthday Dad.**

I quickly make my coffee and collapse into a very white chair at the dining table. I can't believe it — the Wilsons have *bought* a birthday cake. They have paid money for someone else to bake it. Where is the effort and thought in that? Have they also hired someone to shop, select and wrap the birthday present? Are they going to pay someone to cut the cake later too? Where does it end?

Once I drain my mug and refill once, I return to the shed to gather my belongings for my first trip to London's famous shopping district. I don't know what Londoners wear on a weekday outing to the stores, so I dress conservatively in a long daisy-print dress with my gardening boots and a raincoat. I tie a ribbon in my hair that I've stolen from a birthday centrepiece on the dining table, that hopefully the Wilsons will blame the dog for and her insatiable hunger for inanimate objects.

A slight chill hovers in the air, the weather threatening to turn at any moment. I zip up my coat and follow my map to the nearest tube station where I unfortunately have to purchase another Oyster Card. I haven't been on public transport since the day a man took my money and made me angry. If I see him again I'll be sure to ask him for it back since it does not belong to him. I'm sure he'll agree.

I pop on my headphones and stand at the top of the stairs beneath the giant circular sign that reads:



At the bottom is a small bustle of people. Everyone bumps into each other, phones in hand, eyes down. I take a deep breath and descend, reminding myself that this birthday predicament has to be rectified, beginning with a carefully chosen gift and the purchase of ingredients to bake a *real* cake.

June
and the
Trip to Harrods



Newspaper Forecast:
Afternoon rain showers
High of 20°
Humidity 75%

The ride into the city centre is thankfully uneventful compared to the last time I took the underground. There are no money-pinching commuters or non-plussed policemen, which is always good news even for the most seasoned city traveller. But just to err on the side of caution, I hide my money in my left welly boot this time, making it harder for poking prying hands.

I had asked a woman in a ridiculously-overpriced coffee shop to direct me to the best shop in London to pick out a gift for a maximum of £10 for the man I recently discovered is my biological father. She has sent me to a place called:



I decided not to buy a coffee from her in the end, as I need to save my money for the gift.

The *Harrods* building is gigantic. Dozens of windows dot between brown bricks and flag poles, and there is a large glass revolving door. In my experience these doors can be a safety hazard for easily distracted consumers. At *M&S*, shoppers come and go through a one-way pull door, which is much more efficient.

Past the door is a large easel displaying the general ‘guidelines’ for shopping at *Harrods* which includes: refraining from “wearing clothing which may reveal intimate parts of the body” and “removing Google Glasses in areas where photography is restricted.” I have never heard of ‘Google Glasses,’ nor am I wearing revealing clothing that showcase ‘intimate parts of the body’ so I feel comfortable proceeding with the shopping task.

At *M&S*, there are four departments: *Men’s* *Women’s* *Accessories* *Food Hall*

Technically, 'Accessories' can be broken down into further sub-departments if someone counts shoes and handbags as separate, but in general the departments are fairly easy to find and to navigate. Here at *Harrods*, there are three-hundred and thirty departments.

How am I ever going to find a gift for my biological father in the allotted ninety minutes?

I decide to visit Concierge, even though I am not entirely sure of its purpose. It does, however, display a large sign of comparable size to the 'guidelines' boasting 'immediate shopping success' with confident statements such as, 'We'll find you exactly what you need.'

I plop down on the plush armchair and await some assistance.

A tall blonde woman in a skirt suit approaches me from the side and sits in the leather chair opposite me. "Good morning."

"Good *afternoon*," I correct her. Already a bad sign.

"Sorry, *afternoon*. How can I assist you today?"

"I'm here to buy a present for my biological father. I just found out it's his birthday today."

She blinks a couple of times, then smiles. "Lovely. And what does he usually like, in the gift sense?"

"I'm not sure. I only met him three weeks ago."

"Ok. Do you know much about his interests, what he likes to do, what his favourite colours are, and so on?"

"Like I said, I only found out it's his birthday today so I didn't have time to ask his son, my half-brother, all those questions, which I understand now would have narrowed my search significantly."

"Of course," she smiles. "In the past, what have you generally bought for people on their birthdays?"

"I only buy presents on three occasions: Christmas Day, Mother's birthday and Mother's Day. And I always buy a bottle of wine, and sometimes a box of pralines too."

“Have you perused our Food and Wine department downstairs?”

I tilt my head. What a fantastic word that is, ‘peruse.’ I’ll be sure to add it to my regular vocabulary. “No, I have not *perused* it.”

“Would you like me to take you down there now? I’m also a Master of Wine, specialising in old world reds but if you’re after a new world bottle then I can point out a few of our finest. Personally, if it has to be a new world wine, I’m partial to South American regions such as Chile.”

I hold my hand up before she delves any deeper. “That’s ok. I’m a bit of a wine master too — I work at *M&S*.”

I thank her and follow the signs to the escalator. Several minutes of confusion and mis-navigation later, I am in *Harrods*’ Food and Wine department, which is larger than my entire house back in Glasgow. The chocolatier section alone is four times the size of the shed. Everywhere I look there are shiny shelves of gold gift-wrapped boxes and sparkling silver canisters with chocolate, filled with every variation of international ingredients imaginable. There are chocolate bars with Peruvian chilli flakes, Icelandic sea salt and Brazilian goji berries. And the wines! Aisles of green and black bottles, organised by region of country and then by grape. I don’t know where to begin!

So again I ask a staff member. I really hate doing this as I don’t like it when people approach me at *M&S* asking me where the gluten-free muffins are or why wine isn’t included in the *Dine In for Two* deal of the week. I have a lot of tasks to complete on a typical work day and answering customer questions is not one of them. I do my best to help, of course, but if time is marching on or if there are follow-up questions then I politely inform them that I am very busy with more important things to do. They don’t like that answer very much and sometimes complain to Linda, but it is the truth and I like to be honest where possible.

Kneeling on the floor at *Harrods* is a woman not much older than me, with mousy brown hair that’s tied very tightly in a bun at the top of her head, a bit like Mrs Wilson’s hair. It resembles

a small ant mound. “Excuse me, sorry to bother you while you stack the Brazil nuts, but I’m looking for a recommendation for a red wine for a birthday present?”

“Of course,” the attendant smiles, pulling herself up. “Would you prefer old world or new world?”

Again, I’m hearing this confusing concept of wine originating from places classed as either ‘old world’ or ‘new world’ when all I want is a bottle of red wine from this current world.

“How about a lovely Cabernet from Napa Valley?” she says, walking over to the shelves labelled **USA**. She slides out a sleek burgundy bottle with a silver and green label. It certainly looks pretty, and I like the name of the region — *Napa*. I open my mouth and practice saying it. “Napa.” I roll in my tongue for the N and puff out my lips for the P. “Naaaapaaaa.”

She looks at me, then smiles again. “It’s a nice region, I know.”

I take the bottle from her and weigh it in my hands. The glass is heavy, well-made. “How much is it?”

“That one is priced at £86.”

“Sorry?” I splutter.

“Napa Valley had a very bad season with the harvest due to the weather conditions and drought, so their prices are a little higher than usual, but I guarantee you that this one is worth it. It’s exquisite.”

“Perhaps we should find a bottle from a region that isn’t suffering from poor crops and bad weather. Maybe a less sunny region so drought isn’t a factor?” I suggest, handing the bottle back to her. “How about the UK?”

“Actually, there’s a lovely Pinot Noir from a vineyard in Devonshire, now you mention it. But as wine production in the UK is low compared to the rest of Europe, the retail value from smaller, more independent, British vineyards tend to be in the £70- £80 price range too.”

“What is the most *common* wine region? The one with the biggest vineyards that churn out bottles on a conveyer belt like that,” I say, snapping my fingers.

“Well, um, Italy is quite popular.”

“Fantastic. Italy it is!”

“We have a nice Chianti?”

That was Mother’s favourite. She said it’s for special occasions, whilst everyday wine is Merlot from *Asda*. It needed to be cheap, as sometimes she’d go through two or three bottles a night, especially if she finished her work shift before 2PM that day. Buying Mr Wilson a Chianti will be like bringing a piece of Mother to him. He’ll like that. “Chianti is perfect,” I nod. “I’ll take a ten pound one. Actually, eight pounds would be better as I’d like to throw in a box of pralines too. Go all out.”

She squints then glances around the aisle suspiciously like she’s checking to see who is listening to us. “I’m so sorry, but I don’t think we have any wines here that are ten pounds or under.”

“Oh, really?” And *Harrods* boasts of catering to all shoppers’ needs! All shoppers except me, it seems. Clearly, *Harrods* doesn’t need my business so I thank her as it’s not her fault, and leave. I march out the department, up two sets of elevators, along several aisles, past hundreds of shoppers, and out the glass swing doors. And I head straight for the nearest *M&S* where I purchase a bottle of Chianti for £6 and a box of pralines for £2:

$$\mathbf{£10 - £6 = £4}$$

$$\mathbf{£4 - £2 = £2}$$

That gave me enough change for a cheese sandwich.

*June and the
Birthday Party*



Evening Forecast:
 0% chance of evening rain
 Low of 15°
 Sunset: 9:21PM

I have spent more time at *Harrods* than I thought. And I lost more time navigating my way back to the underground train that the locals call ‘the tube’, but when I return to the garden I am pleased to find the Wilsons are not home yet. This gives me a little time to sift, mix, fold and whip the cake ingredients using Mother’s very own recipe, taken from *Women’s Weekly* (spring edition):

Ingredients

200g soft butter, plus extra for greasing
 200g self-raising flour
 1 tsp baking powder
 200g golden caster sugar
 4 eggs
 2 tbsp milk
 For the filling
 142ml double cream
 50g golden caster sugar
 ½ tsp vanilla extract
 100g strawberry conserve
 icing sugar, for dusting

Method

STEP 1

Heat oven to 180C/fan 160C/gas 4. Grease and base-line 2 x 20cm non-stick round sandwich tins with baking parchment, then lightly grease the parchment. Sift the flour and baking powder into a large bowl, then tip in all the other sponge ingredients. Using an electric whisk, beat everything together until smooth. Divide the mix between the cake tins, then bake for 20-25 mins until cooked and golden. When cool enough to handle, remove the cakes from the tins, then leave to cool completely on a rack.

STEP 2

To make the filling, whip the cream with the caster sugar and vanilla until it holds its shape. Build the cake by spreading one sponge with jam and the other with cream. Sandwich the whole thing together, then dust with icing sugar.

Next up is the birthday present. Wrapping a bottle shape is actually quite difficult and it isn’t a technique I have practised much over the years as I usually use a bottle bag, which also fits a slim

tube of *M&S* hazelnut pralines at the side. I am always very careful not to over-stretch or tear the bag as after Mother had unwrapped it she gave it back to me, neatly folded for the next time. However, in haste to sell up and pack up, I have forgotten to bring that gift bag with me so something in the Christmas box will have to do. I slide it onto the shed floor, pushing aside the floral mug that I still haven't returned. The lid pops off and I begin rummaging through the pearl garlands and bubble-wrapped glass baubles until I find two sheets of gift wrap at the bottom. One is blue with snowmen and the other is rose gold with foil lettering wishing everyone a 'Very Merry Christmas.' I opt for the snowmen, which I think is slightly more subtle than the latter, but after folding it over the base and body of the bottle I realise that it only covers half the wine. The label and neck still sticks out. So, I use the second sheet of paper and secure it with some black duct tape I find on the shelf. Perfect.

Something is missing, wrong. I turn the bottle over in my hands. It sloshes, the deep red liquid travelling up the sides to the neck. Red, sanguine, like blood.

Blood on the wall.

Hair in the water.

A birthday card. I have forgotten to buy Mr Wilson a birthday card! How will he know the gift is from me?

I dig out the sales receipt and scribble a simple but effective message on the back:

DEAR MR WILSON

HAPPY BIRTHDAY.

FROM YOUR BIOLOGICAL DAUGHTER FROM SCOTLAND, JUNE WILSON

I attach it to the wrapped gift and gently place it in the front garden on the doorstep, so as not to allude to my presence in the back. I return to the shed and await his arrival. Around 5:25PM they finally come home. I peer through the crack in the door at the big red balloon the child tows down the garden path, while his sullen-faced mother stomps behind rabbiting on about a latex

allergy. “The GP doesn’t believe me, nor does the allergist, and your father certainly doesn’t believe me.”

“I believe you, Mum.”

“Thanks, Henry—” She gasps loudly. “What is this?”

I press my face against the warm wood, eyeing them as they stand at the back door gazing into the kitchen. I didn’t have the time to tidy the kitchen *and* wrap the present, so I prioritised the gift-wrapping.

“What a mess! There’s flour everywhere, and my eggs! I bought that carton of eggs yesterday and that’s all six gone...uh, there’s one on the floor. Henry, what is this? Who did this?”

My face aches from pushing into the wood as I wait for the boy’s response, which is taking a lot longer than it should.

“Um...” he splutters. The red balloon dances and bobs in the air over him.

“Well?” demands his mother, standing over a mound of flour that had unfortunately poured out of the bag when I held it upside down, unaware that it had already been opened on one side. At my house, Mother always sealed opened food bags with brown parcel tape. Here, Mrs Wilson has simply folded over the lip of the paper bag, like that is a fool-proof way to contain the food inside.

“It was me,” he finally says.

“You? When? You’ve been at school all day, then we went to the florist to pick up the balloons.”

“I came home on my lunch break to make Dad a cake.”

“We have a cake, it’s in the fridge next to the kefir pots. Giovanni’s specially made Dad’s favourite.”

What is Mr Wilson’s favourite? And why is Giovanni privy to this information and not his biological daughter?

“I know but I just wanted to make him one myself...or at least, try.”

She sighs loudly, her moan trickling out the open kitchen doors to the garden. “Well, that was nice of you, I suppose. Where is it?”

“Um...” I hear a lot of shuffling around in the kitchen, cabinets opening and closing, drawers slamming on its hinges. Why would the cake I baked be in the silverware drawer? Finally he clocks that it’s still in the oven. I had to frost it still warm sadly, due to time, but there wasn’t enough room in the fridge so I had to put it back into the oven. House flies are terrible this time of year. The summer humidity is an ideal climate to reproduce.

“The oven? Oh Henry, the icing’s all melted off and has made such a mess of the wire racks,” she tuts.

“Sorry, I—Dad’s home!” he yells.

A strange sensation flutters in my belly as I await the opening and closing of the car door, and the sound of his expensive shiny loafers on the garden path.

“What’s all this?” he exclaims. I press an eye into the crack even more. He holds my birthday gift in his hands.

“Your son decided to make a cake — and a complete mess of the kitchen — on his lunch break,” she sighs.

“Lovely, well done! A homemade cake, yum! Can’t wait to try it.” He wraps his arms around the boy, who looks back at the yellow shed where I stand. The sensation I feel begins to simmer in my belly. It’s *my* efforts, and I should be getting the credit.

“What’s that?” Mrs Wilson asks her husband, pointing to the bottle-shaped parcel.

“I’m not sure,” he says, slowly turning it over to read the label. He stops, his shoulders stiffening.

“Well, who’s it from?”

“Uh, a colleague at work. He’d messaged to say he’d missed me at the office and would drop it off on his way home.”

“That’s nice of him. What’s his name?”

“Carl,” he says quickly.

“I don’t know any Carls in your office.”

“He’s new.”

“New? Nice of him to be giving out gifts if he’s new,” she scoffs. “Very generous indeed, you’re obviously paying him too much. Is that Christmas paper? Who would use Christmas paper to wrap a birthday gift in June?” She laughs.

My insides burn. There is no rule forbidding the use of snowman gift wrap outside of December.

“Come on, you can help us tidy the kitchen,” she instructs, marching in. The child is already standing over the flour patch with a brush in hand.

Mr Wilson stands outside on the patio stone, his eyes still on my present. He turns it over in his hands once more, then gazes up at the garden. He looks around, his eyes darting from the potted lilacs and mustards on his right, to the Persian silk at the back, to the planter box I’ve trimmed this morning, and finally to the yellow wooden shed.

My jaw aches as I clench tightly, pressing my teeth together, my eyes fixed on him. He stares back, not looking at anything in particular. Not looking at me. Then his eyes rest upon the gift in his hands. My gift. He slumps over to the bin by the side of the garden path, and drops the present inside.

The shattering of glass cuts through the silence.

“What was that, Robert?” calls out Mrs Wilson from inside the kitchen.

“Nothing darling,” he replies.

*June and
Summer Term*



Gardener's Almanac:
 Cloudy, chance of rain
 High of 21°
 Low of 13°

Since the garden shed is turning into more of a long-term stay than I initially planned for, I decide another *Aldi* visit is needed to make the place even more hospitable. So I return for a quick visit, thankfully not bumping into any chatty cyclists this time, to collect the following items:

1 box of coloured markers...£1.00

5 cans of spray paint in 'India Green' #54...£2.75 each

1 box of amateur acrylic paints...£1.50

2 art paintbrushes...40p each

1 silver photo frame...£2.99

1 white shoe rack...£5.99

I also stop by the shops to buy more of the bread I like, plain white not the brown seedy kind, a jar of *M&S* coffee, and some cheddar slices. I don't need to buy biscuits for my tea breaks because Mr Wilson replenishes his snack drawers regularly. I drink my 3PM tea from a thermos I brought with me and saunter back to the garden. When I arrive the boy is already waiting for me on the grass, schoolbag by his side.

"There you are. I was worried when I got back and couldn't find you. You're always here."

"I went shopping," I say.

"Shopping? For what?"

"For things to make the shed look more like my house back home," I answer, dropping the shopping bags by my feet and reaching in for the shed key. Mother said it was always best to lock up and test the handle at least three times to ensure it was secure before leaving. I always do.

He rises to his feet and joins me at the shed door. “What did your house look like back in Scotland?”

“You’re about to see.”

The shed door swings open, battering off the wall.

“Can I help?” he asks, eagerly.

“No, thank you.”

His shoulders sag.

“Please?” he asks again.

“How can you help if you don’t know what my house looks like?”

“You can tell me.”

I nod reluctantly and assign him some simple tasks to keep him busy and out of my way, which includes shifting shed clutter to the back corner, relocating the sheet of tarp and sweeping.

4:15PM.

I will paint and etch the walls another time when we have more hours before Mrs Wilson’s return.

“Are you excited for *Strictly* tomorrow?” he asks, as he unfolds some extra tarp out on the grass.

“Week 3 is movie week. It’s a good one,” I nod, carrying the Christmas box to the back. “On season 17, Kelvin and Oti did the Charleston to *Mary Poppins*. It was fantastic.”

Mother and I had popcorn on the living room floor, which she’d covered with a garden blanket like we were having a picnic outside. It was wonderful. I have never had popcorn again.

“I’m looking forward to watching it.”

“Will there be popcorn?” I ask him.

“For tomorrow? Probably not, my mum doesn’t allow things like that in the house.”

“Really? Our biological father keeps a stash of crisps, chocolates and *Haribo* gummy bears in the third drawer of his study, underneath the brown envelope labelled *Wills and Power of Attorney*.”

His eyes widen. “Mum won’t like that at all.”

I reposition the rug, this time aligning the tassels to the opposite walls, brushing them out with my fingernails. With the boy’s help we set up the bedding against the right wall at the back where I had my bed frame at home and position the bedside table beside the pillow. I will sleep facing south, like I did at home. The shelves are dusted and my new paint set is organised and laid out for next time. My gardening boots and gloves are placed on the new rack to the left of the door, like at home. In Glasgow, they sat beside Mother’s blue satin heels but here they sit next to a red pair of Mrs Wilson’s, which I hope she hasn’t yet noticed are missing.

The last piece is the photo frame.

At home, I had a photo of Mother and me in the frame, the only one we had of ourselves, taken by Aileen the day we were ‘reunited’. Mother said she hated that photo but she never asked me to remove it, knowing I had no other to replace it with. Here, my frame is empty as I forgot to take the photo with me the day I left so I’ll have to keep the picture it comes with, a colour print of a smiling family next to the words, ‘5x7 silver frame. Only £2.99.’

“You don’t have a photo for your frame?” he says.

“No. I never took one with me.”

“What was it of?”

“My mother. She was young then, but she looked the same.”

“What will you put in it instead?”

I shrug. “I’ll just leave it as is.”

“I can draw you a picture if you want? Maybe I can draw your mother? Then you’ll have a picture of her for your frame?”

“You don’t know what she looks like.”

“Tell me.”

We sit on the floor of the shed. The boy positions a sketch pad on his lap, with a tin of colouring pencils and an eraser beside him.

“Hair colour?”

“Brown with flecks of dark red, like a copper leaf.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

I slide my encyclopaedia off the bedside table and skim the pages for *Autumnal Blooms and Foliage*. “Here,” I say, pointing to a large photo of a copper leaf. “It needs direct sunlight at all times and blooms best in temperatures above fifteen degrees.”

“Eye colour?”

I point to the picture on the next page, still under *Autumnal Blooms*. “*Calycanthus burgundy spice*.”

He carries on drawing, taking much longer than I had scheduled for. I glance periodically at the clock, reminding him that his mother sometimes returns from work early on a Friday to pour herself a glass of Australian chardonnay. He hands me the picture and waits for my critique.

“The eyes need to be rounder, more like mine, and the lips need to be thinner. And her hair is too flat. It was wavy like mine, but longer, down to her waist.”

He tries again, but the eyes are still not right. Perhaps it’s more the eyebrows that are off, so I take the pencil from him and correct them myself.

“Better,” I mutter. I walk over to the open shed door and hold up the drawing to the light. His art skills are definitely questionable even for a ten-year-old, but all the basic features are there and if I squint and tilt my head to the side I can see elements of her in the picture.

It will do.

The next evening as I wait for the dish clatter to fade and the droning of Mrs Wilson to die down, I find myself staring at the child's picture in the frame.

"What do you think, Mother?" I ask her.

I think she likes it.

The air shifts and I suddenly become aware of a clamminess in my palms. I look back at Mother, who now sits on a newly cleaned shelf beside my books. I glance at my watch. It's almost time for *Strictly*. I don't know many movie titles as I don't tend to watch much television other than this show and anything gardening related. I often needed Mother to help me match the songs with the movies. She stayed up much later than me, and enjoyed watching late night movies so she was much more clued up on the names of films.

What if I don't know any this time? Who will help me?

My breathing becomes heavier, sharper, almost loud enough to drown out the familiar tune of the opening credits. I unlatch the shed door and shakily take a seat at the side of the patio doors by the terracotta pots. Mr Wilson is nowhere in sight and Mrs Wilson has her back to me in the armchair. The child stares out, looking for me. I wave. A smile stretches tight across his freckled face. He quickly glances at his mother then gestures to the pot beside me.

Inside, nestled under the leaves of the acer is a small bag of popcorn.

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Inside, nestled under the leaves of the acer is a small bag of popcorn.

It will do.

*June and the
Invitation to Kew Gardens*



Gardener's Almanac:
Sunny
High of 24°
Low of 16°

"I have tickets," the boy exclaims with a smile so wide I wonder if it hurts his cheeks. He waves a piece of paper at me still warm from the printer. I can see images and dots and lines of different colours, some smudged and faded at the bottom to indicate the ink is in need of replacement.

"Tickets to what?"

"To one of the biggest tourist attractions in London...the UK...probably the world!"

"No thanks," I reply, getting back to my weeding. The growth around the planter box is particularly bad. Perhaps Mrs Wilson shouldn't have sacked Sally.

"Why not?" His smile is now well and truly gone. In its place is an upside down smile.

I sit back and sigh. "Because you say it's the *biggest* tourist attraction in London and possibly the UK, which implies that due to its size it will be a fair distance outside of London, which likely means a long train ride, and that doesn't appeal to me. Plus they're not very safe, people steal your money and Oyster card on trains and then the police comes. And if 'biggest' doesn't refer to the size of this attraction, then it must mean big in popularity which means large crowds, long queues and toilets you have to pay 20p to use, which also doesn't appeal to me." I continue with the weeding.

He kneels down beside me, peering over my shoulder as I firmly pull the roots out from the soil, dragging murky green threads over the dirt. "What are you doing?" he asks.

"Weeding is a very important step in regular garden maintenance, without it the weeds will slowly drain nutrients from the soil, pulling life from the plants and flowers around it. They also compete for sunlight and water, and if you're not careful they can harbour pests that destroy the garden."

Common Weeds is Chapter Three in my encyclopaedia. If you can identify them then you'll know what you are dealing with and how to get rid of them. Even Mother occasionally engaged in a few moments of weeding with me while the potatoes were boiling for dinner. She had her own gloves, yellow like sunlight and buttercups. Yellow like the daffodils I planted for her in the front garden, even though I told her they are nicknamed *lent lilies* because they only bloom between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday, and we are not the religious type. We never went to church, and Mother regularly engaged in profanity and blasphemy.

I also informed her that daffies needed direct and full sunlight which we lacked in the front garden, however, I agreed to plant bulbs nonetheless because she wanted to see them every time she came home from work. Because they made her happy, and when she was happy I felt something similar occurring deep inside me. Of course, my plan was to replant them every year knowing they'd only survive one season in our poorly lit garden, but I wasn't able to finish the seeding before Aileen's letter came about the residential home. I wonder who they have reallocated that maisonette to, the one above the Indian restaurant and the pawn shop.

I still have Mother's gardening gloves. The yellow is very bright and occasionally catches the sunlight, flickering into my eyes, but I cannot part with them for some reason even though I know they are more fashion gardening gloves than anything else. It's odd, I don't usually keep items that have no purpose or value so I don't understand why I keep those.

"Imagine how much work it takes to maintain Kew Gardens," sighs the boy dramatically, his eyes darting to mine briefly.

"Kew Gardens?"

"That's what these tickets are for, I thought you'd want to see the fifty thousand plants there, but guess I was wrong," he says, getting up and slowly walking away. He swings his arms by his side. The printed tickets flap in the breeze.

"*Fifty thousand?*" I stand up, my gardening tools sliding from my hands onto the grass.

“Fifty thousand,” he repeats, standing in front of the garden gate, a slight smile creeping onto his face.

I shimmy my hands out from the gloves and start tidying up my tools. “You didn’t say it was Kew Gardens. Had you said that, we could have been down the road and on the train by now,” I mutter, shaking my head. I tuck the gloves into the pocket of my raincoat, just in case staff at Kew Gardens need some assistance from a visitor today, especially someone as skilled in the garden as me.

We trudge out the gate, my wellies still on. The forecast predicts sunshine and afternoon clouds, but you can never fully trust weather predictions as they’re often calculated by meteorologists and supercomputers, not gardeners like myself. About halfway down the street I turn back for my gardening belt. I can not be underprepared for Kew Gardens. This might be a job interview in disguise.

The queue to London Botanic Gardens is long and zigzags down the street and past the third lamppost. Thankfully the child’s foresight to prebook has allowed us to skip the main queue and instead join a much smaller line on the right.

The train here hadn’t been as long, tedious or risky as I feared. In fact, the thirty minute ride and two train transfers had gone by rather quick which I chalked up to my excitement and the Wilson child’s mildly engaging conversation about steam engines. At times it was almost interesting, and I am not a train person, more so because of recent events, however I did listen. The boy is very excited about trains. I’m sure he learns a lot more from my dialogue of horticulture and *Strictly* episodes than I do from his chat, being that I am so much older and more experienced with the world.

As the queue dwindles and we get nearer to the entrance, I notice a man and a woman standing at the gate asking to see inside people's bags and coat pockets. They wear grey uniforms and have name badges pinned to their chests, not too dissimilar to my old *M&S* name tag.

"What are they doing?" I ask the child, as we got closer to the bag inspectors.

"Who? Them?" he says, pointing rather indiscreetly. "They're just checking people's bags, for security, you know."

"Why?"

"I suppose to make sure we're not terrorists," he shrugs.

I gaze at him, eyes wide. I have mentally prepared myself for a challenging train journey and a potential act of theft being conducted, but an act of *terrorism*? I have not considered that, and therefore I am extremely unprepared.

The queue edges nearer, and I begin to feel the moisture forming on my palms.

It's our turn.

"I'm not a terrorist!" I scream at the pair as they motion us forward. A heavy silence fills the space around us, then whispers begin. I hadn't intended to proclaim such a statement so suddenly and so loudly, however, the idea of strangers putting their hands on me and inside my coat pockets, touching my mother's yellow gardening gloves, just became instantaneously overwhelming. Even my breathing is erratic. The stares of those around us is very noticeable.

The security guards pause, look to one another with an expression that escapes my emotional repertoire, and continue with protocols. I don't have a bag, thankfully, but they still finger my pocket linings, most certainly touching the yellow gloves, then gesture us onwards.

All in all, the exchange takes approximately 45 seconds which is somewhat acceptable even by my standards. Next time I'll be sure to avoid clothing with pockets to remove the temptation for an inspection, or perhaps next time I'll store Mother's gloves in a clear ziplock bag so that only my hands touch them. Yes, that sounds more feasible.

"You know you don't have to tell them you're not a terrorist? I think they decide that on their own," he says.

That makes sense. I suppose that's their job.

"Where to first?" he asks. He's clutching a brightly coloured map, possibly one that he's taken from an information stand that I have frustratingly failed to notice coming in. I may possibly still be reeling from the physical security check and therefore distracted. I glance around but I can't see any displays or shelves with maps.

"Where did you get that?" I ask him.

He ignores me. "Would you like to do the garden walk first?"

Where are the maps? I look over his shoulder. I can't see the shaded areas and dotted lines on the paper clearly, he's holding it too far away. I edge closer and reach for the map. I don't want to be guided around Kew Gardens by a schoolboy. He shifts slightly, casually moving it out of my grasp.

He continues, "Or we could visit the Ar...bo...?"

"Arboretum," I sigh. This is why I want to hold the map. "It's a botanical garden existing exclusively of trees. The garden walk first, please."

He nods, folds the map and places it inside his pocket, where I can't get it. Then he points left towards a small entrance, pauses, looks around, then shakes his head. "No, it's this way, I think."

I sigh even louder. After several minutes of map reading, sign navigation and possibly just guessing, he finally leads me through a large stone archway. It unfolds into a promenade of exquisitely lined paths and circular flowerbeds. And it keeps on going. I stop. I am very rarely awestruck or impressed in any sort of way, Mother said I had a 'poker face that could rival Doyle Brunson' whatever that means, but where I stand takes my breath away.

The range of plant families on display is incredible. Pastel pink roses climbing up trellises, evergreen shrubs twisting around towering obelisks, tightly clipped yews shaped into Egyptian pyramids. My head whips around quickly, my neck already aching. I don't know where to look first, where to start, so I wander down the path, past the two girls taking photos of themselves in front of the sunflowers each taking turns to pretend to smell a flower. I glance at the boy and am satisfied by his expression that he too is perplexed by this activity. I stop centre of the path and inhale deeply, making a very audible grunt as I do so, startling him.

"What are you doing?" he whispers.

"Close your eyes," I say. "And smell, like properly smell not like those people back there pretending. Really *smell*."

He closes his eyes, slightly reluctantly at first, breathes in, and also makes a snorting sound. Then he breaks out into a cough, heaving over and clearing his throat.

"Do you know what that is?" I ask him, when he's finished and straightened up, his eyes still watery and pink.

"No," he splutters. "I don't think so." He takes another sniff, gentler this time thankfully. "Smells like...toothpaste."

"It's mint." I nod. "You can do a lot with mint — teas, foods, drinks, soaps, scrubs."

"Do we have mint?"

"Yes in the back, but mint is not for the novice gardener. In one blink of the eye mint can grow and spread and take over the entire garden. It's hard to contain, impossible to tame, as it's *wild*."

Mother often referred to herself as mint.

"Glad we have you then." He grins.

"And over there," I continue, "is white milk parsley. There's Turkish sage, chives, lemon thyme, and see all those tall purple feathery spikes? Lavender."

“Smells like my mother’s perfume,” he says, walking to the edge of the lavender patch. I edge closer to him and together we gaze out at the sweeping drifts of purple and green that flow from where we stand out to the pond where the creamy white water lilies float and dance.

“Did you know lavender is actually part of the mint family, so another one to watch if you’re planting it in small gardens. And lavender first blooms in my favourite month.”

He smiles. “June.”

“June,” I nod.

“You know a lot about plants and flowers. Did you have a big garden at home?”

“We had a small garden but we got some sunlight in the back in the summer months and I was able to grow clematis, salvias, angelonias, and my month’s flower — lavender. The community garden where I volunteered was much bigger and my patch was in direct sunlight and I was able to grow so much more, including herbs for Mother’s teas, like chamomile and lemon balm. Some people use lemon balm for their Sunday roast as it goes very well with chicken.”

“I wouldn’t know. We don’t eat chicken.”

“Why not?”

“We’re vegetarians.”

“What?” I scrunch up my nose at the word — a *vegetarian*? “Do you just eat vegetables?”

“Legumes too.”

“What about that time I watched you all eat lasagne at the kitchen table?”

“Fake beef,” he shrugs.

Fake beef?

Perhaps I’ll need to rethink this living arrangement. Do I really want to live with people that eat fake meat, buy factory-made birthday cakes, pot perennials and collect porcelain houses?

I shake my head in disbelief and go back to smelling the clusters of herbs, all twisting and coiling around one another, creating a mixed fragrance of citrus, wood and earth.

“Will you teach me about plants and flowers? Show me how to garden?” he asks quietly.

“I prefer to garden alone.”

“Oh.” His shoulders sink and his walking slows. “It’s just, I don’t really have much else to do this summer. I...I don’t really have many friends.”

“You don’t need friends,” I say. “I didn’t have any and look how I turned out.”

He nods slowly and walks on.

A twinge of something unfamiliar begins curling inside me, growing rapidly like the wild mint beside us. “Ok, fine. I can show you some beginner gardening skills,” I sigh. I suppose some company in the garden won’t be so bad. I’ll just pretend I’m back at the community patch in Glasgow.

He grins. “Really?”

“Yes, but don’t touch anything in the garden without asking me first, and never ever touch the yellow gardening gloves or my books.”

“Deal.”

We continue down the path, towards the other flowerbeds that boast blankets of bluebells and bellflowers, smelling, seeing, touching, even though there are large signs asking visitors not to touch. I am no *visitor*. I am a gardener, and gardeners experience the garden with their hands so the sign does not apply to me. And I suppose now that the child is my new assistant, the sign does not technically apply to him either.

As we walk, I point out mottled purple crocuses, periwinkle hydrangeas and heleniums the colour of a deep coral sunset on a perfectly clear summer sky, and the boy listens, nodding, taking in the information well. He is already a good student. I identify gerbera daisies with heads bigger than my palm, white-tipped yarrows that look like snowy mountain peaks, and flame-orange hibiscuses that are swarmed with butterflies.

And lent lilies. Rows and rows of perfectly neat daffodil bulbs, all awaiting their next Easter bloom. They're long gone by now, summer is never their friend, but by next year's Ash Wednesday their yellow trumpet heads will be peeking out, ready to take the spotlight in Kew's spring flowerbeds.

I stand at the edge of the patch, which has been taped off due to being nothing more than earth and stem, not particularly pretty to the eye, and feel a churning deep inside. Soon the churning turns into a bitter fiery twist that makes my belly hurt.

Daffodils in the gardens

Snowdrops on the riverbank

"Calm down, June. You're going to hurt someone."

"What is it?" he asks.

I turn and find the child still beside me, his palm out facing the sky like he's trying to take my hand but thankfully respecting the unspoken rule that I do not like to be touched. "Nothing. My tummy feels funny. I think I'm just hungry," I say, turning away from the daffodils.

"Do you want to get lunch?" he asks. "There's a cafe here?"

"I only eat cheese sandwiches," I say quietly, looking back over my shoulder at the dark empty field of bulbs and roots.

"Really? Me too."

I look at him and he smiles. I hope he knows I mean real cheese and not the fake stuff his mother buys. I nod and he guides me onto the main path, back under the stone archway and towards the entrance where we'd come in. I follow slowly behind him, my hands dig deep into my pockets, and I feel Mother's yellow gardening gloves. The pain lessens in my chest.

When I glance up to find the boy, I see a small kiosk with brightly coloured maps. I smile and grab a handful.

*June
and the
Little White Lie*



Gardener's Almanac:
10% chance of rain
High of 22°
Humidity 85%

The maps create a nice collage on the south wall of the shed, with brightly coloured shapes, dotted lines and arrows pointing out little grass patches. Kew Gardens in person is much nicer than the computer drawings depicted on this information leaflet, but for purposes of wall decor it'll do.

Mr and Mrs Wilson are long gone, off to work with their grey suits, black leather satchels and flasks of filtered coffee drinks. The boy has cleverly convinced them he's signed up for a summer programme at the local library and that he'll be back at lunchtime to let the animal out for a widdle. Truth is he has been in here with me since they left and the animal has done many many widdles.

I dip my paintbrush back into the plastic art tray that I got from *Aldi's*, swirling it into the mound of white, which has the same consistency as the double cream that curdled when Mother forgot to unpack a grocery bag. She had tried to persuade me it would still be ok but the overpowering sour vinegar smell that filled my nostrils told me otherwise.

With much reluctance, I have finally caved and tasked the child with the painting of the grass, which will run along the north facing wall of the shed, providing a nice foundation to build my flowerbeds of painted daisies and tulips amongst moss green vines that will reach up high to the ceiling. Apparently the boy thinks that grass grows in perfect singular straight lines like the tally sheet from his maths lesson. There is no movement, no breeze, no freedom in the growth.

I sigh and wince as he paints another ghastly straight line onto what was once going to be my best wall design yet. Now that goal's unattainable.

"I like your daffodils," he says, edging closer to me until his knee almost touches mine.

I inch away, leaving a gap. "They're tulips."

“Oh. I like your tulips then.”

“Thank you.” He continues to look at me. Perhaps he is waiting for me to return the compliment on his grass. I do not, as there is no praise to be given.

“Should I draw a tree?” he asks eagerly, sloshing his brush into the brown clumsily.

“No, that’s probably not a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because...well, it might look a little like that grass.”

His shoulders sag and he drops the paintbrush onto the plastic tray.

“What?”

“You could perhaps, *pretend* my grass is good?”

“Pretend? You mean, lie?”

“It’s not a lie as such.”

“I’d be saying something that wasn’t true. That’s a lie and that would be wrong.”

“Sometimes lies, or little white lies as my mother calls them, are ok to tell if it makes the other person happy.”

I stop painting the stem on my tulip and turn to look at him. He isn’t kidding. He looks very serious about this little white lie fact. At a work review meeting once my supervisor had lightly discussed this idea of a white lie to customers to encourage a sale; however, I had disagreed at the time, arguing that if I were a customer I would want to know if an item of clothing I was trying on looked horribly unflattering on my body type or if a food item in the *Dine In for Two* deal was grossly overpriced. It was never discussed again. I was also moved to the stockroom after that.

“So, if I was to say ‘Your drawing of grass is very good,’ then that would make you happy?”

“Yes.”

“Even if that meant you went on to always draw grass like that and that there was no improvement in your art skills because you had been told no improvement was needed?”

“Yes.”

“That’s a little white lie?”

“Yes.”

“Ok.” It really doesn’t make any sense to me but oddly I am willing to try. For the child.

“I’ve been thinking, it’s July now, how long do you intend on living here?”

“In London?”

“In our garden shed.”

I shrug. I have become strangely comfortable here in this shed. It is now a familiar space, I know where everything is and with these wall drawings it is looking more and more like my bedroom at home. Mother agrees. Perhaps we could live here in this garden shed forever? Ideally we’d have a room inside too, for the days of rain and snow, but this could be our home. And this time there would be no-one to take it from us.

“I heard Dad on the phone just after you moved in.” The boy shifts uncomfortably, again flopping a bit too close to my side of the floor space. “He was talking to someone, a hotel I think. He was asking when you’d ‘checked out.’ He’s maybe wondering where you are. Why don’t you call him or write him a letter?”

A letter.

I haven’t written many letters in my lifetime. When I was six, my social worker made me write a pretend one to Mother when she was away “finding herself.” I was asked to write as if she would receive it, which I’d later learn was impossible as we didn’t know where she lived. Mother taught me all about the importance of correct addresses, postcodes and stamps when she returned and got a job at the post office. But I complied nonetheless, being perhaps slightly intrigued by such an exercise. With Aileen’s help, I titled it ‘Dear Mother’ and went on to introduce myself and tell her my age, height, weight, and current interests which included sitting on the grass in the garden, making daisy necklaces for the other kids in the home, folding socks and looking at analogue

clocks. There isn't much to do in foster care other than that. There are never enough toys and when you do get your hands on one, it will be swiftly taken by a child of larger size. I did like one toy where I wound up the handle and out popped a yellow bear. I wound and wound and wound, even though I knew every time the result would be the same. But one day I wound and wound, and out popped a thin metal coil. One of the bigger kids had pulled out the bear. I was relocated to another foster home after that. I was never sure if it was the finger biting or the eye gouging that got me removed so promptly.

“What kind of a letter?” I eventually ask, as he leans across me for more green paint.

“Oh you know — ‘Hi it’s June, how are you? How is your summer going?’ — something like that?”

“I know how his summer is going. I watch you all through the windows every day.”

“Maybe don’t mention that.”

“What else could I mention then?”

“Well, you could tell him a bit more about yourself? Tell him you like to paint and you like to garden. And maybe you can ask to meet?”

“Why?”

“Because it’s going to start getting a bit chilly in the evenings soon and there are no heaters in the shed.”

“I’ve only ever written three letters before.”

“Really? We have to write them all the time. We were assigned pen pals in Year Five but mine doesn’t reply to me. I still write to him though, on the second of every month. I can help you if you want?”

I watch him carefully draw a straight line down, his hand slightly quivering but the brush firm between his fingers. The oak wall is now looking more green and alive with the outdoors, with flowers and vines and nature. With each paint stroke my insides calm and my breathing slows.

“Ok,” I finally say.

“Great. I’ll finish this off and get a notepad from inside.”

“We can do it after lunch. It’s already 11:45AM.”

“Ok. Will you make my cheese sandwich again today? I like how you make it. It’s better than Mum’s.”

“It’s because I use real butter.”

“We don’t have real butter in the fridge, do we?”

“Yes we do. I hide it behind the kale and probiotic yogurts because no one ever seems to eat those.”

“Oh,” he shrugs, again leaning into me. “I like your vines.”

I glance at him, wondering if he is applying this notion of a little white lie. His face gives nothing away so I continue adding tiny pink flowers on the growing vines, before I follow him into the kitchen to make lunch together.

*June
and the
Trip to Canary Wharf*



Gardener's Almanac:
80% chance of rain
High of 22°
Low of 13°

“Tomorrow we’ll begin our lessons in the garden,” I announce on the train to Waterloo the following day.

The child has insisted on another day trip and since the outing to Kew Gardens had been so successful I have agreed, on the condition that we bring our own packed lunches just in case the sandwich selection in London is as sparse as their restaurant choices. But he hasn’t told me where we are going, not yet anyway. I am becoming quite a seasoned traveller here in London.

“Can I plant something, like a tree?” he asks eagerly.

“Of course not. Our first lesson will be about soil.”

“Dirt?”

“No. *Soil.*”

I am beginning to regret my decision already.

“Oh, ok,” he mutters, gazing out of the dark tube window. The concrete wall whizzes by as snippets of old posterboards come into focus advertising a theatre show or a sports drink that promises to give you enough energy to chase a train. We reach our stop and I wait until most of the passengers have filed out, giving myself some space, then hurry out before the next crowd can rush in. I don’t like people touching me and most of the time people understand that, but in London everyone wants to stand extremely close to me.

“I wrote our biological father a letter like you suggested,” I say, as we take the moving stairs up to surface level.

“What did you say?”

“I asked him to meet me in Hyde Park on Friday.”

“That’s good,” he nods. “Hope the weather is better than this.”

Outside the rain hammers down, splashing heavy drops onto the puddles around our feet. Commuters rush by with large black umbrellas, occasionally bumping into each other. I don’t need an umbrella, my raincoat is ‘proofed’ in every sense of the word — rainproof, showerproof, waterproof. Spending so much time outdoors I have to invest in decent outerwear. Some of the ‘coats’ I see here are just flimsy fabric with the odd bit of fur on the collar. No wonder they need umbrellas. Those are certainly not proofed. One teenager scampers down the street with a floral umbrella that juts up and out awkwardly, the metal spines broken. The rain drips down onto her shoulders and hair. The child huddles under one too, likely given to him by his mother. She also hasn’t equipped him with adequate outerwear or footwear. He has on a flimsy anorak that already looks like it is leaking and very polished black loafers, likely his school shoes, whereas I have on my usual wellies, fit for a day like this. In fact, I seem to be the only person in London fit for a day like this.

We stop outside a large grey stone building facing the river that runs under the bridge we’ve just walked over. Steps lead up to a bright blue canopy that has the words **SEALIFE** written on it.

‘Sea life’ = Looking at the lives of animals that live in the sea, that survive in water.

“No,” I murmur, shaking my head. Large raindrops plop onto my hood.

“No? I thought you’d love the aquarium since you like nature so much. There’s sharks, penguins, jellyfish, a rainforest exhibition and a—”

“No,” I simply say again. I turn and start walking back to the bridge.

The boy hurries after me, his stupid green umbrella bobbing around in the air hitting off people’s shoulders. “Why not?”

“Because nature is not found in an aquarium, there’s nothing natural about large tanks of heated water filled with mammals not native to the UK. And secondly, well... I don’t like sharks or penguins or jellyfish or rainforest exhibitions.”

He lets his umbrella drop down by his side, the rain quickly dampening his hair. I watch it trickle down his cheeks and into his coat collar. I lift it back up over him. I don't want him sneezing around the garden if he catches a cold. Vegetarians don't tend to have strong immune systems.

"Sorry," he says quietly, looking down at his shoes. "I thought you would like aquariums. I thought maybe you hadn't been to one before, being from Scotland and all that. Have you been to one before?"

"No. I've never really liked...water."

"But you don't mind the rain?"

"That's different. I don't like large amounts of water like swimming pools, oceans, aquariums and..." I swallow hard. "And rivers."

"Sorry," he says again. He bites his lip and gazes up at me, his eyes wide. "Maybe we could go in for a few minutes? I already bought the tickets and they're non-refundable."

I look back at the grey stone building filled with water, facing a river, also filled with water, whilst the rain lashes down on us. Today there seems to be no escaping the water. Perhaps I could go in, just so the child doesn't start crying. Children's cries can be piercing, and persistent. "Ok, just for a few minutes. But mostly because I have to use their facilities. The morning tea is going right through me."

He smiles and tugs on my arm, annoyingly, leading us back over the bridge, down the steps and underneath the blue canopy. We position ourselves in a queue and wait to scan our tickets. My palms get clammy as we edge closer to the entrance. I try not to imagine the swirling, churning waters beyond the doors. Like at Kew Gardens, a man asks to see inside my pockets and bag but this time I am better prepared and far more knowledgeable than the last time. I allow him to finger our tightly-sealed packed lunches, my yellow gardening gloves and some small banknotes which I have secured in individual ziplock baggies for this exact situation. He can touch away.

After the ‘security check’ and sandwich-handling, I excuse myself and find the ladies’ facilities which are filled with children on their summer holidays and exhausted grouchy mothers. I wash my hands at the sink, staring at the water as it sloshes around the basin and flows over my skin. The hand dryer startles me and I quickly turn off the tap and sweep my hands across my coat. When I come back out, the boy is waiting for me with another brightly coloured map in his hands. This time I know to look for an information kiosk or leaflet stand. I find one by the toilet entrances and take six maps.

“Wallpaper for the shed?” he asks me, nodding to the maps I am stuffing into my bag beside the gardening gloves.

“Perhaps.”

“June?”

We both snap our heads up. Standing beside the information kiosk is Aldi Boy/Walking Cyclist. He has on a blue **SeaLife** t-shirt with a name badge, grey khakis and a brown belt, but holds no punctured bicycle in his hands.

“What happened to your bike?” I ask him, as a group of kids hurries past me for the toilet.

He laughs and runs a hand through his dark hair. “It’s in my bedroom.”

“Why is it in your bedroom?”

“Because I share a flat and I don’t have a garage or a shed. Where’s your rug and bedside table?”

“It’s in the shed. We have one of those,” I answer.

“No good were they?”

“No, they were very suitable. They were always intended for the shed.”

The Wilson child steps in front of me and holds his hand out like strangers do on TV when meeting for the first time. “Hello, I’m Henry. June’s brother.”

“*Half*-brother,” I interrupt.

“I’m Will,” Aldi Boy says, taking the child’s hand. They shake for a very long time then I clear my throat and they drop hands.

“What are you doing here?” he asks me.

“We’ve got tickets for the aquarium,” the child answers.

“Ah, of course. For a second I thought you were here to see me,” he grins.

“No, of course not. I’d actually forgotten you work here,” I say, shaking my head.

“Well, you’re here now. I can give you a quick tour if you want?”

The child is excited and jumps up and down. “Really?”

“Yeah, I’ve got to feed the stingrays at eleven o’clock.”

“Cool! Can we watch?” squeals the child.

“We’re not staying long,” I remind him.

Aldi Boy smiles and beckons for us to follow him. Reluctantly we do. I try to keep my eyes on the floor, occasionally glancing up, as he leads us through a tunnel that has the words ‘*Sea Life, Sea Happy*,’ written above the stone archway. We encounter a large orange vessel entrance with a **DIVE** sign beside it. I freeze. I am not prepared nor willing to *dive* into anything today, most certainly not a large body of water.

“Don’t worry, no diving is involved,” Aldi Boy laughs, flicking the sign with his hand.

The ground is wet and solid beneath my boots, like a cave. Past the incorrectly posted sign is the penguin exhibition. The child grunts excitedly as small black and white penguins waddle around and jump head first into pools of ice cold water. Perhaps the **DIVE** sign would be better relocated here.

Penguins are odd animals. They have wings but cannot fly. A mistake of nature perhaps, like flowering dogwood that grows on the edges of woodland areas.

“Would you like to feed some stingrays now?” Aldi Boy asks us.

I shake my head no whilst the child animatedly screams, “Yes!”

We follow Aldi Boy around the penguin area and down past the octopus exhibition. The stingray pool is up a set of stairs and underneath a ceiling of wooden panels and lights. The pool is filled with large flat fish with pincer tails. They soar and glide through the water, cutting through it like gardening shears.

I suddenly feel cold, my belly churns deeply.

Aldi Boy produces a large metal pail from under the stingray pool and the child and I peer inside at the squirming clams and wriggling worms.

“Yuck! Is that what they eat?” the child grimaces. I wonder whether to remind him that at home he eats dehydrated chickpeas and something called kefir.

“This is like fine dining to them,” smirks Aldi Boy, looking at me. He picks up a worm with metal tongs and holds it over the pool. It squirms against the metal and frantically darts for an escape. Down below the frenzied stingrays gather, crashing into each other—

A splash of cold water hits my face and I startle, stumbling back from the edge. My hands shake wildly and my shoulders tremble. The water is cold, wet and slightly salty, not warm like a shower or familiar like raindrops. No, this is like a swimming pool or a large open ocean, or...or a river. A rushing, thrashing, crazed river. A river that pulls you under, so deep that the light from the sky above gets dimmer. It pulls you down until you're in a place where the sun can't reach, where no one can reach. Until there is nothing but darkness and decay.

I can hear the child and Aldi Boy calling after me as I run, my boots slapping on the concrete floor clumsily. I am not used to running in wellies or indoors on a hard floor like this.

“June!”

I don't turn back. I run until the crowds gather and stream into a tunnel that I hope is an exit. It isn't. It's the shark tunnel.

Above me, sharks zip past the glass, visitors squealing in excitement, bumping into me, frantically trying to get their photos taken. I don't see the sharks and the stingrays and all the little fish. All I see is water — and Mother.

Swirling, murky, dark water sloshing around, long reeds caught in the pull, floating, knotting...

“Calm down, June.”

It's everywhere. Underneath my feet, beside me, above me. It suffocates me, pulls me down under—

“June?”

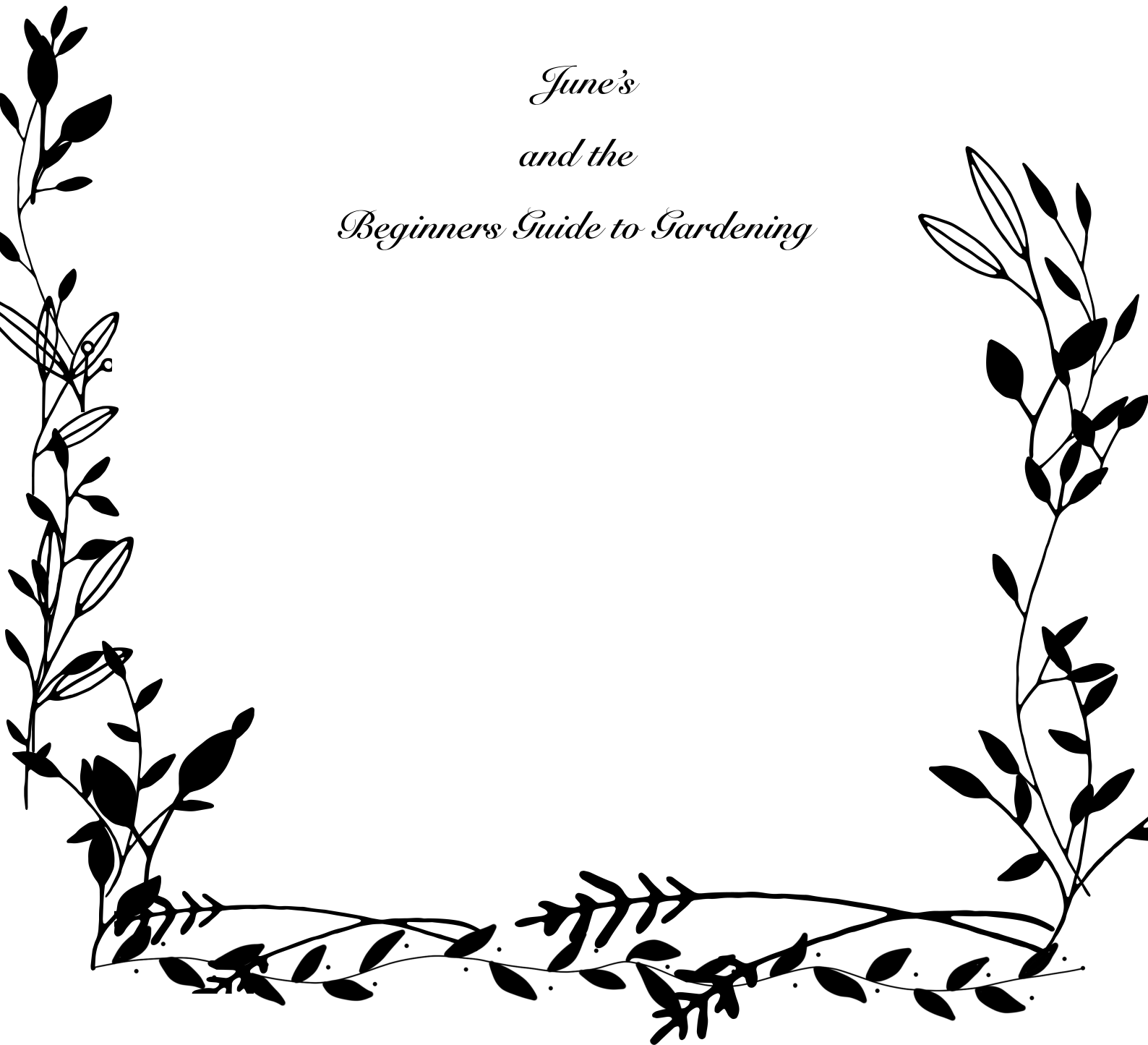
I feel the child's hand on my arm, squeezing tightly. I blink hard and look around. I no longer see water. I only see the faces of families, scared and confused, staring at me. The toes on my right foot are sore, already bruising beneath my socks, and I know then I must have been kicking at the wall.

The child's face is ashen, his eyebrows going in a down direction along with the corners of his mouth, which had been upwards into a smile at the stingray pool. If I could draw on the walls here, I would circle the sad face. I take a deep breath and simply nod. Then I zip up my coat, pull my hood up and follow him as he leads us back out the tunnel and to the exit. I see Aldi Boy at the reception looking around for us, the metal tongs still in his hand. He doesn't see us leave, and we don't say goodbye.

When we get outside, the air hits me and I take a deep inhale. Above the sky has calmed and the clouds have cleared. The boy marches on in front, his head down. I remove the aquarium maps from my bag and toss them into a bin. I don't want them in the shed, or anywhere near Mother.

The child doesn't look back, so I jog to catch up to him.

*June's
and the
Beginners Guide to Gardening*



Gardener's Almanac:
Sunny, Patches of Rain
High of 25°
Low of 15°
Sunset: 21:17PM

“Here,” I say, pouring soil into the boy’s open palm, the grit crumbling onto his skin. “Feel that? That’s dried out, dehydrated, not tended to during a particularly hot summer.”

“This is ours?”

“No, that’s from your neighbour’s garden. Perhaps if he spent less time drinking beer and watching the tennis, the soil in his flowerbeds wouldn’t look so dry and cracked, like a broken plate that’s been glued back together again.”

“Is it dead, forever? Or can it be saved?” he asks, as we stand in the middle of the garden, surrounded by small pails of soil, metal gardening tools, and my encyclopaedia open at his feet to the first chapter.

I sweep the bad soil from his palm and back into the pail. “It takes some work, but with a lot of watering and mixing in some other organic materials like compost, animal manure, and peat moss the soil’s moisture retention will eventually improve. Organic matter like that also attracts worms and they help water flow through the soil.”

“Worms? Like the ones we fed to the stingrays yesterday?”

I nod, the sloshing and swirling and dark murkiness of the water inside the aquarium coming back to me, flooding my brain and my insides.

He wipes his palm on his shorts. A few remaining soil crumbs fall onto the grass between us.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course. I hope you ask lots of questions. I don’t usually like questions, but that’s the only way you’re going to learn about all this and in such a short time.”

“Actually, it’s about yesterday.”

“Oh.”

“What happened?”

“We saw some stingrays, jellyfish and sharks, like you wanted.”

“No, I mean, you were yelling and kicking the walls in the shark tunnel. You were...angry.”

I sit cross-legged on the grass, the warm blades scratching at my bare shins. We both wear khaki green shorts, too alike. “I don’t know. It used to happen all the time, then I took some pills and it stopped. And now it’s happening again.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s like I black out. And when I come to, I’m always sore, sometimes bleeding, and I never remember what’s happened.”

“Did I make you angry yesterday?” he asks quietly, playing with a blade of grass with his fingers. “Was it my fault?”

“No.” I lie back, my spine pressing into the grassy floor. The sky above is a pale creamy blue, the colour of forget-me-nots, filled with large chalky clouds. “Mother always said it was her fault, because she left me when I was a baby and didn’t come back for years.” I remember those early years, the days when we were learning how to live together under one roof. Mother used to say the house was too big for us, but for me, as a child, it always felt too small. There was never a room I could be in where I didn’t hear her voice. Except the garden outside. I didn’t hear her there. Out there, the smells overpowered the sounds. Out there, I let the stems and petals and grass graze against me. And it didn’t bother me. And eventually, when Mother became familiar to me, I didn’t mind when she came into the garden to join me. Because her voice became birdsong, and I grew to listen to it, to need it.

I don’t hear her voice anymore. Not now. I don’t hear her words, “My sweet June.”

“Where’s your mother now?”

“Gone,” I whisper, the clouds drifting across my vision.

“Is she coming back?”

“No.”

I never said things like “I love you” to Mother, because those words sounded strange, foreign like another language. Aileen always said I had a problem with *attachment*, which is silly, because I am attached to many things. My books, my welly boots, Mother’s yellow gardening gloves, Mrs Wilson’s coffee mug which I haven’t returned yet. At home I was attached to the television remote, Mother’s suede heels, and a blue ceramic teacup. At the foster home, I had an attachment to the sage green blanket that Mother swaddled me in when she’d dropped me off at the hospital because she thought that’s where unwanted babies go.

I was also attached to Mother. I wonder if she knew that. Perhaps if I had said that to her then things would have been different.

The child lies down beside me, our heads slightly touching. I let it happen.

“I get upset sometimes too,” he says. “And I cry too. People make fun of me at school. I don’t really have any friends.”

“Me neither.” I shrug. “You get used to it. Sometimes, you only need one person.”

He rolls on his side, propping up onto an elbow. “Do you want to be each other’s person?”

“Can’t,” I say. “I’m already Mother’s person, and she’s mine.”

“Oh.”

My rainbow watch beeps once.

“It’s afternoon tea.”

He clambers up. “I’ll put the kettle on then and see if Dad has any shortbread left in his drawer.” He stands at the patio doors, his fingers on the handle. Inside, the dog foams and froths at the excitement of having someone come in. “June?”

“Yeah?”

“Even though I’m not your person, can you still be mine?”

I prop up on my elbows to get a better look at him. His eyes are wide and waiting, his eyebrows slightly lifted. “Sure,” I say, “why not.”

He grins and slides open the door, the dog bounding out onto the warm grass.

*June
and
the Hyde Park Meeting*



Gardener's Almanac:
Sunny
High of 27°
Low of 16°
Humidity: High

The park is crowded, brimming with bums on blankets, picnics on pashminas, and sunbathers under sun hats that resemble those edible flying saucers that are filled with sherbet that tumbles out your mouth when you bite into it. I've never had one.

The sounds of birds in the sky and the breeze in the branches are masked almost completely by the dregs of London's lunchtime traffic and the blasting of wireless speakers that hang on the edges of blankets. Lazy tourists and workers on their break sun themselves an unnatural and unappealing shade of rusty orange.

It was me that had suggested Mr Wilson and I meet at Hyde Park, but with all the bodies crammed into one green space I am now worried he'll have difficulty finding me. After looking at the child's London book, I immediately chose the Peter Pan statue as a meeting point, given its connection to both of us. I carry the book with me, placing it down on the bench beside me like I saw once in a movie *Mother was watching*. In the movie, two strangers were meeting for the first time and the woman used a book to identify herself. It worked in the movie so hopefully it works now. Although I suppose Mr Wilson knows what I look like, so maybe I didn't need to walk the thirty-seven minutes with a hardback novel *and Mother* in my bag.

My sundress itches against my thigh and I squirm slightly. I don't know if Mr Wilson is coming today as I didn't have a way for him to respond to the letter. I don't have a return address to put down other than 'Your Garden Shed,' and the child told me not to write that. So I gave him a day, a time and a location near his office and asked if he could meet me. I hadn't considered until now that he might be unavailable today due to (1) work demands or (2) a lack of interest in meeting at all.

So far, I have been waiting ten minutes. Of course I came early to get acclimatised to my new surroundings before he arrives. The child suggested that too, although he didn't use the word 'acclimatised'. That's my word.

The sun warms my skin underneath the green sundress that's draped down to my ankles. I've paired it with my usual wellies and a thin raincoat to shield my shoulders from the rays. I am slightly too warm, but most days I prefer to be too warm rather than too cold.

I've arranged the meeting for immediately after lunch so that it doesn't interfere with my meal and tea break timings. I was still able to have my cheese sandwich at noon, outside in the garden, on the grass with the boy. It is now becoming our thing, except for the weekends when he is expected to have his lunch inside at the kitchen table with his sullen-faced mother hovering around. He doesn't get real butter on those days. He gets an organic, vegan, cholesterol-reducing margarine. And he doesn't get real cheese. He gets something labelled 'cheese-flavoured soy protein'. When I make our sandwiches I put a generous smear of slightly salted butter on the bread and an extra cheese slice in between because that's how Mother did it for me. She'd say, "Why eat cheese if you can't *taste* the cheese."

I pick away at a stray piece of skin beside my thumbnail. When it starts bleeding I put it in my mouth and suck hard.

"June?"

I look up and see Mr Wilson approaching, briefcase in his hand. He has on a heavy suit. It appears that neither of us are dressed appropriately for the weather today. I stand and extend a hand, like the child did when meeting Aldi Boy at the aquarium. Mr Wilson accepts, laughing nervously. I shake firmly, startling him, then sit back down again, resting my book in my lap.

After a moment, he sits beside me, facing out towards the bronze statue of a little boy who has no parents and lives in the wild amongst the flowers and the fairies.

"How are you?" he eventually asks, his eyes still fixed on the statue.

“Well, thank you. And you?”

“I’m ok. I mean, I’ve been thinking about you and our first meeting.” He clears his throat.

“I’m sorry if that went differently to how you thought it would go. I was just caught off guard and didn’t know how to respond. It was a shock seeing you like that, in my living room...with my wife.”

“And the police.”

“And yes, the police too.” He clenches his jaw and stares on.

“Crown imperials.”

He snap his head to me. “Sorry?”

“The flowers over there. I couldn’t identify them immediately when I first sat down and now I remember, they’re crown imperials. Their scent keeps rodents away, apparently mimics the smell of fox fur.”

“Oh right, very interesting,” he mutters. “So, you enjoy flowers and plants and all that?”

“Very much so. I spent most days in the garden at home and at a community patch in town. I won an award at the community flower show two years ago for my okra. They’re very difficult to grow. The trick is to harvest three days after the first blooms fade.”

“Right, very interesting,” he mutters again. “And do you have any plans to return home to your garden? I mean...will you be in London for long?”

“As long as my accommodation stays dry. It’s hard to tell whether it’s adequately weatherproof at the moment.”

“You’re not in a hotel anymore?”

“No, I had to find other arrangements. I’m now living at more of a private residence, but the owners are very nice, although I’m not sure about the wife.”

“It’s in a safe area?”

“Yes, it’s in a very good area of London. Very *upscale*.”

“Good, and you’re comfortable there?”

“Quite, actually. I have a nice neighbour, a young boy who’s helped me move in.”

“Oh good.” He clears his throat. “And your mother, where is she?”

I take a sharp inhale, suddenly unable to gather words for a response. So I simply say, “She’s still with me.” I gaze down at my bag by my feet, the tip of the urn slightly poking out, enough to catch a little sunlight. Mother also prefers to be warm. I wonder if the petunias I planted on the morning of her cremation are getting enough sunlight.

Where did I plant them again? I can’t remember.

Mr Wilson turns slowly to look at me, then his eyes flicker down to the book on my lap. He blinks hard, and cocked his head. “I recognise that book.”

“*Peter Pan*. I think it’s yours.”

“Really?”

“I found it in the attic years ago. It has your name scribbled on the inside, although I didn’t know it at the time.” I hold it open. “See.” He stares down at the curled R and sharply crossed T in Robert. “Mother was very angry I found it, but when I got upset she let me keep it.”

“Oh,” he says quietly, his eyes dropping to the ground.

“Do you want it back?” My chest tightens and my breathing becomes staggered. “I suppose it belongs to you, not me, so if I kept it then that would be stealing and stealing is wrong.” My belly flips.

“No, it’s fine, June. You can keep it,” he says, sliding the book back into my hands.

My chest loosens.

He clears his throat and checks his watch. It’s much nicer than mine. Gold, with a shiny face that sparkles in the afternoon sun. “Listen, I should get back to the office. Sorry it’s been so short. I have a meeting with the partners at half two that I wasn’t able to rearrange, but I wanted to see you. Perhaps we can do this again?”

“Ok.”

“How can I reach you?”

“I don’t have a mobile. And my current residence lacks a proper letterbox or mailing system of any kind.”

“Why don’t we just set a date now then?” He reaches inside his briefcase and pulls out a brown leather planner. The pages are bent slightly like on the horticultural books that I read often, and are filled with scribbles in various pen colours outlining what looks like a very busy schedule. No wonder he keeps a secret stash of snacks in his home office drawers. No-one can exist on a busy schedule like that on lentil puffs and chickpeas. “How about next Monday...no, wait, I have that client lunch...hmm, maybe Tuesday after...no, that won’t work.” He takes a deep inhale. “Ok,” he nods. “How about next Friday? We could meet for lunch?”

“I eat my lunch at noon sharp,” I say. I have never organised anything over lunchtime before.

“Right, noon, that’s ok with me.”

“Can we meet at half eleven, to give us adequate time to *peruse* the menu and order?” I smile, happy I can once again find an opportunity to drop the recently acquired ‘peruse’ into a sentence.

“Half eleven, next Friday. Meet at *Zelman’s*? Do you know where that is?”

I shake my head.

“Take the tube to Knightsbridge and it’s on the fifth floor of *Harvey Nichols*.”

“*Harvey Nichols*?”

“It’s a department store, like *Harrods*.”

I furrow my brow, thinking back my shopping experience in *Harrods* with their overpriced wines and imported chocolates. Can *Harvey Nichols* be trusted with my lunch?

“Is that ok?”

“Yes, that’s fine,” I sigh, unable to offer an alternative for a restaurant as I know none.

He nods then slides off the bench, briefcase in hand. “Goodbye then. See you next Friday.”

“See you next Friday,” I repeat.

He begins to walk away then turns back and gestures to the book in my lap. “My father gave that to me on my sixth birthday. I wrote my name inside straightaway. It was my favourite thing. I used to carry it with me all the time as a child. I thought I’d lost it.” He smiles. “I’m glad you have it.”

“I’m not one for simple children’s stories or books about nonsensical worlds and adventures, but I like it a lot. I re-read it almost every year. And I also always carry it with me. I suppose we share that trait.”

Suddenly his smile drops and his face softens. Then he clenches his jaw again and walks away, checking his watch.

June
and
Lesson 2 of the Garden



Gardener's Almanac:
Cloudy, chance of rain
High of 24°
Low of 14°
Sunset: 21:14PM

“It’s called a *dawn redwood*?” the child asks, pointing to the large bristly tree looming over the fence in the back corner. The sunlight pokes through the branches and spills out onto the grass around us, warming the soles of our bare feet.

“It’s fast growing and can reach up to a hundred feet when fully grown so of course it’ll need to be relocated in the next three years.”

“Ripped out?”

“No, just replanted somewhere else, somewhere more suitable, like a larger community space. Not a tiny London back garden.”

“Then why plant it here to begin with?”

“Exactly. Believe me, this isn’t the only confusing aspect of your city,” I say, shaking my head.

“And we have a—?”

“Persian silk.” I point to the fluffy pink blossoms and feathery greens of the tree beside us.

“Mum said it was a cherry blossom tree?”

“Your mother doesn’t know anything,” I answer sharply.

“Did yours?”

Mother knew the basics. How to weed, when to water, but not how to maintain. And when it came to choosing what to grow and what to remove, she often needed my advice. She liked bright colours in the garden, said it made her happier, so often I chose the brightest buds I could find in the local garden centre and tended to them night and day. But by the end, not even the brightest tulip or the most colourful rose bush made a difference.

“She knew a bit,” I say quietly.

“Tell me about these,” he says, pointing to the planter box over on the left.

“These were once your mother’s failed attempt at growing herbs for your meatless dinners.

This one is lemon thyme, this is basil and here is where I removed the mint. You absolutely cannot pot mint. It needs to grow free.”

“Where did you replant it?”

“In the back flowerbeds, but it needs constant attention. I may remove it altogether.”

He bends over and takes a loud inhale that ends with a snort.

“Pinch a stem,” I say. “Rub it between your fingers. You’ll smell it then.”

He plucks a couple of stems and breathes in the lemon thyme, the citrus earthy scent filling the air around us.

“When I arrived they were, of course, overwatered and desperately lacking sun exposure, so I clipped back some of the shade from your neighbour’s birch tree and that redwood, drained most of the water, replacing the over-hydrated soil, and managed to bring them back to life.”

“Mum really isn’t very good in the garden, is she?” he shrugs.

“No.”

Tyres crunch up the gravel driveway, cutting through our peaceful afternoon in the garden. I quickly gather up the tools, stuffing the handheld shovels back into my gardening belt, and duck into the shed. The clock only reads a quarter to five, which confuses me. Mrs Wilson is sometimes five minutes early home from work, but never a full fifteen minutes. I’ll need to readjust my timings so we aren’t cutting it this close again.

I sit cross-legged on the floor, Mother beside me, and open up my RHS Encyclopaedia to page 125, *Annuals and Biennials*. I often re-read important chapters until dinnertime. Dinner has often been prepared ahead of time, staying warm in a glass dish and some tin foil. At 6PM, I remove the foil and eat. I often hear the Wilsons eating inside at this time too. It’s like we’re eating together,

but at different tables. My table has better food. The child has offered me their leftovers before but I refused, fearing an upset stomach would give away my location. I can't imagine soy protein would sit well with me. On some evenings, the child leaves out dessert by the shed door. If it's fruit, I'll bring it in and eat it, but if it's oat milk pudding or gluten-free flapjacks then I usually leave it out for the dog to find. I don't mind some fresh fruit after dinner, but Mother would have been most unhappy with a sliced banana and some watermelon for her dessert.

She had such a sweet tooth.

"Isn't that right, Mother?"

We didn't keep sugar in the house but she would ask me to bring home whatever pudding remained at the end of the day in the *Dine In for Two* deal. This sometimes consisted of fluffy buttery profiteroles topped with chilled chewy dark chocolate, thick dense white chocolate mouse, a crumbly lemon tart, or Mother's favourite — something with hazelnuts.

I raise my head as footsteps come down the garden path from the driveway. These are not the clippy heels of Mrs Wilson but the heavy soles of Mr Wilson's loafers.

"Henry?"

"Oh hi Dad, I thought you were Mum."

"No, I think she's not far behind me though. What are you doing out here?"

"Oh you know, just enjoying the garden. Did you know that's a Persian silk tree in the back, not a cherry blossom?"

"What? No, I didn't. Anyway, what's this charge on my credit card for London's SeaLife?"

"Oh that, I took the train in for the day for a rainforest exhibition."

"Aren't you still going to that summer thing at the library?"

"Uh, yes, but it was a day off."

"Ok. But you know your mother doesn't like you going into the city alone. It can be a very dangerous place—"

“I wasn’t alone though, I went with a friend.”

“A friend? I didn’t know you had any...well I don't mean it like that, I mean you’ve never mentioned him before. What’s his name?”

“Um...Jude.”

“Jude?”

“Yes, Jude. He’s new, just moved here.”

“Oh, how interesting. Well, that’s absolutely fantastic you have a friend. Do you see him often?”

“Almost every day. He lives *very* close by.”

“Great, maybe we can meet him one day, perhaps have his parents round for a drink in the garden?”

“Eh, maybe.”

The crushing of stone fills the air around me as another car pulls into the driveway.

“That’ll be Mum. I better get washed up to help with the dinner,” the child says, before heading inside. He glances back at the shed. A few moments later Mrs Wilson trudges up the side, her high heels pecking at the pebbled path like little birds.

“You’re home early?” she says, her voice raising at the end.

“I still have some work to do tonight, but figured I can do it in the study after Henry’s in bed.”

“You were late last night? I didn’t hear you come in.”

“I had to prepare for today’s presentation. I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“And Friday afternoon?”

“Friday?”

“I called the office and they said you had gone out for a walk to Hyde Park?”

“Oh, yes,” he murmurs.

“Do you often take time off for strolls around Hyde Park?” she asks curtly.

“No, not really...I just, um, needed some air after my meeting.”

“Hmm.”

A heavy silence spreads through the garden and into the shed. I press my ears against the wood to hear more.

“Well,” she continues, “since you’re home early you can help Henry and I in the kitchen, for once.”

“What’s for dinner?”

“Lentils and couscous.”

Lentils and couscous?

“Delicious,” he coughs.

Heels nip at the patio slabs again then march onto the kitchen tiles. Mr Wilson’s heavy soles follow close behind. Then the doors slide closed and all other sounds are muffled, no longer available to me. I sit back down and continue reading.

Around 6:55PM, the child quietly opens the patio doors again. He leaves a small plastic box of mango spears by the shed and hurries back inside. I take the box and sit by the terracotta pots at the edge. The child pushes open the kitchen window and living room door, just in time for a BBC2 special on famous botanical gardens to begin. I eat the deliciously sweet mango while the camera pans across the various flowerbeds and trellises from Kew Gardens. When I’m finished the last bite, I resist knocking on the window and asking the boy to shift the TV slightly to the right for a better viewing angle.

June
and
TV Themes Week



Gardener's Almanac:
Afternoon sun
High of 28°
Low of 17°
Humidity 70%

Today is Saturday, and more importantly, TV Themes Week on *Strictly Come Dancing*. Mother and I used to do fairly well identifying the soundtracks on this particular week, Mother being somewhat of an expert when it came to soaps, British favourites and popular BBC dramas. She didn't sleep well and was up most of the night catching up on any missed programmes from the week, neglected because of erratic work shifts or my preferred TV schedule, which consisted mainly of gardening-related shows and nature specials. For that reason, she recorded hers and would watch them later when I went to bed or if I was tending to the garden outside. Other than that she never once asked to watch anything of her own.

Our storage space always operated at a 98-99% capacity, Mother reluctantly having to juggle firm favourites like *River City* with one-off TV dramas and celebrity biographies. She'd also record the odd show for me to soothe any anxieties or anger occurring from unforeseen technical problems or schedule disruptions, like the time we lost power halfway through *Strictly* during Storm Arwen and she needed to replay a *Countryfile* episode to calm me after it came back on again. Or the time the football ran into extra-time and interfered with *Britain's 2018 Flower Show*.

Yes, I am looking forward to TV Themes Week, very much indeed.

I only have six hours and fifty-two minutes until it starts so I will need to schedule my time wisely. Mr Wilson is spending the day in the office it seems, and Mrs Wilson and the boy left twenty minutes ago. *Zelman's* with my biological father next week will be a change to my usual routine, so I decide to prepare myself with a practise session today. I pack a lunch of cheese sandwiches and berries, fill a water bottle, and head out to find a picnic spot in London.

It's a particularly balmy July day, and I don't fancy being indoors in the shed waiting for the Wilsons to come home. I could sit outside, continue gardening, but I don't know their schedule today and wouldn't want to be caught out.

By the time I get organised, I have approximately forty-eight minutes to find the perfect picnic spot before lunch, so I wander down to Notting Hill Gate tube station to request some help on the matter. The kiosk is very busy, probably with it being a Saturday and a lovely sunny day with temperatures of 28°C, but I wait patiently in line until it's my turn. Holding my new Oyster card in hand, I lean into the vented talking area on the plastic glass so I can see the attendant's name on the badge that's pinned to his chest. I like to address people in the customer service sector by their name, and equally appreciate it when customers do the same to me.

"Hello Geoff. Where might I find a nice spot in a green space to have my lunch?"

He looks hard at me, his eyebrows furrowing down towards the bridge of his nose. "This is an information kiosk for tube-related questions."

"This is a tube-related question, I promise. Your response will provide me with a tube station to travel to. Without an answer I will be unsure of my travel destination."

He sighs and scratches his head. The queue behind me quickly begins building up and blocking the front of the barriers.

"Hyde Park?" he suggests.

"I've recently been there. I'm looking for somewhere new."

He sighs again, this time even louder, then picks up his phone, frantically typing away. "Ok, it says here: Regents Park, Richmond Park, Primrose Hill, Crystal Palace Park, Victoria Park, Holland Park and Battersea Park...Next!"

"Sorry Geoff, I hate to request more of your time, but those are a lot of choices. Which is the closest? I have only thirty-two minutes until lunch begins."

"Regents Park. Take the Circle line three stops to Edgware Road. Next, *please!*"

I thank him, again using his name, then I swipe my Oyster card at the barriers and head for the Circle line. Twenty minutes later I am standing on the edge of Regents Park. It's already filling with blankets, deckchairs, lunch-goers and the occasional cyclist who rests on a spot of grass with their bikes lying idly beside them.

The park is quite large, which is odd as I consider all things in London to be much smaller in size when compared to the rest of the country: sheds, houses, bedrooms, coffee cups, meal portions. Even the cars stuck in traffic jams are smaller here, as are the dogs being walked around me, and the phones people carry, perpetually glued to their hands or ears. Mother and I never carried a mobile phone, not after Mother watched that documentary on Channel 5 about government hacking, but Linda at work does and her phone is almost twice the size of the mobiles down here.

I find a nice spot by the bandstand that overlooks the pond where swans swim and ducks hover near the verge for food. I shimmy out of my raincoat and lay it down on the grass, then sit with my back to the water and my feet bare on the ground. The sun tickles the tops of my shoulders and the crown of my head, warming my hair and skin. The cheese between the buttered bread is slightly moist and not as crumbly as this morning, but it tastes fine and eventually I no longer notice.

This is going ok. Even though I am not in the garden of 16 Lansdowne Road or with the child who I have grown very used to, I am still eating a cheese sandwich on the warm grass. This is a change I am handling relatively well. I glance at the urn that peeks out the top of my bag. Mother agrees.

I slide out my RHS encyclopaedia and review one of the later sections on cacti and succulents. The odd crumb from my sandwich falls from my mouth onto the pages as I skim the names with my fingertips.

Aeonium

*Echeveria**Rhipsalis**Sinocrassula*

Like me, succulents prefer the summer days when sunlight simmers for at least six to eight hours and, also like me, they don't mind a shower of rain but don't fare well in deep water.

A cackle of laughter lifts my attention and I gaze out at the clusters of people forming all over the park, basking in the warm sun. A few have flasks of what I'm sure is not juice or water, while others openly pour from bottles into plastic flutes. Londoners enjoy drinking in parks on hot days it seems. Glaswegians enjoy drinking in parks too, but the ones near our house tend to wait until after dark then throw the cans into gardens.

As my head drops back to my book, I see a flicker of long wavy wild hair, floating in the breeze. Dressed in a thin cardigan like my own, her body slightly hunched with age, she drifts over the grass, her back to me. Everything about her is so familiar — unnervingly familiar.

I stumble up to my feet, remnants of my sandwich dropping to the grass, and edge slowly towards her. She starts walking away, her hair bouncing in the air, her cardigan drifting behind her. The long green floral dress and sandals she wears are also familiar. I follow, my steps slowing as I realise she is walking towards the water. My chest heaves in and out as I find my voice to call out to her.

“Mother!” I yell across the park.

A couple in front of me gaze up briefly but continue their conversation.

“Mother!”

They stare again.

I stumble after her, quickening my pace, my hand slightly out as if to touch her, to grab her.

Soon she stands only metres from me, her sandals at the edge of the pond. Her hair sits long at the waist, the familiar curl at the ends. She wraps a cardigan around her, squeezing it tight across her shoulders. I inch forward, my breath hitching. The grass crunches under my bare feet, my soles squashing the tiny white daisies and yellow buttercups that catch between my toes.

“Mother?” I whisper.

She turns. Her eyes are smaller than Mother’s. Her nose is larger, her mouth is thinner, and her eyebrows are a tad too thick. Her cheekbones are just that bit too high.

“Sorry,” I stutter. “I thought you were someone else.”

She smiles and turns back to the water, waving to a couple of kids who pedal in a small red boat not far from us.

I exhale sharply, feeling a warmth rise from my belly into my throat until bile burns my insides. I swallow hard.

“June?”

I whip around and see Aldi Boy standing behind me.

“I thought it was you,” he grins.

I glance back at the woman who definitely isn’t Mother, and then walk towards him, back in the direction of my half eaten sandwich and open book.

“Where are your shoes?” he asks.

“There,” I say, pointing to my coat.

“Funny bumping into you again.”

“Why is that funny?”

“It’s just a saying, I suppose. Have you been here long?”

“No, not long,” I say, crossing my arms at my chest. I suddenly feel cold, a shiver snaking up my spine. “Why aren’t you at the aquarium? Won’t the jellyfish need you?”

“It’s my day off. And the aquarium isn’t all I do. I go to Uni too.” He smiles. “I’m a mature student.”

“What do you study?”

“Environmental management. Are you studying anything at the moment?”

“No. I haven’t been to a school in a very long time,” I mutter. “There’s a lot you can’t learn in a classroom.”

“There’s a lot you *can* learn in a classroom,” he gently argues, his mouth pulling up into a wide grin.

I don’t bother coming back with a counter argument as my insides still tingle from seeing that woman.

“Are you busy?” he asks.

“Um...I...”

“We could rent pedal boats?”

“Boats? No.”

“Oh.” His face wears an expression not too dissimilar to the child’s when I say no to something. I remember what I’m meant to do — clarify and expand, rather than just say no.

“I said no because I don’t like water. I’m scared of ponds and oceans and things like that,” I add.

“Ah, explains what happened at the aquarium,” he nods. “Was that some kind of a panic attack?”

“Kind of.” I don’t want to say anymore. I have already clarified and expanded. “I should get back.” I start gathering up my belongings, sliding my bare feet into my wellies. I had hoped to stay a little longer, but I don’t want to engage in conversation with Aldi Boy all afternoon, for fear I’ll run out of things to say or that I’ll lose track of time. It’s an important day, with the *Strictly* episode

and all. I'm also worried the Wilsons will return while I'm gone and it'll be challenging to get back to the shed without being seen.

On Saturdays, the child leaves a flower on the garden path to warn me that they are home and possibly wandering around. On those days, I have to sneak into the garden and wait until all sounds have faded from the kitchen before I can try for the shed. On the days I return home first, I'm the one that leaves a flower on the path.

"Well, enjoy your day," I say to Aldi Boy, smiling softly.

"Are you leaving already? Sorry is that because of me?" His smile fades.

"No, I have to get back. I have something important on this evening."

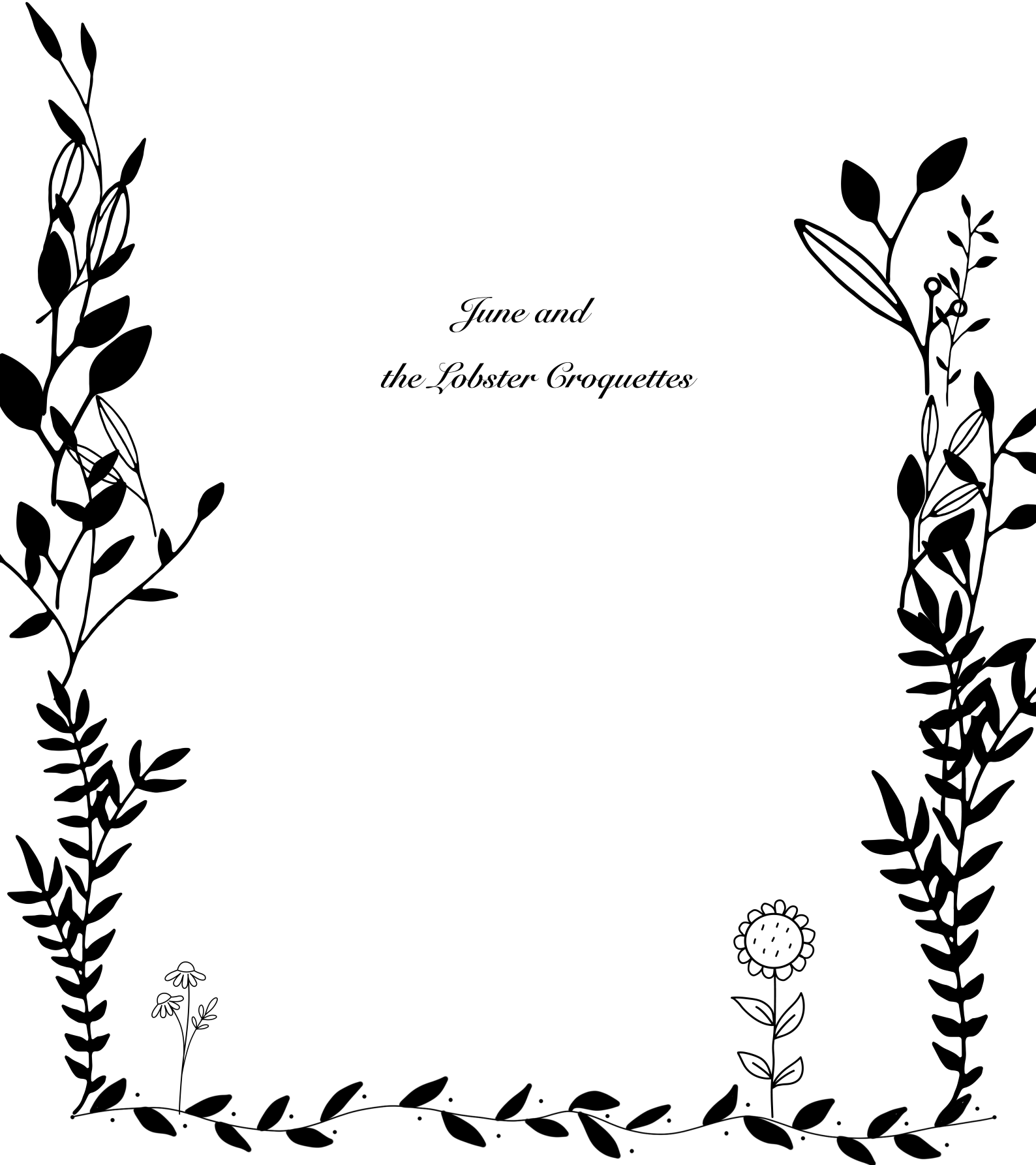
He nods. "Look, I know you don't have a mobile but if you ever want to hang out, maybe get a coffee, I work Thursdays, Fridays and Sundays at the aquarium?"

"I won't be going back to the aquarium."

"No, but I take my lunch break at midday, if you're ever in the area we can do something non-water related."

I doubt I'll ever be in the area of **SeaLife** again but I agree anyway. I say goodbye and watch him leave. Then I stuff the remainder of my sandwich into my pocket next to the yellow gardening gloves. I have never not finished my lunch before. This feels wrong. I glance one more time at the woman who still stands at the water's edge, then walk slowly back to 16 Lansdowne Road, images of wild flowing hair pressing into the edges of my mind. The throbbing of bruised battered knuckles tingling across my skin.

*June and
the Lobster Croquettes*



Gardener's Almanac:
60% chance of rain
High of 22°
Low of 13°

Strictly was particularly good that evening, with four identifiable TV themes, a fabulous Paso Doble to the opening credits of *Eastenders* and an impressive Argentine Tango to Mother's favourite drama, *Line of Duty*. There were a few I didn't recognise, of course, such as the songs to the Waltz and the American Smooth but overall, it wasn't a bad episode for me and for the contestants. The average score was a 7, with an occasional 9. The child seemed to enjoy it too, occasionally turning around to grin when he recognised a theme. I was at one point worried his mother would catch on, but she seemed distracted, her head down in her phone screen, frequently glancing up towards the front door which didn't open until after nine pm. She and Mr Wilson exchanged some words and then he went upstairs and didn't return.

Unfortunately I couldn't hear what was said and, for obvious reasons, wasn't able to ask them to speak louder. But Mr Wilson looked angry and Mrs Wilson looked, well I'm not sure how she looked. Her facial expressions are still indistinguishable to me. She appears to have the same expression for happy, sad, angry and confused. Not like Mother at all. Mother's feelings were always very easy to identify, even when she tried to mask them with another emotion. I was momentarily tricked but I eventually figured it out.

Today they seem to be speaking to one another again, just in time for my lunch meeting with him this afternoon. They exchanged a few words this morning in the garden, and Mrs Wilson asked him to stop by Waitrose on his way home from work to pick up flowers for their neighbour Camille whose husband just left her. I had rolled my eyes when I heard this conversation. Not because Camille's husband left her, anyone could have seen that coming, particularly me who has had nothing else to do this summer but people watch. I have seen Camille's husband get increasingly

thinner over the summer, more tan, and less willing to give her a kiss goodbye in the mornings before work. No, this is not a surprise at all. But I had rolled my eyes upon hearing Mrs Wilson's request because we have a whole garden of flowers here. All she has to do is clip a few stems and arrange them together with some string or ribbon. Actually, all she has to do is ask me to do it as I don't trust her with a pair of clippers in the garden. But I was happy to see Mr and Mrs Wilson were at least back on speaking terms, as I wouldn't want him to be distracted before our big lunch meeting.

I haven't been sleeping well since seeing that woman in the park so dark shadows sit under my eyes, but I dress as best I can for the occasion and head out into the drizzly rain and grey streets. The walk to Knightsbridge takes me a little under an hour but it's a pleasant stroll through Hyde Park and around Kensington Gardens. The streets beyond the tiny yellow shed are busy as always, and I put my headphones on to block out the noise.

Harvey Nichols sits on a street that pulses with shoppers, tourists and children. I can feel the vibrations beneath my wellies. I try to make myself as small as possible to avoid being brushed against, and ascend the five floors up the department store which is not *Harrods* but looks nearly identical with its revolving gold-framed entrance, concierge desk, and large range of departments from cosmetics and clothing to footwear and luxury foods. However, unlike *Harrods*, *Harvey Nichols*' dress code is rather vague simply recommending "smart casual wear," whereas *Harrods* outlined a list of No's including 'No Revealing Clothing' and 'No Google Glasses.'

I take the escalator this time, enjoying the views as it rises up through the racks and over the tops of customers' heads, their arms filled with shopping bags and baskets.

Zelman's is tucked away on the fifth floor, beside a food market and a wine shop, and seems to be one of many choices for eating. I glance down at my green wellies and raincoat, sufficiently confident I am adhering to the 'smart casual wear' guidance, emphasis on the smart for I am the only one in *Zelman's* dressed for the weather outside.

Mr Wilson is at a table near the window, chattering away on his phone as his laptop sits out on the table, clumsily on top of his silverware and napkin. He gestures me over before I can answer the host who wants to know if I have a reservation. He ends the phone conversation quickly and tucks the tiny device away into his suit coat pocket.

“June, glad you found this place ok,” he says, closing the screen on his laptop. He slides it off the table, bringing a fork with it, and puts it back into his briefcase. Then he calls a waiter over for a new fork. “You’re right on time,” he adds, as the waiter returns promptly with a shiny new piece of cutlery.

I blink hard, not sure why me being here on time would even be in question. Of course I am here on time. Punctuality is essential in any situation. Perhaps he is talking to the waiter who hovers near our table.

“Can I start you off with drinks?” he asks, in a sharp accent that I can’t quite place.

Mr Wilson allows me to answer first.

“Water, please. No ice.”

“And I’ll have a glass of the Chianti, please.”

Mother would have been pleased with his selection. I had contemplated bringing her too, but in the end decided to leave her in the shed next to my books and Mrs Wilson’s coffee mug.

Mr Wilson gestures down to the black and white menu that sits in front of me, then slips on some glasses and starts skimming the page with his index finger. At first I am confused, the menu isn’t a menu at all, more of an enforced choice between two dishes: steak and seabass. That is it.

I glance up at Mr Wilson who seems to be nodding as he reads, although I am not sure what he is reading. If he has the same menu as me, there aren’t many words to read.

“The cuts here are delicious,” he murmurs.

Before I can ask him what a ‘cut’ is, the waiter is back with his Chianti and my water.

“Have you had a chance to peruse the menu?” the waiter asks us, pulling out a small white notepad and pen.

Peruse. That’s my word.

“June?” asks Mr Wilson.

“Um...yes.” There isn’t much to *peruse*. “I’ll have...a cheese sandwich, please.” I hand my menu to the waiter and smile to indicate my order is over.

“Sorry? I don’t believe there’s a ‘cheese sandwich’ on the menu?”

“No, there’s not,” I say slowly, “but I’m hoping the chef could make something different, something that’s not on the menu?”

The waiter and Mr Wilson are silent. I have chosen incorrectly. I have not been ‘flexible’ in my thinking. But I always eat a cheese sandwich on white bread at this time. Always. They continue to stare at me, hoping for a further clarification on my order. My belly starts to twist and turn. I wish I had brought Mother with me, she’d know what to do. I glance back at the kitchen, the sounds of chopping and clanging and slicing echoing out.

“Is there something else you may wish to order instead?” the waiter prompts.

I suppose, for one day only, I could be ‘flexible’. I could have an opposites day, where I eat dinner for lunch and lunch for dinner. So perhaps this evening, I have a cheese sandwich on white bread instead. “I’ll have chicken,” I say firmly, holding out my menu. “A Kiev would be ideal but I’ll take any kind of breaded, roasted or pan fried too. No sauces or garnishes. And with some boiled potatoes and vegetables, please?” There. Flexible.

“Sorry,” says the waiter, slowly. “But *Zelman’s Meats* sells only meats.”

“Chicken is a meat,” I say, my eyebrows sinking low to my eyes. Isn’t it?

“Meats in this case, refers to cuts.”

There’s that word again, *cuts*.

“The steaks are out of this world.”

“Yes, they really are,” my biological father agrees.

“We have an excellent striploin from Brazil, or a three-hundred gram rib-eye from New South Wales. Or my favourite, a fillet from Uruguay aged for thirty months.”

“Or fish?” adds Mr Wilson. “The seabass is divine.”

I am beginning to wonder whether Mr Wilson is really working for *Zelman's Meats*.

“I thought you were a vegetarian?” I ask him.

He laughs, and glances awkwardly at the waiter. The smile quickly fades from his face and his cheeks turn a deep red colour much like cockscomb, a flower that gets its name from its rooster-shaped head. “Well...” he stutters. “...I eat meat sometimes. How do you know that?”

The waiter clears his throat, and I realise he is still standing beside me with his pen at the ready.

“So, no chicken?” I clarify.

“No chicken.”

I feel hot and itchy, and begin squirming under my clothes. I don't usually feel the heat like this, but my raincoat and wellies are suddenly stifling. I had thought reversing lunch and dinner would solve everything, but I was wrong. I am still without an option for lunch and time is running out.

“How about you share my fillet and an order of the roasted vegetables, and then perhaps the chef would be so kind to boil up some potatoes for us too?” Mr Wilson suggests. “And then if you don't like the fillet, you'll at least have the potatoes and vegetables?”

“We only have the triple cooked chips,” adds the waiter.

“Then you'll definitely have potatoes in the kitchen. I'm sure if the chef knows how to slice and triple cook potatoes, he'll know how to slice and *boil* them?”

The waiter clenches his jaw but nods anyway.

“No seasoning on the potatoes,” I add. “Just plain boiled.”

“And we’ll have some lobster croquettes for the table,” Mr Wilson pipes in.

I am glad to see the ‘menu’ taken away, never wanting to see another one quite like it again. So tonight for dinner I will have to have a cheese sandwich on white bread and a piece of chicken. That’s the only way to rectify this day.

“Sorry, I didn’t realise you didn’t eat steak or fish,” he says, taking a sip of his glass. He grunts and closes his eyes momentarily, savouring the wine. Just like Mother used to. She really did enjoy a Chianti.

“Mother just made chicken every night — breaded chicken, roast chicken, chicken Kiev. Whatever she could find on sale at *Iceland* or *Asda*. On a rare occasion, she’d come home from work with a fish supper to share but I just ate the chips while she ate the fish.”

“I see,” he says, slowly. “I love fish and chips. There’s a great place round the corner from us, maybe one day I can show you.” He stops, his eyebrows pressing into the bridge of his nose. Then he softens his face, takes a deep breath and gazes up at me. “Did you do well at school?”

“Mother home schooled me from the age of 8. It was better that way.”

“Did you pass your standard grades? Highers?”

“What’s that?”

“They’re exams you should have taken in Scotland, even when home schooled.”

“I don’t remember taking any tests? Except the ones the social worker gave me.”

He leans forward. “What kinds of tests did a social worker give you?”

“She’d give me scenarios and I had to tell her what I’d do, like, if someone approaches you and asks you for money, what should you say? Or, sometimes I had to rate myself.”

Would you congratulate someone for an achievement?	Very Likely	Maybe	Not Likely
Would you hold a door open for the person behind you?	Very Likely	Maybe	Not Likely
Could you recognise when someone needs help?	Very Likely	Maybe	Not Likely

“I see,” he says slowly, taking a bigger sip of his wine.

“Mother told me to always circle Maybe as ‘maybe’s’ couldn’t be adequately judged.”

Our food arrives just as Mr Wilson opens his mouth to speak. It’s placed on the table between us. The steak sizzles and crackles like a fireplace, whilst steam rises and billows from the boiled potatoes and vegetables. Unfortunately, it looks like they have been salted and peppered. I will have to forego the top layer to find the unseasoned ones underneath. As Mr Wilson requests another Chianti, the lobster croquettes come. How fancy they are. Little golden pillows of breadcrumbs and cheese, surrounding a small ramekin of reddish sauce topped with a single stem of Italian basil. Although most people grow basil from the seed, it’s a herb that can actually grow from a clipping. Not just any clipping, but from a non-flowering shoot, snipped just below the leaf.

Mr Wilson spears a croquette and places it on his shiny white plate, then he breaks into it with a swift movement of his fork. I lean in and watch white fluff and gooey cheese ooze out of the breadcrumb shell. He lifts his fork to his mouth, hesitates, then goes back for the sauce. A quick dip into the ceramic ramekin, then it disappears fully into his mouth. I watch as his eyes roll upwards in delight like Mother’s used to when she broke into the box of pralines on her birthday.

“Mmm,” he purrs. “Delicious. Do you want to try one?”

“No, thanks. It’s not chicken.”

“It tastes like chicken,” he shrugs.

“Really?”

I don’t try new foods. Not since I was a child, but this afternoon is out of routine anyway so I decide to impress my biological father and try one, ‘step outside my comfort zone’ like Aileen used to encourage me to do. I thrust my fork into one and bring it up to my lips for a sniff. It smells ok but I decide against the unknown reddish sauce. That is a tad too adventurous and bold, even for today.

My hand quivers slightly as I bite into it. Buttery mashed potato explodes in my mouth, and is quite a pleasant experience. The breaded crumb is garlicky and very akin to a Kiev, and Mr Wilson isn't entirely wrong, the taste of lobster isn't too far off chicken. Thankfully it's chopped very finely because I think if that wasn't the case then the texture of the lobster would be very wrong. All in all, I am surprised. I have tried a new food, and it's very pleasant indeed. In fact, this 'croquette' is absolutely delicious. Once I finish it, I take another and then another until the plate is clean, leaving only the strange sauce and some meagre salad garnish. After Mr Wilson orders a second plate, I realise that I haven't even touched the boiled potatoes and vegetables, instead filling up on this new found favourite — *Lobster Croquettes!* How fancy I have become since moving to London.

As I slide out the plastic container I have brought with me for leftovers, I decide to quiz Mr Wilson as a means of conversation, which has died out while I have been feasting so passionately on the croquettes. "How likely are you to hold a door open for the person behind you?" I ask, spooning in the last of the carrots and parsnips.

"Sorry?" he says, as he polishes off his last piece of steak.

"Very Likely, Maybe or Not Likely?" I clarify.

"Oh I see, like your test." He nods eventually. "Um... Very Likely."

"Would you recognise when the person you are conversing with is bored and a change of topic is needed?"

"Very Likely."

"Would you be able to resolve conflict without losing your temper, defined by yelling or getting angry?"

He takes a deep inhale. "Honestly, it would be a tie between Maybe and Not Likely."

"Would you recognise when someone needs help?"

He lowers his wine glass to the table, and drops his eyes down.

“Would you recognise when someone needs help?” I repeat, not sure why he has suddenly stopped playing the game.

“Maybe we should get the bill, June. I have a lot of work on this afternoon, if you don’t mind.”

“Ok,” I say, snapping the lid onto my tupperware. The leftovers should keep warm for a couple of hours, giving me the perfect meal for later to have with my cheese sandwich and chicken.

After he flags down the waiter and pops his credit card into the little silver card machine, he asks for his coat which baffles me immensely as I don’t know why the waiter would have taken it to begin with. I still have mine on. Where has his gone?

We move back onto the shop floor as he wrestles with his coat and laptop bag.

“How likely are we to do this again?” I ask him when he’s successfully got his coat on.

He smiles, his face softening. “Very Likely.”

*June and the
Planting of the Snowdrops*



<i>Gardener's Almanac:</i> Sunny High of 25° Low of 14° Sunset: 20:58PM

And *Very Likely* he was.

In fact, we meet the following week, this time for a morning stroll around Hyde Park where I get to see more of it and what it has to offer the city of London which includes some lovely flowerbeds filled with rose bushes and herbaceous perennials such as purple torches and brunettes. He brings with him two buttered scones with real butter and two teas in takeaway cups, and we meet at exactly 10:30AM, my usual tea break time.

We don't talk much, which is how I like it. I point out all the blooms in the seasonal beds surrounding the rose arbour while he names all the statues. We walk past the yew hedges and watch tourists throw pennies into a fountain called The Joy of Life. And while I am tempted to fish them out and save them for later, he suggests joining in on this peculiar tradition. Of course I say no. I am not one to literally throw away money. Our meeting only lasts an hour but it is a very pleasant hour indeed, and goes by fast which means I am back to the garden by midday, right on time for lunch which the child has prepared ahead of time, and rather well. He's remembered the extra cheese slice.

The boy has been rather annoyed at me for missing lunch last Friday but today he sits on the grass beside the plant pots, two plates beside him. He rests his chin on his hand and flicks blades of grass as he waits for me. When he hears my boots on the garden path, he immediately looks up.

"You're late," he scowls, making me check my watch.

"No, it's not quite midday yet. One minute left."

"Tea's probably cold by now," he mutters, sliding a mug over to me.

Now that is a problem. A cold sandwich that is already cold to start with is fine, but a hot tea that's now cooled? That's not ok. I kneel down in front of him and reach for the mug that I know is mine because it's Mrs Wilson's. When I bring it up to my lips I am relieved to find it is still warm and manageable for the occasion.

"It's not too bad," I say, sitting cross-legged beside him.

He slides a plate over to me and we eat in silence, bar the squelching of buttered bread in our mouths and the slurping of tea. When we're done, we wipe our mouths with the backs of our hands and slowly finish the tea.

"How was it?" he asks me, finally cutting through the silence.

"Not bad at all. You got the second slice of cheese, but the butter could be a slightly finer smear."

"No, I mean how was the park with Dad?"

"Oh that, yes, it was fine, thank you. Our biological father certainly knows a lot about metal structures and marble statues in Hyde Park."

"Does he? I wouldn't know. He's never taken me to Hyde Park before."

"It's nice. You should go with him."

"I'll ask him but he'll probably say he's too busy. He's always too busy."

He doesn't seem too busy to me, in fact, he's arranged to meet up again next week. But something tells me not to mention that to the child. Instead I sip my tea until the last milky drop hits my belly.

"I have something to tell you," he mutters, looking down at his feet.

"What?"

"That letter you wrote Dad, well, I found it in the bin in the downstairs toilet. It was ripped into lots of pieces, but I recognised your writing."

"Oh."

“Perhaps he didn’t want Mum to see it,” he shrugs, playing with a crust on his plate.

“Perhaps you’re right.”

I shift to stand, to take my plate into the kitchen so we can begin our work in the garden.

The lemon thyme in the back planter is needing tending to today.

“I have something else to tell you,” he says.

I sit back down.

“Mum’s planning to garden this weekend.”

“She doesn’t need to. I’ve done it all for her, she’ll be hard pressed to find anything that needs done, in fact, I’d really rather she not touch the garden,” I snap, the heat stirring in my belly, tossing around the partially digested sandwich.

“She’ll probably need in the shed,” he says, biting his lip.

“What?” I gasp.

“Her gardening tools are in the shed.”

“She doesn’t own proper gardening tools. Everything on the shelf was either brought from home by me or bought here, also by me.”

“I tried to stop her. I asked if she wanted to do something else at the weekend, maybe go to the park or take a day trip to visit my Aunt Anne who’s a lesbian, but she’s got her mind set on planting snowdrops.”

I rise to my feet. “What?” I scream, my voice dancing in the air and hitting off the tree branches. “It’s too early to plant snowdrops! Bulbs will only thrive when planted in the late autumn or early spring. They’ll die in August!”

The child’s eyes open wide, his cheeks flushing.

“She’s not been in the garden all summer, why start now?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugs, rather unhelpfully. “She yanks out weeds when she’s stressed.”

“Why is she stressed? Other than reasons related to being a vegetarian, having very large feet, and being incompetent in both the garden and the kitchen?”

He shrugs again, making me wonder why I am asking him questions at all. Clearly his knowledge is as limited as mine.

“Ok,” I sigh, rubbing my forehead. “So what does this mean for me? If she goes into the shed, she’ll find all my stuff.”

“I think we have to move it.”

“Move it where?”

“We can hide your bedding upstairs in my room, there’s heaps of space under my bed. And everything else we can hide in my cupboard.”

I sink down to the grass, heat filling my cheeks. Air seeps out of my lungs at a pace so fast I can’t inhale. “But—” My jaw hurts and suddenly I feel all tingly all over. “What about me? Where can I hide?”

“I don’t think you can stay here, June. At least not for the weekend.”

And just like that, the garden around me spins, tossing and churning until dirt clumps under my fingernails and the metallic taste of blood lingers on my tongue.

When I finally come to, heaving and panting, the child is inside, staring at me from the glass doors. His eyes are filled with a look I know all too well, having seen it many times on strangers’ faces and once on Mother’s. I don’t ask if he is ok. I just stand up and start pulling out my belongings from the shed, stacking, piling and folding what I can. After a few minutes, the child comes out and helps. He doesn’t say anything for the rest of the afternoon.

*June and the
Bookseller*



Gardener's Almanac:
 Morning showers
 High of 23°
 Sunrise: 5:58AM

The following morning as I lie curled up in what little bedding remains on the shed floor, the child slides a note under the door.

Dear June,

I have talked with Mum and it seems she's planning to start gardening around 8:30 or 9. But the good news is she's made plans to meet a friend all day tomorrow so you should be able to come back tonight, in time for Strictly. I've done some research and the chef is doing the Rumba to a Queen song.

Dad has to work late again, so Mum's letting us order takeaway from a new vegetarian cafe. I'll see if they have potatoes and vegetables for you. I'll just tell Mum I'm really hungry.

I'll leave a flower on the path when it's all clear to come into the garden.

Don't worry, we'll put the shed back how it was as soon as. Signing off for now.

Sincerely,

Henry

I glance at the clock. There is only one hour to remove myself and my belongings from the shed. I sip on the coffee and nibble on the buttered toast which the boy has left for me outside the door, then pack the last of my things into my duffel from home and leave with Mother in my arms. I lock the shed door and return the key to the back pot plant where I'd found it several weeks before.

I can't believe so much time has passed and now August holds me, thrusting me closer to the autumn months. Mr Wilson and I have met again, this time for a coffee near his office in the late afternoon but he's still not mentioned me moving in. The child is beginning to mope around the

garden, knowing his return to school, and to the bullies, is only a couple of weeks away. He has been talking more about it recently, a sad defeated look spreading across his face when he does so. The same look in fact, when the dog finishes his meals and realises there is no more food left.

The animal and I have become somewhat acquaintances over the last fortnight, agreeing to stay out of each other's way, but with me also occasionally allowing him to rest beside me as long as he is not touching me. Yet I still find his little golden hairs on my dresses and shorts and in my hair, and sometimes, inside my bra. It is inexcusable. But, for the child's sake we do allow him to roam the garden while we work. I glance back at my garden one last time before Mrs Wilson destroys it. All those days and weeks of my hard work — gone.

I head back along Lansdowne Road, beneath the copper redwoods and pink cherry blossoms that line the street, and waste two hours in the overpriced coffee shop sipping on tap water and reading my encyclopaedia until I am firmly asked to leave as I am not a paying customer. After that, I wander through the streets and the alleyways and all of the spaces that Londoners call 'green' to distract myself from the fact that someone is currently taking a shovel to my beautiful garden to channel her 'stress.'

Covent Garden is a cluster of tourists, designer shops and restaurants offering 'meal deals' that are nothing like the *M&S* meal deal I am used to. These ones are much more expensive and with fewer choices. I wonder if these dining establishments are also owned by *Zelman's*, given their limited menu options and price range. The thought of *Zelman's* makes my stomach churn and flip as the tiny fluffy buttery gooey oozy croquettes burn in my mind. I wipe my mouth as it waters, and turn up a side street to get away from the crowds gathering outside on the streets drinking takeaway coffees and snapping photos on their very small phones.

The street is narrow, paved with bricks and mortar and lined with cast iron lampposts like something from the past. Shop signs dangle from poles, hanging over my head, each advertising an antique of some kind — maps, lamps, and my favourite, books. Lots and lots of antique books.

These tiny little bookshops with their chipping wooden door frames and flaking red paint sit neatly side by side all the way up the cobbled street. I glance back at the street sign so I know what to look for next time I visit Covent Garden.

Cecil Court

I slowly saunter up the street, being mindful of the dips in between the bricks where the mortar has receded. The first shop hangs faded maps in the glass window showing what Great Britain used to look like back when it was known as Britannia. The next few shops on either side are all selling second-hand weathered-looking books. A familiar cover catches my eye and I wander into one of the shops, cradling Mother and my bag. The bell tinkles overhead as I push open the door. Almost immediately an old man with a grey beard and tiny spectacle glasses pops up from behind a stack of dust jackets and torn paperbacks.

“Hello,” he calls to me, rather enthusiastically like I am the first and only customer to have entered his shop.

“Hello,” I say back, because that is the polite thing to do and I’ve passed enough tests with the social worker to know that.

“Can I help you find anything?”

“Actually, yes. That book in the window, can I have a look at it?”

“Which one?” he asks, shuffling out from the obstacles he’s created in his path.

“The illustrated *Peter Pan*.”

“Ah yes, a lovely children’s classic.”

He squeezes his thin body between a table and a small wooden bookcase, and grabs the book I’ve seen from the street, but instead of handing it to me as I requested, he carries it with him to the till like I am going to purchase it immediately.

“I just want to look at it,” I quickly say. With all the coffee purchases and cheese sandwiches, Mr Wilson’s money is almost coins now.

“Of course.” He slides it over to me, carefully, and watches as I place my hands around the binding and open it. It crackles like a fireplace when I turn the pages which pleases me immensely.

Every page is beautifully written in cursive, and adorned with vines and florals growing up the sides like a wild garden. Pencil drawings of Peter and Wendy fill some of the earlier chapters, while funny images of Hook and Smee and a hungry looking alligator are sketched onto the later chapter pages.

It is just incredible.

My version is fine, but this one is spectacular. Almost as impressive as the lobster croquettes. And that says something.

“Have you read the story?”

“Oh yes,” I smile. “I have my own version, but it’s very old and doesn’t have pictures like this one.”

“Do you have it with you?”

I nod, and slide the duffel off my shoulders. I didn’t dare hide it in the boy’s cupboard for fear it would be lost to the school uniforms, t-shirts and knitted jumpers. My hands find the weathered spine and I slip the book out. It is considerably older and more ‘distressed looking’ than the other.

“May I?” he asks.

I agree, as it seems fair given that he’s allowed me to explore his copy. He turns it over gently and lifts the front cover. He holds the first few pages up to his face, meticulously reading each small print letter like it is an optical test.

“This is a rare edition. A *very* rare edition. Have you considered selling it?”

“Selling it? No, I hadn’t considered that. It was given to me by my biological father whose biological father gave it to him and so on.”

“So it’s a family heirloom? Even more valuable.”

I haven’t really considered that before. A family heirloom. I have something that belonged to Mr Wilson’s own childhood, something that belonged to his family. And now he is glad that I have it. Maybe Mr Wilson is something more than a secondary caregiver, simply replacing my primary caregiver. Perhaps he is, in a way, *family*.

The word sounds quite strange. The child has mentioned it before, how we are family because we are related by blood, but at the time I had dismissed it because it sounds ridiculous. Family can’t be some biological relatives that you meet for the first time at 29 years old and over the course of a brief summer. But now it doesn’t sound so ridiculous.

Family.

“My sweet June.”

“June, calm down. You’re going to hurt someone.”

A cold silence creeps into the shop, and walks up my spine. I shiver and look at the bookseller who seems to be talking. How long has he been talking to me?

He is holding out his palm, on it is a business card, not much different to Mr Wilson’s. They must have got it from the same shop. “If you ever decide to sell, let me know. I can offer you a good price,” he continues.

I nod, pretending I heard the whole conversation, and slide his business card into my pocket. I reluctantly give the illustrated version back to him and take my own beaten-up copy back out the shop and down Cecil Court, which is now my new favourite place in London. And the strange thing is, it isn’t a place filled with rose bushes, trees, flowerbeds and green grass. I haven’t been surrounded by brightly coloured petals and long-stemmed arrangements. It’s a place filled with stories, leather spines and short old men with grey beards and poor vision.

*June
and the
Single Red Rose*



Gardener's Almanac:
30% chance of rain
Sunset: 8:56PM
Low winds

It's a terrible evening, followed by a restless night of sleep deprivation caused by (1) the elimination of our favourite contestant from *Strictly* after a disastrous and poorly-timed Rumba, and (2) the appearance of the shed, which now resembles nothing more than the dusty dirty carcass it was at the beginning of the summer. This was a place I have spent weeks organising and making it look like my bedroom at home. Now it looks like a plain old everyday garden shed. All thanks to the woman inside with large feet and sloppy garden management.

I've alternated between extreme tiredness, hunger and anger, and by the time morning comes I've barely slept. I can't even enjoy the coffee and buttery croissant that the child has left outside the shed for me. And to top it off, the planting of the snowdrops is even worse than I had imagined. They've not only been planted at the back beside the Persian silk tree, leaving it to compete for root space and soil nutrition, but it looks like Mrs Wilson has simply tossed the bulbs in, in a disorganised fashion as opposed to mapping and plotting their location carefully, which is what any real gardener would do. And she's planted them on another scorcher of a day. She'll be lucky if these bulbs survive the week, let alone the month. Of course I'll have to re-do everything she's done, including replanting the snowdrop bulbs in the winter, making my work even harder.

I pick at my croissant, and eventually throw the plate down, not even slightly concerned about the noise it makes. Snowdrops, really!

A light knock on the door startles me, and I pull my legs into my chest.

The next time the knock is louder, harder on the wood. "June, it's me."

I sigh and open the door. The child stands a metre away, my shed furniture by his feet on the grass, a black bag of my other belongings behind him. He smiles, cautiously. "Mum's gone to get a

manicure after all that garden work before she meets Camille. We can put your shed back together now, if you want?"

I allow him into my space, and he slowly enters.

"You should have heard Mum yesterday when she saw all that painting on the wall. She was furious at first. Then she said she liked it."

"She did?"

"Yeah she said the flowers were really well-drawn. Said I should think about art school." He smiles.

"But you didn't do the flowers, I did. You did the grass. Did she say she liked the grass?"

"She didn't mention the grass, actually," he mutters, furrowing his brows.

I hold back from telling him why that is, and start re-organising the shelves as he makes up the bed. After a few minor instructions and finally some physical assistance, the bed is exactly where it was before. Facing south like at home. I re-position the bedside table, with the lamp and books on it. We are getting there.

We stop for lunch at 11:40 to allow for bathroom breaks and for the sandwich-making process. The child boils the kettle and begins gathering the sandwich items. He passes the loaf to me and I begin buttering the bread, a gentle smear on each slice.

"Oh," is what I hear next from him as he stands at the open fridge, the bottom drawer pulled out wide. He holds the white packet of cheese slices in his hand, slowly turning it over.

"What is it?"

"There's only 2 slices left."

I march over and take the packet from him. He is correct, there are only two slices of the cheese left.

"Where's the rest?"

"We probably ate it. We're the only ones that eat cheese here."

“I wonder if our biological father has been sneaking some. He eats cheese too,” I scoff, wondering if he is the culprit.

“He does?”

“And he’s not a vegetarian either.”

“He’s not?” he gasps.

“In fact we’re supposed to be meeting at a place next week that apparently has lots of chicken options on the menu.”

“You’re meeting him again?”

“For dinner this time. A nice early dinner, how I like it.”

“Oh.”

“What?”

“It’s just...never mind.”

“What?” I hate when people don’t use words as I don’t always understand what they are trying to say otherwise. Mother said I never understood ‘subtext’, which I always thought was the words that came up on the TV when you couldn’t hear or understand what the characters were saying. Mother said that was subtitles not subtext, but the words sounded very similar to me.

“I asked Dad if we could go for pizza next week when Mum’s doing her bookclub but he said he didn’t have the time. And now he’s taking you out for dinner.”

“Perhaps he found the time somehow.”

“Yeah, perhaps.”

I can’t tell if this is an appropriate moment or not, but I remove the cheese packet from his fingers. He looks surprised, which he shouldn’t be since I answered Not Likely to the social worker’s question of: How likely are you to share a preferred item with someone else?

He watches me as I position the two slices of cheese onto my bread and carefully press the two sides down. I slice it into two perfect halves, with a quick sharp flick of the knife. Then I place

both halves down on my plate and turn to go outside. He slams the fridge closed and storms upstairs. A moment later his bedroom door also slams shut. I haven't seen this behaviour from the boy before and I am very confused. Why is he so angry?

I check my watch one last time to ensure it's exactly midday and slip back out the kitchen door, being careful not to let the dog out with me. Then I sit and eat my sandwich and drink my tea on the grass with the sun on my face and the breeze at my back. I continue working in the garden, alone. By the afternoon tea break the child has still not returned. In fact, he has pulled his curtains closed. Around 4PM, I go inside to make my dinner, wrap it in foil and head back out into the garden just as it begins to drizzle. I gaze up one last time at the boy's window as I hear Mrs Wilson's car pull in. I return to the shed which thankfully looks more like how it was before the disastrous planting of the snowdrops and wrecking of my shed. I eat my dinner in the quiet, waiting for voices in the garden, but none come. I hear some muffled sounds from the kitchen. Around 7:15PM, there is a tap on the shed door, followed by some quick steps back into the house. When I open the door, I see a small glass dish of cut strawberries and a dollop of cream. How nice of him. I close the door and eat on the shed floor.

I can't stop thinking about the expression on his face when I made my sandwich with the two cheese slices. Surely he understands that I always have *two* slices of cheese in my sandwich? He only ever had one before he met me. But yet I suppose me taking both of them, meant he had none. I sit cross-legged on the bedding on the floor and consider this carefully while I finish the strawberries.

Me choosing my sandwich needs over his, meant he did without lunch today. How would I feel if he had taken both the cheese slices? I pretend to draw three faces on the floor beside the fruit bowl, and circle the one with teeth bared. Angry, of course. I would feel very angry.

I suddenly feel strange, and tingly all over. I feel...I'm not sure what emotion this is.

I think about the book beside me, the one the bookseller wanted to buy, and how when Tinkerbell made Peter angry, she drank poison to save him and as a way of saying sorry. Now there is no poison lying around the shed, thankfully, but I contemplate what the next best thing would be.

I wait until 9PM and slip out of the shed into the evening air. The lights are almost completely out in the house, except for a lamp on in the hallway for when Mr Wilson returns, and the dinner has been cleared away from the table and sink area. The night air is cool, noticeably cooler than last month, hinting that autumn is not too far away. The odd car passing and bird chirping nips at the air, as I walk barefoot to the roses in the front that I brought back to life this summer. The gravel is sharp underneath my soles and pinches at my toes. When I get to the rose bush I clip a stem, being careful not to wrap my fingers over a thorn. They have all bloomed perfectly and finding a good one is easy as each is exquisite.

I walk quietly to the patio, and peer inside. The hallway is empty, still absent of Mr Wilson's black loafers and briefcase. He is still at work. I bend down and place the single red rose on the patio step beside the glass sliding doors. I hope the child will like it. I think it's better than poison.

I don't like to think of myself as Tinkerbell, but in this case I have upset another and although I usually don't care too much unless it's Mother, I suddenly find myself caring now.

Sharp stone

cold water

trickling through.

The river becomes quiet

*June and the
Marital Affair*



Gardener's Almanac:
80% chance of rain
High of 21°
Low of 14°
Sunset: 8:53PM

I awake the next morning to the raised voices of Mr and Mrs Wilson seeping in under the shed door. At first I think I'm dreaming, but as their voices get louder, I quickly come to and realise it's coming from inside the kitchen.

I rub the sleep from eyes and stagger to my feet, the sounds of anger spoiling the morning sunlight. My fingers find the latch on the shed and my feet drift over the dewy grass, until I reach the side of the house. I can hear better from here, just behind the terracotta pots where the boy occasionally leaves something for me — a letter, a trinket of sorts, an evening treat for a TV special.

Raised voices isn't something that new or unfamiliar to me as I had often heard them at home with Mother frequently falling out with neighbours, colleagues, the milk man, the city council and the bin men on Mondays. There are a lot of people Mother added to her angry list over the years, funnelling most of that energy towards the bin men. In the months leading up to her death, they simply refused to take our glass recycling box, which to be fair was often over-flowing, with the occasional bottle rolling down the street on a windy day. It didn't help that Mother only drank one particular kind of Merlot so everyone knew which box belonged to our house even when she scribbled out our door number.

I inch closer to the Wilsons' kitchen, tilting my head up to the words spat out by Mrs Wilson who sounds very cross, and much like Mother in this case. I wonder if she too is addressing the street's waste management.

"You're telling me you have no idea how that got there?" she yells.

"No!" said Mr Wilson, rather loudly.

"You just woke up and a red rose was sitting on our doorstep for you?"

“Who said it was for me?”

“Who else would it be for?”

“There are two other people who live in this house too you know...plus Tilly.”

“You think someone left a romantic gesture on the doorstep for the *dog*, Robert?”

“Well, I didn’t say that exactly, what I was getting at was—”

“I know what you were getting at, but what I’m getting at is your complete lack of respect!”

“What does that mean?”

“You’re out late all the time—”

“Working!”

“I call the office and you’re taking walks in Hyde Park, going out for lunch, meeting someone for coffee—”

“It, uh, helps to clear my head,” he mutters.

“I found a receipt in your suit pocket for *Zelman’s*.”

“I went out for lunch to get some peace to work on a presentation for the partners.”

“The receipt had drinks for *two* people, food for *two* people and even said at the top, table for *two*!”

“Oh yes, now I remember, I uh, had a business lunch that day with a client.”

“Oh, it’s a client now. Your story’s changing.”

“It’s true.”

“A client that ordered three expensive sides of lobster croquettes?”

Oh, I didn’t realise they’re expensive, now that’s disappointing. With what little money I have left I had hoped to revisit *Zelman’s* for those croquettes. Maybe take the child with me too, just to try them and see the look on his face when he realises how absolutely delicious and genius they are.

“And don’t think I haven’t noticed all these notes that have been left on the doorstep for you, which magically disappear soon after.”

“That’s just the post, Judith,” he pleads.

“The postman puts the letters and bills through the letterbox, not hidden away at the back step or on the front door, but if you say it’s him then I’ll be sure to ask the postman why he does that, next time I see him.”

Is she referring to *my* letters to Mr Wilson? Perhaps I should have considered more carefully where to leave the letters for him, rather than on the door step or on the patio as that has obviously caught her attention.

“What are you accusing me of, Judith?”

“Are you having an affair, Robert?” she croaks, her voice a little quieter.

“No, I am bloody well not!”

Now *he* sounds angry.

“Then who is this woman Camille across the street has been seeing coming in and out of our house on the days I am at work?”

“What? Who is coming in and out our house?”

“Yes, Robert. Our neighbours even know you’re having an affair. Do you know how embarrassing that is for me?”

“I promise you, I am not having an affair,” he says again. “Camille is obviously wrong.”

“I don’t believe you! You’ve changed, you’ve not been the same since that girl showed up on our doorstep at the beginning of summer. You’re distracted, you’ve not spent any time with Henry or me all summer, and you know Henry needs you right now. He’s been begging me to move him to a different school, or home school him or something. School terms begins on Monday and he’s terrified to go back. Have you even noticed? Do you even care?”

“Of course I care!”

“So show it! Because for the past few years, you’ve been an absent father and an absent husband! And now you’re a lying cheating husband!”

“How dare you? I am trying my best here—”

“Your best? If this is your best, Robert, then...then...”

“Then what?”

“Then I think we need some time apart,” she splutters.

A thick silence descends upon the house and spills out into the garden like a dense fog, closing in on me.

“What? Judith!” he cries.

“Robert, I’m sorry, I just don’t believe you. You’re lying to me, to us, I know you are. Something’s changed with you. I don’t know who you are anymore.”

“Can’t we just talk about this calmly?”

“Why? You’re not being honest with me, so what’s the point of talking?”

“So what, you want me to move out?”

“Yes.”

“Move out?” he gasps.

“Yes, I want you to move out. I don’t think you’ll have trouble finding somewhere to go.”

“For the last time, I am not having an affair.”

“But there is *someone*. And until we can start communicating like we used to, until I can trust you, I can’t have you here with us. We can’t be arguing like this in front of Henry. It’s not healthy for him.”

“He’s probably already heard us. The whole street has probably heard us, Judith,” Mr Wilson sighs.

He’s probably correct on that matter. London is a big city, but small and nosy, much like my street back home. Neighbours are the same wherever you go, and people want to know your

business, which is why Mother said never to trust neighbours, especially when they ask you how you are.

The silence is interrupted by a shuffling of feet, so I hurry back to the shed. The patio doors open just a few moments later.

“Dad? Are you leaving?” I heard the child call out.

“Sorry Henry, um...I’ll be going away for a few days. It’s nothing to worry about. I’ll be back at the weekend, no doubt.”

Mrs Wilson clears her throat like she is about to cough.

"Bye for now, Henry. Judith, I’ll be back later for a bag. I hope we can talk more then.”

His footsteps crunch into the gravel path as he leaves. And soon the sound of tyres screech out the driveway and hurl down the street. A few moments later, a second car leaves, this time much slower and more cautious.

The child and I are alone, again.

I unlatch the shed door and it creaks open, letting in the warm morning sun that casts a harsh spotlight on the garden. The boy stands on the patio staring at me, his face ashen and puffy.

There is a strange distance between us, one that can’t be explained by where we stand. This distance feels much deeper, is more noticeable than mere proximity, and something I have not felt before. I don’t like it. It makes me feel odd and warm, and uncomfortable.

“Is there butter left?” I ask, finally breaking the silence between us, but not that sensation of distance.

“What?”

“Butter — is there any left? The tub was almost empty yesterday but I’m hoping there’s at least enough for my breakfast, then I can go out and get some more for our sandwiches later.”

He looks at me, eyes wide, with an expression that’s not in my social repertoire.

“Oh, did your mother already get more? Because if she did, it’ll be that fake neon yellow margarine stuff again—”

“Didn’t you hear any of that?” he asks.

“The arguing and raised voices? Yes, I did, why?”

“Dad’s gone.”

“I know, I heard. Sounds like he’ll be back later to pack a bag.”

“He’s...*gone*.”

“I know,” I say again, not quite sure why we are talking about this. We were just talking about butter a moment ago and now the subject has been changed but the initial one has not been fully addressed, nor resolved. We are still low on butter.

“June, Mum thinks Dad’s having an affair because he’s meeting with you, and because you’ve been leaving notes and roses on the doorstep for him.”

“That rose last night was for you, actually,” I correct.

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“But Mum thought it was for Dad. And then what Camille said...June, the neighbours have been seeing *you*. You’re the woman coming in and out the house.”

“Well that I gathered.”

“So you have to say something!”

“To who?”

“You have to tell Mum and Dad it’s you, that you’ve been living here, sending those notes, meeting with Dad... You have to tell them everything!”

The air suddenly feels warm around me. “I can’t do that. Mr Wilson hasn’t asked me to move in yet. If I tell them everything then they might ask me to leave.”

“This was a bad idea,” he says, pacing on the patio stones.

“It was *your* idea to start writing to our biological father, to meet up with him, spend time with him. In fact, a lot of what’s happened over the summer was your idea,” I say, my voice getting sharper.

“I never told you to move into our garden shed,” he argues. “That was *you*.”

“It’s not *your* garden shed.” My skin is warm and tingling.

“Yes, it is, this is our home!”

“It’s *my* shed.”

“It’s not!” His voice bounces off the fence and hedges, and I take a step back. The child has raised his voice, and it’s at me. This sensation of distance and discomfort is getting stronger, more unmanageable. He has to stop.

“June, this all started when you arrived—”

“I seriously doubt that—” I rub my temples, coaxing away the waves of anger that surge through me.

“If he leaves forever, if they divorce, we’ll probably sell the house, including the garden and shed—”

“Stop,” I whisper, my temples throbbing and pulsing, the blood warming in my veins, pressing against my skin.

“I might never see you again...you might never see Dad again—”

“Don’t say that!” I scream, not sure what’s upsetting me more, the thought of another caregiver vanishing from my life, any sense of a home slipping away too, or the thought of never seeing this annoying, pale-faced, spectacle-wearing child again. Why do I care so much whether I see him again? He is nothing to me, except an embodiment of some shared genetics.

No, I don’t care. I shouldn’t care. Because when you care, you lose things and you don’t get them back. They are just gone forever.

“June?” he asks, his breathing shallow, his eyes wide, and waiting. Waiting for what?

“I don’t care,” I mutter, rubbing my forehead hard and firm until it tingles slightly. “This was not the plan. You’re all not following the plan. You’re all ruining everything.”

The child begins crying, and with that something inside me shifts. Slowly at first, then that familiar warmth surges and ripples through me, pulsing like the slow steady beat of music. The tingling is back, the anger building quickly inside me. Suddenly I am afraid, scared of unleashing it, scared of harming the child who stands so close to me.

“June, stop. You’re going to hurt someone.”

“Go away!” I scream at him, longing to grab something, to throw something, to break something.

He startles and takes a step back.

“Go away!” I yell again, as his face gets paler, his eyes grow wider.

Knuckle on wall, blood on skin

thump

thump

“I wish you’d never come here!” he hurls back at me, then he turns and runs into the kitchen, locking the doors behind him. Inside, the dog barks and howls, and throws himself against the glass doors.

I rush back into the shed and slam my fists against the shed walls, over and over again.

Thump.

Thump.

In the distance, heavily blanketed under my anger and urges, I hear the shattering of Christmas ornaments and the ringing of the clock as it falls from the bedside table. I hear my books scatter across the floor, a page of my encyclopaedia tearing as it slides. I hear the thumping of my fists on the wall.

“My sweet June.”

I turn and scream at the urn with everything I have. How could she leave me?

My voice escalates until it burns my throat and bile comes up. I fall to my knees and pant, my lungs twisting and coiling, like the dark green reeds that knotted around her hair that day.

Then a silence sets in, a deep dark silence that blankets me from the yellow shed, and from the Persian silk tree and the rose bushes and the lemon thyme. And from the child. A silence that tells me to remember the lines of Mother's face, the curly long strands of her auburn hair that bounced off her back as she walked, the sound of the blue suede heels on our kitchen floor. And the shallow pop of the uncorking of a Merlot as she turned and smiled at me, and said my name.

"My sweet June."

I close my eyes and remember that day, the last day I saw her. A day I have not been able to remember until now.

Barefoot on the pavement

Past number 27

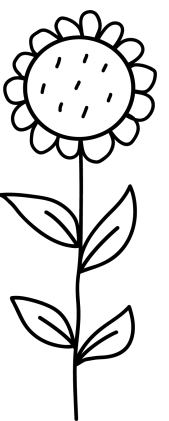
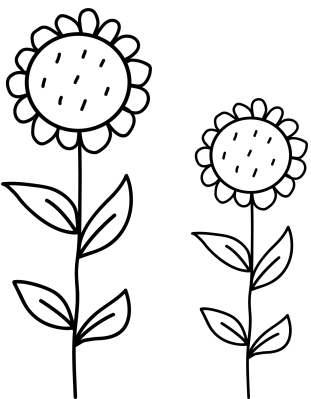
29

I scream but I can't hear my voice

Everything is quiet

Silence

June
and
That Day



It was not a Sunday. And I didn't know why, but I had been plagued with the odd feeling all morning at work that I had to come home early that day.

It had been a strange morning already. First Linda had called in sick, which never happened, then Margaret called in, which always happened, then all of a sudden I was being asked to operate a checkout on the shop floor. I preferred the stockroom, signing for deliveries, counting the merchandise, preparing the stock trolley, you know, 'behind the scenes' stuff. I don't like customers, and more often than not, customers do not like me. One person told management that day that I was 'rude.' I am not rude, I am simply honest. If more people were honest about what they're thinking and how they're feeling then perhaps the world would make sense to me.

I had heard a woman saying to her friend that she was on a diet for a cruise that she'd booked and wanted to lose a stone, so as she browsed the meal deal section which I was replenishing at the time, I merely pointed out that what she was holding was high in both fat and calories. And when she picked up something else, I pointed out the same thing. And again. It was then that she and her friend marched off to find a supervisor.

So, for me to be on tills talking directly to customers was very rare. But with both Linda and Margaret off, and now Angus in the Meats section needing to go home early to collect his son who had chickenpox, the manager had no choice but to temporarily promote me to tills. She went over the mechanics of the machine for several minutes then initiated a fake sale to show me how it would work when the time came. It was very interesting, actually. Tills are fascinating devices, and quite fun. If only there wasn't that element of customer service to it.

Anyway, I stood at the checkout at *Marks and Spencer*, pushing the plastic keys on the cash register until it clicked and pinged and popped, opening to reveal coins of silver and bronze, crisp violet notes of twenties and five pound blues. *Open. Close. Open* —That was when I had the strangest feeling. A feeling that I had to go home that very second. So I did.

I first closed the register — so not to leave it vulnerable to thieves — and went to find the manager who looked extremely cross when I told her, like Angus, that I also had to leave early. She asked me why, and because I never lie, I said, “Because I have a funny feeling in my belly,” which she deduced as being a stomach bug.

After standing in a queue at the bus station for almost a half hour, I decided to walk to home, which was roughly a fifty minute journey.

It was March, the first day of spring, a time for new beginnings in the world of gardening. As I walked through the park near our house, I became surrounded by snowdrops, the first signs of the season. It was an exceptional bloom too, certainly better than the previous three years. Snowdrops in Scotland bloom best in March, their tiny white heads blanketing the ground like a thick white duvet on a freshly made bed.

When I reached the edge of the park, I bent down and plucked a handful, wrapped them in my scarf to protect the delicate blooms from the wind and carried them home for Mother. I was exactly two hours and thirty-two minutes earlier than my usual time home. Mother hadn’t expected that.

The house was quiet. Curtains pulled closed, kitchen cabinets shut tight, bedroom doors sealed. I entered the kitchen first, immediately noticing the door was unlocked and slightly ajar, letting the cool wind float through to the living room. The TV was off, remote control stacked on top of the DVD player where it always was.

After a few glasses of Merlot and some late night TV, Mother often left the controls strewn on the rug by the TV set, tucked away somewhere, or sometimes shoved behind a pillow and subsequently sat on. It upset me greatly as I’d never know where they were. They would be in a different place each time. Once they were in the fridge. Of course I hadn’t thought to look there, most people wouldn’t, and it caused me to miss the first three minutes of a nature documentary. I

was extremely unsettled, and from that day on Mother made a special effort to put them back in the same place every night before bed.

I stood in the middle of the freshly hoovered living room, and glanced back at the kitchen which had also been recently cleaned, but with the incorrect product as muddy streaks were smeared across the granite tops. The wine glasses were drying in the rack by the sink, the dishwasher had been emptied, the knives had all been returned to their correct place in the knife block. A small ceramic jug held white baby's breath, ripped out from the neighbour's garden by Mother's hands not mine, and sat in the middle of the kitchen table on top of a coaster to catch any remaining water droplets. Beside it was my Royal Horticultural Society Encyclopaedia. Mother never touched that. She knew not to.

The place was immaculately clean and Mother only cleaned on Sundays. But as I said, that day was not a Sunday. I placed the snowdrops on the coffee table and ascended the stairs. Perhaps Mother was napping, having cleaned midweek and done such a good job of it, apart from the granite tops.

The hallway was dark, the light held captive in the closed bedrooms. I opened my own door first. My bed had been stripped and re-made with washed sheets, and there was a pile of washed and ironed clothes on my dresser. My slippers had been paired up and set on the floor at the head of the bed, my blinds open and the drawers closed. The room smelled of furniture polish and *Febreze*.

Next was Mother's room, which didn't look like the rest of the house. The covers were bundled at the bottom of the mattress, dirty laundry covered the rug, and a few small white caplets spilled out of a paracetamol tub on top of her dresser.

I gazed out the window beside it, which faced the front and looked out onto the street below. She said she chose the front bedroom because she liked to keep an eye on her neighbours as they often kept an eye on her.

Mine looked out onto the back garden, and the fence that separated our house from the train tracks. I liked looking out onto the garden, onto the blush pink clematis, violet-hued salvias, and soft purple angelonias. I liked the scent of lavender wafting into my room and tickling the wind chimes.

Beyond the green silk fabrics of Mother's curtains, the street lay quiet down below. The neighbour's cat crawled nimbly under the red car parked in front of number 24. The plastic recycling bin belonging to Mrs Maclean at number 26 was still positioned by the pavement, almost three days after collection. Mother wouldn't be happy about that. Then I saw a blue car drive up the street and an *Asda* delivery van parked between numbers 28 and 30, although I wasn't sure which was receiving the delivery.

And Mother.

I saw Mother, standing outside number 27 on the other side of the street.

I knocked loudly on the window, but Mother didn't turn around. She walked past number 27

29

31

33

Until she wound round the corner and I couldn't see her anymore.

I rushed downstairs, out of the open back door and crossed the street towards number 33. By the time I reached the corner, Mother was already at the end of the next street. She was barefoot and dressed in a blue nightdress, which flapped in the wind behind her. Her hair was loose and wild and flowed down her partially-covered back.

I was worried she was cold so I followed her with a coat, down the street, over the main road that looked down onto the motorway, past the primary school where I had gone before I'd been home schooled, and onto the riverbank. Cars honked and slowed to watch her, but she didn't stop, didn't glance round or turn back. She just kept on moving.

By the time Mother reached the river she was staggering in her footsteps like she'd had too much red wine, like most evenings. I started running to catch up to her. If she got any closer she might get wet, and in barely any clothes she would surely catch a cold or the flu and be unable to complete her tasks around the house.

"Mother!" I yelled, darting between cars.

Mother swayed at the water's edge for a brief moment, then waded in. Her fingers grazed the surface as it swallowed her calves then her thighs.

By the time I reached the riverbank, the river had consumed her up to her belly, then her breasts, her collarbone.

I tripped over the long grass and wild weeds that grew in amongst the daisies and beer cans, and called to her again. But all I could do was watch her from the edge as she floated downstream. Fabrics of her blue nightgown tangled in the water as the current tugged at her. Her pale body sparkled under the bright afternoon sun as she twisted and coiled in the water as the current strengthened.

I raised my hand high to the sky, hoping she'd see me. Her hand shot up too, straight up like she was trying to touch the sun, then disappeared back under the water, along with her neck, her chin, her nose and finally the crown of her head. For a moment, a split second, she popped back up, gasping for breath, her long hair snaking behind her, then she went down again.

She didn't pop up this time.

I stood at the water's edge, feet covered in daisies and dew, staring into the current until the sun set and the darkness crept in. Then I walked home, closed the kitchen door, removed my boots and placed them on the shoe rack next to Mother's cobalt blue heels, and turned on all the lights.

Then I punched the walls so hard that my knuckles split. The neighbours heard and called the police.

*June and the
Emotions
Chart*



Gardener's Almanac:
98% chance of rain
High of 23°
Low of 16°
NE Winds of 6mph

The next morning starts off slow and groggily, with the rain lightly trickling down the sides of the shed and seeping in under the crack in the door. Now that it's late August the colder, rainier autumn days doesn't seem too far off anymore.

It's been two days since Mr Wilson left, and two days since I'd last seen the boy. He doesn't come to see me anymore, and doesn't write me letters or leave out things that he thinks I'll like. He doesn't wave from his window either, in fact, his curtains have been drawn since. He's back at school now, so I still go into the house and make my meals and sort my tea breaks, but lunchtimes are different now without him. I didn't realise how much I enjoyed our lunchtimes together until now. I still sit on the grass, with my back to the house, staring at the Persian silk but now it feels different. I no longer take Mother out onto the grass with me. She stays inside the shed, beneath the shelves, beside my boots.

Everything feels different.

Just after my morning tea, I decide to head into town, to buy more cheese slices and butter. I can't afford a trip to *M&S* with the money remaining so I opt for somewhere cheaper. I ask three people at Notting Hill Gate where the nearest *Asda* is but nobody knows. On my walk to *Aldi*, I see a *Tesco Express*, which will do. *Aldi* can be my back-up plan.

Tesco is busier than I would have thought, and I have to stand in a very long queue. I will have to count the remainder of my money when I get home and come up with a plan for September. I will also need to investigate insulation for the walls for the winter months. I don't know when the child will start speaking to me again, but we still have a lot to cover in the garden before autumn truly sets in, including soil maintenance and weed prevention.

The walk back to the garden feels long, as images of the child standing in the garden crying scratches away in my head. It makes my temples throb, so I start reciting all of the flowers and plants that start with the letter J.

Jack in the Pulpit

Jacob's Ladder

Jewelweed

Joseph's Coat

Jumping Cholla

Juniper—

I freeze.

Mr Wilson is standing in the garden, outside the yellow shed. He turns slowly to me, the door of the shed wide open, the makeshift mattress on the floor, blankets still rumpled from this morning, my belongings on the shelves, the bedside table with my books. Punch marks in the shed wall, blood smeared across the wood.

I had locked the shed before I left, testing the handle three times, and up until now I didn't realise that the Wilsons would have another key for it.

His suit jacket lies on the grass. His tie is discarded and the top button of his work shirt is undone. In his hand is a piece of paper.

"It's you," he gasps, his eyes wide, a hint of a frown creeping onto his face. "All of this, all this time — it's you." He waves the piece of paper at me. I edge forward and take it from him.

It's the silly survey the child had done with me at the beginning of the summer when he'd been learning about tallies. I had written my name on the bottom under Participants, next to the neighbour Camille's. Beside my name I had drawn a sunflower, like I had on the notes I had written to Mr Wilson all summer.

"The woman Camille saw going in and out the house, Henry's new friend Jude he's been talking about, and you...you said you had moved to a 'private residence' where your neighbour was a young boy who was helping you move in..." He shakes his head, his eyes dropping down to the grass by his feet. "Jesus, what an idiot I feel now. It was so obvious."

I swallow hard, the lump in my throat getting large, protruding until it hurts.

"How long have you been living in my garden shed?"

"Ten weeks."

"Ten weeks?" He chokes on the words. "How could I miss this?"

"It's not your fault, really. I wait until you leave for work, see to myself for breakfast, unless it's the weekend and then the child leaves something for me outside the shed. Then I spend the day in the garden, explore a bit of London, and show the boy how to tend to the flowerbeds and herb patches." I try to smile, but the expression feels odd on my face and pulls tightly at my cheeks.

"The child? Henry? You've been spending time with him?"

"Every day."

"Every day," he repeats, scratching at his chin. He shakes his head. "June, where is your mother? We need to call her. Now. This...all of this...is *strange*."

"You can't call her," I say quietly, feeling the heaviness of the food shopping in my hands.

"We have to. Does she even know you're here? Your mother and I had our differences, sure, but knowing her, she'd be worried."

"She's not worried, trust me." I glance behind him, at the urn that sits on the floor by the bedside table. Why didn't I bring her with me to the shop? She feels so far away now.

Mr Wilson stands firmly in my path, blocking me from her. “June, please, just give me her number.”

“I told you, you can’t call her,” I say again, the heat building inside me.

“Then tell me how to reach her.” His face is getting redder and his jaw is hardening. I now recognise these facial expressions as anger. It took me a while to learn the three basic emotions, but I now understand they follow a predictable pattern and can be easy to identify and label:

HAPPY	Common clues include: A smile/upturned mouth, laughter, eyes that light, relaxed shoulders, sometimes affection.	Examples: Being told you received an A in a school assignment, doing something you enjoy such as painting or planting.
SAD	Common clues include: A frown/downturned mouth, quiet voice, eyes that gaze down or look away, eyes that water, tense shoulders.	Examples: Losing a favourite toy, not being allowed to do a preferred activity such as reading or playing outside.
ANGRY	Common clues include: A frown/downturned or open mouth, red face, clenched jaw, loud raised voice/shouting, tense shoulders, closed fist or waving arms about.	Examples: Someone says something mean to you, someone takes your favourite toy from you, being told No from a teacher or caregiver.

I struggle with the more complex emotions such as hungry, confused and tired which are much harder to teach, and much harder to learn. But occasionally I recognise them, more specifically right before I ‘black out.’ This tends to happen when my routine is disrupted, like not having my meals at a regular time which makes me hungry, thus angry; or not understanding people’s cues if they don’t verbalise them makes me confused, thus angry; and also not going to bed at my usual time or having my sleep disrupted by a loud noise outside makes me tired, and again, angry. Once Aileen highlighted these patterns with Mother, she tried really hard to keep everything the same for me. And it worked, along with the medication. I was able to get a job at *M&S*, volunteer without supervision at the community garden, and even go to the shops myself to buy the odd item such as milk or butter or jam. It worked, until she was gone. Then it stopped working.

The anger I've felt since March is unsettling, and I long for someone to help me identify what I am feeling and then give me a solution to fix it. I can't call Aileen because her solution will be to put me in a place where I can't get out, where there will be others who are just like me, who get angry like me, and then it's not safe. And what if I'm not allowed to bring Mother with me? Where will she go? I can't lose her. Not again. Who am I without her?

"June," Mr Wilson pleads. "If I can't call your mother then I need to call someone. You mentioned a social worker? Give me her number."

"No!" I scream, the panic rising up. No, I need to be here with my biological father, my secondary caregiver, because that's how it works. That's what worked last time.

"Then give me your mother's number!"

"No! No! No!" I yell, my voice bouncing off the house and fence, off the branches of the Persian silk tree at the back of the garden. "No!"

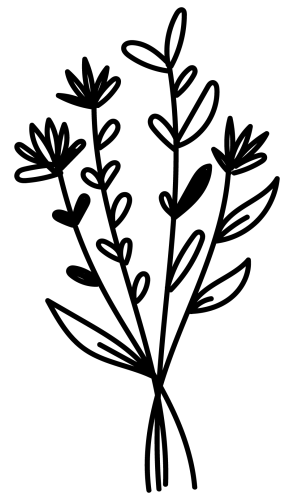
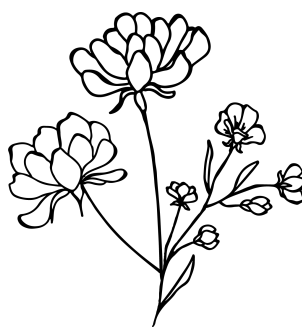
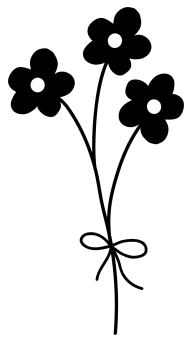
He steps back, his face ashen like the child's was when I had yelled at him in the garden. And like the child, Mr Wilson wears an emotion on his face that I learned much later in life after I became an adult.

Scared.

Mr Wilson looks *scared*.

I drop the groceries by my feet, hearing the butter tub crack on the stone. Then I run.

*June
and the
Night in the Park*



The flowerbed in front of me is shredded by the strips of sunlight that blasts through the iron gates. It looks like the tasselled garland I made for Mother on her last birthday out of printer paper and takeaway leaflets.

Heads of pink petunias, purple crocuses and white baby's breath wash over the soil before me. I count each head slowly, and when I am all done, I recall the principles of colour theory from my RHS Encyclopaedia, essential for selecting the best colours for garden beds and borders:

Primary	Red, Blue, Yellow	e.g. Roses, Asters, Yarrows
Secondary	Green, Orange, Purple	e.g. Cymbidium Orchids
Tertiary	i.e. Teal, Fuchsia, Mauve	e.g. Wisteria

But even after all of that, I still can not block out the kinds of thoughts that make the corners of my eyes prick with warmth. I clutch the bench with my fingers and squeeze my eyes shut.

Sad is not a feeling I easily identify and know how to rectify. But I have accidentally left Mother in the shed, along with my encyclopaedia, Mr Wilson's rare copy of *Peter Pan*, and all of the things I have brought from home that reminds me of the life I used to have with Mother. A life that is now gone, and replaced with empty garden space and floral vines that etch up dusty shed walls but don't lead to a real home.

I have also left a small cluster of dried snowdrops, which I use as a bookmark. The snowdrops that grow on the riverbanks around my old house. The ones I had plucked on my walk home through the park that day and the ones I had grabbed at my feet before I left the riverbank with Mother floating down it. I'd put them in a mug of water and dried them the next day after returning home from the police station after questioning and from the hospital to identify Mother's body. Flowers can be easily preserved if they're hung upside down in a well-ventilated room for at least two weeks and sprayed lightly with hairspray for protection.

Thankfully when I had run from Mr Wilson I had been wearing my raincoat so at least I will be warm for this evening.

I wonder if he's still standing there outside the shed, waiting for me to come back.

Of course he would find out. It was inevitable. I had left too many clues along the way for someone as smart as him to quickly piece together. But why did it have to happen now? It's not the time. None of this is part of the plan. He's supposed to offer me a place in his house, a room of my own to paint and decorate. I shouldn't have to hide in his shed. Don't biological parents have to care for their children, regardless of their age?

Now, I have nothing. I've lost Mother, Mr Wilson, the shed, my home. I've lost the child. No, I have lost my *brother*. I don't care about Mrs Wilson or the dog. I'm happy to have lost them.

I dig my hands into my pockets and tickle the zip of my coin purse, an old weathered green one that Mother gave to me from her own collection. I won't have enough for a hotel room tonight, or for a restaurant to get a chicken dinner. I have no clothes with me, no books, no pillow to sleep on, no ceramic mug to drink coffee from in the mornings. In fact, I have no coffee. My belly gurgles and churns. I wish I hadn't dropped those groceries when I had run. I wonder if they are still there, lying on the garden path, the butter melting slowly in the afternoon sun, the cheese softening and quickly gathering moisture.

I swallow hard, bile stinging my throat, and start reciting the names of all the flowers I know that begins with the letter C. Because C is for Catherine — Mother's name.

Calendula

California poppy

Cardinals

Carnation

Catchfly

I do that until the sun dips behind the clouds. As voices carry down the street into the balmy evening, I hug my knees into my chest and lie down on the cold bench. It's hard and uneven, and every metal slat presses into my hips, stopping sleep from coming.

I have never slept outside like this before. Mother and I camped once, outside in the garden at home, where I could still enter to use the facilities if needed. It was in late July and the weather was exceptionally glorious for Glasgow. "London weather," our neighbour Mora said to us. We opened up all the windows in the house to let the cool air in and the warm stuffiness out, but I still felt congested with the heat which was when Mother suggested a crazy solution — that we drag our bedding down the stairs and out onto the grass, and watch the stars peek through the city smog and feel the cold air dance on our skin.

It sounded silly at first. *Sleep outside?*

I knew I wouldn't be bothered by the usual things that deterred people from sleeping outdoors like itchy grass in my back and tiny insects crawling across my face, but I did worry that the change in sleeping arrangements would upset me and cause a disturbance. And what if I was thirsty in the middle of the night or had to use the toilet? Would the darkness consume me?

So Mother suggested we leave the back door slightly open and the kitchen lights on, like a nightlight. I liked that idea.

It was that night as we lay on our backs, our heads touching, gazing up at the stars that fought hard to be seen, that Mother first told me her plans for 'after.' I hadn't heard her talk about death before and felt very confused. She was in good health, not plagued by bowel cancer like Maureen at work, and still young. So the chances of her dying were minimal, and yet she talked at great length about what would happen when she did. She said I would be okay, that I would be left here alone in the house but that she trusted me to take care of it, to shop for myself and prepare my meals adequately. She had taught me many things already, like how to check a chicken is cooked thoroughly and how long to leave potatoes on to boil. I had a job and a steady salary, and I knew the

basics of saving and spending. She said I was ready. But as I sat in that funeral home in Daldowie, clutching the urn they'd handed me with the charred remains of my mother, I knew that I wasn't ready. I'm still not. There's still so much I have to ask her, so much she needs to teach me. For example, I don't know what to do with her ashes. I had considered scattering the remains in the community patch, around the astors and cosmos, seeds I'd just planted. They'll be blooming about now, although with no one to tend to them, they may not have fared well. Or I could have travelled back to Jura since she seemed to enjoy it there so much. But the boat ride put me off. Or I could have climbed a hill or tossed the ashes in a glen somewhere where the flowers grow free and the grass is wild. She also liked going to *Asda* so I could have scattered the urn in the car park.

I had been deciding where to tip the urn out when the letter from the council arrived about taking back the house for a larger family. I had just wanted more time. More time to decide, more time with Mother — *just more*.

A warmth pinches my eyes again, and I squeeze them shut, willing sleep to come and take me. But it will not. For this is not my garden at home. I am not sleeping on the grass, my house still in view, lying on my back, my head touching Mother's, hearing her steady breaths in and out. I am here in London, on a park bench in Ladbrooke Square Garden, where I have scaled the iron fence and likely pulled a muscle.

I am not home. I am not with Mother.

Mother.

The pinch turns to a single drop in the corner of an eye, that soon runs down my cheek. It tickles my skin and lands on the bench beside me. I press my finger into it and feel it disperse on the varnished wood. I have never cried before. Sadness is not in my repertoire. But death is also not in my repertoire.

I close my eyes again and continue reciting plants, this time beginning with J, picking up where I left off earlier.

*Juglans**Juniperus**Jungle Flame—*

A scattering of male voices reverberates around the park, startling me and interrupting my list. I haven't got to *Justica* yet, a cantaloupe-coloured floret that bloomed in spiky clusters in Asia, with veins coursing deep in the leaves.

As I try to remember whether it's a spring or summer blossom, a small crowd of four or five teens appear at the park gates, outfitted in camouflage and black, with hoods up or hats on. The taller one at the back pushes a bike by his hip, and for a moment I think he is Aldi Boy but when I straighten up and narrow my stare, I realise he definitely is not Aldi Boy. I wonder why everyone in London chooses to walk their bikes and not ride them.

The one at the back suddenly glances my way and stops. I scoot back in the bench, trying to make myself very small so he won't see me.

He sees me.

“Oi, Oi!” he yells through the iron posts.

I don't know what ‘Oi’ is. I haven't come across ‘Oi’ as a type of greeting before. Am I supposed to say ‘Oi’ back or ‘Hello’?

So I don't say anything at all.

“What's wrong, love? Don't feel like chatting?” he calls.

His friends turn and soon all of them are interested in this exchange, if that's even what it is.

Again I ignore him, his friends too, but that just seems to make them more insistent on getting my attention, and soon they are clawing at the iron gates like wild animals, howling and whistling and shouting.

My skin tingles and my bones throb as the cacophony of deafening sounds tears through my once quiet, peaceful park, shaking the heads off the dahlias and rippling through the stark branches of the cherry blossoms that patiently wait for spring. My chest pounds and thumps.

They yell louder.

I press my hands into my ears. I have forgotten my headphones. The noise, it's too loud. I push my palms into my ears until it hurts—

A movement in my peripheral jerks me up and I see the tall one with the bike start to climb the gate, much like I did, his foot slotting through the first slat.

They are coming in.

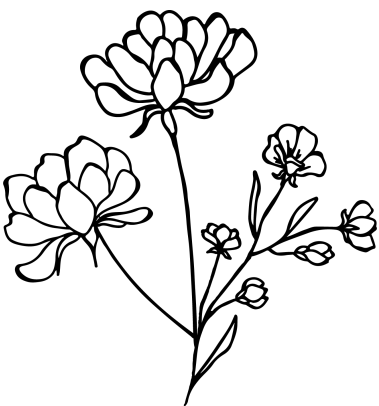
They are coming—

The darkness pushes against me as I heave myself up and run. Damp dewy grass blades squelch and bend under my boots as I launch at the back gate and pull myself up and over. A sharp tug in my left thigh muscle makes me wince as I run.

They call to me, telling me to come back, as I continue running down the street, through Ladbroke Grove, onto Kensington Park Road, finally hitting Portobello Road where the buildings are still lit up and the taxis glide through the darkened streets searching for revellers. I am no reveller and I have no money, so I collapse against one of the shuttered second hand shops I've seen previously selling replicas of designer handbags, and clutch my chest. My heart races.

No, I am definitely not home, and never will be again.

June
and the
Aquarium Trip, Part 2



Observations:
Overcast, milder
Likely a high of 19°

I sit on the bench outside the aquarium, my back to the thrashing, swirling river. The entrance to **SeaLife** looks smaller than I remember, the door closing in on unknowing visitors, thinking they are there to see jellyfish and sharks, but really they are about to be cocooned in a giant subterranean water trap.

I shiver and check my watch. It's just after midday and Aldi Boy is nowhere to be seen. Perhaps he is off work due to sickness or injury. Perhaps one of the jellyfish got him. I will give it another ten minutes then leave. My stomach gurgles and I hunger desperately for my usual cheese sandwich. I have never waited this long before for lunch, but everything is different, and rather than feel anger or confusion or loss, I just feel numb. Today is the first day I have ever spent away from Mother.

My fingers ache for the urn and yearn to hold the cold ceramic close to my warm chest, but all I hold are her yellow gardening gloves which are still in my pocket. They are my comfort today.

“June?”

Aldi Boy strides towards me, still wearing his **SeaLife** t-shirt and name tag, carrying his very small mobile in his hand.

I wave awkwardly, already forgetting my much practised social skills, then quickly follow up with an appropriate greeting of, “Good afternoon.”

“‘Good afternoon’ — very formal,” he grins. “What brings you here?”

“You said you had your lunch break at midday?”

“Do you want to get some lunch together?”

“It's 12:10pm,” I mutter, checking my watch again. 12:10...

“I had a fight with a hungry jellyfish,” he laughs. “So, lunch?”

“I suppose I could just eat late,” I say slowly, the words foreign to me. I have never eaten late before.

He gestures to begin walking so I do. We head past a small outdoor cafe where couples smoke cigarettes and drink pink wine, then loop under a small bridge.

“How have you been?”

“Okay,” I answer. I usually say ‘Well’ or ‘Fine, thank you.’ But not today. Why not today?

“You don’t sound okay?”

“I had a fight with a child.”

“Ok” he says, his voice going up at the end. “Any particular child?” He laughs uncomfortably.

“My half brother.”

“Oh sorry to hear. What about?”

“He wanted me to tell someone something but I refused, but then that person found out anyway and now...” I trail off, imagining Mr Wilson at the shed. Did he search it afterwards, prod through my things, find Mother?

“Now you wish you had just told them yourself?”

“I’m not sure,” I say. “Do you think that was what I should have done?”

He shrugs and digs his hands into his pockets, looking off slightly towards the river. “I don’t know. I can’t tell you what was best, because I don’t know the people or the situation, but what I can tell you is, the truth is usually the best option.”

“Mother said never to lie.”

“Did you lie?”

“I don’t think so. But I don’t know now.” I check my watch again. 12:16PM. “Where are we going by the way?” I ask as we pass another little cafe with more people sitting outside drinking

wine and funny little drinks with teeny tiny umbrellas and straws. Is that all people do here in the summer? Sit around in the sunshine and drink?

“There’s a great pop up fish van over here.”

“A pop up van? Like a pop up book?” The only pop ups I’ve seen are of cardboard cutouts of children’s characters springing out of book pages.

“No,” he laughs. “London has a lot of pop up places in the summer — pop up cafes, bars, food trucks. They set up for summer and then break everything down at the end. Most of these places have larger venues in the city. This is just for Southbank.”

“Oh,” is all I can say, as I don’t really understand what he means. Where do they go the rest of the year?

“Here it is,” he says, pointing to a white van that’s parked in a large open space surrounded by outside tables and chairs. It appears to be situated in what should be a car park. “What can I get you?”

Oh no, another menu *perusal*.

“The fish and chips is really good here. The best.”

I sigh in relief. I know a fish supper and thus don’t need to look at the menu and make any rushed decisions about my lunch. It’s already past 12:20pm. I may be numb now but for how long? Soon the realisation of a missed lunchtime is going to hit. “A fish supper is fine with me. But can I have mine without the fish? Mother had the fish while I had the chips.”

“So should I just order you some chips?”

“Oh I never thought of that. That way I won’t have to throw away the fish.”

He leans into the fish van’s window and asks a big burly man in a white apron and football cap for two portions of chips.

“No salt or vinegar please,” I quickly add.

The man nods and turns away from us, shovelling and spooning some freshly fried chips into two cardboard trays with tiny black forks poking out.

“Drink?”

“I don’t drink,” I reply. Mother encouraged me not to drink, said I would turn out like her because addiction is in the blood; although those drinks with the teeny tiny umbrellas look very interesting.

“I mean a soft drink like a Coke, Fanta..?”

“A water, please.”

“Two waters, please,” he asks the man.

I reach into my pocket to count the pennies I have left in the coin purse, hoping it will cost the same as the local chippie round the corner from us back home, but Aldi Boy lightly touches my arm, startling me.

“It’s my treat. You came all this way.”

I don’t want to clarify by saying I’ve actually been walking the streets up and down ever since the Ladbroke Square Garden ordeal. I had not initially intended to come here to see him or to have lunch with him, but as the man in the food truck hands me a tray of hot steaming chips that instantly reminds me of home and of Mother, I am extremely thankful to have ended up here.

“Thank you,” I say to Aldi Boy as we sit down at one of the tables that shields the sun from our faces with a tall coral-coloured parasol.

The chips are delicious. Not on the same taste level as the lobster croquettes but after missing the last two meals, they are exactly what I need. I inhale the salty greasy smell and begin shovelling them into my mouth.

“You’re hungry.”

“It’s been a while,” I choke, an end of a stray chip falling from my mouth.

“Since you’ve had a fish supper — without the fish?”

I nod and carry on hungrily feeding my empty belly.

Mother and I never ordered takeaways from the odd exotic restaurant that popped up in Maryhill, but they were always busy when we passed. Mother wasn't one for spice or salt, and I like what I like, but on the rare occasion that we did order food 'to go', we went to the local chippie for a fish supper, minus the salt and malt vinegar of course. On those rare occasions we dressed in our finest, the cobalt blue suede heels for her and a cardigan not dusted in soil from the garden for me, and we sat on the living room floor on a blanket like we were having a picnic. It was a good time to practise my conversational skills too, everything I'd learned that week from Mother or Aileen, or from the telly.

How was your day?	→	Appropriate Response: Good, thanks. And yours?
Terrible rain today	→	Appropriate Response: Yes, awful. Is rain expected for tomorrow?
Did you see the news?	→	Appropriate Response: No, I didn't. What's happened?
I like your shoes	→	Appropriate Response: Thank you. They were on sale at <i>M&S</i> . Do you shop there?

What I learnt during that time is to answer a question with another question. Mother said it was to keep the momentum of the conversation going so it doesn't stop dead. That's how a conversation 'flows' apparently. I learnt a lot from our dinner practice sessions. Mother was quite an expert on conversation, having practised a lot with her *Royal Mail* colleagues and our neighbours, especially Mrs Maclean who liked to share gossip about the street.

But the fish supper is different today. There is no blanket to sit on, no fine clothes to change into as my duffel has been left at the shed, and no Mother, dressed in her finest and her cobalt blue heels.

There's just me and Aldi Boy, and given everything that has happened in the last twenty four hours, I am not particularly in the mood to practise my conversational skills. Mindless small talk about the weather or television programmes seems empty today.

So instead I say, "My mother's dead. I watched her drown herself in the river beside our house then I cremated her body. She's in an urn in the garden shed where I've been living, if you want to meet her." Then I carry on eating.

Aldi Boy stops, his mouth still open, a chip poking out. The words feel okay off my tongue and out my mouth, even though it's the first time I have ever said them, and to a stranger too. He wipes his mouth with a paper napkin and lays his tray down on the table between us. He swallows hard and looks at me.

"S-sorry," he stutters finally.

I shrug, having nothing more to share. He did say honesty is best, so there it is — the truth.

"Does your brother, I mean *half*-brother, know?"

"No."

"Perhaps this is one of those times where the truth is better?"

I pause, and let the fork drop down to the tray. "But I didn't lie?"

"But did you tell the truth?"

"I don't know the difference now," I say quietly.

"Why don't you go home and talk to him?"

"I suppose I have to go back to get my things and to get Mother. She won't be happy sitting in the warm shed by herself especially on a day like this. She likes to be outside too."

He nods, then starts fingering his leftover chips. I copy him and do the same, but my belly gurgles and refuses anymore. "Thank you again for the chips and water."

"You're welcome, June."

I smile and slide away from the table. If I leave now I might be home in time for the child to return home from school. It'll be afternoon tea break then and we can have tea in the garden together. I can finally introduce him to Mother.

“June?”

I turn back. “Yes?”

“Would you like to do this again sometime?”

“Eat pop up chips?”

“No,” he laughs. “Hang out, talk.”

“Well, I don't think I'll be here much longer.”

“Oh.”

I have only ‘hung out’ with one other person on a regular basis, and that was Mother and then it was the child. I don't know if I am ready to add another person to that list, but I feel indifferent to Aldi Boy. He is neither a stranger or a ‘safe’ person yet. Perhaps I will need more time with him to figure that out, assuming I'll be in London for longer.

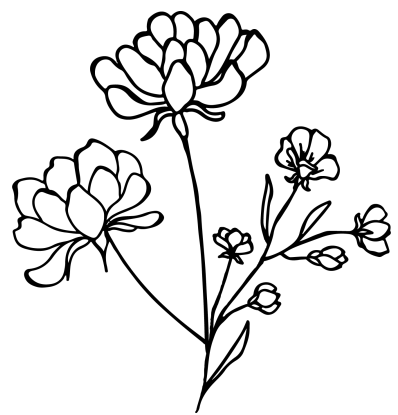
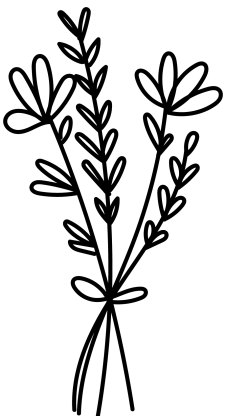
“But if I do stay, then, maybe.” I shrug, tossing my tray into the open black bin.

“I'll take that,” he grins. “Bye for now, June.”

“Bye for now, *William*.”

He looks at me: a smile/upturned mouth, laughter, eyes that light, relaxed shoulders — William is visibly showing signs of Happy.

June's Return
to the
Garden Shed



Observations:
Rain showers in the afternoon
Still around 19°

The garden is empty, the shed door closed, the branches of the Persian silk quiet and still. The crushed stone from the garden path cracks and shifts under the soles of my wellies as I creep slowly down towards the grass.

The house beside me lies quiet, the driveway empty, both cars gone. When I get to the corner, I carefully peer around. The patio furniture is untouched and the kitchen doors are closed. The Wilsons are nowhere in sight. I walk over to the shed and open the door. It's unlocked. Inside, my bedding is still on the floor, my clock is on the shelf, the gardening tools are where they should be and Mother is where I left her. My chest loosens slightly.

I begin to quietly pack, folding my clothes neatly into my bag, then the clock and all other items that I can fit inside the duffel. I grab my books off the table which will have to stay, sadly, along with the rug and the lamp. I won't be able to take furniture with me. I lift the copy of *Peter Pan* up to my face and sigh. I have already called the nice little old man with the grey hair that lives on Cecil Court. I am to come by his shop this afternoon to exchange the book for money, then make my way to Victoria Coach Station for the next *Megabus* departure. I am going home.

It will be a long journey back to Glasgow. Ten hours and five minutes, assuming the bus departs on time. I wonder how I will hold my bladder for such a long time. Perhaps they give you little cups to widdle in as you board the bus. I doubt there will be a fully functioning toilet, like the train has. Or a hot food and beverages carriage. I also wonder what makes this bus so *Mega*, compared to the other buses, like the one I took from Maryhill to *M&S*. But I will find out soon enough, and then be equipped with the knowledge to tell others what I have learned. Linda at work will be very interested, assuming I still have my old job when I return. Will I?

The spine of the book feels so familiar in my palms, with the paper slightly yellowed at the edges. I flick through the pages, each one skimming the air and landing with the others. A white corner pokes out from the back. When I turn the page, I see a white envelope that's been placed in the back cover, just after the final page. On the front are the words '**To the person in June's life**'. It's Mother's handwriting. I would recognise her font anywhere. I skim the words, my fingertips caressing the indentations from the pen. Has it always been here? Did I put it here myself?

Yes, I did. I remember now. I took the letter and put it in the book because I knew the book would always be with me, and so would her letter. I forgot about that, until now. I forgot about a lot of things.

The patio doors suddenly slides open and I startle, dropping the book and the envelope to the floor. Clipped heels march across the patio stone towards me, each footstep careful and slow. Before I can decide where to hide, Mrs Wilson stands at the shed door in front of me. She's dressed in a pair of loose fitting beige trousers with a white shirt and a shawl of some kind draped over her shoulders. Her hair is tightly pulled back in a bun, her face taut with the force. She is the complete opposite of Mother, but she wears drop earrings that are the same colour as Mother's cobalt blue suede heels. Blue like windflowers and sea holly.

"I was hoping you'd come back," she says eventually. "I parked down the street in case I scared you off."

I just blink at her.

"I don't know you, and you don't know me. But it appears my husband and my son have become quite fond of you."

I'm numb, not sure what to say or how to respond. My conversational skill sessions have not covered situations like this.

"I'm sorry, June," she sighs. She walks over to the patio table and sits in a chair. "I didn't know Robert had a child before we met. Neither did he, it sounds like, and I believe him. You came

here to meet your father and neither of us were respectful or welcoming. We responded terribly, but I'm listening now. What is it that you want, June?"

I edge over and sit in the chair opposite her, clutching my hands in my lap. What do I *want*? I have never said the words out loud. "I want a home again." I clear my throat and continue. "I want a family," I say, my voice strangely calm.

She nods. "Understandable. I'm truly sorry for your loss. When did she die?"

"March when the snowdrops bloom. How do you know she's dead?"

"We saw the urn on the shed floor. It has your mother's name engraved on it, along with the date she died."

"Oh."

"Robert's trying to speak to someone in social services at Glasgow City Council."

"Why?"

"Just to talk to someone, to learn more about you, your situation. He was really worried about you when you left yesterday. We were up most of the night talking. He showed me photos of your mother when they were kids at school. She was very beautiful."

"Yes, she was."

"You look just like her."

"Will I see the child — I mean *Henry* — again?" My jaw clenches as the warmth tugs at the corners of my eyes again. I haven't come back to the garden for my things, the books, or perhaps not even for Mother. I realise in that moment that I have come back for *him*. For Henry.

"He's upstairs right now. He's waiting for you too. We all have been."

I lean forward, resting my hands on the warm patio table. "What happens now?"

"Honestly, I don't know."

I lower my head. The summer is almost at an end and I am still seeking answers to my questions. I wonder if the Wilsons will let me stay on in their shed, be the friendly girl in the garden

that every London home should have. A live-in gardener. All I request are cheese sandwiches at midday and tea breaks at 10:30AM and 3PM.

“But what I do know is that we won’t be able to solve anything right now or today, so why don’t you come inside for a cup of tea? I hear you tend to have one about this time?”

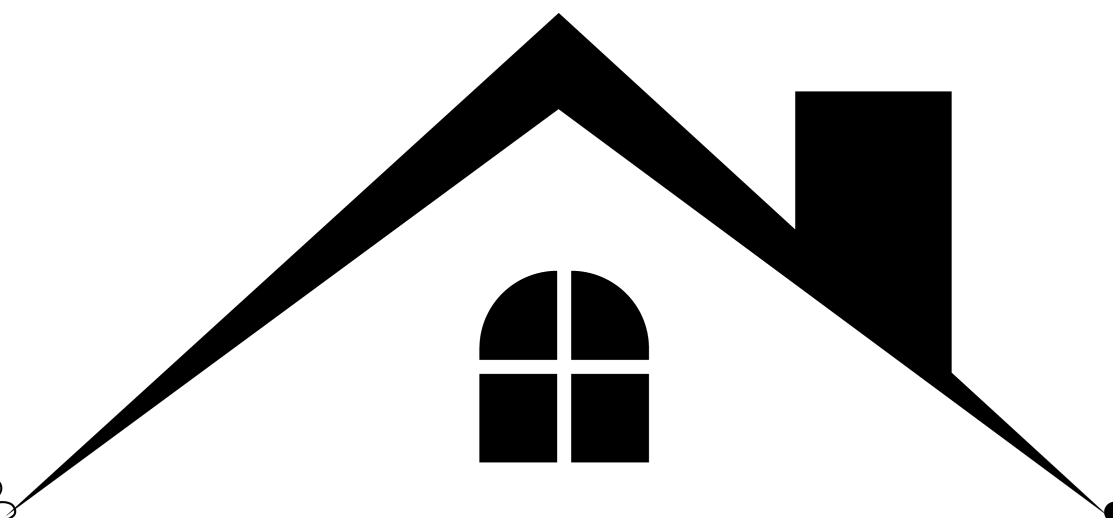
I snap my head up, then glance back at Mrs Wilson. Really?

“Then maybe later you can help me make the dinner? And we can take it from there,” she adds.

A huge wave floods over me, soaked with emotions I can’t even begin to describe. My skin prickles and comes alive. Am I being invited in? After all these weeks? No more hiding. “Uh..um..” I stutter, in complete disbelief. In only a couple of hours I will be sitting at that dining table, eating dinner with everyone. “Yes. Yes please.”

She smiles, her eyes softening, and pushes herself out of the chair effortlessly. I start to follow her, then pause, my feet not yet inside. “What are we having for dinner?”

She marches over to the kettle, flicking it on with a quick hand movement. “Quinoa and marinated seitan.”



June in the House



London Times:
Mostly fine and dry
Maximum temperature: 24°
Minimum Temperature: 15°
Chance of precipitation: 10%
UV: low
Pollution: low

Tiny yellow stickers are scattered across Henry's ceiling. Bright stars. Some with the corners fraying out, the stickiness long gone, others with a point missing as if someone has tried to reposition them, and failed.

I painted vines and florals on my bedroom walls back home, but I never considered putting stickers on the wall like this. What a clever idea. I wonder if there are floral adhesives available to buy somewhere.

Henry snores gently from the bunk bed below me. I check my watch, it's just after seven. I slept peacefully in the bunk above him, the street noise much quieter in here than outside in the shed. These walls are much thicker, thankfully. Insulated and leak proof. A real duvet is nice and I brought my own pillow in from the shed, along with my books and Mother who now sits on the windowsill facing out into the garden, where I have spent most of the summer.

A little cough cuts through the morning quiet. "Are you awake?"

"Yes." I didn't realise he was.

"I've never had a sleepover before."

"Me neither."

"Do I snore?"

"Yes."

"Good, because so do you."

"No, I don't," I scoff. The covers rustle and the bunk creaks as he shifts around below me. "I like your stickers."

“If you move in, you can put up your own if you like? Or we can paint the ceiling? You can do the grass this time.”

I stare at the stars above, counting the ones closest to the wall edge. After I get to twenty, I clear my throat. “Would you want me to move in?”

I count another three stars while I wait for his response.

“Yeah, I think I would. I think I would like that a lot.”

I stop counting the stars and smile. “Me too.”

While he finishes the last chapter of his own *Peter Pan* book, I ease myself out of the top bunk and down the small wooden ladder, which digs into my bare feet. My feet touch down on the soft plush carpet and I follow it out of the room, closing the door behind me and down the hallway to the stairs. The main bedroom door is closed, Mr and Mrs Wilson must still be sleeping.

I had waited up as long as I could but Mr Wilson had returned home from work very late. I had heard some muffled exchanges with his wife in the kitchen below us but I couldn't make out what was said. The acoustics in these bedrooms are awful compared to the garden.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, the dog runs towards me pushing his wet nose into my crotch. I touch him once on the head, then wipe my palm on my pyjama trousers. He has left a residue. I shoo him away back to the living room and tiptoe through to the kitchen to put the kettle on. I shall start my morning a little earlier today, so I don't miss Mr Wilson going to work.

When I push open the kitchen door, I see him already sitting at the dining table, a pot of coffee beside him and Mother's letter, the envelope having been ripped open.

“Good morning,” he says softly.

“Good morning,” I echo, my voice matching his.

He gestures for me to come join him at the table, so I do. He pours me a cup of coffee from a blue ceramic pot and pushes the milk jug towards me. He doesn't offer me sugar. He knows how I take my coffee, it seems. Perhaps Henry told him.

I settle into the chair, the steam from the mug billowing and wafting in front of me.

"Judith tells me you both had a nice conversation yesterday and enjoyed some dinner and TV later?"

"Yes we watched a David Attenborough special on cacti on *Green Planet*."

"Sounds interesting," he nods. He takes a sip of his coffee and lays it down. "June, I talked to your social worker yesterday and she seems quite worried about you. She said she hasn't heard from you since you left Glasgow. There's a missing persons file open on you because you're a... 'vulnerable person', her words, not mine." He pauses, taking in my facial cues. I don't think I'm showing any.

"I didn't have a phone while I was here," I begin. "And I didn't want her knowing where I was in case she came for me."

"You're twenty-nine years old. She can't 'come for you.' You're free to live your life. She's there to offer financial and accommodation support since your mother's deceased. She's there to help if you need it."

I nod. "She tried to send me to a residential home."

"Is that what you want?"

I shake my head fervently.

"I don't think she can legally enforce that."

I take a sip of my coffee. It's a little strong for my liking but I don't say so. It'll do. "Should I go home now?"

"Do you want to go home?" he asks.

"Should I? Is that what Mother says in the letter? That I should be in Glasgow?"

“You didn’t read it?”

“I had forgotten it was even there, until yesterday. Besides, it’s not addressed to me. It’s addressed to the person in my life and I don’t know who that is just now.”

“Well, I opened it, so I suppose that person could be me.”

A heavy silence sets in around us, and I became aware of the birds outside, nesting in the Persian silk.

“I fear I might be quite difficult to live with,” I whisper.

“I fear the same,” he grins. I return the smile, the expression not feeling entirely unfamiliar.

“What happens now?”

“That’s up to you. What is it that you want to do with your life, June?”

“I don’t know yet,” I say. “I don’t really know who I am, or what I do best?”

“I think I know,” he says, pointing to the vase on the kitchen counter, filled with milky white baby’s breath, blue tinted hydrangea stems and dark purple phlox. I didn’t pick those myself, but I assume Henry did. They have been neatly clipped, to maximise regrowth. I have taught him well.

Mr Wilson slides the letter to me across the table, slowly, cautiously.

“Should I read it?”

“That’s up to you.”

I stare at the letter, the folded edges curling up, Mother’s handwriting facing up to the sun.

“I didn’t kill her,” I say quietly.

He frowns. “I didn’t think you did. Have you thought that this whole time?”

“I just couldn’t remember. Sometimes I get angry and bad things happen.” I rub my knuckles which were once split and bloodied. Now they’re healed, a faint scar across two.

“I’m sorry if you blamed yourself, but what happened wasn’t your fault.”

“Then why did she do it?” My voice is barely a whisper now.

“She loved you very much. Read the letter, and I’ll think you’ll see that too.” He gets up and walks away. “I’ll give you some time alone.”

The autumnal morning pecks at the window, the copper-stained leaves in the back rustling in the breeze. I pick up the letter and head for the patio door. The animal bounds past me and launches herself into the garden. I walk gently across the patio stones until the soles of my bare feet touch the soft grass, moist with the morning dew, and sit down.

The morning air smells different today. It smells new and fresh, and is filled with the scent of lavender from the back flowerbed. It’s quiet in the garden at this time, calm, with only the trees and birds and morning bees to keep me company. I try to ignore the dog as he burrows into the earth around the Persian silk tree which is turning with the season, and instead close my eyes and remember my garden at home. A garden so rich with flowers and herbs, and memories. Memories of me, of Mother, of our life there together.

I don’t remember my life in the years between Mother leaving and returning. I only remember my years with Mother, and everything she told me, taught me, showed me. I fell in love with the garden because she once loved it. I grew flowers so that she could pick them. I grew herbs so she could cook with them. I tended to the grass beds so she could lie on her back on them and gaze up at the sky with me. Everything was for her.

I slowly open the letter and read:

To the person who replaces me in June’s life — if she is to need someone which she might not,

If you’re reading this, then I’m dead. No other way to say that, I guess. But it’s true. Hopefully the pills worked, and if they didn’t then I’d have secured the outcome with a trip down to the river behind Barbara’s house, which I hope wasn’t too much bother to retrieve my body at the end. That river can be awfully fickle and toss up rubbish in all sorts of places. I just didn’t want June to find my body in the house after work. Don’t spend too much time dwelling on this, there is nothing anyone could have done to stop me. I too thought it would pass, but it didn’t. I am broken and have always been. But this isn’t a suicide letter because this isn’t about me. This is about my daughter June. Believe me, taking this option was a difficult choice for

me, but one I had to do. I didn't want to leave June but there really was no other way, and she has seemed ready in the last two years. Please tell her I love her and always will, and that everything I did, I did for her. I can only hope she has the tools now to live without me.

Anyway, just a few things to square away because I don't have a will or anything like that. I'm not paying those bloody solicitors to do nothing. This letter will hopefully do.

The Funeral

June knows what to do after I die, so please follow her lead. She may need some help with the actual organising but she knows the plans. Don't tell her how to dress on the day, let her wear her wellies and her raincoat and if she insists, carry that almanac or flower encyclopaedia with her if it makes her feel better. She'll insist on choosing the flower arrangements and that's fine, just make small financial suggestions as the service may quickly turn into a display at Kew Gardens otherwise.

Be sure to start the service dead on 11am (excuse the 'dead' pun), after June's tea break, and serve lunch at exactly midday, not a moment after.

And don't hug her and say, 'Sorry for your loss.' She won't like that. In fact, don't touch her at all.

The House

Hopefully the council will let June stay in the house. We've been there most of her life and we've kept it in good condition, it's only fair. I'll be sure to clean it before I go. Anything that can be sold, please help with the sale and give June the money. She understands how to look after money. I've taught her well in that area.

The Schedule

June will see to herself for her mealtimes and work schedule. Just check in on her regularly to make sure she's ok. She's fine to shop for herself, cook for herself, etc. but I wouldn't want her to get lonely or for anything to happen, such as the TV stops working and she can't watch *Strictly Come Dancing*.

June has a very consistent schedule, so encourage her to follow it even after I'm gone. Routines help keep her on track. She's not an emotional person so she likely won't grieve for me in the 'normal' way however if she's thrown off her routine, she will become very unsettled and very upset. And ensure she keeps up with her meds. They really do help.

Here is a rough outline:

7:30am She'll wake naturally so you don't need to wake her

7:45am Breakfast is a coffee with a splash of milk, a slice of white toast with butter (the real stuff, or she'll notice the difference). She may occasionally take a croissant with sugar-free strawberry seedless jam. Please make sure she takes her Paroxetine medication. It takes the edge off her OCD.

8:05-8:25am Shower and dressed, she'll leave just after this for the bus

8:40am Bus into town for work (all the regular drivers know her now)

June works at Marks and Spencer from 9:30am until 2:30pm, please ensure she remembers her packed lunch (cheese sandwich, Pink Lady apple, 1 bottle of water). On Saturdays and Sundays she volunteers at the community garden in town from 10am until 3pm. She loves being around flowers. (Side note: Don't let her bring her encyclopaedia of flowers & herbs to work with her no matter how much she begs. Once she forgot it in the staff room and oh my god, what a tantrum that led to. I lost three dinner plates, a ceramic bowl and a good bottle of Chianti that evening.)

3pm+ June will either read or do some light gardening outside or for a neighbour

5:15pm June likes to sort the vegetables and potatoes for dinner (don't worry she can handle the big knives)

6pm Dinner (if you're assisting then please make sure dinner is on the table for 6pm otherwise she gets upset)

7:00-9:00pm TV Time (June likes The Antiques Show, Escape to the Country, DIY SOS, Strictly Come Dancing and any gardening or nature shows)

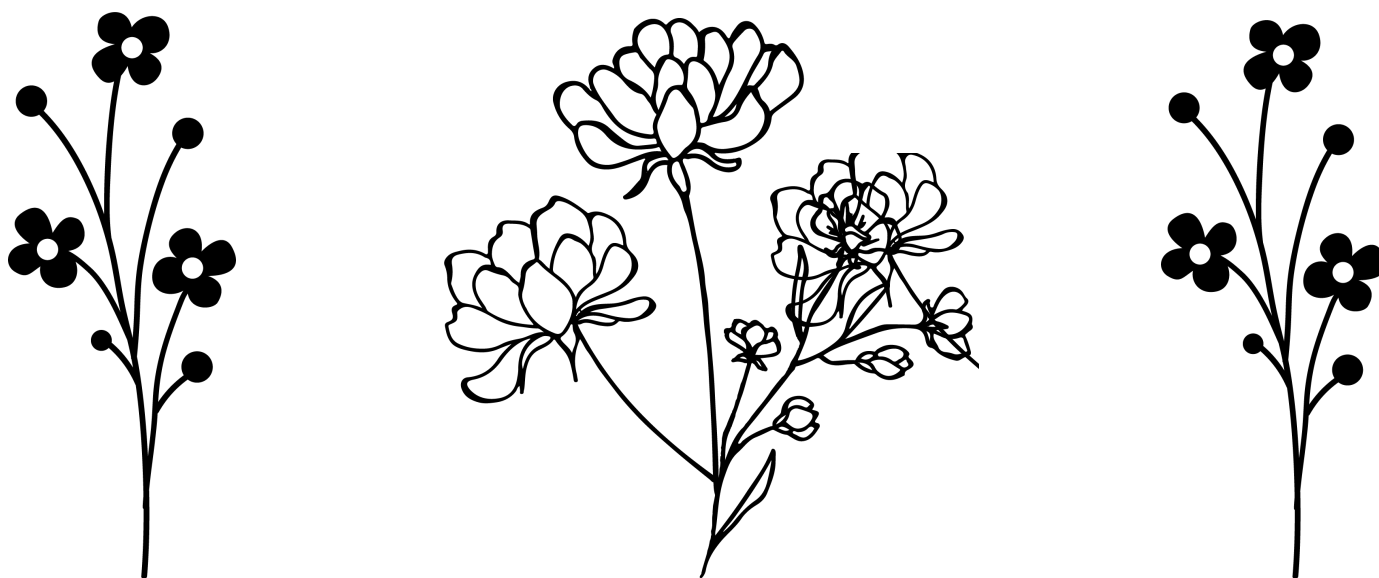
9pm Bedtime — she'll take herself upstairs so you don't need to remind her. She doesn't need sleep meds anymore.

June used to have episodes when she was younger, mostly angry outbursts, throwing things, etc. She's not had one in a very long time, because we keep a consistent routine at home and at work. Me being gone may trigger some of these episodes to happen again, and if they do then don't panic, call her social worker Aileen Macdonald at Glasgow City Council. She had some good advice for me when I was dealing with it in the beginning, such as staying calm, removing sharp or fragile objects, etc. It'll pass eventually and when she's back on routine and not thinking about me anymore, then they'll go away completely.

This may seem like a lot, but please understand — June is special. She may seem 'different' to those around her, but her differences only make her more special. She has a big heart and most of the time she's sunshine and rainbows. That's why I called her June.

June, like a warm and bright summer's day.

~ The End ~



COMMENTARY

Introduction

This critical reflection will explore particular strands of neurodiversity and heterogeneity in the field of contemporary fiction, to give an understanding of the framework created for the characterisation of June in the creative work submitted for this research degree. It is my goal that this thesis recontextualises the presentation of RAD, and more generally of social-emotional detachment, to find a new way of reimagining and presenting neurodiverse characters in fiction.

Discourse on attachment theory and its connection to the notion of neurodiverse social behaviours will form one component of this paper to give insight to the psychology of the protagonist June in the creative work submitted, *June in the Garden*, beginning with a look at the origins of the term ‘neurodiverse’ and its associations with disorders relating to social and emotional disengagement, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and reactive attachment disorder (RAD)¹. Subsequently, an in-depth analysis will explore the clinical understanding of attachment and the diagnostic term reactive attachment disorder, using key findings from discussions with Dr Helen Minnis, a leading RAD expert, from the University of Glasgow.

To examine where my creative narrative could sit in the context of existing fiction about neurodiversity and wider societal and academic debates, I will analyse current works of fiction within this genre, particularly those that utilise common practices largely associated with representing heterogeneity, including *A Man Called Ove* by Fredrik Backman (2014) and *The Rosie Project* by Graeme Simsion (2013). The novels I have selected all have protagonists that exhibit characteristics of social disengagement and/or emotional detachment.

An element of this analysis will encompass themes of family trauma, the mother-daughter relationship in literature, and the more general role of the mother in fictional texts that have a

¹ Disorders including autism and reactive attachment disorder will not be capitalised, as per The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) and the CDC. Disorders incorporating the surnames of those who first described it will be capitalised, such as Asperger’s syndrome and Tourette syndrome.

character with suspected RAD, such as *The Seven Imperfect Rules of Elvira Carr* by Frances Maynard (2017) and *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman (2017). In both novels, the daughters sustain physical and/or verbal abuse from the mother from infancy and have non-existent relationships with the father, which creates a narrative around the absence or abuse from a mother figure, similar to my own creative endeavours with *June in the Garden*.

The final strand of the critical exegesis will examine the use of literary techniques to convey aspects of emotional detachment and/or disorganised social engagement through the application of typography, visual design and marginalia. Novels I will be analysing here include Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), Janice Galloway's *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989), and Max Porter's *Lanny* (2019). I will examine how these novels represent the heterogeneous neurological patterns of their protagonists to depict social-emotional detachment, and highlight my own exploration into the ways in which the form of the novel can be used to augment the concerns of the narrative itself.

The genesis of the project comes from a place of experience and observation. Having graduated with a Master's degree in Scottish Literature and Creative Writing (2018), I sought a research project that combined creative writing with my Master's degree in Education (2010). In my twelve years of teaching experience, the students I have worked with exhibited a multitude of learning needs: autism, impairments to vision and/or hearing, attention-deficit disorders, and disabilities related to medical trauma, including brain injuries and birth complications. One disability that was new to my understanding of special education delivery was a term that will be discussed in more depth in this critical commentary: reactive attachment disorder.

Working with a child psychologist and the community social worker, it was my job as the education case manager to identify foster children displaying attributes of social-emotional delays associated with adverse childhood situations. It was then I learned of reactive attachment disorder

(RAD). I needed to educate myself further on the origins of it, the associated traits and the educational outcomes in order to identify, diagnose and integrate those children into appropriate school-based programmes.

However, upon delving into my own personal studies in RAD I discovered the research and public awareness of it was very limited. There were no diagnostic tools at the time to administer assessments, and my team and I were left to instead use tools more associated with the identification of emotional and behavioural disorder (E/BD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Based on a conversation with Dr Helen Minnis at the University of Glasgow and from reading her pilot study report, the diagnosis of RAD did exist in this period (2012-2016); however, it was not commonly known or used at a universal scale, and most certainly not in a small school district on the east coast of America where I was working at the time. Upon returning to the UK to continue my teaching career in the Scottish school system, I found it to be an educational term still not commonly discussed. And when I started to put together the proposal for this research project, I knew it was an area I wanted to explore further.

Having completed the synopsis and early chapters for the creative work that would later be titled *June in the Garden*, the character I wanted to create was of an adult age. Having commercially published four novels for a young adult audience, I sought a writing challenge and a path into the adult literary market. I had observed RAD at the childhood level and was somewhat familiar with the symptoms, but I did not know RAD within the scope of adulthood. I had questions that pertained to the psychology of it, the prevalence, and its presence in works of fiction. Questions that informed my initial research included: What does RAD look like in an adult? What impact does it have on an adult's socio-emotional profile? How could RAD be portrayed realistically in a contemporary fiction narrative?

Having talked with Dr Helen Minnis, a leading expert on the diagnostic term, research into adulthood RAD is less prevalent. However, it is deduced that symptoms at the adult level will mirror those associated with children with RAD, particularly stunted social-emotional development. Therefore, I formulated the following thesis questions to explore: what would an adult RAD profile look like? What would June's symptoms be and how would they continue to impact her life and her ability to develop and sustain social relationships and emotional connections with others? And finally, how would these traits I have manifested in my protagonist adversely affect her general rationale and reasoning and, more crucially, her decisions after the death of her sole caregiver?

In answering these questions, I hope my research will open up more opportunities for future studies and literary representations so that reactive and disorganised attachment is an area that is better represented and more widely recognised.

To summarise, the main findings of my research will identify the key traits of RAD and detachment, and argue that the two primary avenues for depicting such social-emotional detachment are (1) an application of typography and/or visual arrangement and (2) heterogeneous narration. Using novels that employ these two components, in addition to writings on narratology and postmodern narrative theory, I will explore how I attempted to represent elements of the diagnostic term reactive attachment disorder in *June in the Garden*.

Neurodiverse Representations: Understanding the Psychology Behind 'June in the Garden'

Disability in Literature

To understand the neurodiverse characterisation of the protagonist, it is crucial to first discuss the broader subject of the representation of disability, which according to some is, "everywhere in

literature”². For the purposes of this argument, it is useful to highlight a selection of contemporary novels featuring a character with a suspected or named disability, whether it be physical or motor like in Bridget Kemmerer’s *A Curse So Dark and Lonely* (cerebral palsy) and Eric Lindstorm’s *Not If I see You First* (visual impairment), intellectual such as Erin Lange’s *Dead Ends* (Down’s syndrome), or neurological as in Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (suspected ASD); not to mention my own creative work (RAD).

Barker and Murray argue that the now “constant presence” of disability in literature “arouses notions of “deviance” or, conversely, being “special”; provides an example that shocks, creates fear, or invites pity; or functions as the subject of spiritual or philosophical contemplation.”³ Mitchell and Snyder agree that some texts use disability as a crutch, adding that “disability pervades literary narrative, first as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device.”⁴ Whereas, I would like to believe that the existence of narratives featuring a character with a disability are simply an attempt to provide an accurate representation of our population profile, with 22% of people in Scotland identifying as having a disability.⁵ In fact, it would be inaccurate to portray a fictional world without diversity and disability.

However, I do agree that the representation of disability in contemporary literature needs to be clearer at times, because when “disability appears to signal the possibility of so many connections to other topics, it can easily be lost or subsumed in what are presumed to be more “important” (and nearly always nondisabled) questions”⁶. For example, in Brigid Kemmerer’s *A Curse So Dark and Lonely*, a modern reimagining of *Beauty and the Beast*, Harper’s motor

² Claire Barker and Stuart Murray, “On Reading Disability and Literature,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1.

³ Barker and Murray, *On Reading Disability and Literature*, 1, 2.

⁴ David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 47.

⁵ “Housing and Disabled People: Scotland Statistics,” Equality and Human Rights Commission, accessed 18 April, 2023, <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/housing-and-disabled-people-scotland-statistics>

⁶ Barker and Murray, *On Reading Disability and Literature*, 2.

impairment is anchored in her opening chapter — “cerebral palsy doesn’t mean my curiosity is broken”⁷ — but quickly diminished by the elaborate story-world she enters and the tensions within it.

Having discussed this topic with the Stirling Autism Research (STAR) team, there also appears to be a growing concern about the publication of misleading information, particularly with Mark Haddon’s widely popular *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Both myself and the STAR team disagreed with Haddon’s depiction of a disability, assumed to be ASD; however, for this thesis I will discuss Haddon’s use of typography later when examining narrative form. Conversations with the STAR team echoed some concerns that as ASD and other disorders gain more of a presence in contemporary fiction, people with disabilities become “subject to misrepresentation and prejudice, still patronized, feared, or relegated to the margins.”⁸ It is very often for this reason that authors avoid using diagnostic terms in their creative work, possibly for fear that their representation is incorrect or exaggerated. Moreover, G. Thomas Couser states that “disabled people come to literary production from within the same culture that marginalizes them”⁹ further questioning the lack of representation in writing, with many of the authors who produce work about disability coming from “a world designed, built, and maintained for the nondisabled.”¹⁰

It was, therefore, my goal at the beginning of the thesis to avoid this notion of misrepresentation, to not use June’s disability as a “representational trope”¹¹, but instead explore the many facets of RAD, utilising its characteristics to tell the story. My goal was to create a piece of fiction that could “also do productive cultural work in the ongoing struggle against the

⁷ Brigid Kemmerer, *A Curse So Dark and Lonely* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 8.

⁸ Stuart Murray, “The Ambiguities of Inclusion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 90.

⁹ G. Thomas Couser, “Signifying Selves,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 200.

¹⁰ Couser, *Signifying Selves*, 201.

¹¹ Mitchell, Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, x.

marginalization and oppression of disabled people”¹², as ambitious as that was. It was through my research, and my experiences as a special needs educator, that I came to the conclusion that for this thesis, social engagement disorders such as RAD and ASD be reframed as neurodiverse thinking patterns and behaviours, rather than disabilities.

Neurodiversity and its Relationship with Autism

The next strand of this critical exegesis is an explanation of the term ‘neurodiversity,’ its association with known social disengagement disorders such as reactive attachment disorder (RAD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) — which is sometimes misdiagnosed and difficult to differentiate from RAD due to the exhibited traits — and the theory of attachment and detachment to better understand the psychology behind the creative work submitted. References will be made to prominent research and to my creative narrative to provide an understanding of the frameworks utilised to build said narrative.

The term ‘neurodiversity’ is the main focus of Steve Silberman’s *NeuroTribes* (2015) which examines the heterogeneity of certain individuals and case studies, including Henry Cavendish, “paying tribute to the ways they bring the strengths of their atypical minds to their work”¹³ in a largely homogeneous world. As indicated in *NeuroTribes*, it can refer to any individual considered to have an atypical mind¹⁴. However, when researching social-emotional impairments, one will find an abundance of information on the more commonly known diagnostic term for social disengagement: autism.

Autism originates from ‘autos,’ the Greek word for ‘self,’ labelled by renowned child psychiatrist Leo Kanner because those who presented with the disorder “seemed happiest in

¹² Ria Cheyne, “Disability in Genre Fiction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 186.

¹³ Steve Silberman, *NeuroTribes* (London: Allen & Unwin, 2017), 7.

¹⁴ Silberman, *NeuroTribes*, 7

isolation”¹⁵. In 1944, Hans Asperger studied a group of young children displaying the same developmental delays as Kanner’s patients, but also showing advanced academic competencies, particularly in maths and the sciences. His work would coin the medical term Asperger’s syndrome, which is now defunct in the clinical field, arguably because of Dr Asperger’s connections to Nazism. Changes were noted in the 2013 publication of the *American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, which is used in the UK in combination with their own handbook: The International Classification of Diseases (ICD).

Both Kanner and Asperger are credited with establishing autism as a diagnosable medical disorder, but “Kanner seemed to see it as an unmitigated disaster, where Asperger felt that it might have certain positive or compensating features”¹⁶. Their work identified several key traits of autism which are still used today as a criterion for diagnoses, such as “repetitive or automatic movements...abnormal (and often ‘paradoxical’) sensory responses, with some sensations being heightened and intolerable...a tendency to verbosity, empty chatter, cliché-ridden and formulaic speech”¹⁷. Autistic traits like the need for routine and predictability tend to begin at an early age and can be mistaken for typical and ‘endearing’ behaviours of a young child: “He touched the same chairs and tables in exactly the same places every time he crossed the room...At first, Craig and Shannon thought his little routine was cute.”¹⁸

The British National Autistic Society estimates that around 1 in 100 children are diagnosed with autism, totalling around 700,000 in the UK alone.¹⁹ In the US, 1 in 54 children are identified with autism.²⁰ The discrepancy in rates between the US and the UK “probably reflects varying

¹⁵ Silberman, *NeuroTribes*, 5.

¹⁶ Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 245.

¹⁷ Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars*, 245.

¹⁸ Silberman, *NeuroTribes*, 56

¹⁹ “What is Autism?” National Autistic Society, accessed 17 September, 2020, <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism>

²⁰ Centers for Disease Control, “Screening and Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder,” accessed 18 August, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/hcp-screening.html>

levels of autism awareness and of services offered.”²¹ Another factor could be policy changes and state mandates, some of which do not exist in the UK. In 2001, a nationwide mandate saw that all fifty US states issued financial support to parents with children in need of behavioural therapies, saving families up to \$50,000 a year. Autism diagnoses increased by 10% that year and up to 18% in the following years²². This could suggest that more families were referring their child for diagnostic testing, even if they were once borderline cases. Furthermore, in 2006 “the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended screening all children for autism during routine pediatrician visits at 18 and 24 months of age”²³ which led to a greater number of diagnoses.

Another factor could be the CDC’s acknowledgement of school-administered assessments and special education classifications, an area I was familiar with when working in an autism unit at a school district in New England. Schools no longer require a medically-sourced diagnosis of autism to provide special education services to a student. In fact, nowadays a “Developmental screening can be done by a number of professionals in health care, community, and school settings” and moreover, “Training requirements are not extensive for most screening tools. Many can be administered by paraprofessionals.”²⁴ This had significant impact on schools, with many paraprofessionals — teaching assistants — now being allowed to administer assessments which would classify a student as autistic for their remaining academic years. Eventually the CDC included “those with an autism billing code or a special education classification of autism” in their data collections “to be counted as a datapoint in the “autism epidemic”” possibly inflating the rates

²¹ Jessica Wright, “The Real Reasons Autism Rates Are Up in the U.S.,” accessed 22 June, 2022, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-real-reasons-autism-rates-are-up-in-the-u-s/>

²² Rachel Burr Gerrard, “There’s no autism epidemic. But there is an autism diagnosis epidemic,” accessed 23 June, 2022, <https://www.statnews.com/2022/02/10/theres-no-autism-epidemic-but-there-is-an-autism-diagnosis-epidemic/>

²³ Wright, “The Real Reasons Autism Rates Are Up in the U.S.”

²⁴ CDC, “Screening and Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder.”

even more.²⁵ Of course this term ‘epidemic’ is disputable, as is the question of whether an inflation of rates took place.

As autism became more prevalent, so did the study and representation of it in texts. Within the wider scope of neurodiversity, the texts I will be discussing, including works by Steve Silberman, Oliver Sacks and Temple Grandin, allude to or reference autism, and are worth mentioning because there is an elision between the terms autism and neurodiversity with, at times, autism being ‘substituted’ for neurodiversity. To understand the psychology behind June’s atypical social behaviours, I am situating RAD in the context of ASD to highlight that the separation between the two disorders can sometimes be obscured due to the physical traits present, particularly deficits in social language and detached emotional responses. The connection between RAD and ASD is also demonstrated with Henry, whose neurodiverse social behaviours can sometimes echo June’s.

Because it is instructive for the wider idea of neurodiversity and detachment, the first text I studied was by Temple Grandin, renowned animal expert and autism advocate, who narrates her understanding of autism in *Thinking in Pictures*, particularly recalling her early school days: “I would tune out, shut off my ears, and daydream. My daydreams were like Technicolor movies in my head. I would also become completely absorbed in spinning a penny or studying the wood-grain pattern on my desktop. During these times the rest of the world disappeared.”²⁶ I applied this notion of shutting out the world with my own character June to further the theme of detachment and disengagement, having her become as absorbed in horticulture as Grandin was in spinning a penny or fixating on a particular pattern.

British neurologist Dr Oliver Sacks studied Grandin, providing the foreword for her book *Thinking in Pictures*, observing “her total bewilderment about other people’s mind, her inability to

²⁵ Gerrard, “There’s no autism epidemic. But there is an autism diagnosis epidemic.”

²⁶ Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures* (New York: Doubleday Dell Publishing, 1995), 96

decipher their expressions and intentions, along with her determination to study them...as if (in her own words) she were ‘an anthropologist on Mars.’”²⁷

The term ‘Anthropologist on Mars’ became the title for his own publication later that year, in which he examined the neurodiverse qualities among a small case study of people exhibiting ASD, amnesia, colour blindness, and Tourette syndrome, with a particular focus on their interactions with the world and their relationships with others around them.

Laura James recalls her experiences with establishing emotional relationships in *Odd Girl Out: An Autistic Woman in a Neurotypical World*, singling out her concrete thinking patterns and inability to decipher contextual clues as factors that impact her career, her relationships with others, and her understanding of her self: “I find it painful when I cannot second-guess how someone else is feeling or what they are thinking”²⁸ because “I can’t name my feelings. I don’t recognize them. Don’t know what they look like.”²⁹

When contemplating her own experiences with autism, particularly with navigating social situations that rely heavily on conversational nuances or figurative language, Fern Brady poses the simple question of: “Why did everyone go around speaking in code then getting angry at me because I didn’t have the glossary for their secret language?”³⁰

My character June is also unable to process non-verbal cues and figures of speech due to her social-emotional impairment:

I don’t like ‘figure of speeches.’ I find them very confusing, especially metaphors.

IT’S RAINING CATS AND DOGS

²⁷ Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, 13.

²⁸ Laura James, *Odd Girl Out: An Autistic Woman in a Neurotypical World* (Colorado: Bluebird, 2018), 99.

²⁹ James, *Odd Girl Out*, 2.

³⁰ Fern Brady, *Strong Female Character* (London: Hachette, 2023), 76.

SHE'S AS HAPPY AS A CLAM

I'LL BE AS GOOD AS GOLD

HE'S A NIGHT OWL

THAT TEST WAS A PIECE OF CAKE

Why can't people just say exactly what they mean? Why bundle the meaning into a metaphor or a simile making it hard for some people to decipher what they mean?

That just seems like more work to me.³¹

Other traits that I selected for my characterisation of June based on secondary readings, my experiences as an autism educator, and informal discussions with Dr Helen Minnis and the Stirling Autism Research Team led by Dr Eilidh Cage, included: uncontrollable rage prompted by a trigger, a need for predictability and routine, particular eating habits, and a fascination with a certain subject matter or object.³² For Daniel Tammet in the memoir titled *Born on a Blue Day*, it is an “obsessive collecting of different things, such as the shiny brown chestnuts”,³³ in the case study of ‘Leo’ in Silberman’s book it is green straws³⁴ and for my character of June in the creative work submitted, it is horticulture.

Creating a chapter where June does not display empathy for her brother by taking the last of the cheese³⁵ echoes Laura James’ comment, “The unusual way I experience empathy leaves me confused about human relationships.”³⁶ Similarly, June does not process empathy like most people, and even when faced with a very obvious cue that her actions have upset her brother, she still does

³¹ Natalia Liebnitz, *June in the Garden* (Stirling University, 2023), 78.

³² Silberman, *NeuroTribes*, 56-57.

³³ Daniel Tammet, *Born on a Blue Day* (New York: Free Press, 2006): 60.

³⁴ Silberman, *NeuroTribes*, 48.

³⁵ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 284–289.

³⁶ James, *Odd Girl Out*, 99.

not comprehend the situation in the moment. In fact, she carries on making her sandwich, confused about his response. It is only after she's had more time to reflect that she's able to come to the conclusion that she has done something to upset him and that she will mimic an act of apology from her book, *Peter Pan*, to rectify things.

Empathy allows the “sharing of experiences, needs, and desires between individuals,” thus “providing an emotional bridge that promotes prosocial behavior.”³⁷ This is an area that June requires additional processing time with, because of her attachment delays. It is not that she completely lacks empathy, but that she is incapable of responding to it at the time. A display of empathy is “achieved through a mechanism of neural action representation that often modulates observers’ own emotional content and motivates empathic responses.”³⁸ However, if differences exist in someone’s hardwiring, like June’s, then “Differences in these neural processes may account for different individual capacities for empathy.”³⁹

Neurodiversity and its Relationship with Reactive Attachment Disorder

One such developmental delay of the social-emotional processing system that impacts the ability to show empathy and establish emotional connection with others, is reactive attachment disorder (RAD), which is sometimes misinterpreted as ASD due to the neurodiverse social-emotional behaviours exhibited.

Largely stemming from unresolved trauma from an absent, neglectful or abusive parent, there exists many variations of the term, including disorganisation disorder, detachment disorder,

³⁷ Helen Riess, “The Science of Empathy,” *Journal of Patient Experience*, no. 4 (2017): 74.

³⁸ Riess, “The Science of Empathy,” 75.

³⁹ Riess, “The Science of Empathy,” 75.

disorganised attachment, dissociative disorder, insecure attachment disorder, and DSED which is disinhibited social engagement disorder.⁴⁰

Attachment is “a term used to describe the dependency relationship children develop towards their primary caregivers.”⁴¹ Some research into attachment theory tends to focus on the mother-baby relationship; however, “an attachment figure is defined as someone who provides physical and emotional care, has continuity and consistency in the child’s life, and an emotional investment in the child’s life.”⁴² For the character of June, this attachment figure is her mother, who despite her earlier abandonment and her later mental health struggles, provides this basic emotional and physical care.

“Human infants are not born with attachments already made to their primary caregivers. This special relationship emerges over time and through a series of stages.”⁴³ These important stages were missed for June and her mother, causing her to develop *insecure* attachment patterns, resulting in a significantly altered perception of, and interaction with, the wider social world as she got older.

Early attachment behaviours include, “smiling,” “signalling or calling to,” “protesting separation,” and “seeking to be picked up.”⁴⁴ These were all behaviours June exhibited as an infant, but had no parent that responded. She could not protest separation because the separation from a parent was forced upon her when her father abandoned her in utero and her mother left her shortly after birth. She had no one to apply and practise these early attachment behaviours with. And over time, whatever attachment patterns eventually form in an individual with a background like June,

⁴⁰ Kate Moran et al, “A Study of Attachment Disorders in Young Offenders Attending Specialist Services,” *The International Journal of Child Abuse & Neglect*, (April 2017): 2.

⁴¹ Colby Pearce, *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017), 15.

⁴² Pearce, *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder*, 15.

⁴³ Pearce, *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder*, 19.

⁴⁴ Pearce, *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder*, 21.

these patterns appear visibly “disorganized”,⁴⁵ with the person showing significant “difficulties in developing intimate relationships.”⁴⁶

June exhibits these disorganised attachment patterns through conversational exchanges with those she meets, robotic questions and responses that may come across as rude or abrupt, and sometimes by repeating social skills she’s learned from her mother or the social worker:

“Hello,” he calls to me, rather enthusiastically like I am the first and only customer to have entered his shop.

“Hello,” I say back, because that is the polite thing to do and I’ve passed enough tests with the social worker to know that.⁴⁷

Core symptoms of June’s diagnosis, reactive attachment disorder, are “Unusual social behaviours such as disinhibited/overfriendly or, conversely, withdrawn hyper vigilant behaviours.”⁴⁸ Other symptoms I observed as an educator in the US working with children diagnosed with RAD included some rigidity in behaviours similar to OCD, delayed communication skills, kleptomania, food hoarding and poor self-regulation of emotions which produced extreme episodes of rage.

These symptoms can be indicators of other developmental delays and mental health disorders; however, “classification systems recommend that RAD should only be diagnosed if there is a history of adverse early childhood experiences.”⁴⁹ In June’s case, this would be the absence of her mother. “In childhood RAD, it appears that some children who...have been maltreated fail to

⁴⁵ Helen Minnis et al, “Reactive Attachment Disorder Symptoms in Adults with Intellectual Disabilities,” *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, no. 23 (2010): 98.

⁴⁶ Minnis et al, “Reactive Attachment Disorder Symptoms in Adults with Intellectual Disabilities,” 401.

⁴⁷ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 280.

⁴⁸ Minnis et al, “Reactive Attachment Disorder Symptoms in Adults with Intellectual Disabilities,” 398.

⁴⁹ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

achieve a key developmental milestone, for example, the development of stranger anxiety.”⁵⁰ This explains why June is immediately trusting of the stranger in the London tube station who takes her money, and why she is confused by his actions rather than fearful. Her behaviours with this stranger and, later in the narrative, with ‘Aldi Boy’ could be defined as disorganised and disoriented, displaying “bizarre and contradictory behaviours” with a stranger who is not a known attachment figure.⁵¹

Diagnosis and Misdiagnosis

Unlike autism, the number of people diagnosed with RAD is largely unknown, with the first case study of RAD in school-age children having only been carried out in the last decade by Dr Helen Minnis, Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the University of Glasgow. This study found that of the children assessed from 29 primary schools in the area of Glasgow, 1.4% displayed signs of an attachment disorder.⁵²

Diagnosing RAD is significantly more challenging than diagnosing autism because “prevalence is unknown beyond infancy.”⁵³ And because “RAD should only be diagnosed in the presence of a history of ‘pathogenic care’”, which is simply an absence of care.⁵⁴ Therefore, a suspected diagnosis can be very difficult to ascertain as it depends heavily on parents being open about their home circumstances, which may include neglect or maltreatment, but is not always the case. “Caregiving need not be abusive or purposefully negligent to result in insecure attachment.” It can unfortunately result from “the inadvertent intrusions of the parents’ own difficult

⁵⁰ Minnis et al, “Reactive Attachment Disorder Symptoms in Adults with Intellectual Disabilities,” 401.

⁵¹ Pearce, *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder*, 24.

⁵² Helen Minnis, “Children on the Edge.” *The Herald*,” June 2012, accessed 3 September 2021, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13060537.children-edge/>

⁵³ Helen Minnis et al, “Prevalence of Reactive Attachment Disorder in a Deprived Population,” *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 202 (May 2013): 342.

⁵⁴ Minnis et al, “Prevalence of Reactive Attachment Disorder in a Deprived Population,” 344.

experiences.”⁵⁵ I took this direction with the character of June’s mother, who although provides a loving home for her daughter, is ultimately unable to care for June whilst dealing with her own mental health issues.

Dr Helen Minnis suggests that a lack of representation of RAD in both the clinical field and in contemporary fiction could be in part due to the nature of the condition with “the core symptoms of failure to seek or accept comfort are difficult to spot, because they are an absence of something rather than a presence of something.”⁵⁶ Without a full background disclosure and understanding of family history, RAD can easily be missed or, sometimes, misdiagnosed as ASD.

In one particular example, Silberman associates “socially inept genius” Henry Cavendish’s preference for routines, “anti-social behavior” and resistance to change with autism;⁵⁷ however, my interpretation of his profile leads me to question whether RAD might be present. Certainly Cavendish displayed all the usual “inexplicable idiosyncrasies”⁵⁸ of a person with ASD — “adherence to rigid timetables” and a “habit of listening obliquely to conversations rather than talking face-to-face”⁵⁹ — but he also grew up with an absent primary caregiver and “may have been traumatized as a child by the death of his mother.”⁶⁰

According to Dr Minnis, a person with RAD is at a significantly higher risk of also developing ASD and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder); therefore separating traits of RAD from traits of ASD can be difficult.⁶¹ This has made the “diagnostic process more complex”,

⁵⁵ Rebecca McKenzie, Rudi Dallos, “Autism and Attachment Difficulties: Overlap of Symptoms, Implications and Innovative Solutions,” *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (May 2017): 2.

⁵⁶ Helen Minnis, personal email communications, February 2022.

⁵⁷ Silberman, *NeuroTribes*, 27.

⁵⁸ Silberman, *NeuroTribes*, 38.

⁵⁹ Silberman, *NeuroTribes*, 32.

⁶⁰ Silberman, *NeuroTribes*, 33.

⁶¹ Minnis, personal email communications.

“increasing the risk of misdiagnosis.”⁶² As “the resulting symptoms are similar” thus “leading to a lack of clarity surrounding the comorbidity of the two conditions”⁶³ I created a fictional character who displays the neurodiverse qualities of RAD and paired her with a sibling who presents with ASD to (1) highlight the gaps in clinical studies surrounding the rare condition of RAD, and (2) to further the notion that often RAD can become ‘muddied’ with other disorders pertaining to social-emotional engagement, particularly ASD, obfuscating its socio-economic origins. I also wanted to highlight that as a special needs educator, the strategies I learned for communicating with students with RAD and ASD were near identical: scripted interactions, a processing of emotions with visual charts, predictable routines, and minimal physical touch.

Socio-Economic Factors

As Minnis discusses the prevalence of RAD in a particular socio-economic population, the context for the creative work titled *June in the Garden* stems from Dr Minnis’ pilot study in 2013 which determined that children belonging to ‘high risk populations’ in urban settings are significantly more likely to suffer from episodes of maltreatment, including neglect, abuse and parental absence; and therefore, RAD was more prevalent than initially considered amongst school-age children living in deprived urban areas. In addition, it was found that providing support and services for children living in high risk communities was an ongoing challenge, based on the difficulties Dr Minnis and her team faced trying to organise meetings with parents and caregivers, and gather information for the assessments and questionnaires.⁶⁴

Therefore, it was important to this research degree and particularly to June’s narrative direction, that she be from a high-risk area of Glasgow which was defined as a geographical

⁶²McKenzie and Dallos, “Autism and Attachment Difficulties: Overlap of Symptoms, Implications and Innovative Solutions,” 1.

⁶³ McKenzie and Dallos, “Autism and Attachment Difficulties: Overlap of Symptoms, Implications and Innovative Solutions,” 2.

⁶⁴ Minnis et al, “Prevalence of Reactive Attachment Disorder in a Deprived Population,” 346.

location where the employment deprivation and child poverty rates were high, in addition to a large number of single parent households.⁶⁵ To further my characterisation of June's mother, I also selected an area where alcohol consumption was higher than the national average, as were suicide rates and patients prescribed medication for anxiety and depression.⁶⁶

To further highlight the background choices I made when creating June, I decided to characterise her brother Henry in a different manner. For his profile, I placed him in a low risk population, defined by belonging to an area where life expectancy was considerably higher than the London average, as were property ownerships, compared to 'social rentals'. Overall, "The Notting Hill area generally has very low levels of deprivation for income, health, employment and education."⁶⁷ For the same reason, I also decided to assign the characters of the father and stepmother with high-income professions and postgraduate degrees.

Other than a high prevalence of RAD in low-income areas, Dr Minnis' research has found there are two subtypes of RAD: (1) Inhibited and (2) Disinhibited. When developing June's character, I determined that she would primarily exhibit Inhibited RAD, with established traits of poor eye contact, hypervigilance and unpredictable social responses, but with some additional characteristics associated with Disinhibited RAD, including displaying attention-seeking behaviours and being overtly forward with strangers, such as asking them personal questions and not adhering to social boundaries.⁶⁸ I wanted June to display traits of *both* subtypes because "Although two distinct subtypes are outlined, research shows that they can occur together."⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Glasgow City Council, "Area Partnership Profile," accessed May 2022, <https://www.glasgow.gov.uk/councillorsandcommittees/viewSelectedDocument>, 3-6.

⁶⁶ Glasgow City Council, "Area Partnership Profile," 22.

⁶⁷ Notting Hill Gate Council, "Demographic and Public Health Area Profile," accessed May 2022, <https://www.rbkc.gov.uk/pdf/Notting%20Hill%20Gate>, 5.

⁶⁸ Minnis et al, "Prevalence of Reactive Attachment Disorder in a Deprived Population," 4.

⁶⁹ Moran et al, "A Study of Attachment Disorders in Young Offenders Attending Specialist Services," 2.

For both subtypes of RAD, ultimately “behaviors are thought to arise from persistent caregiver neglect, physical or emotional abuse or a lack of continuity in caregivers that prevents the formation of stable attachments, for example frequent changes in foster care.”⁷⁰ Therefore, I sought to highlight June’s experiences of *insecure* attachments by peppering in details about her father’s abandonment pre-infancy and her mother’s neglect and absence between birth and five years old. I added snippets of past conversations with her mother to establish neglect:

When I’d asked her where she’d gone when she’d left me in a brown wicker basket outside Glasgow Royal Infirmary on the morning of August 8th 1995, when temperatures were 12° with South-East winds of 6 miles per hour (I’d looked this up on the Google), Mother had turned her back on me.⁷¹

To emphasise the duration of this neglect and imply that June’s early childhood years had been spent in foster care, not knowing where her mother was and if she’d ever be back, I wrote a chapter about her reunion with her mother and addressed it more explicitly in a later chapter:

When I was six, my social worker made me write a pretend one to Mother when she was away “finding herself.” In it I was asked to write as if she would receive it, which I’d later learn was impossible as we didn’t know where she lived.⁷²

⁷⁰ Moran et al, “A Study of Attachment Disorders in Young Offenders Attending Specialist Services,” 1.

⁷¹ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 48.

⁷² Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 225.

To suggest her foster care situation did not fully meet her emotional needs, nor accommodate for her social differences, the chapter endeavoured to shed more light on the home dynamics:

With Aileen’s help, I titled it ‘Dear Mother’ and went on to introduce myself and tell her my age, height, weight, and current interests which included sitting on the grass in the garden, braiding my hair, folding socks and looking at analogue clocks. There wasn’t much to do in foster homes other than that. There were never enough toys and when you did get your hands on one, it would only be swiftly taken by a child of larger size.⁷³

Further developments to June’s characterisation centred around strong depictions of (1) an “insecure-avoidant”⁷⁴ attachment to people, where at times in the narrative she’d appear “relatively detached and self-reliant; even self-absorbed” with a tendency to “avoid or ignore others and rarely initiate affectionate gestures”;⁷⁵ (2) an “insecure-ambivalent” attachment where June would display moments of anger and distress;⁷⁶ and (3) “disorganised/disoriented” social behaviours, “alternating engaging with and disengaging from”⁷⁷ others, evident in shortened encounters with her father, Aldi Boy and her half-brother throughout the narrative. These encounters were intentionally brief as June lacks the social capacities for longer interactions, which require more social-emotional effort.

⁷³ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 225-226.

⁷⁴ Pearce, *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder*, 23.

⁷⁵ Pearce, *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder*, 23.

⁷⁶ Pearce, *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder*, 24.

⁷⁷ Pearce, *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder*, 25.

The Relationship with Rules and Identity

Essie Johnston, a mother who adopted a child with RAD, believes these ‘disorganised/disoriented’ behaviours stem from a “need to create predictable situations.”⁷⁸ Those with RAD like their life “scheduled to be exactly the same as yesterday.”⁷⁹ This need for predictability I wove throughout my creative work:

Routine

Routine

Routine

Routine is so important according to Mother and my social worker, who rarely agreed on anything except that. But it’s not 7:45AM, and this is not my usual clock or the mattress I sleep on or my bedroom. This is not my house, and when I go inside to make my coffee it won’t be *my* kitchen. This is all different and my routine is getting lost.⁸⁰

The desire for routine is so profound that any inconsistencies or changes can be “one of the most common triggers for a child with RAD”,⁸¹ which is why June’s behaviours spiral when her mother dies, causing her to desperately seek another connection to a caregiver, because she associates routine and predictability with the role of a parent. With the mother figure gone, the next logical person in mind would be the father figure. Her need for control is the driving force for her moving into the garden shed.

Stemming from this need for control, a person with RAD often has a complicated relationship with rules, feeling an incessant need to abide by them, yet also engaging in forms of lying and/or stealing. Whilst some individuals with RAD may have a strong “motivation to lie”,⁸²

⁷⁸ Essie Johnston, *Parenting Pandora: Understanding Your Child with Reactive Attachment Disorder* (Seattle: Amazon Edition, 2014), 7.

⁷⁹ Johnston, *Parenting Pandora: Understanding Your Child with Reactive Attachment Disorder*, 19.

⁸⁰ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 157.

⁸¹ Johnston, *Parenting Pandora: Understanding Your Child with Reactive Attachment Disorder*, 20.

⁸² Johnston, *Parenting Pandora: Understanding Your Child with Reactive Attachment Disorder*, 29.

others may not understand the concept of “white lies”, the distinction perhaps being too abstract for a “concrete little brain.”⁸³ Wanting to explore this further, I wrote a chapter titled *‘June and the Little White Lie’* where the concept is introduced to her by her younger half-brother, who explains that white lies “are ok to tell if it makes the other person happy”,⁸⁴ which is confusing to June due to her concrete thinking patterns.

A person with RAD perceives rules and relationships in a different way to those around them. They struggle “to establish relationships,” and show behaviours that are “socially inappropriate,” not adhering to common social rules, because they have experienced “maternal separation of over six months in their first two years.”⁸⁵ The stress of this maternal separation is determined to have “an adverse effect on development in terms of emotions, behaviour, social relationships and intellect.”⁸⁶

Emotions are a particularly confusing terrain to navigate for individuals with RAD, and other social disengagement disorders such as autism, with many needing clear and explicit lessons on feelings, with concrete illustrations. One example of this, that I have observed in school-based settings, is drawing emotions such as a happy face, a sad face, and so on. I incorporated this technique in the creative work, where June is explicitly taught feelings and asked to identify her own using similar illustrations:

It was Mother who made me write down on paper why I was angry and what would help me next time so that I didn’t become angry again. And then she started with the faces — a smiley face, a sad face, a hungry face, a tired face, a confused face — and

⁸³ Johnston, *Parenting Pandora: Understanding Your Child with Reactive Attachment Disorder*, 31.

⁸⁴ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 224.

⁸⁵ Moran et al, “A Study of Attachment Disorders in Young Offenders Attending Specialist Services,” 2.

⁸⁶ Moran et al, “A Study of Attachment Disorders in Young Offenders Attending Specialist Services,” 2.

she'd ask me to circle the one that best represented how I felt inside. That was easier and so we carried on with that.⁸⁷

A lack of knowledge and awareness about emotions contribute to a larger loss of identity and sense of self, a common trait among those with RAD and one that I wanted to emphasise in my characterisation of a young woman displaying signs of detachment and social disengagement. “When a mother-infant dyad is predominately anxious-ambivalent...then he is likely to develop particular patterns of relating to other people and to himself”⁸⁸ as “attachment and attachment relationships will contribute to their concept of self.”⁸⁹ Without these attachment relationships, the child will not develop a coherent concept of self and therefore, display signs of identity loss. I attempted to make this evident in June with fragments of the past spilling into her reality with snippets of flashbacks of her mother’s suicide, to try and convey a sense of her being ‘lost’ — stuck in limbo between the past, which she cannot process, and the present, which becomes increasingly unpredictable and unknown.

For adults like June, many are able to “contain their anxieties most of the time, even appearing rather dismissing in their relationships with others - until there is a crisis that shatters these defences and reveals a core of preoccupation.”⁹⁰ For June, this crisis is her witnessing the suicide of her mother.

⁸⁷ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 170.

⁸⁸ Linda Cundy, *Anxiously Attached: Understanding and Working with Preoccupied Attachment*, (London: Karnac Books, 2017), 2.

⁸⁹ Pearce, *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder*, 34.

⁹⁰ Cundy, *Anxiously Attached: Understanding and Working with Preoccupied Attachment*, 3.

Security and the CARE Model

When understanding attachment disorder, it's crucial to briefly consider the prevalence of trauma and, particularly for RAD, the prevalence of *unresolved* trauma. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is “characterized by four clusters of symptoms: (1) re-experiencing symptoms (e.g., recurrent intrusive memories, traumatic nightmares, and flashbacks); (2) avoidance symptoms (e.g., avoiding trauma-related thoughts and feelings and/or objects, people, or places associated with the trauma); (3) negative changes in cognitions and mood (e.g., distorted beliefs about oneself or the world, persistent shame or guilt, emotional numbing, feelings of alienation, inability to recall key details of the trauma); and (4) alterations in arousal or reactivity symptoms (i.e. irritability, hypervigilance, reckless behavior, sleep disturbance, difficulty concentrating).”⁹¹

Although there is a link between trauma and RAD, “assumed to stem from profoundly disturbed interactions between primary caregivers or lack of a stable available caregiver at an early stage of development”, it is important to note that “studies on possible overlap between RAD or DSED symptoms and PTSD symptoms are scarce.”⁹² Moreover, some studies show that “most individuals experience a traumatic event during their lifetime” and “the majority of trauma-exposed individuals do not develop PTSD”;⁹³ in fact, “more prevalent disorders, such as depression, conduct disorder and substance misuse, occur more frequently than PTSD in young people who have experienced trauma.”⁹⁴ Therefore, the broader concept of trauma and PTSD will not be a lens through which I examine my protagonist.

What was beneficial was garnering information on the supports and strategies available to individuals with RAD to determine whether it was creatively feasible to allude to these in my

⁹¹ Cynthia L. Lancaster et al, “Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Overview of Evidence-Based Assessment and Treatment,” *Journal of Clinical Medicine*, 11, no. 5 (2016): 2.

⁹² Stine Lehmann et al, “Potentially traumatic events in foster youth, and association with DSM-5 trauma and stressor related symptoms,” *The International Journal of Child Abuse & Neglect*, (January 2020): 2.

⁹³ Lancaster, “Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Overview of Evidence-Based Assessment and Treatment,” 2.

⁹⁴ Helen Minnis et al, “Autism and Attachment Disorders — How Do We Tell The Difference?” *British Journal of Psychiatry Advances*, no. 28 (February 2022): 372.

narrative without the risk of adding too much of a ‘clinical feel’ to the overall piece. Although I wanted to highlight the lack of supports around families dealing with RAD, I wanted to show June’s mother’s desire to *try*. I wove in threads of a positive mother-daughter relationship, albeit challenged by the mother’s ongoing mental health problems, with accounts of evenings spent preparing meals together, watching particular television shows, camping out in the garden and engaging in conversational exchanges, allowing June to practise her social skills. Another indication of the mother’s willingness to re-attach, was routinising June’s day to create a predictable schedule. June’s wake up time was 7:30AM, lunch was noontime and dinner was exactly at 6PM because, “Ritualizing structured activities helps immensely. The child with RAD is NOT a fan of variety. Dinner is at 6:00. Not 6:01 and certainly not 5:59.”⁹⁵

Routine, expectation and predictability are key to understanding attachment patterns because they “lay the foundations of unconscious beliefs about ourselves, and expectations we hold of other people and relationships.”⁹⁶ Therefore, June’s attachment patterns, particularly her profound desire to reintroduce routine and predictability back into her life, impact her expectations of coming to London. She assumes her biological father will immediately slip into the role of a parent figure and she will once again have a primary caregiver, a home, and a routine. When this doesn't happen, June becomes cognitively disorganised, confused, and makes irrational decisions, specifically moving into the garden shed because it is simply close in physical proximity to her father. When her needs are further ignored, such as not being able to see the television screen from the garden for the opening episode of *Strictly Come Dancing*, she becomes angry and disoriented because for a person with RAD, “anger and distress seem disproportionate to the events.”⁹⁷ Regardless of the cause, rage

⁹⁵ Johnston, *Parenting Pandora: Understanding Your Child with Reactive Attachment Disorder*, 21.

⁹⁶ Cundy, *Anxiously Attached: Understanding and Working with Preoccupied Attachment*, 1.

⁹⁷ Cundy, *Anxiously Attached: Understanding and Working with Preoccupied Attachment*, 5.

is unregulated and often results in extreme displays. In June's case, she smashes the terracotta plant pots on the patio.

Furthermore, those with RAD tend to be "hypervigilant to signs of rejection" and when they are rejected, they may be persistent in their "attempts to make contact, perhaps escalating the intensity of his communication",⁹⁸ which perhaps explains why June resorts to living in the shed over the duration of the summer and why she continues her attempts at contacting her father (the letter, the meetings, etc.). She's desperately trying to form a 'secure' attachment, not realising she is naturally doing that with her brother. To her, the father is the end goal; but in reality, it is the brother that will meet her attachment needs.

Individuals with RAD also display "distancing behaviour in order to promote a sense of a predictable world and associated feelings of safety."⁹⁹ This was evident in the chapter titled *June and TV Themes Week* where the protagonist encounters Aldi Boy/Will again, and begins to socially distance herself from the conversation shortly after it begins, having just been triggered by seeing a woman standing on the edge of the riverbank who bears a strong resemblance to her mother:

I glance one more time at the woman who still stands at the water's edge, then walk slowly back to 16 Lansdowne Road, images of wild flowing hair pressing into the edges of my mind. The throbbing of bruised battered knuckles tingling across my skin.¹⁰⁰

One particular framework associated with attachment theory, and particularly RAD, is the CARE model: Consistency, Accessibility, Responsiveness, Emotional Connectedness.¹⁰¹ Due to the

⁹⁸ Cundy, *Anxiously Attached: Understanding and Working with Preoccupied Attachment*, 5.

⁹⁹ Pearce, *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder*, 57.

¹⁰⁰ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 261.

¹⁰¹ Pearce, *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder*, 37.

maternal separation June experienced between infancy and five years old, she developed “Disordered attachment representations” while in and out of various foster care homes “where normal attachment behaviours fail to consistently elicit CARE.”¹⁰² When reunited with her mother, this framework of CARE was re-implemented to a certain degree with most of June’s basic needs being met; however, the damage to the mother-infancy bond had already been done and patterns of reactive, disorganised, and socially disengaged attachment behaviours were already established. Moments of additional caregiver loss/absence occurred occasionally from ages five onwards, during periods where June’s mother struggled with her own mental health and alcohol addiction.

As stated on the previous page, rather than create a situation where June’s emotional needs are eventually met with the reintroduction of a parent, her biological father, I wanted another person to provide her with Consistency, Accessibility, Responsiveness, and Emotional Connectedness — her half-brother. It is through their emerging relationship, and ultimately her *attachment* to him, that she experiences some level of “attachment security and recovery from an attachment disorder.”¹⁰³ With “the provision of good CARE” from her brother and “the promotion of safe environments”,¹⁰⁴ albeit temporarily through the garden and the shed, June begins to form an identity and a stronger sense of self, understanding “who and what others represent and what relating to them is like and what interacting with the world is like.”¹⁰⁵

As with all models of supports and strategies, there exist some that are considered to be controversial or ineffective. To juxtapose the success of the CARE model with my main character, I also created a scene that implemented a strategy developed by Dutch ornithologist Nikolaas Tinbergen. He believed social disengagement disorders, particularly autism, were a result of “upsetting experiences in early childhood”, and proposed a form of intervention that “required

¹⁰² Pearce, *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder*, 47.

¹⁰³ Pearce, *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder*, 75.

¹⁰⁴ Pearce, *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder*, 52.

¹⁰⁵ Pearce, *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder*, 66.

mothers to ‘tame’ their children by hugging them for an hour each day — by force, if necessary — while gazing intently into their eyes.”¹⁰⁶ It is worth noting that Tinbergen worked predominantly with birds and not children.

Using this information, I inserted a scene in the chapter titled *June and the Return of Mother* where the character of Mother attempts to forcefully hug June to evoke an emotional bond between them, one that was severed at the stage of early infancy when Mother abandoned her. In the narrative, the ‘intervention’ does not work, much like Tinbergen’s efforts according to Silberman.¹⁰⁷

Literary Representations: Neurodiverse Attachment and Social Engagement Patterns

The second strand of this exegesis will explore twenty-first century narrative representations of emotional detachment and neurodiverse social engagement patterns, whilst reflecting upon my own creative processes for *June in the Garden*. The texts I selected for this section are: Janice Galloway’s *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989), Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Steven Hall’s *Raw Shark Texts* (2007), Graeme Simsion’s *The Rosie Project* (2013), Fredrik Backman’s *A Man Called Ove* (2014), Ann M. Martin’s *Rain Reign* (2014), Sara Baume’s *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* (2015), Gail Honeyman’s *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (2017), Frances Maynard’s *The Seven Imperfect Rules of Elvira Carr* (2017) and Max Porter’s *Lanny* (2019).

I chose to predominantly study fiction novels from the last twenty years because I am writing a contemporary novel that will hopefully one day be published for a contemporary market; therefore, texts earlier than the year 2000 were not included. The exception to the rule is Galloway’s text, which was published in 1989. This is because the novel is so seminal and integral to my own

¹⁰⁶ Silberman, *NeuroTribes*, 60.

¹⁰⁷ Silberman, *NeuroTribes*, 60.

creative work in terms of its Scottish setting and general typography. More crucially, I will be examining the strong sense of social-emotional detachment that is conveyed through its narrative form, one that creates “an annex of nowhere”,¹⁰⁸ further exemplified by marginalia. The character of Joy becomes pushed out of her own story, “a voice incapable of getting itself fully into the narrative.”¹⁰⁹ I will be examining these texts of modern fiction through two literary lenses: heterogeneous characterisation and narrative form.

(1) Heterogeneous Characterisation

Characterisation is a key element of storytelling. It is simply not enough “to establish the mere existence of an individual in a storyworld”, an author must create this individual through “enduring traits and dispositions to action, in a word, personality.”¹¹⁰ Therefore, this section will examine traits and dispositions considered to be ‘heterogeneous’, which is simply atypical in nature, or ‘neurodiverse’. It is because of these traits and dispositions that I chose these fiction novels. My criteria in choosing such books developed from my research into the psychology behind *June in the Garden*, as previously discussed. The main traits I determined to be crucial for my argument were visible signs of social-emotional detachment, defined by: repetitive or formulaic speech patterns; misinterpretation of commonly known figures of speech, such as similes and metaphors; and atypical social interactions with others. Other traits included: a complex relationship with rules and routine; a heightened awareness of time and/or space; a cognitive preoccupation with a particular subject matter.

The traits examined will show common patterns across the books selected, specifically an acute awareness of time and space, place, and language, particularly “verbal idiosyncrasies and

¹⁰⁸ Janice Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (London: Penguin Random House, 1989): 37.

¹⁰⁹ Cairns Craig, “Otherworlds,” *The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 270.

¹¹⁰ Uri Margolin, “Character,” *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 72.

catchphrases” to make the characters “memorable, even endearing.”¹¹¹ Many of these character traits are also the behaviours outlined in the first section that are commonly linked to disorders associated with social-emotional detachment, specifically diagnoses of reactive attachment disorder and/or autism spectrum disorder.

Although the selected literary works have not necessarily labelled their own protagonists as having either of these diagnoses, Frances Maynard alludes to her character as having a ‘condition’ that impacts social/emotional language processing and engagement in *The Seven Imperfect Rules of Elvira Carr* (2017) and discusses abusive aspects in the home, stemming from a mother figure, as does Gail Honeyman in her novel *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (2017). Both of these fictional works feature protagonists with behaviours associated with RAD and were ideal for this literary exegesis. For the others, including Haddon and Backman, I have categorised them as such for purposes of this research degree based on their lead characters displaying the associated traits discussed in the section before this.

Establishing Identity

The first narrative element that I have considered as critical for depicting heterogeneity is the representation of a character’s identity, and although this is a multifaceted term I will be using the notion of identity to describe any profile that deviates “from cultural, societal, narrative, and stylistic norms” as per Fludernik’s argument.¹¹² In these novels the constructs of identity are essential to the plot, emotional tone, pace, and sometimes, the overall objective of the protagonist. As exemplified in many of the selected texts, the concept of ‘alterity’ is presented through the characters’ “performative stances” and sometimes their “memories of past experiences”,¹¹³ such as

¹¹¹ Bronwen Thomas, “Dialogue,” *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 80.

¹¹² Monika Fludernik, “Identity/Alterity,” *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 260.

¹¹³ Fludernik, “Identity/Alterity,” 261.

Ray's relationship with his father (Baume, 2015), Ove's conversations with his deceased wife (Backman, 2014), Elvira's tempestuous relations with her mother and previous incidents with 'NeuroTypicals' (Maynard, 2017), and Christopher's 'affected' memories of his mother (Haddon, 2003).

All of the novels require the presence of secondary characters, as "Identities cannot be upheld without the cooperation of others. The continuity between present and past self that subjectively exists for individuals relies to a significant extent on the support that identity construction receives from the other."¹¹⁴ Socially-atypical interactions with colleagues, neighbours, fellow students, not only serve to highlight the 'individuality' of the protagonists but also formulates their identity, or 'alterity.' For each of the mentioned characters, their identity does not "exist independently" and "becomes notable only where set into relief against one or more others" — the 'others' being either "non-human" (the setting or societal institution) or "human".¹¹⁵ This relationship between the protagonist and the 'others' who support their identity constructions is continually challenged throughout the texts, with many of the characters maintaining an innate fear of being placed in any social situation. All of the chosen protagonists desire to lead relatively isolated lives separate from the wider community, for example, "I'm still afraid of almost every single form of social situation."¹¹⁶

Interactions with others, people often depicted to be developing more typically and homogeneously than the protagonist, help uphold the identity, or lack of, and the heterogeneity of said protagonist because "identity is relational, meaning that it is not to be found inside a person but that it inheres in the relations between a person and others."¹¹⁷ In Maynard's 2017 novel, there was a common theme of 'NormalTypicals' versus 'Atypicals' — "None of us understood

¹¹⁴ Fludernik, "Identity/Alterity," 261.

¹¹⁵ Fludernik, "Identity/Alterity," 271.

¹¹⁶ Sara Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* (London: Penguin, 2015): 36.

¹¹⁷ Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 25.

NormalTypicals or how they communicated” and “NormalTypicals instinctively *knew* how to behave, but people with my Condition had to *learn*.”¹¹⁸ Elvira even researches this on her new computer, finding that “people with my Condition were in the minority: NormalTypical was the way of the world” and “it was part of my Condition to believe people were what they pretended to be. If NormalTypicals were more like us there wouldn’t be these sorts of Incidents.”¹¹⁹

This sense of self-awareness within the fictional setting is reinforced in other fictional works, where the protagonist is recognisant of their own social differences. This is shown in Baume’s novel *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* when Ray acknowledges others’ impressions of him: “Everywhere I go it’s as though I’m wearing a spacesuit which buffers me from other people.”¹²⁰ He is well-informed of his heterogeneous personality traits, as is Don in *The Rosie Project*: “there is something about me that women find unappealing. I have never found it easy to make friends, and it seems that the deficiencies that caused this problem have also affected my attempts at romantic relationships” whilst also referring to himself as “the least socially competent person in the room.”¹²¹

In Haddon’s novel the character of Christopher shows some self-awareness but does not fully comprehend the extent of his alterity when compared to others — “There were lots of people on the train, and I didn’t like that, because I don’t like lots of people I don’t know and I hate it even more if I am stuck in a room with lots of people I don’t know.”¹²² Furthermore, he avoids other people as much as possible, “I do not like talking to strangers”, because “I find people confusing”, and he is hypervigilant about his peers, often considering violence if he feels threatened, “I can hit people very hard” and “I have my Swiss army knife if they hit me and if I kill them it will be self-

¹¹⁸ Frances Maynard, *The Seven Imperfect Rules of Elvira Carr* (London: Mantle, 2017): 83, 90.

¹¹⁹ Maynard, *The Seven Imperfect Rules of Elvira Carr*: 90, 223.

¹²⁰ Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither*, 13.

¹²¹ Graeme Simsion, *The Rosie Project* (New York: Pocket Books, 2013): 4, 35.

¹²² Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (London: Vintage, 2003): 158.

defence and I won't go to prison".¹²³ Whilst Elvira Carr is almost too trusting of 'NormalTypicals' in Maynard's text, Christopher Boone is very aware of a possible threat from them.

The Unrestricted or Restricted Setting

A heterogeneous character placed in a homogeneous setting further emphasises the neurodiversity of the protagonist. With regards to place, the theoretical framework for developing heterogeneity within a novel can often include a *restricted* setting, one which highlights the atypicality or idiosyncratic behaviours of a character. For Eleanor in Honeyman's novel it's a common workplace, for Elvira in Maynard's it's the clinical setting of a hospital or the local nursing home, and in Backman's text it's the normal workings of a suburban neighbourhood which Ove encounters on his daily "inspection of the street."¹²⁴ In both *Rain Reign* (2014) and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) it is a school — an institution, arguably known for regulating an individual's academic and social behaviours. In other words, the school emphasises Christopher's and Rose's rigid behaviours, atypical thinking patterns and cognitive fixations — Rose with homophones and Christopher with numbers.

With that said, it would be possible to read the shed as being a restrictive setting for my character of June; however, it is simply a *physically* restrictive setting. There is an absence of social restrictions often placed on an individual in an institution such as a school or within a cul-de-sac of neighbours, so June is somewhat free to exhibit her social and emotional idiosyncrasies within the garden and the shed. It is therefore, unrestrictive in nature, as is the main setting for the novel.

The city of London offers a geographical base for both *June in the Garden* and for *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* possibly because "a London setting provides a symbolic representation of the relationship between the centre (in the form of the capital city) and

¹²³ Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, 34, 14, 34, 44.

¹²⁴ Fredrik Backman, *A Man Called Ove* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2014): 6.

the marginalised characters that the texts portray...London forms an opportunity for a striking metaphorical repositioning of once marginalised voices (in the forms of their characters) within the centre.”¹²⁵

Arguably London is much like Glasgow within the context of my narrative. Like Glasgow, London is an urban setting, providing more opportunities for social interactions with others, and a city that has been “defined and redefined”,¹²⁶ also similarly to Glasgow. Although *June in the Garden* is deeply-rooted in Scotland because of my own personal ties to it, and a desire to produce a novel for the Scottish literary market, the relocation of June to London is important because the city “has long been associated with the journey towards maturity which young protagonists embark on.”¹²⁷ Perhaps it mirrors June’s social-emotional detachment, because it too is a place “of fragmentation and disorder” allowing for “fragmented identity constructions.”¹²⁸

Allen also argues that “The conclusion to *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* clearly expresses how the journey that Christopher has undertaken has made things better for him and changed his life as he realises the full potential of his abilities, and he is able to look forward positively to the future”, which could not have been possible without the destination of London being his “call to adventure” because the city “has given Christopher a way of understanding the world”, much like it gives June.¹²⁹ She displays a ‘fragmented’ sense of self and identity due to the sudden absence of her mother and the complete removal of routine and structure, and the London setting for her journey furthers this notion that the identity she attempts to construct herself over the course of the summer is one that is splintered and temporary. The shift from Glasgow to London is

¹²⁵ Claire Allen, *London Fiction at the Millennium* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): 12.

¹²⁶ Allen, *London Fiction at the Millennium*, 14.

¹²⁷ Allen, *London Fiction at the Millennium*, 66.

¹²⁸ Allen, *London Fiction at the Millennium*, 84, 96.

¹²⁹ Allen, *London Fiction at the Millennium*, 95, 69, 96.

therefore written out of necessity, because without a new narrative setting June cannot be challenged to understand the world beyond her usual confines.

Other literary tropes pertaining to the “the quest narrative” of London-based works of fiction include those that can also be associated with *June in the Garden*, such as: “the road of trials; atonement with the father; the achieving/finding of the boon; the refusal of return; rescue from without; the crossing of the return threshold; and the freedom to live.”¹³⁰

One differing conclusion to *June in the Garden* from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is that with Christopher “his journey and experiences there have served the purpose of him reaching the next stage of his journey to adulthood” and therefore end as he has essentially “outgrown the capital.”¹³¹ Whereas for June, there is no such conclusion to her story. She has not yet ‘outgrown’ London because the novel ends when the next stage of her journey begins. She has finally been accepted inside the family home in Landsdowne Road, albeit temporarily, but how her relationship with her father progresses after that is intentionally left ambiguous, open to the reader’s imagination and interpretation.

Language and Semantic Patterns

Language is another aspect to consider when creating a heterogeneous character because it contributes to the construction of identity and because it is linked to setting, to the colloquiums and dialects that June is hearing in the environment around her.

Furthermore, not only is language the “means by which characters communicate with each other” and with the reader,¹³² but it is how characters interact with and understand the fictional world in which they exist. And “although we expect it to be authentic”, the reader also understands

¹³⁰ Allen, *London Fiction at the Millennium*, 97, 69.

¹³¹ Allen, *London Fiction at the Millennium*, 97.

¹³² Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (New York: Routledge, 2009): 64.

that “Spoken exchanges in novels are grammatically and syntactically correct; they are more concise than real-life conversations since numerous repetitions, rephrasing, fillers and many other features of spoken conversation have been eliminated.”¹³³ As an author, how we select and organise language on the page can reveal a lot to the reader about our character’s ‘mind style,’ a term coined by British linguist Roger Fowler to refer to “any distinctive linguistic presentation of an individual mental self.”¹³⁴ It is both a stylistic choice we make as a writer and a psychological choice we make for our protagonist. If “literature is the creative use of language...in the context of general linguistic description” then theoretically a heterogeneous or, neurodiverse, ‘mind style’ can be “equated with the use of unorthodox or deviant forms of language”,¹³⁵ with the terms unorthodox or deviation referring to an avoidance of stylistic norms; for example, clear and concise direct or indirect speech patterns. Therefore, this section will briefly analysis the *atypical* stylistic choices some authors have made to represent heterogenous voices in their fictional work.

In Mark Haddon’s novel, the way Christopher relates to the world around him is evident in the language Haddon uses, specifically syntax and semantics. Much of the narrative is written very plainly and matter-of-fact, lacking phrases that have more than one meaning. The lexical repetition of Christopher’s sentencing and conversational exchanges with secondary characters reveal a child-like quality. Sentences are either short and direct, or long, often running on and including conjunctions such as ‘And’ or ‘Then’ to depict the fast-moving mind of a child seemingly unable to mentally organise thoughts and separate ideas:

Then we went to the cafe and Father had plaice and chips and apple pie and ice cream and a pot of Earl Grey tea and I had my sandwiches and I read the guidebook

¹³³ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 65.

¹³⁴ Roger Fowler, *Linguistics and the Novel* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1977): 103.

¹³⁵ Geoffrey Leech, *Language in Literature: Style and Foregrounding* (New York: Routledge, 2015): 12.

to the zoo.¹³⁶

Whilst some individuals displaying low-functioning social-emotional skills use a “lexicon of non-verbal sounds, song fragments, and catchphrases”, and “riffs of scat singing,” “little melodies,” and “repertoire of echolalia”¹³⁷ to communicate with the world, others struggle to decipher idioms, figures of speech and jokes. Elvira in Maynard’s 2017 novel displays this difficulty:

Oh, do keep up, Elvira was something Mother often said, when I asked her what was happening in a Foreign Film, or what someone had meant exactly, by puzzling phrases like *We must meet up soon* (why must we?) or *A change is as good as a rest* (but it’s completely different) or *It’s as plain as the nose on your face* (why is my nose plain?).¹³⁸

Difficulties with interpreting meanings in conversation is a frequent occurrence for Elvira — “when I’d been unsure how to answer a question, she’d said, ‘Cat got your tongue?’ and I’d run across the road, crying, thinking the ginger cat opposite was eating it, and Mother and Jane had been angry. I knew now it was a Figure of Speech.”¹³⁹ And, often when she does this in public, her mother becomes frustrated and cruel to her, showing the reader the extent of verbal abuse Elvira experiences in the home, which further highlights a possible RAD diagnosis.

Similar semantic patterns can be found in Mark Haddon’s narrative about a boy displaying social-emotional idiosyncrasies, much like my character of June and the other protagonists

¹³⁶ Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, 86.

¹³⁷ Silberman, *NeuroTribes*, 46.

¹³⁸ Maynard, *The Seven Imperfect Rules of Elvira Carr*: 49.

¹³⁹ Maynard, *The Seven Imperfect Rules of Elvira Carr*: 114.

mentioned in this analysis. Like Elvira, Christopher also struggles with jokes, telling the reader “I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them.”¹⁴⁰ He also makes the observation that:

people often talk using metaphors. These are examples of metaphors

I laughed my socks off.

He was the apple of her eye.

They had a skeleton in the cupboard.

We had a real pig of a day.

The dog was stone dead.¹⁴¹

Christopher continues to reflect upon the nuances of adult conversations in a manner that highlights his cognitive preoccupation, or fixation, with particular subject matters:

The word *metaphor* means carrying something from one place to another, and it comes from the Greek words **μετα** (which means *from one place to another*) and **φερειν** (which means *to carry*), and it is when you describe something by using a word for something that it isn't. This means that the word *metaphor* is a metaphor.¹⁴²

Semantic threads connect Haddon's novel with my own, with June also displaying difficulties with types of figurative language. Another novel with a school-aged protagonist displaying behaviours one would associate with ASD, is *Rain, Reign*. In the novel Rose shares her

¹⁴⁰ Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, 8.

¹⁴¹ Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, 15.

¹⁴² Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, 15.

fascination with homonyms with the reader: “I am Rose Howard and my first name has a homonym. To be accurate, it has a homophone” and “I like homonyms a lot.”¹⁴³ Rose interacts with her world through homonyms and at times, narrating her story in this form of figurative language: “I stand on the porch for a moment and look at Rain/Reign/Rein.”¹⁴⁴

Those with an emotional support network, possibly a caregiver, a teacher or a colleague, can practise social language skills, a common protocol in many educational settings when working with students who display social language delays. Rose Howard has access to a teacher at her school who “encourages me to think up conversation starters. Some conversations starters about me that do not have anything to do with homonyms or rules or prime numbers.”¹⁴⁵ And Don Tilman is encouraged by his colleague to “undertake some face-to-face dating to practice my social skills” in *The Rosie Project*.¹⁴⁶ In my own creative novel *June in the Garden*, June lacks a partner to practise with after her mother passes away: “There are lots of things I want to tell her, particularly because without Mother, I have not had an opportunity to practise my social skills in real-time conversation.”¹⁴⁷

In these novels, language is both the key to unlocking the world around these characters and the door that separates them from their peers, further attributing to their neurodiversity. Elvira Carr, Christopher Boone, Rose Howard and June Wilson are acutely aware of semantics and pragmatics, but also challenged by the presence of them in a social context.

¹⁴³ Ann M. Martin, *Rain Reign* (New York: Feiwel and Friends, 2014): 3, 4.

¹⁴⁴ Martin, *Rain Reign*, 52.

¹⁴⁵ Martin, *Rain Reign*, 6.

¹⁴⁶ Simsion, *The Rosie Project*, 34.

¹⁴⁷ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 13.

Relationship with Rules

The complex relationship these protagonists have with routine, structure, rules and boundaries is another common thread that runs through many of the novels examined, including my own. An acute awareness of it and sometimes, an obsession with it, can highlight the heterogenous character in fictional narratives, often impacting and influencing their relationships with others, and with the world around them.

When examining neurodiversity, the individuals in Steve Silberman’s *NeuroTribes* depict a “complicated relationship with rules and expectations.”¹⁴⁸ Rules imply structure and predictability, two elements that were deemed crucial for people with ASD and RAD in the psychology section of this exegesis. Individuals with a complex view of rules frequently review them, and sometimes even share them with others. The fictional character Rose Howard states in *Rain Reign* that “Making a mistake is accidental. Breaking a rule is deliberate.”¹⁴⁹ She goes on to further distance herself socially from her school peers by pointing out ‘rule-breakers’ to her teacher — “Look! Rule number six. ‘All games, supplies, art materials, and books must be returned to their proper places when not in use.’ He broke the rule!”¹⁵⁰

This notion that a relationship with rules exists in these novels is one furthered by my own protagonist's desire for rules, because to her rules mean certainty, and certainty means predictability and stability, as well as an adherence to schedule and routine. In *June in the Garden*, the character of Henry understands and recognises some of June's boundaries, for example: “What is it?” Half-Brother asked, thankfully respecting the unspoken rule that I did not like to be touched.”¹⁵¹ This relationship with rules and expectations isn’t challenged until much later, when June’s need for

¹⁴⁸ Silberman, *NeuroTribes*, 91.

¹⁴⁹ Martin, *Rain Reign*, 3.

¹⁵⁰ Martin, *Rain Reign*, 50.

¹⁵¹ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 221.

routine and control comes between them, particularly when she is faced with the dilemma of splitting the final cheese slices for their lunch.

Rules are also a significant theme in Frances Maynard's 2017 novel, aptly titled *The Seven Imperfect Rules of Elvira Carr*. In it Elvira develops a set of rules to interact with the world, that need to be constantly rewritten as new social situations arise:

The Seven Rules

Rule 1: Being polite and respectful is always a good idea.

Rule 2: If you look or sound different you won't fit in.

Rule 3: Conversation doesn't just exchange Facts - it conveys how you're feeling.

Rule 4: You learn by making mistakes.

Rule 5: Not everyone who is nice to me is my friend.

Rule 6: It is better to be too diplomatic than too honest.

Rule 7: Rules change depending on the situation and the person you are speaking to.¹⁵²

These are created because, according to Elvira, "We didn't understand NormalTypicals' Rules, often we weren't even *aware* of them" so "Keeping to these would help me to move around the world of NormalTypicals, without getting into trouble."¹⁵³ Additionally, there are checklists so she can establish whether a rule has been followed or not.¹⁵⁴

Elvira realises the world is not black and white, and trying to navigate it with a spreadsheet of perceived guidelines for fitting in will not help her: "It seemed I had done *something* wrong but I

¹⁵² Maynard, *The Seven Imperfect Rules of Elvira Carr*, 84.

¹⁵³ Maynard, *The Seven Imperfect Rules of Elvira Carr*, 84.

¹⁵⁴ Maynard, *The Seven Imperfect Rules of Elvira Carr*, 94, 103.

couldn't work out which Rule, or Rules, I'd broken."¹⁵⁵ Like June, Elvira discovers it is her relationship with rules, specifically her own misinterpretation of them, that restrict her interactions and understanding of the social world. Sadly rule number five is one that is learned the hard way after she is victim to an assault by a work colleague.

Awareness of Time and Space

Broadly speaking, "Time has always played an important role in theories of narrative, given that we tend to think of stories as sequences of events"; referencing time can elevate it from being just "background elements in narrative" to becoming "part of its fabric."¹⁵⁶ A character acknowledging narrative time can also be linked to this complicated relationship with rules and expectations previously discussed, often making the heterogeneous protagonist acutely aware of these details, whether it be the time, the day of the week, the exact date, or in June's case, the almanac's expected forecast for the day and sometimes the time of sunrise or sunset:¹⁵⁷

<p><i>Gardener's Almanac:</i> Light rain showers High of 19° Sunrise: 04:43AM</p>
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With regards to the all-important opening line of a novel, both Sara Baume's *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* start their stories with an acknowledgement of time or day. While Haddon's opening line of, "It was 7 minutes after midnight"¹⁵⁸ refers to the exact time on a clock, Baume's refers to the day of the week: "You

¹⁵⁵ Maynard, *The Seven Imperfect Rules of Elvira Carr*, 110.

¹⁵⁶ Teresa Bridgeman, "Time and Space," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 53.

¹⁵⁷ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 190.

¹⁵⁸ Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, 1.

find me on a Tuesday, on my Tuesday trip to town.”¹⁵⁹ I also employed this device in *June in the Garden*, beginning with both a reference to the time and the temperature:

4:12PM.

The waiting room in Maryhill Community Centre is cold, at least five degrees cooler than what we keep our house thermostat at.¹⁶⁰

I considered it to be an appropriate trait for her character and for an individual displaying RAD, based on my readings and from what I had learned from research into social-emotional detachment disorders. It connects back to the theory that a person desiring rules and certainty, equally desires to know the time of day because that particular knowledge impacts their schedule and their routine.

The Rosie Project and *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* do not immediately begin with time/day referencing but feature it in the opening chapter: “we both arrived at exactly 7:00 p.m. as arranged”;¹⁶¹ “From Monday to Friday I come for 8.30.”¹⁶² *A Man Called Ove* delays time referencing until the opening of the second chapter: “It was five to six in the morning when Ove and the cat met for the first time.”¹⁶³

Referencing time/day/month/temperature doesn’t just serve to highlight the ‘simultaneity’ of a story, “locating a narrative in time” or beginning “the narrative proper” but also functions as a platform to show the protagonists’ heightened sense of detail.¹⁶⁴ Like my own, some of the novels

¹⁵⁹ Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither*, 7.

¹⁶⁰ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 11.

¹⁶¹ Simsion, *The Rosie Project*, 5.

¹⁶² Gail Honeyman, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (London: HarperCollins, 2017): 4.

¹⁶³ Backman, *A Man Called Ove*, 5.

¹⁶⁴ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 43.

mentioned then go on to regularly reference time to again show this awareness, like in *The Rosie Project*: “The lecture was scheduled for 7:00 p.m....I arrived on schedule at 6:57 p.m.”¹⁶⁵ When Don’s schedule is impacted by others, he feels wronged and responsible for getting himself, and those he is providing a lecture to, back on track: “we got started, *eighteen minutes late*. I would need to speak forty-three percent faster to finish on schedule at 8:00 p.m.”¹⁶⁶ His cognitive preoccupation with time threatens the one relationship that ends up being crucial to his social-emotional growth: “it was now 8:01 p.m. and Rosie was not there.”¹⁶⁷ After numerous time conflicts with his love interest, he softens his approach to schedules and routines, declaring: “Time has been redefined”¹⁶⁸ due to his blossoming relationship with Rosie, who is the complete opposite of him.

In *Rain Reign*, time awareness and referencing indicates a rigid relationship with rules, routine, and expectations: “The routine for after school is that Uncle Weldon picks me up at 2:42 p.m. and drops me off at my house between 2:58 and 3:01.”¹⁶⁹

For Christopher in Haddon’s novel, the mention of time and the use of the future phrases *going to* and *I will* indicate a cognitive preoccupation with the future and an uncertainty about what lies ahead: “I am going to prove that I’m not stupid...I’m going to take my A level in maths and I’m going to get an A grade”, so “I will be able to get a job and earn lots of money and I will be able to pay someone who can look after me.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁵ Simsion, *The Rosie Project*, 7.

¹⁶⁶ Simsion, *The Rosie Project*, 10.

¹⁶⁷ Simsion, *The Rosie Project*, 49.

¹⁶⁸ Simsion, *The Rosie Project*, 65.

¹⁶⁹ Martin, *Rain Reign*, 59.

¹⁷⁰ Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, 44, 45.

June in the Garden also mentions time frequently throughout to show not just an awareness of it, but to emphasise a further loss in identity, associating who she was with her previous routinised life with her mother and her *M&S* work colleagues back in Glasgow:

I have tried hard to readjust to the new routine since arriving here, pushing back my breakfast time by a whole five minutes while the last of the Wilsons trickle out the door to work/school.¹⁷¹

This sense of a loss in identity and how it connects to time is one that also exists in Galloway's *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*. Although the character of Joy Stone is one I did not initially consider as 'neurodiverse' due to origins of psychological trauma being quite prevalent in the narrative, I did eventually conclude that the theme of social-emotional detachment is too prominent to ignore. It is Joy's socially and emotionally-detached behaviours, and how they visually manifest on the page, that makes Galloway's text important for my research. And like the other novels, Galloway also employs the literary device of time referencing. But for the character of Joy Stone, it is not the knowledge of time that she seeks, unlike the other characters discussed, it is the *passing* of time that is emphasised, to highlight her concern with the process of "lasting through."¹⁷² For example, there are 121 mentions of the word 'time' in Galloway's novel, perhaps to emphasise Joy's complex relationship with it — "I know the waiting isn't over yet. There is always something not taken into account. Something more to come."¹⁷³ Joy is fixated on what will come next because, "Suspicion is never enough."¹⁷⁴ For her, there is never an end to her trauma, and never closure.

¹⁷¹ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 156.

¹⁷² Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 54.

¹⁷³ Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 147.

¹⁷⁴ Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 77.

Representing the Mother-Daughter Relationship

Another pattern associated with heterogeneous characterisation, and one that pertains directly to RAD, is the complicated relationship between the protagonist and the mother. Texts I will be referring to include my own and novels by Frances Maynard and Gail Honeyman that portray an anxious, ambivalent, absent or abusive mother. In these texts, it can be argued that the character of ‘Mother’, creates a protagonist that is socially and emotionally detached, displaying heterogeneous social behaviours with others, because “Anxious and inconsistent mothering makes children afraid to explore the world. They grow up needing other people to help them manage many aspects of their lives.”¹⁷⁵

For Elvira Carr, an abusive and resentful mother makes her worry about “the Modern World. Managing it without upsetting people or getting shouted at, or there being Incidents.”¹⁷⁶ When her mother is placed in nursing care, Elvira becomes dependent on her next door neighbour Sylvia to carry on this mother role and essentially, tell her what to do.

For my protagonist, soon after moving into the garden shed, June begins to depend on her brother for meals, conversation, suggestions of how to initiate communications with their father and for access to the kinds of routines she once shared with her mother, such as watching *Strictly Come Dancing* on Saturdays. But over time the relationship with her brother, a person who also displays atypical behaviours and struggles to form his own attachments to same-age peers, will grow into one that’s more authentic, ‘normal’ and *secure*. Her interactions and experiences with her younger half-brother will help her “Develop healthy affect regulation”, “Create space for thought”, “Promote self-awareness”, “Build a stronger sense of self” and “Strengthen capacity for empathy and compassion.”¹⁷⁷ The attachment that forms between them will act as a somewhat “attachment-based

¹⁷⁵ Cundy, *Anxiously Attached: Understanding and Working with Preoccupied Attachment*, 6.

¹⁷⁶ Maynard, *The Seven Imperfect Rules of Elvira Carr*, 67.

¹⁷⁷ Cundy, *Anxiously Attached: Understanding and Working with Preoccupied Attachment*, 16.

psychotherapy”¹⁷⁸ for her, helping her to find resolution with her past and with the ambivalent attachment patterns that have formed from the past.

However, for Honeyman’s character in *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, the mother-daughter dyad is more than just “anxious and inconsistent”, it’s *traumatic*.¹⁷⁹ Generally, trauma in fiction can be “defined by its intensity, by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the physical organization.”¹⁸⁰ Eleanor’s own trauma-initiated neurodiversity does not stem from one single trauma but from a long period of traumatic events occurring throughout childhood. Her traumatic past shapes her present atypical thought-processes and social responses, and alienates her from wider society thus making her appear more atypical to the outside world. Like June and Elvira, Eleanor is aware she doesn’t ‘fit in’ but unlike them, she cares about that fact: “These magazines could tell me which clothes and shoes to wear, how to have my hair styled” because “I aspire to average.”¹⁸¹

Context surrounding the extent of her trauma is woven in through the occasional flashback and subtle nods to her physical appearance, such as: “ridged, white contours of scar tissues that slither across my right cheek, starting at my temple and running all the way down to my chin.”¹⁸² Additionally, certain sections of dialogue with a medical professional drop in further clues about an abusive past: “You’re still of the view you don’t want to know anything else about the incident, or about your mother, I understand?”¹⁸³ Additional trauma inflicted from having an “absent parent”¹⁸⁴ — her father — coupled with a neglectful and abusive mother suggests Eleanor’s heterogeneous

¹⁷⁸ Cundy, *Anxiously Attached: Understanding and Working with Preoccupied Attachment*, 16.

¹⁷⁹ Cundy, *Anxiously Attached: Understanding and Working with Preoccupied Attachment*, 6.

¹⁸⁰ Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002): 2.

¹⁸¹ Honeyman, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, 30.

¹⁸² Honeyman, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, 10.

¹⁸³ Honeyman, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, 53.

¹⁸⁴ Honeyman, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, 31.

differences when it comes to emotionally attaching and socially engaging could in fact be a product of RAD as well, given the associated behaviours and established family history of maltreatment.

Whereas Eleanor refers to her mother as ‘Mummy’ throughout the novel — “Mummy has always told me that I am ugly, freakish, vile”¹⁸⁵ — Elvira uses the ceremonious title of ‘Mother’ in Maynard’s text. Wanting to create a similar sense of detachment and emotional distance between mother and daughter, my character June Wilson also uses the formal title of ‘Mother’ — “Winter was also a time when Mother became small and quiet, choosing to spend most evenings in her bedroom with a bottle of red wine, her pills and her photo albums.”¹⁸⁶

Finding fictional works with a “focus on mother/child relations”¹⁸⁷ was integral to my creation of June. As explained in the first section, the psychology behind the characterisation of a young woman with RAD is deeply embedded with this idea of a fractured bond between caregiver and infant, particularly in the first few years of a baby’s life. Although June did not endure physical or verbal abuse from her mother, unlike the characters of Eleanor and Elvira, she did experience significant and detrimental neglect and loss when her mother left her. I selected the two texts *The Seven Imperfect Rules of Elvira Carr* and *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* because, like *June in the Garden*, they are concerned “with daughters deeply identified with their mothers.”¹⁸⁸ I also wanted June’s identity to be tied to her mother, to further June’s identity loss when her mother dies. The emotional tie between a mother and her baby is so strong and vital to a young infant’s development that if it’s severed or damaged it could lead to a plethora of social-emotional issues in later life, and this is what the reader is observing with adult June.

Although the two novels selected and discussed in this section arguably endeavour to “elucidate the dilemma of the public’s relationship to the traumatised” and “expand their audiences’

¹⁸⁵ Honeyman, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, 30.

¹⁸⁶ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 158.

¹⁸⁷ Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, 4.

¹⁸⁸ Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, 4.

awareness of trauma by engaging them with personalized, experientially oriented means of narration that highlight the painful ambivalence that characterizes traumatic memory and warn us that trauma reproduces itself if left unattended”,¹⁸⁹ my intent as an author was to emphasise an absence of emotion in June, rather than a presence of trauma. By threading through subtle flashbacks or anecdotes about the time spent with her mother before her passing, I sought to highlight the lack of emotional capacity that June exhibits because of her RAD diagnosis.

Trauma is touched upon in some of the other heterogeneous novels discussed, delicately balancing the quirkiness and sometimes comedy of heterogeneity with a darker undertone of loss, and in some cases, caregiver abuse, neglect or absence. In both Baume’s and Backman’s texts, the protagonist has recently lost a loved one. In *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither*, Ray is still processing the death of his father and often refers to a “sadness that’s in me”,¹⁹⁰ whilst in *A Man Called Ove*, the main character is still grieving the loss of his wife as is evident in the conversations he imagines still having with her — “Nothing works when you’re not at home...She doesn’t answer...I miss you,” he whispers. It’s been six months since she died.”¹⁹¹

Trauma is a central theme to Galloway’s *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989), a narrative steeped in detachment with lines such as, “I watch myself from the corner of the room.”¹⁹² Just as Joy’s lover drowned, there is an ongoing echo of the trauma, with Joy drowning in her own sorrow and in societal expectations, eventually causing a separation between her and the world around, leaving us with a “novel of the most profound alienation, manifest not only in psychological and social but also in artistic terms.”¹⁹³ More will be said on these ‘artistic terms’ in the *Narrative Form* section of this exegesis.

¹⁸⁹ Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, 2, 3.

¹⁹⁰ Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither*, 51.

¹⁹¹ Backman, *A Man Called Ove*, 34.

¹⁹² Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 7.

¹⁹³ Alex Thomson, “Alienation and community in contemporary Scottish fiction: The case of Janice Galloway’s *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*,” *Community in Modern Scottish Literature*, ed. Scott Lyall (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 167.

Focalisation

The narratological meaning of ‘focalisation’ is the “point from which a narrator views fictional events and characters as if visually.”¹⁹⁴ This can be “either fixed (adhering to one character throughout the text), variable (shifting between different characters) or multiple (shifting between different characters while retelling the same event).”¹⁹⁵ This final section in *Heterogeneous Characterisation* will endeavour to elucidate my creative decision to narrate my novel in a fixed first person point of view.

For *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (Galloway, 1989), “The novel’s first-person perspective and its use of typographical breakdown” indicate “points of intense psychological or textual disturbance.”¹⁹⁶ Most of the other fictional texts discussed in this thesis utilise a similar point of view, including *Rain Reign* (Martin, 2014), *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon, 2003), *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (Honeyman, 2017), *The Rosie Project* (Simsion, 2013), and *The Seven Imperfect Rules of Elvira Carr* (Maynard, 2017), suggesting neurodiverse thinking patterns and social-emotional detachment might be better represented by “opting for a first-person narrator or adopting the point of view of a character.”¹⁹⁷ Moreover, it can be argued that the social language gap between neurodiverse protagonists and neurotypicals can be further highlighted by this restriction in knowledge caused by using a first person point of view, where readers “do not have access to other minds and are restricted to what they have learnt in the course of the story”, much like June is because her condition impacts her ability to process and comprehend non-verbal cues.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁴ Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, 26.

¹⁹⁵ Burhard Niederhoff, “Perspective — Point of View,” *Handbook of Narratology*, edited by Peter Hühn et al (Berlin: De Gruyter, Inc., 2014): 698.

¹⁹⁶ Thomson, “Alienation and community in contemporary Scottish fiction: The case of Janice Galloway’s *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*,” 166.

¹⁹⁷ Niederhoff, “Perspective — Point of View,” 696.

¹⁹⁸ Niederhoff, “Perspective — Point of View,” 699.

By comparison, Backman's novel *A Man Called Ove* (2014) is narrated in an omniscient third person point of view, where "the narrator and the protagonist are different individuals" and the "narrator is frequently nothing more than a disembodied voice", speaking from the "other of the other world."¹⁹⁹ Whilst Backman's use of a third person point of view finds a balance "between the closeness of an inside view and the distance of the third person narrator standing back with the reader in moments",²⁰⁰ *June in the Garden* conveys more of an 'inside view' to "create an intimacy" between the reader and June. Perhaps that particular perspective emphasises that heterogeneous individuals like June Wilson are "representations of people, not mere constructs" and that by employing a first person point of view it evokes an emotional response from readers that is "fundamentally similar in nature to our responses to real people in the world."²⁰¹ A first person point of view arguably gives a stronger voice to June and to her social-emotional detachment, with "the representation of the story" being "influenced by the position, personality and values" of June, and "possibly, other, more hypothetical entities in the storyworld";²⁰² for example, the visual, or typographical elements of the narrative.

Although the point of view is in fixed first-person, the narration style also "suggests that we are viewing a character from the outside, from a spatial and possibly from an emotional and ideological distance."²⁰³ This was achieved through simple, plain language, from a person acutely observant of their immediate environment: "The morning air smells different today. It smells new and fresh, and is filled with the scent of lavender from the back flowerbed."²⁰⁴ Observations of

¹⁹⁹ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 31, 266.

²⁰⁰ Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, 29, 28.

²⁰¹ Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, 32.

²⁰² Niederhoff, "Perspective — Point of View," 692.

²⁰³ Niederhoff, "Perspective — Point of View," 693.

²⁰⁴ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 336.

surroundings, people and conversations are scattered throughout the novel, to better create a profile of an individual with suspected RAD.

(2) Narrative Form

With regard to narrative form, this next section will examine and argue that heterogeneous characterisation, particularly surrounding social-emotional detachment, can also be represented through typography and visual design to frame the story and underline the atypicality or ‘uniqueness’ of the character and content.

Although “Such techniques do not seem like classical storytelling methods”,²⁰⁵ an arrangement of visuals can strengthen and emphasise the degree of detachment and social disengagement depicted in a narrative. It is my goal not to adhere to ‘classical storytelling methods’ because June is not the classical heroine of a plot. She can, at times, be the unlikeable, enigmatic, anti-heroine.

A conventional printed novel is usually “typeset in a ‘box’ surrounded by outer margins wide enough that the reader’s thumbs do not obscure the text, and a gutter (inside margin) wide enough that lines of text do not curve into the spine of the book”,²⁰⁶ and anything outside of that framework can be considered unconventional.

The narratological term typography is essentially “the art of designing text.”²⁰⁷ Whilst most physical forms of a novel are presented in a traditional manner as just mentioned, in simple text form with the standard page numbers, margin width and chapter titles, some novels intentionally deviate from this framework. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, including making “changes in the typeface”, “overlapping or omitted text”, a “physical disruption of the text” and just

²⁰⁵ Allen, *London Fiction at the Millennium*, 96.

²⁰⁶ Zoe Sadokierski, “Disturbing the text: typographic devices in literary fiction,” in *Book 2.0*, accessed September 2019, <https://zoedadokierski.com/disturbing-the-text-typographic-devices-in-literary-fiction>

²⁰⁷ Sadokierski, “Disturbing the text: typographic devices in literary fiction.”

generally, “graphic and typographic ‘quirks’ that are recognisable at a glance.”²⁰⁸ Furthermore, I will be including the following devices as typographical in form also as they impact the arrangement of text: numbers, formulas, lists, symbols, logos, transcripts, marginalia, illustrations, font style, font size and font colour, and nonconventional chapter headings.

Formatting, Spacing and Punctuation

Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) plays with formatting, such as unconventional spacing, as well as other typographical devices, to narrate three generational perspectives within the Schell family. The various typesetting styles Safran Foer uses are to “distinguish between the three different narrative voices” and “to disrupt pace and the rhythm of reading in order to communicate gaps in conversation or pregnant silences.”²⁰⁹ In the chapters narrated by Grandma Schell, the elongated spaces add a conversational element, as if the character’s letter is direct speech, words spoken to her grandson, held back after so many years:

I had a letter from everyone I knew. I laid them out on my bedroom
floor, and organized them by what they shared. One hundred letters.
I was always moving them around, trying to make connections. I
wanted to understand.²¹⁰

Her husband’s muteness is represented through pages blank bar a few words in the centre surrounded by white space, such as “The regular, please” and “Help” to add a sense of quiet and stillness to his narrative, and to accurately depict the notebook in which he writes common

²⁰⁸ Sadokierski, “Disturbing the text: typographic devices in literary fiction.”

²⁰⁹ Sadokierski, “Disturbing the text: typographic devices in literary fiction.”

²¹⁰ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (London: Penguin Books, 2005): 79.

responses to questions he has predicted will arise in his day, for example, “You want a cup of coffee, Thomas?”²¹¹ This typographical device “also echoes the profound loneliness of Thomas Senior’s world – the whiteness of the page surrounding the line of text breaks his relentless, unpunctuated narrative, effecting a sense of isolation and silence.”²¹² When Thomas becomes more prominent in the narrative, returning to the story and to the family after years of abandonment, the pages in the novel become saturated with tightly-packed sentences which eventually overlap to blacken the pages. The degree of “visual juxtaposition between this heavy ink and the whiteness of the single-line daybook entries visualize the complexity of his heartache.”²¹³ The reader becomes immersed in his emotions, as the text is absorbed into the once blank pages.

Moreover, letters and newspaper articles are presented in various typesetting styles and sizes to make them stand out and to convey a narrative journey after the loss of a loved one, similar to June’s letter exchanges with her half-brother after the passing of her mother.²¹⁴ Their letters are presented in different font styles too.

The typography in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) also highlights the neurodiverse thinking patterns of nine-year-old Oskar, who displays above average cognitive abilities in his conversations with others: “most people my age don’t know what that means.”²¹⁵ When questioned about the typography, Safran Foer commented in an interview: “Oskar is a very visual kid – he’s an inventor. I wanted the book to feel like one of his inventions, to be flamboyant in the same way that his imagination is.”²¹⁶ Safran Foer adds to this invention with black and white

²¹¹ Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 23, 26, 17.

²¹² Sadokierski, “Disturbing the text: typographic devices in literary fiction.”

²¹³ Sadokierski, “Disturbing the text: typographic devices in literary fiction.”

²¹⁴ Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 10, 11.

²¹⁵ Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 2.

²¹⁶ Joel Whitney, *An Interview with Jonathan Safran Foer*, accessed 13 May 2021, <https://www.joelwhitney.net/jonathansafranfoer.html>

photographs — some blurry and out of focus — and pages marked up with red ink or filled with scribbles made with an array of coloured markers.²¹⁷

In Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007), the formatting, sentencing and spacing serve to place Eric outside of his own story, existing in a separate narrative universe, a “conceptual stream with no mass or weight or matter and no ties to gravity or time.”²¹⁸ This is a universe where conceptual fish swim in that stream, feeding on “promises thoughts stories plans whispers lusts lies tricks secrets longings” because “life will grow and exist and evolve anywhere, even in the most inhospitable and unlikely of places.”²¹⁹

Steven Hall wants the reader to feel as disorientated as his character, who suffers from dissociative amnesia, a disorder that significantly impacts his memory recall, causing large chunks of memories to be irretrievable with each relapse. His condition is revealed to the reader in the first chapter, with the first associated visual being presented in the second chapter in the form of fragmented text, scattering letters in a white box spelling out the names of extinct species of primates²²⁰ — “particles of the conceptual other world, composed of the thoughts and memories of all humankind.”²²¹ Other plays with formatting exist, including the use of italics to depict an individual's emotional response as he struggles to process what little information he has on his past life: “*I have a condition. A disorder. What was that going to mean?*”²²²

Font size, spacing and shading play a role in the novel too, as do textbook articles, letters, word maps, a blueprint of a conceptual boat, all to physically form the ‘Ludovician’²²³ — a conceptual shark that feeds on “ideas, thoughts, fragments, story shards, dreams, memories” until

²¹⁷ Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 53-55, 62, 103, 208-215, 45-49.

²¹⁸ Steven Hall, *Raw Shark Texts* (Edinburgh: Cannongate, 2007): 55.

²¹⁹ Hall, *Raw Shark Texts*, 315, 55.

²²⁰ Hall, *Raw Shark Texts*, 16.

²²¹ Sadokierski, “Disturbing the text: typographic devices in literary fiction.”

²²² Hall, *Raw Shark Texts*, 17.

²²³ Hall, *Raw Shark Texts*, 266, 81, 229, 300.

the “victim’s memory and identity have been completely consumed.”²²⁴ The words and splintered sentences that form the shark’s outline become darker and larger as the Ludovician approaches the conceptual boat, the *Orpheus*.²²⁵ When Eric falls into the conceptual ocean and is pulled to safety by Scout, the incomplete sentence “Fingers clamped my wrist and forearm and dragged me back up towards the surface with a”²²⁶ is repeated several times over the next nine pages, alternating in dark to light to convey the intensity and tension. The final page of the novel is saturated in dark print and half-finished sentences, that bleed into each other to form the head of the deceased shark.

Another example of creative formatting, spacing, and sentencing is Max Porter’s novel *Lanny* (2019), where the main text is rearranged, at times wrapping around the character of Lanny, who never talks to readers directly, and fading into the background. Sentences are written, formatted and presented on the page in such a way that it appears to intersect with the nature it describes, becoming part of the forest much like the fabled character of Dead Papa Toothwort.

The novel alternates between short sections of prose and paragraphs that visually resemble poetry, written and presented as if heard, carried in the wind from the village through the forest to Toothwort. Snippets of conversation are written in italics and printed on the page like strands of breeze as “he reaches in and delicately pulls out threads, a conductor coaxing sound out of an orchestra.”²²⁷

All voices are heard: Lanny’s mother, Lanny’s father, Lanny’s art teacher, the villagers, all except Lanny himself. The protagonist of the book is muted, represented only through the language of others. *Lanny* is arguably a study of language itself, and how it is “used in literary texts, with the aim of relating it to its artistic functions.”²²⁸

²²⁴ Hall, *Raw Shark Texts*, 160, 64.

²²⁵ Hall, *Raw Shark Texts*, 337-375.

²²⁶ Hall, *Raw Shark Texts*, 373-381.

²²⁷ Max Porter, *Lanny* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019): 5.

²²⁸ Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short, *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose* (London: Longman, 2007): 7.

Whilst one function could be to represent the neurodiverse qualities of Lanny, the protagonist we only interact with through those around him, another function of Porter's chosen linguistic form could relate to tone. Porter utilises the beauty and mystery of nature to form the sentences, and to give the reader an immersive experience that is "part of a textured surface, ripples, moment, shifting in deep-time, story-beating, pulsating, connected to all that is water and all that is air."²²⁹

Examining the physical language, we can see that some sentences are purposefully unfinished, others run on, punctuated only with commas to lengthen and accentuate rhythmic flow, sounding quite poetic in form:

he swims in it, he gobbles it up and wraps himself in it, he rubs it all over himself, he pushes it into his holes, he gargles, plays, punctuates and grazes, licks and slurps at the sound of it, wanting it fizzing on his tongue, this place of his²³⁰

For other sentences, there are no full stops to show an ending, perhaps because "one thing leads to another again and again, time and again, with no such thing as an ending."²³¹ Other sentences lack punctuation completely, especially with dialogue, leaving it to also fade into the narrative, and into the forest with Dead Papa Toothwort, an immortal being that is both everything and nothing at all. The concept of immortality is represented through the never-ending threads of italicised words, pulled from the sleepy village beyond.

²²⁹ Porter, *Lanny*, 214.

²³⁰ Porter, *Lanny*, 7.

²³¹ Porter, *Lanny*, 9.

Some sentences are physically broken apart, pushed onto separate pages by the clatter of village chatter to emphasise the connection between Dead Papa Toothwort and the village he overlooks, a connection which is almost biological in nature, like he is a living part of it. For example, one sentence begins on page 21, “Dead Papa Toothwort remembers when they built this church...”, then is interrupted by snippets of village conversation for the remainder of the page. It continues on page 22, “stone from afar, flint from round here...” and finally ends on page 23.

Other than italics, Porter plays with font in other ways. For example, the opening scene of Dead Papa Toothwort waking is in bold which both establishes the typography in the novel whilst also introducing the muted ominous presence that will move through the village silently and slowly.

Dead Papa Toothwort wakes from his standing nap an acre wide and scrapes off dream dregs of bitumen glistening thick with liquid globs of litter.²³²

Font styles and size are also used to depict changes in point of view and in dialogue volume; for example, when Lanny climbs a tree the font size decreases as he climbs higher then increases as he shouts louder to Pete:

Then from way up above me,

There are bees up here!

There are bees up here!

Pete, there are bees up here!²³³

²³² Porter, *Lanny*, 3.

²³³ Porter, *Lanny*, 56.

In Part 2 of the novel, the exchanges between characters and the switches in point of view are quicker in rhythm and are now simply separated by a plus sign to indicate a change in speaker:

+

Archie, is Lanny up there with you?

+

Theo, have you seen Lanny since school?

+

It's Lanny's mum, she's asking if we've seen Lanny.

+

Jolie's texted asking if we've seen Lanny.²³⁴

And as the panic builds around Lanny's disappearance, the punctuation in the sentences is dropped completely:

a corridor of freezing silence cutting into the hissing lukewarm salt

diving again and again

every time shocking²³⁵

Using italics and placing certain text in bold can be a useful literary device. In amongst the village chaos when Peggy talks directly to Toothwort, her thoughts are in bold like Toothwort's opening chapter, perhaps to imply a connection between the two, much like the connection between

²³⁴ Porter, *Lanny*, 117.

²³⁵ Porter, *Lanny*, 134.

Toothwort and Lanny.²³⁶ Perhaps this notion of *connection*, is ultimately what drives Porter's creative display of language. Overall, his "typographic devices are woven into the fabric of the narrative" and are "integral to the primary text", meaning that "they cannot be removed from one edition to the next without significantly altering the narrative."²³⁷

Similarly, in *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, the narrative becomes splintered in some sections, using unfinished sentences to convey a sense of chaos, and more importantly a notion of isolation and alienation:

The point is

The point is

The point²³⁸

The fragmentary elements in Galloway's novel "offers us no concrete natural or social environment, but a circular entrapment in which the domestic interior reflects Joy's consciousness of isolation back at her."²³⁹ Joy exists outside of any known environment and place, which can only be represented visually. The typographical devices, including formatting and form, in Galloway's novel are vital to Joy's narrative.

Haddon (2003) utilises bold text to highlight labels, categories and names: "And when people ask me to remember something I can simply press **Rewind** and **Fast Forward** and **Pause**."²⁴⁰

²³⁶ Porter, *Lanny*, 150.

²³⁷ Sadokierski, "Disturbing the text: typographic devices in literary fiction."

²³⁸ Galloway's *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 107.

²³⁹ Thomson, "Alienation and community in contemporary Scottish fiction: The case of Janice Galloway's *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*," 167.

²⁴⁰ Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, 76.

My favorite animals were:

1. **RANDYMAN**, which is the name of the oldest **Red-Faced Black Spider**

Monkey (*Ateles paniscus paniscus*) ever kept in captivity.²⁴¹

In *June in the Garden*, the use of bold imply signs, important to June's journey to and around London: "Outside the window, a large sign reads **KING'S CROSS**"²⁴² and the use of italics emphasises sentences or words that require additional processing time for June:

Above the living room archway is a long silver banner emblazoned with red

lettering: **Happy Birthday Dad**

Happy Birthday Dad.

It appears to be Mr Wilson's birthday, although I haven't been informed of this fact.²⁴³

Font colour is also experimented with to give insight to June's 'mind style'.²⁴⁴ She has heightened observational skills, and is hypervigilant about her surroundings, therefore, noticing signs, labels, colours, etc.:

When I open them I see the boy beside me still licking his ice-cream, his mother who is looking intently at her phone screen, a man holding a big mint green storage bag

²⁴¹ Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, 86.

²⁴² Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 43.

²⁴³ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 190.

²⁴⁴ Roger Fowler, *Linguistics and the Novel* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1977): ix.

with the word **DELIVEROO** on it, and then there's the man who has been helping me find Notting Hill.²⁴⁵

I also wanted the novel to connect more with the city setting to “generate a kind of graphic white noise that defines the culture of this novel”²⁴⁶ with regard to shop signs, street names and brand labels, presented in the same or a similar font style and colour as which a person would see them on the street (Harrods, Deliveroo, Underground, etc.). I wanted June to be bombarded with everyday London signage to further strengthen the urban setting and the culture within it.

Galloway's novel uses italics to reflect gaps in time and to highlight the flashback sequences of when she witnessed her partner's drowning. The italics is scattered between real-time events to emphasise that Joy is reliving that same day over and over again, the outcome always being the same: “*His mouth is a red O, eyes wide to the sky.*”²⁴⁷

“Many narrative texts employ flashback...to fill in the past history of protagonists while avoiding a lengthy introduction or in order to reveal new facts”, and to add separation between “memory of past events within the main narrative” and “the reader's own memory of those events.”²⁴⁸ Quite often these flashbacks are italicised, as illustrated in *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* and in my own creative work, *June in the Garden*. The italicised flashbacks are used to convey the same meaning as Joy's flashbacks in Galloway's novel — to highlight that June too is replaying fragments from that fateful day, doomed to relive it through her own memories of her mother which are rooted in trauma and loss: “*Swirling, murky, dark water sloshing around, long reeds caught in the pull, floating, knotting...*”²⁴⁹ We learn later that the long reeds floating and

²⁴⁵ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 56.

²⁴⁶ Sadokierski, “Disturbing the text: typographic devices in literary fiction.”

²⁴⁷ Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 40.

²⁴⁸ Teresa Bridgeman, “Time and Space,” 57.

²⁴⁹ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 235.

knotting are in fact the strands of her mother's hair in the water as she drifts further down stream, away from June who stands on the riverbank watching her.

This notion of detachment and observation is also reflected in Galloway's text with the addition of "ooo"²⁵⁰ in several places as paragraph breaks or chapter headings, which could signify a lengthy or exaggerated 'O' for 'Observer'. Perhaps the three O's are a shadow of the former Joy, "whose name contains two 'o's" and who has now "become a third and absent person to herself, a circle containing only white space."²⁵¹ The 'ooo' could also be a reminder of the "red O"²⁵² on her deceased partner's face or it could be numbers and not letters, with the zeros representing Joy's emptiness and nonexistence in her own narrative — "I didn't exist."²⁵³ Detachment is such a central theme to Galloway's novel. The character of Joy exists outside of the story, trapped between two worlds: the traumatic past and the isolated present.

Lists and Inventories

Other elements of typography include lists and inventories, which some of the mentioned authors have employed in their own fictional narratives, including Janice Galloway and Mark Haddon.

In *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, Joy is a person who acknowledges: "I make a lot of lists."²⁵⁴ Perhaps she needs to structure her day to feel control, something she's lost since the death of her lover. Following lists, including ones from a magazine, a TV advertisement and suggestions from a friend, allows Joy to continue to emotionally separate herself from life, to avoid processing the trauma. The lists represent her alienation from society. Inventories and lists give her options and purpose, however temporary and false that may be:

²⁵⁰ Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 57, 70, 72, 76, 77.

²⁵¹ Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002): 195.

²⁵² Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 40.

²⁵³ Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 79.

²⁵⁴ Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 40.

THINGS YOU CAN DO IN THE EVENING

listen to the radio

watch TV

have a bath²⁵⁵

Without lists, Joy would be left to decide upon her own actions, which to her is terrifying and confusing at this time of mourning.

Haddon employs typographical devices in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, in fact “the use of pictures, diagrams and mathematical equations forms an integral part of the narrative.”²⁵⁶ The visuals he utilises also include lists to show Christopher’s heightened sense of detail and need for order:

This what I had in my pockets

1. A Swiss Army knife with 13 attachments including a wire stripper and a saw and a toothpick and tweezers
2. A piece of string
3. A piece of a wooden puzzle which looked like this²⁵⁷

Lists can often relate to rules, routines and expectations, and therefore was a preferred visual for my own creative work. I wanted this to be a relatively new cognitive strategy for June, one passed on to her by her late mother and social worker — mapping out her options for new and unfamiliar situations:

²⁵⁵ Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 37.

²⁵⁶ Allen, *London Fiction at the Millennium*, 96.

²⁵⁷ Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, 13.

As it's only 7:25PM I am not quite ready for sleep so I contemplate my options to pass the remaining two hours:

1. Stare out the window at the countryside beyond Edinburgh City.
2. Doodle florals and vines on the napkins that the previous person has left on the side table.
3. Read, which I can do as I have 2 books packed with me.
4. Go for a walk and explore the train as it may be my last time on one if I am to live in London with the Wilsons.²⁵⁸

June also uses lists when assessing costs, profits and generally to keep track of her finances, because that's what her mother taught her in the event she ever needed to manage her own funds, which happens when her mother dies and June leaves for London.

1 foldable yoga mat in forest green... £4.99

1 plain white pillow... £7.99

1 lamp with tassels on the shade... £12.99

1 rug (striped, again with tassels)... £10.99

1 slim bedside table in white oak... £15.99

Estimated total..... £50 ish²⁵⁹

In *The Rosie Project*, like June, Don regularly makes lists to help him with decisions before beginning a course of action, usually when his routine has been disturbed for some reason, or to

²⁵⁸ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 38.

²⁵⁹ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 129.

outline the advantages of some of his ‘life rules’, including implementing a “Standardized Meal System”:²⁶⁰

1. No need to accumulate recipes books.
2. Standard shopping list - hence very efficient shopping.
3. Almost zero waste - nothing in the refrigerator or pantry unless required for one of the recipes.
4. Diet planned and nutritionally balanced in advance.
5. No time wasted wondering what to cook.
6. No mistakes, no unpleasant surprises.
7. Excellent food, superior to most restaurants at a much lower price (see point 3).
8. Minimal cognitive load required.²⁶¹

Lists feature several times in *The Rosie Project* to highlight Don’s need for control and predictability, whilst in Hall’s *The Raw Shark Texts*, lists serve to ground the main character and provide stability as he desperately tries to untangle a web of psychological trauma. Although the character of Eric Sanderson is different to some of the other protagonists like Ove (Backman, 2014), Christopher (Haddon, 2003), Don (Simsion, 2013) and my own, he does still exhibit a neurodiverse character profile in terms of presenting with social-emotional detachment. Moreover, like the other characters discussed, he also makes lists to aid in his mental processing, reasoning and decision-making:

²⁶⁰ Simsion, *The Rosie Project*, 62.

²⁶¹ Simsion, *The Rosie Project*, 63.

I ate my breakfast in front of the still-chattering TV and made a mental list of the things I wanted to find in the house. The list went like this:

- Address book to contact family/friends and tell them what had happened.
- Photographs/photograph album. I needed to see my past life. I needed to see a picture of me with the girl who died in Greece.
- I remembered there had been a locked door upstairs, next to the bedroom I'd woken up in. I'd find the key to the door and what was so important that it had to be locked away *inside* the house.²⁶²

There are also letters, communications from his previous self, the “First Eric Sanderson”²⁶³ and frequent chapter breaks to drip feed the narrative to the reader and to compellingly convey a sense of fragmentation and detachment. This is further strengthened by Hall’s word choice. The word ‘fragment’ is peppered into the narrative around fifty times, at a rough count. Similar words also feature, such as “fractures”, “isolation”, “empty”, “ambiguity” and “deterioration”²⁶⁴ to depict Eric’s emotional detachment. Whilst “parameters” and “boundaries”²⁶⁵ convey his desire for control and stability, much like the other characters mentioned in this section.

Formulas, Signs and Symbols

Other than lists, Haddon adds other typographical devices in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, many of them mathematically-based. For example, Christopher’s chapters are titled with prime numbers, not with cardinal numbers, giving a reader insight into his atypical thinking patterns:

²⁶² Hall, *Raw Shark Texts*, 19.

²⁶³ Hall, *Raw Shark Texts*, 111.

²⁶⁴ Hall, *Raw Shark Texts*, 23, 28, 30, 75, 143.

²⁶⁵ Hall, *Raw Shark Texts*, 29, 30.

I have decided to give my chapters prime numbers **2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13** and so on because I like prime numbers.²⁶⁶

Christopher then goes on to demonstrate how prime numbers are determined using a number grid and a formula. This is one of the many grids, graphs and mathematical formulas that a reader can find in Haddon's novel. Other visual representations of Christopher's acute observational skills include images of t-shirt logos, maps, photographs, and street or building plans.²⁶⁷ His sense of detail and his desire to make readers also value detail is highlighted with the use of footnotes and flowcharts with predicted outcomes for various scenarios.²⁶⁸

Additionally, Haddon utilises the 'faces' technique on pages two and three, a common strategy for teaching basic emotions to a child with social and emotional differences in special education classrooms, a type of typography I use in my own creative work.

I include shop signs and brand logos to explain the processing patterns of June and also to emphasise the newness of her surroundings, a factor greatly affecting her social and emotional behaviours. June is outside of her comfort zone in London, and is therefore, hyperaware of everything around her — the buildings, people, accents, shop windows, street signs, etc.

I had asked a woman in a ridiculously-overpriced coffee shop to direct me to the best shop in London to pick out a gift for a maximum of £10 for the man I recently discovered is my biological father. She has sent me to a place called:²⁶⁹



²⁶⁶ Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, 11.

²⁶⁷ Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, 36, 87, 88, 144.

²⁶⁸ Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, 5, 65.

²⁶⁹ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 194.

This is used throughout the novel to highlight June’s observational skills and sense of awareness to her surroundings:

I can’t continue sleeping on the floor on some tarp and a hotel blanket.

So here I am to make some basic alterations:²⁷⁰



Like June, Joy in Galloway's text is a person who presents with social-emotional detachment. The numerous typographical devices employed, including footnotes, magazine headings and titles such as “This is the Way Things Are”,²⁷¹ convey a person desperately trying to write her own narrative. Joy plays many characters in her own story — she is a mistress, teacher, friend, sister, daughter, patient, victim and once was a “good wife.”²⁷² But after the trauma, and the aftermath, she is cast out from society, alienated and taken advantage of, and even dismissed by the many doctors and healthcare visitors she encounters while grieving for her deceased lover.

How Galloway redesigns our understanding of narrative form does more than draw “our attention to the ‘consciously constructed’ book in our hands”, she illustrates that “these devices form a unique typographic ‘language’ that we learn to comprehend as we engage with the novel.”²⁷³ Galloway shows us that trauma, detachment and — as a consequence — atypical existence, can be shown in other ways than standard text. Neurodiversity is sometimes best illustrated *visually*.

²⁷⁰ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 128.

²⁷¹ Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 26.

²⁷² Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 41.

²⁷³ Sadokierski, “Disturbing the text: typographic devices in literary fiction.”

Scripts and Staging

As we engage more with the text, we realise the narrative devices Janice Galloway employs, such as scripted interactions with the numerous visitors that come and go, are there to further remove Joy from her life, placing her in this ‘otherworld’ where she is separated from the community, and from her emotions:

HEALTH VISITOR	[Intensifying] But what about the day-to-day? How are you coping?
PATIENT	OK. [Brave smile] I manage. ²⁷⁴

In this particular scene, Joy plays the role of Patient, as she does in other scripted dialogues with the various psychiatrists she encounters while placed in treatment. The format of her conversations reinforce a sense of physical and emotional detachment for both Joy and the reader. Another example of a script appears during the memorial; the words in the reverend’s speech are capitalised and off to the left of the page, with a commentary on the right. This comes before a list organising her interpretations of the hidden message, that she is “the stain” that needs to be “cleansed, absolved, got rid of”²⁷⁵ with regard to her affair with her married work colleague:

THIS SERVICE HAS BEEN ONE OF	
JOY AND CELEBRATION AS	I notice he rolled his eyes
WELL AS SORROW	unpleasantly ²⁷⁶

²⁷⁴ Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 21.

²⁷⁵ Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 79.

²⁷⁶ Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 78.

The displaced text represents a displaced Joy, “sentencing her to a life without continuity” where she “has been written out of the script.”²⁷⁷ I employ a similar device in my own creative work, to serve the same purpose:

SOCIAL WORKER: (Sighs loudly) June, I’m so sorry for your loss.

JUNE: (Pauses) Okay.

SOCIAL WORKER: I talked with the police again yesterday. The autopsy doesn’t show any drugs in your mother’s system—

JUNE: (Interrupts) Mother doesn’t take drugs. Not anymore.²⁷⁸

The script-like sections reveal June’s inability to navigate this unfamiliar world, post-Mother. Just as Joy describes herself as “indecipherable”,²⁷⁹ June also feels the same, further illustrating this ‘otherworld’²⁸⁰ she now exists in like Joy.

Scripting is also a common technique used when working with students with neurodiverse thinking patterns and the inclusion of it in *June in the Garden* highlights its importance. Fern Brady agrees in her memoir that for individuals with social-emotional disorders, “Scripting is crucial” to avoid the “impossible social calculations”, because when “you have no social intuition, you can use scripts to interact more effectively.”²⁸¹ Whilst Brady is referring to her own diagnosis of ASD, this statement is also true for those with RAD.

²⁷⁷ Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel*, 193.

²⁷⁸ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 12.

²⁷⁹ Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 37.

²⁸⁰ Cairns Craig, “Otherworlds,” 270.

²⁸¹ Fern Brady, *Strong Female Character* (London: Hachette, 2023), 47

Marginalia and Graphics

This concept of ‘otherworlds’²⁸² existing outside of the main narrative is one present in Steven Hall’s *The Raw Shark Texts*, with graphics of a conceptual shark, a “powerful and persistent mnemonic predator” that hunts the character of Eric Sanderson, sending him into a state of “*otherness*” and “black space”, temporarily hidden by “Dictaphone fragments” and “a smokescreen of codes and texts.”²⁸³ The world Eric exists in is physically restrictive, much like June’s world in the shed, consisting only of “tunnels”, “shafts”, and “crawlspac^e.”²⁸⁴ An afterword by the author confirms this ‘otherness’, informing his reader that, “For every chapter bound into this book, there is an un-chapter, a negative, existing somewhere beyond its covers.”²⁸⁵ This comes after the author’s acknowledgements, several pages after the reader has perceived the narrative to have concluded.

The idea of ‘otherness’ that Hall presents is further exemplified in my own creative work with the various housing structures on the chapter title pages, both a representation of June’s reactive attachment disorder and a vehicle for driving her objective in the narrative: to create a home for herself. The vines inked up the sides of the first page of every new chapter serve as walls creating that home, as temporary as it may be at that time.

The opening chapter of *June in the Garden* shows remnants of what once was June’s home in Glasgow, an outline of a house on a street, with the neighbour’s home in the background to indicate that June belonged to a community, a safe haven where she knew all the neighbours. The next chapter shows a house sitting alone, starting the reduction of the visuals, and the boundaries that held her securely within the emotional shelter of her mother. Her mother was her world, and she helped June stay on track by keeping everything predictable and easy to comprehend. After her

²⁸² Cairns Craig, “Otherworlds,” 270.

²⁸³ Hall, *Raw Shark Texts*, 266, 116, 227, 179, 283.

²⁸⁴ Hall, *Raw Shark Texts*, 216, 216, 225.

²⁸⁵ Hall, *Raw Shark Texts*, 440.

death, these walls are taken down, with only fragments remaining of what was once there. When June departs for London on the train, leaving behind Scotland and her home, the chapter pages are blank, void of security, structure and predictability.

In Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts*, pages 330 to 338 are blank, empty of words and visuals, as Eric falls into the conceptual ocean and the word shark approaches, finally coming into typographical form on page 339. The “flipbook device” of this typographical element makes this scene “a cinematic allusion, in a cinematic way.”²⁸⁶

Similarly, in *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, one page is completely blank with only the word “oops”.²⁸⁷ A blankness sandwiched between an emotional episode at the treatment facility where Joy requires medication to calm down and a birthday sequence where she is stoically unwrapping presents from pink tissue. Like in *June in the Garden*, there is a sense of loss conveyed by employing this typographical device, replacing any continuity and familiarity with fragments of a disrupted life, again highlighting an existence outside of the story.

Aside from basic roof structures when she visits her father and goes to the hotel, we don't see the regrowth of visual walls in *June in the Garden* until June is in the shed. Over the course of the summer, the main timeframe of her story, we see the slow rebuilding of walls, but this time created with vines to represent the shed, the garden where she is living, and her fascination with horticulture. These vines will grow but never meet at the top. A roof will never be constructed because that is the final piece to her journey. Her creation of a home will never be complete until her biological father accepts her.

²⁸⁶ Sadokierski, “Disturbing the text: typographic devices in literary fiction.”

²⁸⁷ Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, 188.

Flashbacks, including the chapter titled “June and the Return of Mother”,²⁸⁸ cause a momentary removal of the vines to convey a sense of loss, emptiness and isolation, with sometimes only a few flowers on the ground remaining.

More blooms stem from June’s increased interactions with her biological father. From the chapter titled “June and the Lobster Croquettes”,²⁸⁹ small handpicked flowers begin to grow from the ground, to represent another step forward, another layer to the reconstruction of June’s identity, to the formation of stability and boundaries, and a step towards rebuilding a secure emotional attachment to a caregiver. And as the chapters progress, particularly around “June and the Red Rose”²⁹⁰ when her relationship with her half-brother is tested, as they argue over the last of the cheese for their lunch, the vines and flowers begin to grow wilder, taking up more visual space on the page as June’s emotions become heightened and affected by her interactions with her half-brother. The chapter after the flashback where the circumstances surrounding her mother’s death are finally revealed to the reader, the title page becomes saturated with garden growth, much like the saturated pages in Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Hall’s *The Raw Shark Texts*.

The discovery of her in the shed by her father in a later chapter again causes the removal of these walls, her temporary home, and when she is forced to sleep on a park bench the title page that precedes is again predominantly blank, void of the vine walls and of the stability and boundaries she craves, but with the occasional cluster of flowers growing from the ground without a foundation. By the end, when she is reunited with her father and also with her mother through her final letter, the vines finally meet the straight angular lines of a rooftop, delicately framing her final chapter to symbolise an end to a summer spent living in a shed, and also to represent a meeting of

²⁸⁸ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 180.

²⁸⁹ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 262.

²⁹⁰ Liebnitz, *June in the Garden*, 283.

two very different households and backgrounds, to show growth and a blossoming relationship with her father, half-brother and stepmother.

Visually, I wanted to show some artistic variation and, narratively, a small degree of a freeing of June's emotional boundaries and restrictions, therefore the configuration of the vine walls changes slightly with every growth and every new chapter, rather than adhering to one particular design. The vines that build the shed are also perhaps a character in itself, much like Steven Hall's conceptual shark in his novel, growing alongside and around June as the narrative form grows around Eric, eventually constructing the 'Ludovician'. The form changes and grows as June attempts to understand and interact with the world around her, never fully processing the notion of impermanence, with the threat of change being so imminent.

Narrating June's story through certain typographical elements emphasises her own neurodiverse way of interacting with the world, a way that is both visual and emotionally-detached. These "typographic elements do not alter the meaning of the text itself"²⁹¹ but highlight the representation of character within the text. Without these typographical elements, *June in the Garden* would still fundamentally convey the same meaning, but with them the representation of RAD and, more generally, of social-emotional detachment, is considerably strengthened.

CONCLUSION

Disorganised, disinhibited and detached all apply to the medical term reactive attachment disorder (RAD), a diagnosis that greatly affects an individual's emotional attachment patterns and ability to socially engage with others. This can result in neurodiverse thinking patterns and atypical social behaviours, commonly associated with some heterogeneous characters in contemporary fiction, particularly the ones discussed in this thesis. This understanding of heterogeneity is explored in the creative work using common threads often found in similar texts that feature a neurodiverse

²⁹¹ Sadokierski, "Disturbing the text: typographic devices in literary fiction."

protagonist, including: social language difficulties, a restricted setting, a heightened awareness to detail and time, a loss of identity, and more significantly, through an element of typography and design. Literature featuring a neurodiverse character with suspected ASD has been included in my research because (1) there is a discrepancy in RAD narratives, leaving a gap in the commercial market; and (2) “emotionally withdrawn symptoms of RAD” can be “hard to discriminate from the emotionally withdrawal found in ASD”.²⁹²

This research project identified particular themes and patterns common in novels featuring a heterogeneous protagonist, specifically those associated with the representation of social-emotional detachment. However, it is my hope that *June in the Garden* has proposed a new way to represent social-emotional detachment and neurodiverse thinking patterns; a way that reframes the presentation of a disability like RAD, where the character’s objective is woven into the typography itself and not necessarily just spilling out of the main text like many of the novels discussed here. The chapter pages are a manifestation of June’s goal, which is to find a more stable home. In addition, I hope to raise awareness on the existence of reactive attachment disorder and other forms of social disengagement disorders, and that it will highlight the lack of representation of RAD in clinical research and commercial fiction. Perhaps it will initiate a wider discussion on whether it is the individual’s “failure to adapt to the social world, or the social world that has failed to provide her with adequate resources to sustain her existence”,²⁹³ an important argument to consider after the suicide of June’s mother, and one present in Galloway’s novel *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*.

Hopefully this piece of research will carve a space for itself in the field of creative writing, and that further academic discourse will continue to take place after this, particularly on the prevalence of RAD in communities and the absence of it in contemporary fiction. It is of my opinion that this research has achieved its goal of depicting an adult protagonist with RAD, using

²⁹² Minnis et al, “Autism and Attachment Disorders — How Do We Tell The Difference?” 375.

²⁹³ Thomson, “Alienation and community in contemporary Scottish fiction: The case of Janice Galloway’s *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*,” 169.

the childhood traits associated with the disorder to construct an adult identity, one that is fractured and ambivalent. If commercially published, this novel could narrow the gap between homogeneous fiction and heterogeneous fiction, specifically stories that address social-emotional detachment issues outside of “autism narratives.”²⁹⁴ Moreover, if published, *June in the Garden* may become the first piece of RAD fiction on the market, an accomplishment that Dr Helen Minnis, renowned RAD expert at the University of Glasgow, said she would most welcome due to the lack of current representation.²⁹⁵

This critical exegesis highlighted two primary avenues for depicting social-emotional detachment in fiction: (1) heterogeneous narration and (2) an application of typography and/or visual arrangement of text. The typography employed seeks “to create verisimilitude – a believable world for readers to enter” and “strives to support the author’s verisimilitude” because “well-executed typography allows readers to slip into the world of the book, unimpeded by the activity of reading.”²⁹⁶ Typography can sometimes be embedded into the narrative, much like *The Raw Shark Texts* where Steven Hall directly refers to the “complicated visual arrangements” in his novel, and even attaching one secondary character, Dr Fidorous, to “The Bureau of Language and Typography”.²⁹⁷ This may be because Steven Hall “started out as an artist” and wanted to write a piece of fiction that explores “ideas about language and the evolution of ideas and language in a visual sense”,²⁹⁸ which he accomplished.

Like many of the novels discussed, the visuals in *June in the Garden* help to construct the storyworld, not distract a reader from it. It is for this reason that I employed typographical devices with caution, and not in a way that frequently disturbs the text and constantly rearranges and

²⁹⁴ Barker and Murray, “On Reading Disability and Literature,” 7.

²⁹⁵ Helen Minnis, personal email communications, February 2022.

²⁹⁶ Sadokierski, “Disturbing the text: typographic devices in literary fiction.”

²⁹⁷ Hall, *Raw Shark Texts*, 227, 278

²⁹⁸ Structo Magazine, “Interview with Steven Hall,” accessed 2 February, 2021, <https://structomagazine.co.uk/interviews/steven-hall/>

redesigns the written narrative, much like Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), which is why I did not include his work in this critical exegesis when discussing typography and narrative form.

The fictional texts I did discuss, along with my own, use typographical devices: (1) to be a representation of social-emotional detachment, particularly RAD, becoming a personification of June and her overall loss of identity caused by the death of her mother and the upheaval of her predictable and routinised life in Scotland; and (2) to visually represent June's overall objective to find stability and a home.

Lastly, I hope this research encourages more academic discourse on what classes as neurodiverse or heterogeneous behaviours, or more specifically for this thesis, what classes as emotionally-detached behaviours? To whom are we comparing these neurodiverse characters? Perhaps instead of representing a disorder or a disability, *June in the Garden* challenges "the very terms of normalcy that circumscribe disability" and disputes "dominant notions of what it means to be disabled."²⁹⁹ Perhaps these characters are "extraordinarily abled, here" because they have "access to information that "normal" people cannot access."³⁰⁰

When reflecting upon the use of typographical devices in *June in the Garden*, I considered whether it would come across as 'gimmicky' or distracting, or perhaps even inauthentic or forced. However, an interview from Jonathan Safran Foer after the release of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* resonated with me: "It's a shame that people consider the use of images in a novel to be experimental or brave. No one would say that the use of type in a painting is experimental or brave. Literature has been more protective of its borders than any other art form – too protective."³⁰¹ My creative choices for my novel do not come from a place of ambition, for I too do not consider novels that employ typographical devices as ambitious or brave. Anything deemed unconventional

²⁹⁹ Sarah Jaquette Ray, "Normalcy, Knowledge, and Nature in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*," in *Disability Studies Journal* 33, no. 3 (2013): 8.

³⁰⁰ Ray, "Normalcy, Knowledge, and Nature in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*," 5.

³⁰¹ Gabe Hudson, "Everything is interrogated," in *The Village Voice*, accessed March 2022, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2005/03/22/everything-is-interrogated/>

when compared to the standard print form has the potential to further a representation, an emotional journey, or to construct a separate world for the character to exist in, like Lanny or Joy Stone. We can't be protective of the conventional narrative form because story conventions and forms are constantly changing. Furthermore, "Literary disability studies is rapidly diversifying in terms of its reach across literatures",³⁰² these types of "Disability narratives never stand alone, but interweave around and through other codes and contexts for writing."³⁰³ In *June in the Garden*, the representation of RAD is intrinsically connected to the representation of family, trauma and the complex mother-daughter dyad. Therefore, June's narrative could never have been told without the characteristics of a social-emotional detachment disorder figuratively and physically spreading across the page, as her identity and sense of self is so inherently entangled with her neurodiversity. June sees the world in flowers, bloom and growth, and interacts with it and those within it in a manner that is both simple and contained, but also complicated and free. She is woven into the fabrics of the page, particularly the chapter pages. Each part of her story represents her taking a step forward, or sometimes back, and even though the final part, the roof, is added to the last chapter, her story continues on, as does her struggle with RAD.

³⁰² Claire Barker and Stuart Murray, "On Reading Disability and Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 6.

³⁰³ Barker; Murray. *On Reading Disability and Literature*, 7.

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