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These stories are both funny and moving, paying tribute to the breadth of storytelling across multiple generations all over Scotland. We hope you enjoy them.

Happy reading!

#BookWeekScotland

A huge thank you to the following supporters,
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Blether



scottishbooktrust.com

First published in 2019 by Scottish Book Trust, Sandeman House,
Trunk's Close, 55 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1SR

scottishbooktrust.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Typeset by Laura Jones

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

Scottish Book Trust makes every effort to ensure that the paper
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Cover design by O Street

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**Stories by published authors.*

Please be aware that this book is unsuitable for readers aged 14 or younger as it contains strong language and mature content.

Introduction

Tom Pow

Chambers 'Scots Thesaurus', in its section on 'chit-chat', tells us that 'to blether' means 'to talk foolishly, loquaciously or idly'; and that 'a blether' is someone who does just that. The thesaurus also provides any number of alternatives: bluiiter, buff, clytach, gibble-gabble, haiver, jibber, slaver, trattle, witter, yaag, yaff, yammer and yap. The message is of a culture that is suspicious of 'empty vessels' and of any speech which is not clear about its purpose. There was a time in Scotland when such attitudes had a corrosive effect on young people's confidence. Now, we can make light of these namings – invent others to match them, as writers do here, with, for example, the 'double-blether' and the 'tag-team blether'.

For, somehow, 'blether' has escaped its boundaries. Yes, it can still carry a sense of emptiness, carelessness or tedium, but it also carries warmth and intimacy. In fact, if someone asks you the meaning of 'blether', just give them this book. It will show them how flexible blethering is: you can do it at the berries, in a supermarket, sharing a meal, on a journey with a friend or while walking your dog – even while your mother is about to pray. 'Dae ye need tae dae it right noo, Maw? Will ye no take a wee bit lunch first?' Perhaps it wasn't in Lindz McLeod's mind, but in the set-up of 'Squeak', though not in its gentle tone, I'm reminded of Holy Willie's deluded 'blethering' to God.

Blethering while you're doing something else is one of the most common features of the blether, something it shares with gossip. Linguists now propose that gossip – let's call it blethering in this instance – played a significant part

in the development of language itself. Language seems to have been the verbal equivalent of our primate ancestors' mutual flea picking. It is the human way of making and strengthening social connections. The other day, for example, at the newsagent's, the person before me ushered me forward with the words, 'I'm just waiting here for a blether'. The blether has no need of a focus or a shape, although Grace Murray in 'Mibbie Aye, Mibbie Hooch Aye' creates, in eight short lines, a community drama of wildfire proportions. Nowadays, as we read elsewhere in the collection, 'vocal grooming' has access to a wide range of outlets, from the traditional letter to social media.

Blethers, the book shows, can be intrusive (the unwanted questions) and they can be distressing (the unwanted voices), but more than anything, the stories, scripts and poems here show how often the intimacy of a blether can cradle a deeper conversation – the sharing of a confidence or a hesitant revelation – until the moment feels right to share it. It will surface, albeit after a deep breath, through commonplace shared exchanges. Sometimes, in these circumstances, the narrative will end, as it does in Laura Clay's 'F, M, Other', at the point when 'a whole new conversation' begins, 'one that might go on for a long time'.

I've been invited to write this introduction because I've been working on a project about conversation for quite a while now and during that time my awareness of the importance of conversation has steadily increased. Conversation is something that nurtures communication, empathy and engagement; it is central to the arts, to education, to the worlds of mental health, old age and to the 'loneliness agenda'; and clearly it needs to set up home in the shoutfest of politics.

‘In my opinion, the most profitable and most natural exercise of our mind is conversation’, wrote the great French essayist Montaigne. It seems remarkable that this richness is available to us all, in some form, from the moment a mother or a father speaks to a foetus until our final breath. We need, more than ever, given the challenges we face, to pay it attention. That is why the aims of A Year of Conversation 2019 are to celebrate conversation, to initiate conversation and to explore conversation. All of these happen within these pages and beyond, extending into all the activities of Book Week Scotland; a demonstration that, though some may wish to shrink the world, we remain a conversational nation. Or a Convers[n]ation.

You may see ‘conversation’ as a Sunday word for ‘blether’. They are undoubtedly on the same spectrum, although conversation, to me, suggests a deeper engagement – an openness to change. But that is, in no way, to underestimate the power of the blether. I know from reading this collection, that I am not alone in having once received letters from my mother, where she had written, eventually, that she was just ‘withering on’. Yet that ‘withering’ or ‘blethering’ about the hum of life was the most precious conversation to me. For what often underpins conversation is the blether, the warm touch, the familiar. This book shows how deep that touch can be.

Tom Pow
Creative Director
A Year of Conversation
ayearofconversation.com

**Wee blethers,
big conversations**

Squeak

Lindz McLeod

Squeak, squelch. Two sets of trainers on linoleum. Wan dry, wan wet. Squeak, squelch. Ah dinnae need escorted tae the room, but it's protocol. The nurse gies me a sympathetic look, but thinks better ae patting ma sodden shoulder. It's pure baltic oot there. Ma jeans are soaked right up past the knees. Ah cannae stand it. Ah dinnae ken why they waste time torturing terrorists wi pliers an junk when they could dress them in denim an stick them in a Bellshill bus shelter in November. They'd be greetin their een out in minutes, guaranteed.

'She'll be wanting a blether, son.'

'Aye, cheers.' Ah duck intae the room. Ah've nae idea whit the architects wur thinking. Ye couldnae punt a dug intae this doorwae. No everywan is four fit high.

Maw's looking fine the day; clean white nightie, dressing goon tae match.

'Colin,' she looks up, all seriousness, 'will ye help me tae pray?'

'Guid afternun tae you as weel, Maw.'

'Ah need tae pray, it's weel past time.' She's trying tae get up off her seat.

'Dae ye need tae dae it right noo, Maw? Will ye no take a wee bit lunch first?'

'Did Jesus take a wee bit lunch before he went up on that there cross?'

Ah huv tae think about this, cause I'm no right sure tae be honest.

'Aye, well, mebbe he didnae.'

Ah lean in tae help. Offer ma arm.

‘Then ah’ll no either.’ Ah lower her slowly til she’s on hur knees.

‘Dae ye huftae be on yer knees fur it? Ahm sure God wouldnae mind if ye sat somewhere comfy.’

‘Then ye dinnae ken Him like ah dae.’

Nae point in arguing. Yer maw will always hae the last word.

‘Ah hope ye pray at hame, fur the sake o yer soul.’

‘Oh aye, Maw, sure ah dae.’

She adjusts hur dressing goon and starts. ‘Oor faither, who art in Heaven –’

Ah’ve already zoned oot. Ah wiz in Heaven last weekend wi Eve Brannigan fae doon the road. Ah said ma prayers that night, ah tell ye, but no tae God. Just a mortal wumman with cracking blue een and cheekbanes ye could carve a roast on. Best no mention it tae Maw though. She’s git *notions* aboot the Brannigans.

‘And auld Mrs Jessop fae doon the hall, ye kin bless hur as weel, even though she stole ma pudding again yisterdae, the craven hussy.’

Ah roll my eyes. Auld Mrs Jessop is two years younger than Maw.

‘And ye kin bless, oh,’ she turns tae me, ‘dae ye remember Fraser Smith? His da used tae run that shop, the wan wi the yella ootside?’

Ah wisnae expecting to be conferenced into hur phone call tae God, so it takes me a second tae kitch up.

‘Ah dinnae ken, Maw.’

‘Ye used tae play wi him.’

‘Ah dinnae ken, Maw.’

‘When ye were two. Ye hud them matching soaks.’

‘Ah dinnae ken, Maw.’

‘Aye, ye dae ken,’ she insists, ‘Fraser, he was a rare wee hing. He marriet that lassie fae Cruix, the wan wi the –’ she gestures at hur face, ‘– the *snoz*.’

She thinks. ‘Or wiz that his brother?’

‘Ah dinnae ken, Maw.’

‘Oh weel, he’s deid noo.’

Ah blink. ‘Who’s deid?’

‘Whit?’

‘Who’s deid, him or the brother?’

‘Och aye,’ she adjusts hur goon again. ‘Ye ken who else is deid?’

‘Who, Maw?’

‘Ma neighbour from when ah wiz wee, ye remember him? Jimmy with the fish lips?’

Ah’ve nae idea who she’s talking about. Ah feel sure ah would huv remembered somedae wi fish lips.

‘Cannae say that ah dae, Maw.’

‘Och aye,’ she says again. ‘And that Mary Brannigan’s daughter, ye ken her?’

Biblically, ah think, but dinnae say oot loud. ‘Whit, is she deid an aw?’

‘Naw,’ she says, ‘*pregnant*.’

Ah can hear the blood drumming in my ears. Ah drop tae my knees beside her, wet denim be damned tae hell.

‘Mebbe ah should pray wi ye, jest tae be safe.’

Crossing the Bridge

Kirsty Souter

12:00

'Alright, time's up. Pens down!'

12:01

The empty tick-tock of the clock is suddenly swamped by a rising tide of chatter. *What did you write? See what I said was – oh yes the one I answered was ...* I'm already over it. A breath I didn't know I was holding tumbles from my mouth. It's done. *It's done.*

12:15

They open the door. I'm out of my seat like a shot. No coat to pick up, no bag of notes I'd fooled myself I'd read in the tense fifteen minutes outside the exam hall. My feet pick up speed on the spongy green linoleum. One-two-three. One-two-*free*. I'm almost skipping out into the sunlight. Goodbye, university. So long, classmates. See you in five months.

It's a beautiful day.

12:28

I see he's already parked outside. He's stood by my front door, and he waves when he sees me turn off West Richmond Street. I'm not a hugger. But he's five-foot-four to my five-foot-six, and I owe him this indulgence. He ruffles my hair. 'Hello short-arse, congratulations are in order!'

I know he's still trying to pretend it doesn't bother him that I've outgrown him. I elbow him away and thank him for the lift. He doesn't mind. He'll give me a hand with all my bags.

12:45

Edinburgh traffic is good, and we're making good progress through the city. He's feeling generous, so I'm controlling the music. He's being polite, but I know he hates most of my choices – indie rock, eighties pop, folk classics. We haven't shared an iTunes library since he was in early high school. 'Trust me!' I say. 'I saw them live at Sneaky's, they're good – they're from Fife, you know!'

He half-heartedly taps to the beat on the side of his steering wheel. I wish he would just tell me what he wants to hear.

12:48

We stop at a red light. Shuffle has finally struck gold. He turns to me and grins. He recognises this song. Do I remember road trips with Dad back in the day? Of course I do. Cramped in the back seat of the Subaru, windows down, Fleetwood Mac. The seatbelts straining against our chins as we played air instruments. The light turns green.

13:17

We've pulled to a halt again before we reach the Forth Road Bridge. Traffic is moving at a crawl.

13:20

Someone cuts into the lane out of nowhere. I'm informed that, in no uncertain terms, the man is a wank.

13:35

I stare at the Queensferry Crossing as we drive parallel across the water. 'You think they'll finish that on time?' I wonder out loud.

'Imagine that! Finishing on time!' he laughs. 'I thought it was supposed to open end of this month.'

'Dunno,' I shrug. 'Looks finished to me.'

We sit in silence for a moment, contemplating the bridge.

'I like this one better,' he says eventually.

'Like, visually? Or driving on it?'

'I like the view from it. I'm ... I dunno. Why did they build a new one?'

I look at the criss-crossing suspension wires. We pass under the first arch. 'Things change, I guess. They had to adapt.'

The car thunks over the joins in the bridge.

'I also like the old one,' I say, 'I reckon probably because we're just not used to things being different. But the new one's impressive.'

He laughs slightly. 'Aye. Guess so.'

The music swells, filling the silence around us. I count the beats.

13:40

'So how is uni?' he asks.

'Well, uni finished about an hour and a half ago.'

'You know what I mean. Apart from exams, how's it been?'

'Oh same old, same old. Five friends. More alcohol than necessary. I sure am gonna miss them all when we graduate. It's been a lot of fun.'

He laughs at that. Drinking? That's new. Besides,

graduating isn't the end of it all – even if I'm going back and they're not.

'Just because you move apart, doesn't mean you stop being friends.' It's older brother wisdom that I didn't ask for.

But I'm kind of glad I got it.

I might as well share some of my more hilarious misadventures. He laughs – call those misadventures? Child, please. Let the master talk.

13:54

We're in deepest Fife now. We've lost the motorway signs; they've faded away to green hedgerows and half-tumbledown stone walls. Give way to oncoming traffic. I pause, catching my breath; settling back into my seat to watch the familiar towns as they begin to emerge and then whirl away on the roundabouts. We're both quiet. I want to say it's a companionable silence, but there's a pressing need in the back of my throat to cough up more words.

13:59

He has to tell me something.

14:00

My breath catches in my throat. I wish it didn't.

14:01

Tell me.

14:01

This is torture.

14:02

‘So,’ he says. ‘I’m gay.’

14:02

Wait, what?

14:03

‘Before you freak out –’

I can’t stop myself –

– I laugh. I laugh and I laugh and I laugh and there are tears rolling down my face. Freak out? Why in the world would I freak out?

He doesn’t have a good answer. Only that our parents were shocked.

I bring myself back from laughing with an ugly choking snort. I’m *not* our parents. He never *needed* to tell me – and it doesn’t change a thing. Not to mention, I mean, I’m not surprised. I remind him gently why we stopped sharing an iTunes library.

Sometimes, things stick in your head – even if you wish they wouldn’t. He swears.

Then he laughs, and I laugh again. We laugh together.

14:07

A familiar song bursts through the speakers. We grin at each other.

He winds down the windows. Fresh air buffets through the car. I crank up the volume.

My hands thud down, drumming the glovebox. He takes on the lyrics and I harmonise with him at the chorus.

Don’t stop.

Catch-Up

Catherine Wilson

Two women on the phone (to each other). One in a kitchen, one in a 'pre-loved' flat.

Mum: Well, at least it was better than 'Prim'.

Daughter: Anything is better than 'Prim'. I can see why you'll never go back to your maiden name.

Mum: Yes, well.

Daughter: 'Chatterbox', though?

Mum: It followed me – all through school. I got to university and remember the girls with their noses turned up, saying 'Oh, well, you do talk an awful lot don't you.' Posh and nasty.

[Her face shifts like tectonic plates.]

Daughter: Are you alright?

Mum: With ... everything at work ... I did start to think about who I talk to. And ... well ... who doesn't let me talk ...

Daughter: I let you talk! I've phoned you right now for the express purpose of talking.

Mum: That's true. Once a week for thirty minutes.

Daughter: More like eighty. Can't be calling you like I did when I was a student anymore.

Mum: Yet somehow you always manage to catch me halfway through making dinner. How is it that you do that?

Daughter: Ah, see, then I'd be letting on my young lady secrets. It does mean that these conversations always make me crave spaghetti though. And miss the cat.

Mum: Listen. I need to talk a bit more properly now.

Daughter: Yes?

Mum: I'm signed off. For two months.

Mum: Yeah. Look, I don't want you to worry.

Daughter: Why?

Mum: Depression. And stress.

Daughter: Oh God. What's happened?

Mum: I guess it started slowly – I got moved out of pitches – reallocated to someone else. Then projects got taken out of my hands – things I was really passionate about. Then I'd hear a colleague mention a meeting and I wouldn't have been invited.

Daughter: Jeez, Mum. I didn't know. Are you okay?

Mum: No.

[A pause.]

Mum: It got to the point where people would shush me for chatting in the staff room.

Daughter: [with fierce protectiveness] That's bullying, Mum.

Mum: I know. I know. I just. I worried I could do to be a little bit more quiet ...

Daughter: Isn't the role of a saleswoman to be chatty?

Mum: I guess.

Daughter: Did you chat to Dad about this?

Mum: Yes, but he keeps saying I should leave.

Daughter: He's right.

Mum: True. But I'm not ready. I know I'm nearly sixty, but I'm just ... I still want to work. It makes me feel like I have a purpose.

Daughter: What does Dad think you should do? Once you leave, I mean.

Mum: [laughs] Oh, he just keeps saying 'if you're not going to do something about it then I don't want to hear the complaining'. I guess he has a poin-

Daughter: No he doesn't! Ach, Mum. I'm sorry. I get pulled up for chatting all the time too. You know how I've left working at the hotel?

Mum: Yes?

Daughter: I promise it's relevant.

Mum: Yes, yes - tell me!

Daughter: Well. We had this one boss, really nasty piece of work. He kept saying all the female members of staff were obviously late because we were too focused on make-up.

Mum: Ew.

Daughter: Yes! He even called us that. 'The females'. As if we were, like, a type of lizard or something. Anyway. He kept ragging on at me because he called me too chatty. Me and my work pal Jenny would be talking about who would take what rooms and he'd thunder down the corridor like the rock in Indiana Jones. 'What's all this useless blether!' he'd shout. I started pointing out he'd never pull up Mickey and Perry whenever they got chatting on the shift. He then went into some massive rant about how when men chat at work it's 'shop talk' and not 'airless and long-winded women chat'.

Mum: Is this the reason you've left the job?

Daughter: Well, after what I did I kind of had to.

Mum: What do you mean?

Daughter: Well ... I ... I put laxatives in his morning cup of tea.

Mum: What?

Daughter: He was off on holiday for a fortnight. Perfect amount of time for me to hand in that two weeks' notice and not have to see him again. But I got so angry and I ... I put laxatives in his tea before a ten-hour flight.

Mum: I'm not sure what to say.

Daughter: Say anything, Mum.

Mum: I want to tell you you should never do anything of the sort but ... I'm oddly proud of you?

Daughter: Thanks, Mum. I'm proud of you too.

Mum: For what?

Daughter: For doing what you're going to do next. You're going to find your own version of laxatives.

Mum: What, like a brand?

Daughter: No! Metaphorical laxatives. You'll find your way to go back to work and get your own back and if you don't ... I know you'll find something else.

Mum: Thanks. For listening, I mean. And talking too.

Daughter: Of course.

Mum: What a role reversal! I feel like you're looking after me.

Daughter: Well, it's my pleasure. You did wipe my bum for a good couple years. In return I tell you my youthful rebellion stories.

Mum: [laughs] I'm glad I raised a daughter unafraid to use her voice.

Daughter: I learnt from the best.

Letter to Hettie

Hazel-Ann Urquhart

Dear Hettie,

What a week it's been, but as Mam used to say, 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger'. Thing is, I'm not sure if I am – stronger that is. It's hard to tell. I'm not dead either, so there's that. Although, some days I place my fingers on my wrist, just to check. You never know, I've missed things before. Like when Frank stopped loving me. When did that happen? Aye, Frank's gone, packed up and left last week. I'm not sure where it all went wrong. Was I too busy to notice or too tired to care? Either is possible, both are likely. Even now, I muster up the emotion to feel hurt and loss, slipping it on like a new jumper I've been gifted, but don't really like. It itches and smells funny – smells like her.

I wonder if he tried to tell me in his own way – muffled and monosyllabic. Did I respond with a 'yeah, okay' or 'that's fine', not realising I was discussing the demise of our marriage? Did it matter? I'm not even sure I'd have put up a fight. Those days were long gone, along with romance and sexual attraction. Distant memories, hard to hold on to and disappearing through the cracks of our failing relationship. When I try to picture him with her, I can't. I can't picture him with anyone, not even me. I barely remember what his face looks like and I only saw him yesterday. All I come up with is a furrowed brow, cloaking uneasy eyes.

He came for the rest of his stuff. I didn't even know he had stuff until I saw the boxes stacked in the spare room. Where was he was hiding it all? Somewhere dark I suspect, along with his intentions. The strange thing is the house doesn't appear to be missing anything. There are no gaping holes now that he's gone. Perhaps that's because he's been gone for years. Slowly removing parts of himself to prepare for his big departure.

I saw number 36's curtains twitching when he loaded the boxes into his van. Not that she can talk, hers left three years ago with the guy from the leisure centre. Living in Brighton now, I heard. At least we never had any kids. Not through choice, or any kind of malfunction, it just never happened. Maybe my womb paid better attention than I did. Sensed the finality of it all and shut up shop. Although, it would be nice to have someone, especially now, but that's just selfish. Maybe he was right about me.

'Always thinking of yourself', was the last statement he threw at me before he left. I tried to shut the door but it slid in through the gap and punched me in the gut. If I'd thought about myself more I wouldn't have stayed with him all these years! Or would I? The signs were there, I just dressed them up as something else. Excuses were my speciality, my pièce de résistance. I served them for every meal. Gorged on falsehoods and got fat on lies.

I haven't decided if I'll bother telling the ladies at bingo. It's the kind of thing they lap up on a weekly basis, but would they even know I had a husband? I don't think I ever mentioned him. Maybe I'll not say anything, keep it to myself. Save any awkward questions and explanations. I'm not even sure I'll go back. I never win anyway.

Maybe now I'll get down for a visit, nothing to stop me anymore. I hope you and Bill are doing well and give Suzie my love. Don't tell anyone about Frank yet. I'm not sure I'm ready for everyone to know.

Bye for now.

Love, Ann xx

I See My Voice and It Is

Shakti Women's Aid (group poem)

I see my voice and it is
Wandering and doesn't know what it's looking for
Calm prayers and the hunger to learn something else
An early morning bird – you have to listen before it's gone
Listening to myself and meditating on what is next
A voice for the voiceless
A budgie, a lot of noise and not much sense – but it likes
the sound it makes
Shaky in the beginning, but in the end it gets me where
I need to be
Not weak. People don't see the voice of my heart.

I see my voice and it is full of the opinions denied me as
a woman
Most of my life I've not had a voice and now I'm like a
parrot, I talk too much.

The B&B Blether

Leila Aboulela

Dahlia and Farah sat at a table which overlooked the garden. Their placemats had pictures of zebras and paper napkins in leopard prints. There was no one else in the dining room although some of the other tables showed signs that people had finished their breakfasts and gone.

Farah said that the jam was poor quality and so was the toast. She showed Dahlia what she had found in her porridge. Something beige, crescent shaped and hard. 'I think it's Julie's fingernail,' she whispered. Julie, the proprietor, was a slim woman in her sixties, with a sharp haircut and a smile more optimistic than the profit she was probably making from her business. Last night she had welcomed the two women as if they had popped out of her television set.

Dahlia laughed. 'Julie's nails are painted plum. I think.'

Farah made a face. 'I must look closely at her nails.'

Dahlia was hungry but felt she wasn't entitled to more toast. Farah was more talkative than usual. 'I've been thinking about that game you wanted us to play yesterday. If, hypothetically, we were allowed one sin that didn't have repercussions in this world or the next, what would I choose to do?'

Dahlia resisted the seriousness of Farah's tone. 'It was meant to be light-hearted.'

'But your question assumes that we want what is forbidden. It also assumes that what is forbidden is pleasurable.'

‘Isn’t that the case?’

‘Not always. But sometimes what is forbidden is desirable simply because it is forbidden. So it is highlighted and we become attracted to it. Here’s a story. A little boy is told by his grandfather, “There is an electrical socket in this room which is very dangerous. You mustn’t touch it or come near it.” “Where is it?” asks the boy. “I’ve never seen it.” So the grandfather lifts up the sheet that’s hanging off the bed and, with difficulty, crouches down on his hands and knees. The boy copies him. “There,” the grandfather says, pointing in the dark. “Where?” says the boy. “There, it is hidden away. See it now?” The boy nods and the grandfather says, “Good. Never ever go near it.’

‘Don’t tell me,’ Dahlia said, shaking her head. ‘I can guess where this is heading.’

‘To an accident. That’s where it’s heading. The boy didn’t even know about the socket. But once he knows, he can’t keep away. He’s a typical curious child. As for us adults, chafing against restrictions gets us nowhere. Besides, there are other kinds of sin that have nothing to do with enjoyment. There is malice and envy, being angry and feeling hatred or feeling superior or deliberately harming others.’

‘True,’ said Dahlia. She was not only subdued but conscious of a tilt in her relationship with Farah. Usually she was the one who knew more and better.

As if reading her mind, Farah explained, ‘I was never religious. All the years growing up, the time I was concentrating on my career up until I got married and had Safiyah. And I had her quickly – ten months after the wedding. Then when she was born, so unwell, so different, everything changed. I changed. For the first time ever, I felt terribly helpless. I became conscious

of a power greater than myself. I wasn't self-sufficient, I wasn't empowered. At first I was praying for Safiyah to get better, for some kind of miracle and then it dawned on me that Safiyah was a miracle in herself. Her imperfection was a deliberate creation, not a mistake. Allah had not forgotten her or overlooked her or blotched up her body, no, He had made her like this on purpose whether I liked it or not.'

Dahlia told Farah how yesterday her children had ordered pepperoni pizza behind her back. With Mum away and Dad working late, the older children had consumed pork with relish. 'Please, please, please don't tell them I told you. Pleeeeeease, promise, promise. I will get in trouble for snitching. I didn't have any and I'm hungry now.' This had been her youngest on the phone in a wail of genuine deprivation which diffused Dahlia's righteous anger.

It was not her first time to feel disappointed and ashamed of her children. Had she brought them up wrong? A part of her despised them for their weakness. She felt ashamed that they were less than perfect, less than good. She had phoned and put in a delivery order for another pizza. Margherita this time. For the youngest who hadn't eaten the pepperoni.

Farah did not laugh. 'Would you rather not have known?'

'Yes,' Dahlia said. 'To be honest, I would rather not have known.'

'That's a good sign. It means that you're angry not because you have been disobeyed but because they did wrong.'

'Isn't it the same thing?'

'No, it's different. One is about you and one is about them.'

‘So what should I do?’

‘Forgive them.’

Dahlia crushed the paper napkin she had been fiddling with. Such an ugly napkin with its tacky leopard print. A conversation like this with anyone else would be unthinkable. Imperfect children were what she and Farah had in common.

Julie bustled in carrying extra toast. Friendly and chatty now, she asked them if everything was alright with their breakfast, if they needed anything else. ‘So you’re off to the Abbey,’ she said, moving the salt and pepper shakers out of the way. ‘It’s not my kind of place but seems to be popular this time of year.’

Dahlia, needing a break from the kind of small talk that was part of her daily exchange at the clinic, did not care to contribute. Farah, to whom a conversation with a stranger was novel, asked, ‘Why not? Why isn’t it your kind of place?’ She sounded intense and Julie paused, the slightest bit taken aback. Then she rallied and said, ‘Monasteries, churches, even if they’ve been converted – there is no joy in them, nothing cheerful. To each their own, of course, but religion and I don’t get along.’

‘Don’t you believe in an afterlife?’ asked Farah.

Julie shrugged. ‘In Hell I do. It’s Heaven which is far-fetched.’

Dahlia and Farah both stared at her nails. They were a deep plum.

Mum's the Word

Breea Keenan

You were added to the group 'Blether'

Monday 1st at 20.24

Mum 1: How are all the babies?

We need a catch up soon!

Mum 2: We're all good, ladies ...

How about next Friday, noon?

Mum 3: Hi – that would be great

But noon's a bit late?

She naps twelve to two ...

After two good for you?

Mum 1: Can't do Fridays

I'm back at work you see 😞

Mum 2: Oh how's it going?

Has he settled at nursery?

Mum 3: Not long & that'll be me. 😊

Mum 1: He cries going but then ok

got his own wee peg and tray! ❤️

Mum 2: Sure he loves it, he'll settle soon.

What about Thursdays (not at noon 😊)

Mum 3: Thursday would be good for us

Can meet in town? I'll get the bus.

Mum 2: Great! Any advice on sleep? 😊

Mum 3: Have you tried that Sleepy Sheep? 🐑

We're struggling with solid food ...

Think she's getting too much boob!

Mum 1: Can't do Thursday, vaccination time 😞

Mum 2: Nightmare but sure he will be fine!

Mum 3: What about Wednesday 10th at two?

Mum 2: We've got Bookbug, why not come too?

Mum 1: Great idea, that suits me!

Mum 3: Wow – a date that suits all three!

Mum 2: Afterwards a HOT cup of tea?! 😊

Wednesday 10th at 13.38

Mum 3: Sorry girls, can't come along

She's got the cold, don't want to pass on!

Mum 1: sorry me too, he's been up all night

Screaming and crying – he's teething alright 😞

Mum 2: Don't worry, we'll get another date.

Mine's teething too & we're running late!

Monday 15th at 14:24

Mum 1: Girls, feel really down ... At the end of my tether ...

Mum 2: Remember that we're all in this together!

Mums 2 & 3: We're on our way round for tea and a

blether 😞

Continue the story...

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Gies the goss

Blether

Jane McCarry

I grew up believing that everyone in Glasgow knew my dad. His name was James but he got called Jimmy. Dad was a driver at Central Station and most weeks we would go into town on the train. As we cut through the station men would nod, stop to chat or shout over 'Hello, Jimmy'. Then, as we walked through the streets of Glasgow, every other man would say, 'Awright, Jim?' or 'How's it going, Jimmy?' Of course, I now know these men were unknown to dad and it was just custom for Glaswegian men to refer to other men in that way, but my dad was so familiar with these folk that from a child's perspective, he was pals with just about everyone in our beautiful, gritty and complicated city.

Once I got into my teens I wanted to die whenever my mum or dad started up a conversation with a pensioner at a bus stop, or my absolute worst nightmare, a good-looking boy around my age. But as I got into my twenties I discovered that I just couldn't help myself, I too started talking to random strangers ... I BECAME ISA ... I AM A NOSEY COW! I'm never happier than when I'm finding out about someone's life and the very best place to do it is on public transport.

There are so many journeys I could write about, so many times I've missed my stop because I got caught up in someone else's business. However, this story is exceptional because it's probably the one and only time I can remember not wanting to get involved with other passengers. This, my friends, is what happened ...

It was February 2018 and I was working in Edinburgh, commuting from Glasgow every day. I was doing a musical called *Bingo* and during the performance a character got their finger and toe chopped off, covering me in fake blood. It was a Saturday night, bitterly cold and I had to run to catch the last train home from Waverley. I was tired and looked like I had just come off the set of a horror movie. I sat down next to the window at a table and diagonally across from me sat a stern-looking woman, smartly dressed, about my age. I closed my eyes and leaned against the window and wished the now late train would hurry up and leave. I was just about to doze off when a man in his fifties, half cut, shook my shoulder and said ‘Can I sit here, hen?’ The woman across the table looked at me and our hearts sank. Fifty minutes with this yin? No thanks. ‘Do you have to?’ I said, with a weak smile. He threw his head back and roared, ‘Wait and see, you’ll have the time of yer life.’ He’d no sooner sat on the seat when he bellowed ‘Martin!’ and a guy in his twenties, wearing the shiniest tracksuit I’d seen since the 80’s, staggered up carrying two plastic bags full of drink. ‘This is ma boy, ladies. Let’s get this party started. Are you fur beer, cider or wine?’. ‘Ohhh noooo, not tonight,’ I thought. This will be the longest fifty minutes of my life. We both politely declined, the woman took out her phone and once again I closed my eyes ... then he spotted the blood.

‘MAAAARRRRRTINNNN, this lassie’s hurt, go and get some bog roll.’ Now, how do I handle this? Once he knows it’s fake he’s going to want to know why and that opens a whole can of worms. Other folk are now looking over. We still haven’t left Waverley. I caved. ‘Open the wine, Martin,’ says I and so the conversation

begins. By Haymarket I'm two glasses in, I know all about Tommy, his job, his divorce and his wonderful, funny, sweet-natured boy – and I'm absolutely starving. 'You've not got a cheesy Wotsit in that bag by any chance have you Martin?' I ask. 'I have!' says the stern-looking woman who hadn't once looked up from her phone or made eye contact before now. 'In fact,' she said, 'I've got crisps, sweets and sandwiches I bought this morning and didn't eat, you can have the lot.' Well, Tommy's eyes lit up like a Las Vegas slot machine. 'You sure I can't get you a drink?' says Tommy. She stares into space for a few seconds then says 'Tae hell, I'm Yvonne, pour me a cider.'

By the time we reach Falkirk High, Tommy has confessed to being a Celtic, *Simple Minds* and *Still Game* fanatic. Yvonne winks at me, she's clocked me but isn't giving the game away. The atmosphere is good and spirits are high. 'So, Yvonne, have you been working today?' says the bold Tommy. She put down her can and without uttering a sound, tears started streaming down her face. 'No,' she said, 'I've just buried my best friend, she got ill with CJD two weeks ago and died. I've known her from school. She was my bridesmaid and my son's godmother and I can't bear the fact that I'll never be able to talk to her again.' We all sat in silence, then Tommy reached over and held her hand, then we all took hands. Four strangers on a train. No one looked at their phones or out of the window or pretended to be asleep. We pulled into Queen Street and Tommy and Martin walked myself and Yvonne to the taxi rank. We hugged each other and I was put in the taxi first. I put down the window to wave and Yvonne said, 'Can I tell him?'. 'Tell me whit?'

said Tommy. As the taxi started to pull away Yvonne said ... 'That's Isa from *Still Game*.'

I'll never forget the look on his face, nor will I ever forget that magical encounter that I could have so easily missed by judging folk on first impressions, something my wee dad would never have done. I hope one day we bump into each other again ... and next time, the drinks and swedgers are on me.

Links Park Luminary

Alun Robert

Propped on planks, splintered
twa rows frae the front
wid blether non-stop
on arrival afore kick-off, richt
through half time an the match.

Bunnet pulled doon oer his heed
clay pipe filled wi shag
reekin an stinkin, aboot when
we had near beaten
a First Division club, or another.

When it was horizontal rain
(fur that was fell often)
wid wear a khaki trench bocht
frae that army and navy surplus up
cobbled High Street near Woolies.

At ony lull in the action
wid spout plenty o his drivell
yappin about oceanic tales
never heard on repair flares
o Arbuthnott, the boat builders.

Then in derbies agin Brechin
or Loons or the Lichties
wid proffer double-blether on
the best Angus toon, apart frae
new builds – bloody councils.

Oft he regaled oor players
frae just efter the War
first names, family names
an much mare tae the point
nicknames he wid gae them.

But nae matter the score line
nae matter the opposition
wid remonstrate wi yon refs
repeatin it tae those in oor stand
compos mentis an in ear shot.

An efter ony game ended
he wid stott alang New Wynd
tae Albert Bar fur a hauf an a hauf
chasing doon his sorrows
an tae gae his bletherin a rest.

A Guid Blether

Craig A Mudie

‘Hello, Catriona. Come away in.’

‘Hi, Alf, how are you doing this morning?’

‘Oh, you know, same as always. I checked the Deaths column in the Courier as usual, and since I wasn’t in it I thought I’d better get up.’

Catriona chuckled. ‘Well, you say that, but one of these mornings you’ll be in it, then you’ll be able to have a lie in.’

Alf laughed. ‘Aye, yer right enough, hen. But kenning my luck, my name will be in the Tele, no the Courier, so I’ll no find out ‘til tea-time.’

Alf turned and shuffled slowly down the hall and into the living room. ‘The kettle has just boiled, if you want to make yourself a cup of tea,’ he called back.

She followed him in, then turned into the small kitchen on the left. She spotted that the plastic milk carton had been left out on the worktop, and half a pack of custard creams was sitting beside it. She reached up into a cupboard, and selected one of the mismatched cups from within, while she grabbed a teabag from the dented tin beside them. As she dropped it into the cup, and poured the water from the still-warm kettle onto it, Catriona found herself casually checking the best-before dates on the items in the fridge. The pack of chopped ham still had a few days left, but the block of cheddar cheese had a patch of mould growing on it.

‘Alf, do you know your cheese is going mouldy?’

‘No, but hum a wee bit, and I might recognise it.’

Smiling, Catriona carried her cup through into the

living room. Alf was always like that, quick with a wee joke or a laugh. He might be a little slower on his feet than he used to be, and getting up from his chair next to the three-bar electric fire might be more of a struggle, but his mind was still sharp. It was a big part of what she enjoyed about these weekly visits. She sat down on the settee, and placed her tea on the side table to cool a little.

‘So, how have you been this week, then, Alf?’

‘No bad, lass. I had a visit yesterday from a couple of missionary types. Twa American laddies, with bowl-cuts and weirdly shiny teeth. I told them it’s a bit late in my life to be worrying about changing religion, but I did want to know how they managed to keep their shirts so brilliantly white. I asked if it was Daz or Fairy they used, but I’m not sure they fully understood what I was on about.’ Alf smiled. ‘Mibee it’s my accent.

‘Other than that, I’ve just been listening to the wireless or reading the paper. I see that the council is planning on knocking down another twa schools – the bairns will soon all be going to just one massive school in the middle of the town. Which reminds me, how is your wee lad getting on?’

‘Oh, he’s not that wee now – he’s off to Glasgow in a couple of weeks, starting at university.’

‘University? That’s braw! What’s he studying?’

‘Earth Science.’

‘Earth Science? Whit’s that?’

‘I’ll be honest with you, Alf, I’m not sure myself. Something to do with climate change and renewable energy. He’s always going on about getting me to sort out my recycling and to get the bus rather than driving.’

‘Well, he’s probably got a point. He’s got to live on this planet a lot longer than we do, now, and we’ve no exactly left it in the best of states for him.’

Alf took a sip of his tea.

‘On the other hand, maybe we’ll just have to start growing tea instead of strawberries on the way to Perth. Still, good luck to him.’

Catriona smiled, too, but there was a wistful look on her face as she did so. She took a handkerchief from her bag, and dabbed at her eyes. Alf reached out his hand and placed it on top of Catriona’s.

‘You’ll miss him, I’m sure, but he’ll be back before you know it – as soon as he needs his washing done.’

She smiled again, properly this time. ‘Aye, you’re right there. I’m not even sure how he knows how to turn the washing machine on.’

The next half hour passed quickly, with Alf telling tales of his own family and Catriona adding stories of her own. Then Alf sat back further in his chair. ‘Before you go, there’s something through the house for you.’

Catriona stood up, a little confused, and headed back into the hall.

‘It’s in my room, on top of the tall-boy. I got the Tesco delivery boy to pop it in there.’

Pushing open the door, Catriona saw a tall glass vase, filled with a big bunch of tulips, still in their plastic wrapping, their petals a deep crimson. She lifted them up, and took them back to the living room.

‘What are these for?’ she asked.

‘It’s five years ago today, isn’t it?’ said Alf. ‘That you lost your man, I mean.’

Catriona’s eyes welled with tears again. She nodded.

‘Oh, Alf, you shouldn’t have. I’m surprised you remembered.’

‘Of course I did. And I’m happy to say thank you again, for these wee chats. I appreciate them, I really do. I know what it’s like to lose someone, and I was embarrassed

at first to apply to the befriending folks. But when you came along, I realised that it wasn't all about me, and that these chats were a help for you, too.'

Catriona leant down and gave Alf a gentle hug.

'Aye, you're right there, Alf. There's nothing better than a guid blether.'

The Automation

Mark Haw

The scene: a large branch of a well-known supermarket chain. Two colleagues in the branded uniform of the company: a middle-aged woman and a young man. Supposedly conducting a shelf-check with electronic scanners, in fact engaging in idle chatter.

‘You don’t like Tommy, do you?’

‘He’s all right. I dunno.’

‘You see him in the Fresh Prod aisle and you turn right around and run away. I’ve seen you.’

‘Well, you know. He’s ...’

‘Tommy’s harmless.’

‘It’s just he keeps giving me this spiel – all this stuff – his “theory of retail”. I mean, come on. Like *he’s* got it all worked out? And ...’

‘And he’s the borderline Jakey what’s wasted his life between Fresh Prod and Bathroom Tissue, and you’re the clever wee bastard from uni just slumming it here with the dimwits while you finish your engineering degree?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘He used to be in a band, you know.’

‘Yeah, right.’

‘They had a single. Number 36 in the chart he says.’

‘He don’t look like Robbie Williams.’

‘Apparently the record company screwed them over.’

‘There ain’t no justice.’

‘And he wrote this novel.’

‘Oh, Jesus.’

‘If he ever tries to show you it, you say no. Don’t ever let him show you it.’

‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘It’ll fuck you up. Marge from Tobacco and Lottery? Never recovered.’

‘He expects me to cover for him with Management Mikey – every time he’s too pissed to make it in for the shift. Which is just about every day. Why me?’

‘Get used to it, kid. Life. Users and used. Think ‘cause you’re at uni you can skip the being used stage? You poor little chrysalis you.’

‘And his bloody theory. We’re all gonna be replaced with robots. The Big Data Revolution. They’re actually gonna come to your house in the night and *replace* you.’

‘Marge never came back ...’

‘I mean, why would they bother with all this surveillance capitalist crap? Machine learning, artificial intelligence. How complicated can it be to keep on selling shite to idiots?’

‘I wonder what happened to her. We used to have a nice little blether, me and Marge.’

‘Killed by Tommy’s book maybe? Like that film *The Ring* only about retail data processing? That’d do it.’

‘You think you’re a lot better, don’t you?’

‘Better than what?’

‘Better than all of us.’

‘Anyway, I’m not sticking around here any longer than I need to. BEng Hons Electronic Engineering, predicted First Class. Finals in three months. Whoosh, outta here baby. Got a job lined up already. Huawei.’

‘Huawei? Jesus Christ.’

‘What’s wrong with that?’

‘You’re going to spy on us for the Chinese.’

‘That whole story’s garbage. It’s basically racist.’

Look out, here comes Management Mikey. What am I supposed to do with this?’

‘It’s an RFID scanner. You shove it up your arse and press *scan*.’

‘No, really.’

‘Point it. Press. It bleeps. It counts.’

‘Oh right. This one doesn’t bleep. It burps. It *belches*. What’s it counting?’

‘It’s taking stock. It’s feeding all the retail data instantly back to Head Off. So they know exactly when they can replace you with a robot.’

‘I mean, listen to that – it’s definitely belching. Who’d have thought the Big Data Revolution would announce itself with a belch?’

‘Where *is* Tommy? Have you actually seen him this week?’

‘Nah. Totally rat-arsed for the last five days, is my bet. That or lung cancer. I mean, like, *finally*.’

‘Or he’s been replaced.’

‘Lucky bastard.’

‘You’re not pointing it straight. Look, like this – that’s better. You don’t want them to get the wrong data, do you?’

Mibbie Aye, Mibbie Hooch Aye

Grace Murray

There wiz a rumor gaen the roons
That Dollag Baird, the teacher,
Had taen up wi Euan Mhor
Thon michtie weel daen preacher.

Wee Sheonah says she spotted them
Disportin' in the heather,
But dinna heed a word she says –
She's sic an unco blether.

Latha Eile nam Bheatha

Marion F NicilleMhoire

Ag èirigh. An TBh a' cabadaich. Droch aimsir. Side fhuar agus rathaidean reòhte.

Mo chridhe fuar. A' togail orm. A' breithneachadh air an latha romham.

Thoir leat bile a' ghas. Thoir leat na *jotters*. Dèan do shlighe gu d' obair.

Tha 'n latha a' sgaoileadh nam cheann.

A' putadh tro dheugairean

'S dorsan gan slaodadh air ais 's air n-adhart 's trioblaidean sàrachail.

Mar Anndra, dìreach air tilleadh bhon aonad shònraichte

Sùilean fiadhaich 's e deònach tidsear no dhà a thilgeil far mullach na staidhre.

'Thoir an aire. Tha mi cumail sùil gheur ort. An fhìrinn a th' agam,' thuirt e.

'S mi tha coma,' fhreagar mi.' 'S e 'n fhìrinn a bh' agamsa.

Seo a' chiad latha saorsail aige. Blagaireachd. Am blàr mu dheireadh aig Custer.

'Ciamar tha Mam?' dh'fhaighnich mi.

Mu dheireadh thall tha e rànaich. 'S tha e a' gèilleadh. Airson an-diugh.

'S an uair sin tha Dàibhidh, nach bi a' feuchainn nan deuchainn,

'Tha mo leannan E.X.P.E.C. 'S chan eil fios aig duine ach agaibhse.'

'Nach tu bha còir a thagh mise airson an sgeul seo.'

Agus an glèidh mise agam fhìn e? 'S cò ris tha mise dol ga innse?

'S dòcha gun leig mi a-mach e gun fhìost' aig coinneamh an luchd-obrach

Eadar, Cànán Thairis air a' Churraicealam, agus Cuspairean Àbhaisteach.

Latha an àigh!

'S a-nis, tha òraid ann. Tha agam ri leum air a' bhus.

Tha e tulgadh. Tha mi gu tuiteam, Tha an dràibhear a' gearan.

'A bheil thu tighinn air bòrd neo a' falbh, neo a' cumail *post mortem*?'

Air mo dhearg nàrachadh.

Cailleachan a' bbingo gam sgrùdadh. 'S iad nach eil toilichte leis.

'Haoidh. A dhràibhear. Bidh thusa aig do phost mortem fhèin.

Bheil thu math gu leòr, a ghràidh? Dè bha mi ag ràdh?

Seall an duine agamsa. Seall Bingo. Tha gràin aige air. Na fir!'

Tha iad ag aontachadh. Tha mis ag aontachadh. Tha sinn ag aontachadh air fad.

Tha mi ruith suas Cnoc Gille Mhoire.

Tha an t-òraidiche a' bleedraich:

'Na teòridhean lèirsinne meacanaigeach

Mar tha iad a' bualadh air an t-siostam nearbhach.

Dè tha seo a' ciallachadh?'

'S fhada on a bha sgeul air an t-siostam nearbhach agam fhìn.

'Tha seo a' ciallachadh a' dol mun cuairt ann an cearcail,

A' siubhal gun dòigh,' tha mi freagairt.

Tha mo cheann làn bhratagan ag imrich,
Agus bile a' ghas nach do phàigh mi,

Agus na *jotters*, agus cuspairean àbhaisteach.
Tha mi tuiteam nam chadal aig Talla a' Bhaile.
'Aimez-vous Brahms?' thuirt am fear a thug ann mi.
'S fheàrr leam Haydn,' fo m' anail, '*The Farewell*

Symphony.'

Am bi thu cuide rium anns an àm ri teachd?' thuirt a shùilean.

Chùm mi mo smuaintean gu faiceallach nam chridhe
Oir chan eil esan a' cunntas mòran dhòmhsa.

Ach 's e conaltradh airson a-màireach tha sin.

Another Day in My Life

I get up. The TV burbling. Cold weather and icy roads.
My heart cold.

I set off. The day rehearses itself in my head.

Take the gas bill. Take the jotters. Go to work. The day unfolds.

Bouncing my way through teenagers and swing doors
Forward, back, forward and jarring perplexities.

Like Andy. Just back from the special unit wild eyed and
wanting still to throw a teacher or two down the stairwell.

'You're marked,' he says. He means it.

'I don't care,' I say. And I mean it.

First day out for him. Bravado. Custer's last stand.

I ask him 'How's Mum?'

He cries eventually. And I win him over. For today.

And then there is Davie who will not sit his exams,

'My girlfriend is E.X.P.E.C. And no one knows except
you.'

'How kind of you to pick me.'

And who shall I tell now, or not tell, as the case may be?

Or shall I slip it in nonchalantly at the staff meeting,
Between, Language Across the Curriculum and
Ongoing Topics?

It has brought my day to a perfect close!

And having seen to that, I have a lecture to attend. I
have a bus to catch.

It lurches. I stumble.irate driver berates.

‘Are you coming on or getting off, or just holding a *post mortem*?’

Red faced.

The bingo ladies stare. Not amused.

‘Hey, driver. You’ll be at yer ain post mortem. OK, hen?
Right. Where wis a?

‘See my man. See Bingo. He hates it. See men!’

They agree. I agree. We all agree.

I sprint up Gilmorehill

The lecturer drones on:

‘The mechanistic theories of perception

In relation to the functions of the nervous system.

What does this mean?’

I have long since lost touch with my own nervous
system.

‘Going round in circles blindly following,’ I answer.

I have a head full of processionary caterpillars, and
unpaid gas bills,

and jotters and ongoing topics.

I fall asleep at City Halls.

‘Aimez-vous Brahms?’ The man who brought me says.

‘I would rather have Haydn,’ under my breath, ‘The
Farewell Symphony.’

‘Will you be my future?’ His eyes ask.

I guard my heart. For he is not everything to me.

But that will be tomorrow’s conversation.

(Not) forgotten blethers

Blethers at the Berries

Lynn Valentine

The talk as sweet as the rasps themselves,
all day the echo of blethers across the berry field,
Though wasps fly here and there, yellow barbs
among the chatter, an argument in the dreels.

And then calm again as picker leans into picker
keeps rhythm with their neighbour, one to one.
Soft blethers as sun breaks through their summer labours
a shush of voices, a quiet communion on the farm.

At day's end a shout of 'weigh in', pickers queue,
still blethering as jewelled berries are poured like lava
onto the scales. A bright release of scarlet to match
the pickers' quick tongues, stained hands and their
beaming red faces.

Cash

Caron McKinlay

She lay on the makeshift mattress, listening to her father's restless dreaming in the next room. At most he had only a week or so to live; he hadn't taken the doctor's news well. Only that afternoon, watching him stare vacantly into space, his meal left once again untouched by his side, she had complained, 'Are you going to let it steal your last few days too, Dad? Don't let it take what time you have left. You're braver than this. You're not dead yet.' It had felt cruel, but then who else would speak so honestly to him but her? The mollycoddling and smothering were making him worse and something had to jolt him back to the days he had left, even if every word uttered crushed her heart.

Eventually, her eyes felt heavy and she dozed her way back to sleep. Then suddenly, the air was filled with a terrible scream.

'Morag! Morag! Morag! Oh, my Morag!'

She scrambled to her knees. *Please, don't let it be now*, she thought. *Please, give him more time.*

She ran across the room, paused for just a moment at his door, terrified of what she would see inside. She flinched as he called out again and then she threw the door open. He sat upright in bed, a cigarette dangling in his hand, with that infernally cheeky grin she knew so well.

'Jist testing your reactions, dear. See how fast you'd wake up. You ken you like your bed!'

'Dad! You're not funny. Gave me the fright of my life!'

He giggled, delighted, and soon, despite herself, she

collapsed onto his bed and joined in with his laughter. As she lay there, she remembered long-ago lazy Sunday mornings. She and her two sisters would listen for Mum to go downstairs to the kitchen to prepare his Sunday stew, then excitedly climb into his bed, clambering over themselves to get the best spot nearest him to cuddle and listen. As an adult, the memories were intoxicating, yet tinged with sadness. But as a child it had been heady and exhilarating to her, that innocent love, the safeness, and if they were lucky, the sisters would all get to dip a piece in the gravy!

While Mum prepared breakfast, he would begin.

‘Once upon a time, there was a man walking home drunk from the pub when he suddenly tripped over a ten-pound note and fell down an open manhole, into a wild jungle, with ferocious snakes and venomous lions...’

‘But Dad, it’s snakes that are venomous and lions that are ferocious.’

‘No in this jungle,’ he would warn, blue eyes twinkling. ‘It’s the snakes that’re ferocious!’

And they would shiver and then all shout, ‘What happened next, Dad?’

As the years passed, you never quite knew what was true. Had he really been to Africa, or walked 300 miles home after spending all his holiday money at the bookies? Had he really swum the Channel not just once, but twice?

‘What a blether he is,’ Mum would say.

He was indeed a blether; however, one thing was true. Wherever you wanted to go, he could tell you travel directions by the nearest pub, then elaborate by informing you of the price of a pint and whisky chaser in each.

His voice interrupted her thoughts. 'There's plenty money for mah funeral. Make sure there's a free bar, Morag. Tell them all to have a guid drink on me.'

'Ah will, Dad, Moira and the boys will be steaming, ah bet.'

'Ach, I'm going to miss it all, Morag. Ah wish ah could go and see it all. You ken ah love a party.'

She glanced away so that he could not see the pain cloud her eyes. 'Now, what story do you want me to tell at your eulogy? Tell me your words, Dad.' She had to be brave. It was the last thing she could do.

Later, but not by much, she stood with her sisters near the shore as they laid red roses gently on his coffin. Her tears fell as the scent of the sea drenched her mind with images of a much younger man, chasing her and her squealing sisters through Yellowcraig's sand dunes. 'Catch me, Daddy! Catch me!' they would all scream in excitement, hoping that they would be the chosen one enveloped in his strong tanned arms. Once caught, he would throw them up in the air a few times, then laughingly toss them into the cold sea. Their shrieks of delight would bounce off the waves. So strong was the memory that Morag believed if she just looked hard enough through the tears, she would perhaps catch a glimpse of those little girls and their daddy running along the beach.

After the funeral, as the family left for his free bar and party, she whispered to the falling rain, to the sea.

'It has been a wondrous fairy tale, Dad. A glorious, technicolour fantasy of jungles and superheroes. Magical forests and gigantic humpbacked whales. Princesses fighting with green, silvery dragons and Batman rescuing them all!

'My life is less exciting. Less funny without you, the

light has dimmed, but I can climb into bed when it gets too hard, close my eyes to listen to you once more.

‘Your tales brought our little family joy and sunshine and they live on deep in each one of us. You will always be here. Thank you for the wonder, Dad.’

Later that evening, her grandson snuggled safely in her bed clutching his Batman figurine, she began: ‘Once upon a time ...’

'Sup?

Graeme Bradley

- We nearly there?
- No really, a bit to go yet.

The time for blethering had passed long ago – back when we were near the bottom, talking freely, filled with excitement and the promise of adventure.

Now every breath was measured; every inhale a desperate gasp for some form of sustenance, every exhale cut short for another gasp of energy. This process broken only for the most poignant of words to be spoken.

- How much further?
- Couple of hours.

Distance is measured in time when ascending the mountains of Scotland, and we've been on this one for a long time already.

The steep climb is unrelenting, much like the weather. The wind drives at us in waves at a low angle, enough to throw the rain directly into our faces. With each step we question ourselves, why are we here?

But I know why. I know why we're here. I know what we're doing.

I know we will start talking again at the top. I know it will be like the last few hours of silence never happened once the summit comes into sight. I know our morale

will increase. I know we'll be blethering all the way down, feeling relieved yet elated, and filled with a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

I know this because it always happens. With each mountain summited we get closer not only to each other but ourselves. Our silences are our resolve, our self-exploration. Our steps are our achievements. And our blethers our bond.

The summit cairn is a dot on the horizon, but it's there. It's in sight. Our breathing eases. Suddenly I feel an extra burst of energy. The pace gradually picks up.

- Did you hear about ...?
- Have you ever seen ...?
- I meant to tell you about ...
- You'll never guess who ...

Our bond strengthens.

Two Hours

Louise Behan

The way I picture it is fairly simple. Sitting at a bar, a pint of lager and a half pint of Guinness. A pack of Marlboro Lights beside a packet of B&H. Two hours, that's all I ask.

I don't know why it isn't a table: it never has been. It's always sitting at a bar. It allows us to stare off into space. We don't have to look at each other if things get too much. It's dimly lit, but daytime, and there aren't many others about. A few drinking at the other end of the bar. No one to disturb us.

I have so many questions. I want to know so much. What do you think of Trump? What about Brexit? What about Ireland these days? Do you like Varadkar? What about the EU? What's the last book you read? What do you think of Drew Harris? What's God like? Have you seen Ursie?

I want a handle on who he is.

I want to know if he likes me.

I want to know if he's proud of me. That, more than anything.

I will fall over myself with wanting to know his thoughts, jumbling words, leaping from subject to subject and wanting to tell him things, asking questions, but not waiting enough for answers. I think he already knows what's been happening in the last twenty-seven years, but I want to talk to him about it all. *All* of it, even though I think he already knows it – where he is. I want to catch up on everything. I want twenty-seven years in two hours.

‘There’s peace in Northern Ireland, Dad! Paisley died, but the DUP goes on. This is an iPhone! I drive a Kia! They didn’t have those here in 1992. There’s this thing called the internet ... I ... I don’t think we have the time for it. Computers, Dad. Trust me, you’d mostly hate it. Especially Facebook. Ryanair were taken over by a fella called Michael O’Leary, you wouldn’t like him. You wouldn’t believe what Clinton did! Oh, he came after Bush, but before Bush’s son. Ah, there’ve been a few since then. Dad, I moved to Scotland!’

‘What do you think of that? I live in Edinburgh. I have for nearly twenty years. It just sort of happened. Everyone else is still at home, and they all got married. Mam is well. I go home a lot, though, don’t worry. And when I go home, I say I’m going home, and when I’m there and coming back I say I’m going home. I don’t really know where home is any more. It’s here, but it’s there too. I’m that, but I’m this too. I say “wee” now instead of small, as if I were from Donegal ... Scotland has its own language, Dad, its own turn of phrase. It’s hilarious. Instead of a langer, a wagon or a bollix, a person can be a martian, an absolute weapon, a bawbag, a fud – you don’t want to know what that last one means, but you would be severely unimpressed to hear me use the word if you knew. Ken. Raj. Ned. Crabbit. Hoachin. But there’s crossover too – an eejit works on both sides of the sea. So does a gobshite. And ain’t that the truth.’

‘You were right about this place. I know you always wanted to visit. It’s stunning, Dad. You would just love Edinburgh, it’s beautiful – high ceilings and open parklands. You’d consider moving to the West of Scotland. You’d adore the Highlands. You’d stay in Skye. Peace. Serenity ...’

I only ever wanted a couple of hours.

I want to hear the particular resonance of his voice. That voice I still have an echoing, almost translucent memory of.

'I love you.' When you tucked me in at night. Every night. I can just about still hear that half-whisper, and the sheets getting slightly tighter. So I knew you were there. I love you. Every night. Whenever you got in, whenever your shift finished.

Mam says you weren't much of a talker. I am. A blether, they call that in Scotland. Chattering away endlessly with what they call in Scotland a potty mouth. You wouldn't approve of my swearing. Your quiet, solid, listening ear. Mam says that even if I could see you and talk to you, that I wouldn't get to know you properly. That that was just you, you were always more of a listener. That it was hard to know what you were thinking.

I know in my heart what you'd say, though. The only thing that would matter in our two hours. You'd smile, and maybe reach out to me, touch my arm. And you'd say it again. Once more for the hard of understanding. Maybe we'd hug when we'd finished our drinks. One last tuck in, tight hold, and whisper.

Thicker Than Blood

WJ Sharp

‘Where’s the wee one got off to?’ I asked your mother quite casually.

‘Ach, he’ll be causin’ trouble ootside mare than likely,’ was her quite dismissive reply.

‘Well, I’ll go check on him.’ I didn’t stick around for a reply, I had never been fond of how you always seemed to be overlooked. I’m the only one that seemed to really pay attention to you. I made my way to the back door and caught sight of you through the kitchen window. You were alone, as usual, but ... you didn’t seem lonely. You were bouncing around the garden like it was your own magical world. Up and down trees like you had extra limbs, popping in and out of random bushes like there were portals hidden inside them, it was a joy to watch. I stood there for a good 20 minutes watching you, until you fell from a fair height, upon which I rushed over to see that you were unhurt.

‘Yow, yow, yooooow, that wis a sare yin!’ I heard you shout gleefully as I approached. You were picking yourself up as I reached you.

‘What were you doing all the way up there? Yer not a monkey you know, sillybilly.’ I had tried to be stern at first but looking down at your glowing face made it impossible.

You laughed a little, making a cute face, then answered, ‘Well, everybody calls me a cheeky wee monkey, are ye oot to check on yer flooers? Ah’ve made sure tae no go near them,’ while giving me a big toothy grin.

‘Not entirely, pumpkin, came to check on you as well, see if you need a little pruning.’ Your face was a picture for a split second before you realised I was joking.

‘Graaan, you can’t prune wee boys!’ you declared to me confidently.

I decided to tease you a little more and said, ‘Aye, well, we’ll see if that holds true,’ while giving you a little wink. You didn’t take the bait and continued to play away while I tended to the garden which you had, as stated, not disturbed ... mostly. As I worked away we blethered for a little bit about school and home. You told me you didn’t mind school but sometimes it wasn’t fun because people made fun of you for being poor and looking ‘dirty’. Well I set that straight as soon as you said it. I told you that no matter how little money you may have or how much they may have it doesn’t matter, because you have a wealth inside that they could never attain. You didn’t quite understand what I meant so I put it simpler, saying that money or appearance doesn’t truly matter, it is what is inside the person that counts most and that you were a wonderful person, the sort of which they could never hope to be if they placed so much worth in money and outside appearances. You perked up a good bit after that and without thinking I further mentioned that I would have loved to have had a little boy like you, to which you quickly responded, ‘What about your own boys?’

You caught me off guard and quite quietly I replied, ‘I lost mine ...’

Once again, without missing a beat and while looking at me quite sincerely, you said with astounding positivity, ‘If I was around I would have saved them for you.’

I don’t think I’ve ever moved as fast as I did in that moment. I grabbed ahold of you and hugged you tighter

than ever before. You didn't protest. In fact, you seemed to sense I was a little out of sorts and let me hold you for a good while. After I eventually let you go you still had that wonderful smile for me and as upset as I was at remembering that old, deep wound, it just couldn't take a hold over me with your beaming face acting like a lamp banishing the darkness. I quickly gave you another little hug and said softly into your ear, 'No matter what, you will *always* be my little boy and I'll always be here for you.' And when I let you go with a quick peck on the cheek you gave me another smile and continued your little adventure in my garden. I'll never forget that day ...

'Now as I stand before you all repeating these words as they were said to me, I have one last thing to say. My gran told me this, thinking that I couldn't remember that day as I was so young. But I do. I remember every single time we blethered about life, mostly *my* life. I cherished every one of those moments and even more so now that she's gone. She was a light the likes of which I've never known since and she will always be held the most dearest in my heart, but I have one regret, the biggest of my life. Which is that I never told her what I just told you. I always told her I loved her, but I never told her just how much the times I spent with her meant to me. All those blethers we had saved me more times than I could have ever thanked her for. She truly was, no, *is* the most amazing person that I have ever known. So I humbly ask you all to not wait, because if it does become too late you might never forgive yourself.'

Mighty

Lynn Fraser

We were sat in the car, Mammie and I, waiting for the rain to stop.

Listening to it. Watching it. Oohing and aaahing.

Lashing doon it was, torrential, monsoon-like.

A thunder-plump and we were under attack.

But yet at the same time comforting, safe.

Disconnected from the world, the two of us, our own unit in battle

cocooned in that wee metal capsule for a while.

‘I want to talk to you about something, darling’

She changes the emotion gear in the car and takes my hand.

It was just days before she was going in for a high-risk op, an abdominal aortic aneurysm.

She talks about not being here, about dying. I listen.

‘I’m not frightened, just a wee bit apprehensive,’ she says with a smile.

Mammie’s faith was strong. Always had been.

It had seen her through her cancer, the suicide of her son, the death of her sister and her husband.

All in quick succession – and in that order.

Life can be a bastard.

‘... and I wonder what it’s going to be like!’

smiling genuinely, she turns away from me, and looks to the window.

When my brother died, it was like a bomb had gone off.
Mammie had carried her grief and ours,
scooped us all up as a family in her arms and saved us
from drowning.

She'd stumbled at times, aye, but she'd always
put one foot in front of the other
and with fortitude and grace she'd kept going.

She's looking into the rain now,
which looks like a melting, kinetic, watery mass
as the water reverberates off the windscreen.

'... but I know I'll see everyone: your Dad, Maureen –
and Gerard.

Och, I'll give him such a good kick up the backside when
I see him –
but after I've given him the biggest hug.'

'So don't be sad, darling,' my Mammie says.

'Well, be sad a little! And sure, have a cry, as I know you
will.

But I've had a good life, a lovely wee life. So please be
happy for me,
because I will be happy.'

She's smiling. And there are tears in the wee metal
capsule.

Continue the story...

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Changing the conversation

Blether

Nikesh Shukla

My daughter expresses frustration by sighing like she's Harry Enfield. It's a groan and a sigh mixed all in one. She has her head bowed and her hands in her pocket as we turn the corner to head up to her nursery when she makes this noise, out of nowhere.

You okay? I ask her.

I just want to go to all the places I've never been, she says and then looks up at me. There are too many places.

The poor thing. Already, the world feels unwieldy and enormous and she hasn't even discovered the drudgery of school, the disappointment of ring doughnuts or the crushing inevitability of the bus that runs late when you're in a rush and have already torn yourself apart debating whether it'd be quicker to just walk or stay put.

Life is already too big for her.

I remember a friend likening parenting to plane safety video instructions. That it's all about survival. And in the event of a loss of cabin pressure, should air masks drop from the panels above you, you are instructed to secure your mask before attempting to aid a loved one. In practice, this sounds very sensible. In the moment, though, you will be thinking about that poor kid next to you. But if you don't survive, how can you ensure that your child will too? My friend told me that in order to maintain some semblance of balance in my parenting life, I had to metaphorically secure my own air mask.

Which in practice, is super selfish. But you get why they said it.

Life is too big for me. And I wonder just how I can instil a sense of boundlessness in my child, without making her dreams unrealistic and projecting onto her my own disappointments with everything around me. Surely there is a sweet spot between the sense of wonder at all the joys the world has to offer, and a life filled with ring doughnuts.

Where would you go if you could go anywhere? I ask her.

She wants to go to Canada because her favourite bear is from there and then she wants to go to Kenya because her mummy and daddy saw giraffes there. They're her favourite animal, and once she asked me to show her images on my phone. A Google search for giraffes told me that they were newly on the endangered list. I chose not to tell her and instead focused on the pictures of the doe-eyed long-necked black-tongued beauties.

She then wants to go to India because she is half Indian and she wants to go to England because she is half English. And then after that, she wants me to tell her about the places I haven't told her about yet.

This all started because I asked if she wants to visit a beach soon. Suddenly the thought of a beach led to a selection of beaches previously visited, which led to the thought of holidays, which led her to consider how big the world was, and she didn't even know about much of it.

My poor child.

Conversations with her challenge me. I've always found conversation too much effort. Much more comfortable with a book or with writing an email or a pithy tweet, or heck, some conversational comedic yet poignant prose. I take conversation for granted. I long to have those brilliantly quippy back and forths you only

ever see on television, joking and ragging on each other, while always maintaining a signature tell about what sort of person each character is.

Conversations with my child force me to be engaged and interested and not bullshit her in any way. I can't lie to her about why the sky is blue or why eyeballs never grow, or what kombucha actually is. I have to rely on that teacher's trick of asking, why don't we look this up together?

Where is your favourite place to go to? she asks me.

I like the beach, I tell her.

This makes her upset. I ask what's wrong and she cuddles into me.

Which beach? There are so many.

We can visit as many of them as we want, I tell her. Watching her quantify the size of the world is distressing me.

Often, when the world feels so bleak and unknowable and we try to root ourselves to what action we can take to make it better, we end up failing at the first hurdle.

Quote-tweeting Trump and calling him stupid won't make him take a long hard look at himself.

Going meatless on Mondays won't bring about the reduction in mass meat production needed to go some way to fixing our environmental problems.

Same with hashtagging your veganism. Same with only caring about cultural appropriation and not mass incarceration or social housing. Same with reading the right books and watching the right documentaries and wearing the right t-shirt.

We think too big. We take our actions on a global scale and not on the grassroots impact we can have. Often I'm asked how someone can be a good ally to me and I remember Reni Eddo-Lodge saying that she doesn't want

you to be an ally to her, she doesn't know where you hold power and influence. Where do you hold power and influence? Even if you think you don't, you do.

I think about that a lot. About doing things in a scaleable way. I think about fixing myself, then my family, then my house, then my street, then my city, then my county, then my country, then my world, then my galaxy. That way where I hold myself on the scale feels manageable, do-able. I know where what I'm doing is having an effect.

And with that, I look at my daughter and smile and say, we can go wherever you want and see whatever you want to see, and we have the whole of our lives ahead of us to do just that. And sometimes it's not about doing as many things as you can, it's about doing what you can well. So let's pick a beach, and go there and have the best time ever.

She smiles and thinks about it and says, can we have ice cream?

Blether

Chic Gibson

Hi, I'm Chic, I'm a 46-year-old man from Paisley, Renfrewshire.

I don't happen to blether much, it's not in my skill set and I don't get much opportunity to do so.

I was diagnosed a few years ago with a form of autism called Asperger's Syndrome.

Well, it was Asperger's, but I'm not quite sure if there's a new name for it, as a journalist, the other year, made quite a point of investigating his involvement with the Nazis.

Probably quite rightly, but it made things quite awkward and difficult for us with the condition as obviously the man it was named after wasn't really a good guy or anything.

Anyway that's blethering and going off to an angle.

Aye, I don't really talk much, I suppose, I had a rough couple of years between finding that out, becoming separated and my mother passing away.

She was the one person that I always blethered with. Every day.

I sort of got lost without her to talk to and given what I have, found it difficult to tell anyone else.

I still 'blether with her' once in a while as her ashes were put in a kirkyard and I go and talk to the tree nearest where we put them.

Aye, I talk with a tree a couple of times a year and I'm happy to. I tell her about the kids, I say I'm alright and I tell her I miss her.

It's maybe strange but I find mawkish the posts that people put online about their deceased relatives, so maybe that's just doing the same thing in a different way.

My boys have a dog and the dog likes me and I like him. He's a labradoodle and he's cute and furry but big enough too.

I catch myself some days talking away to the dog; he looks back at me blethering at him, although I think he really only wants me to say 'walk', 'food' or 'water'.

So I've got a dog and a tree so far ...

I talk to my kids, whether they listen is another thing, but I suppose that's the experience for every parent.

My eldest boy has another kind of autism and he talks and communicates in his own way.

He sometimes listens to me, he sometimes talks back to argue with me.

He sometimes doesn't and we do hand gestures and a type of sign language called Makaton to make sure he's happy.

He talked for the first time after his mother and me took him to see Mickey Mouse at Disneyland Paris.

You 'Meet Mickey Mouse' but Mickey doesn't talk, he gestures, hugs, shakes hands and you get your picture with him.

For my son, that was amazing and he loves Mickey Mouse and has had cuddly toys and blankets with Mickey since he was little.

But speaking for the first time, he said it was 'good' and that he liked meeting Mickey.

As parents we cried and were all over the place at our son finally talking and finally telling us this was his favourite thing.

For all that we hear people speak, so much can be inessential chatter or blether.

Not that time. Those were the 'first words' long delayed.

My son can still be non-verbal but on a good day he'll ask me for things or call me daddy.

It's a strange voice as he's picked up language at first from hearing things on TV or through his device that he watches things on.

I suppose we can take kids being chatterboxes for granted and we'll all be on a train or a bus or in a shop and hear a child talking and talking and talking and be relieved to escape it.

In our case, a child talking was never so welcome.

But that's one side of things, I can be not so great verbally myself and I know from living alone that there's times I'll talk to myself without realising it. It's not strange or weird to hear myself say 'bedtime, mate'.

I suppose I chatter at length by writing in my blog and I chatter in shorter ways using social media and texting. I suppose it's easier on me and I get across what I'm trying to say without the distraction of faces or background noise.

That doesn't mean that I don't like people and that I don't want to chat with them, but part of what I have means that I can get things like small talk and chit-chat a bit wrong and either say too little or go on and on and on.

So I kind of struggle with blether and although I can type away and tell a tale or a story, I can't quite do it right using my mouth and speech.

It's okay and I've learned to forgive myself for maybe not talking as it's maybe better to not blether at someone and get things wrong when I'd rather blether with someone or ideally be the one that's blethered at.

It's estimated that one per cent of people have autism

in one form or other and it's a lot of people that can't quite blether how they'd like.

There's others with different issues with speech and hearing and I try to be mindful of those that'd like to be part of the conversation and like me either can't get it right or can't do it at all. We need a wee bit of kindness now and again and on a bad day for me I struggle with the noise and picking out one conversation from another or from not knowing how or where to even begin.

Anyway, I've blethered enough about me ...

F, M, Other

Laura Clay

It started like a lot of these chats do: on a Saturday evening, after a couple of bottles of wine. I was sitting in my friend's back garden after dinner, when he turned to me and asked the question: 'What pronouns do you use these days?' It's definitely not your usual party small talk. But the queer spaces I occupy have their own rules, different vocabulary, and a candour and passion born of decades of oppression and prejudice.

In March last year, I took part in the first Trans Pride in Edinburgh. Hundreds of LGBTQ+ marchers huddled under flags in typically balmy Scottish spring temperatures. At events like this, talking with complete strangers can often feel like meeting up with decades-old friends. One minute there was a sea of awkward glitter-covered faces shuffling along the Royal Mile; the next, life stories came as thick and fast as the snow falling on the cobbles. Debating the merits of different Pride flag colours swiftly turned into grumbling about homophobic comments, getting suspicious looks in bathrooms or being snubbed by loved ones.

At times, it feels more comfortable to be your authentic self when you know the conversation won't be cut short by hostility. After the march, fuelled by scalding hot conference centre coffee, some school students said they felt that Pride events were an escape from stifling atmospheres at home or in the classroom. The rigid, forced pleasantries about who they were taking to the end of term ball or why they didn't wear makeup could move

aside. Among like-minded people, sentiments that were locked away gathering dust could be released.

When I got home, my bag stuffed with leaflets and badges, I began to research the new descriptions and unknown terms I'd heard that day. 'Genderqueer'. 'Genderfluid'. 'Transmasculine'. I read conversations on online forums, Facebook groups full of furious arguments, blog posts from other curious folk. Their excited chatter played over and over in my head. I wished that I could somehow join in.

I started new, tentative discussions. Sometimes they faltered, meandered or reached dead ends, because nobody has ever had a 'quick chat' about the big philosophical questions in life. There were more late-night gatherings, more bottles of wine, more questions than answers. Eventually, I found what I was looking for, but I had no idea what to do with it.

The confab at my friend's house should have happened months earlier, but I shut my feelings away, sure that nobody would want to hear about them. Every time certain topics came up, I'd sidestep them, change the subject. Unspoken words hung in the air, gathered into clouds that loomed over every social event. It seemed it was easier to talk to strangers about what was really on your mind.

The journey to self-identity can be a fraught process, and a kind word over a cuppa can make all the difference. It takes a lot to ask friends and family for help working it all out.

Once everything clicks into place, though, it's hard to stop talking about how you feel.

You want to shout it from every rooftop.

So when my friend asked me about my pronouns, the answer was easy: they, them. And that started a whole new conversation, one that might go on for a long time.

Hearing Voices

Lee Kerr

I first heard voices at my dad's house when I was sixteen. I went downstairs straight away and told him about it and he phoned Rosslynlee Hospital for help. My uncle gave me a lift there and I was admitted straight away. My voices were just saying random things but I didn't feel too scared because I was getting help. The doctor there asked me lots of questions and the next day I requested to stay because the medication they gave me didn't work.

My mum brought me some clothes and I was sectioned not long after that. I spent two years in Rosslynlee Hospital. I was the youngest person there but I felt safe. I did art, sport and used the boxing bag. I also sang in the Christmas choir. I was still bombarded by voices. We got breakfast, lunch and dinner there and I made a few friends. I was too ill to spend any money on drugs. I had a DLA meeting and got refused at first but then I got it with a doctor's line. My mum and dad visited me weekly.

I got a job working as a labourer in a warehouse. I got two 15-minute breaks per day and got paid £300 per week. After six months I stopped working there because of my voices.

In 2008 I went to AMPS at Cambridge Street. Staff were there from 8am to 6pm. I had my own room and more independence there and met my flatmate Allan. It was OK at AMPS, better than hospital. I started taking clozapine around then and had more distractions,

I met Charlie the wood-worker and had turntables, which helped the voices. I also did some gardening and office work but couldn't work full time because of voices and blood tests. I was still hearing voices and I started using drugs like MDMA and Base to block them out. Around this time I had an admission to Meadows Ward. It was OK there, people were nice to me and they had a smoke room.

After AMPS I moved to my own flat in the Grassmarket. I had no support there apart from seeing my MHO once a week. I was managing my own money there at first but I got used by people who stole money from me. I was unwell there and the police came to see me with a doctor. I ended up getting admitted to hospital again but I just accepted it. I was relieved that I wasn't being exploited by people anymore. I was on Balcarres Male Ward and was started on a depot injection. I didn't like that because it gave me bad side effects and I had to take procyclidine. I was still hearing jumbled, random voices and was taking legal highs to block them out.

After Balcarres, I moved to North Wing Ward and was there for two years. During that time I was put back on clozapine but was still using legal highs. In North Wing I was mostly just playing football as an activity. After North Wing I was discharged and moved to supported accommodation. I was still just playing football and using legal highs.

I moved from Morningside Park to a shared flat in Duke Place with visiting support. I decided to stay off the legal highs. My clozapine was changed from mornings to evenings. I saw my OT Moira every week and got involved in lots more activities like street soccer, Italian and Mediterranean cooking, badminton, fresh start, Cyrenians and the tool library. I also went on

holiday to Liverpool with support staff while I was there.

I didn't get on with my flatmate at Duke Place so I started to look for my own flat by bidding on Edindex. Not long after that I got the flat where I live now.

I am now able to take medication by myself and no longer have visiting support from Carr Gomm. I also have my own bank account, take care of bills and keep my flat tidy by myself. I am able to save up for things and have had lots of tattoos done. I have also got a pet parrot called Flip. My voices come and go but are not as bad as they used to be. I see my mum and dad regularly.

I enjoy living in my own flat and having my independence. I am still involved in playing football, cooking classes and going to the tool library. I also meet my friend and we spend the weekend doing things like cooking, playing turntables or going on a trip somewhere. I use my turntables a lot because it helps me to cope with my voices. I also have all of my activities which help keep me busy.

Breaking the Silence

Lesley Crawford

It seemed that the words were stuck inside me.

Opening my mouth, I willed myself to set them free, but it was impossible. It felt like no amount of coaxing would loosen my tongue.

My friend waited patiently. She knew I had something to say, and she wanted to listen. As I looked into her eyes, I knew that it was safe. I knew I could trust her, but as I opened my mouth to try, the fear rushed in and choked me once more: fear of judgement, of rejection, fear of being misunderstood, of not being believed ... The ferocity of its grip kept me silent.

While I struggled to find my voice to say the words aloud, the voice inside me prattled relentlessly:

'Don't be so stupid ... you know you can't tell ... she'll never believe you ... don't even think about doing this ... no good can come of it ... it's safer to stay silent ... you have to keep this to yourself ...'

The secret had been held there for too long, buried so deep that summoning it to the surface seemed an impossible task. Years of silence and layers of denial held it down. The risk was too great. What would happen if it was released after so long? Once the words escaped there was no going back.

And yet my conviction had grown that I had to overcome this fear. Silence was no longer an effective coping mechanism. I had to take a chance on something better. I had to find my voice.

Finally, it was my friend who broke the silence.

‘Let’s meet again tomorrow, and you can tell me then.’
She paused, and then she hugged me. ‘Whatever it is, I’ll think better of you for facing up to it.’

I spent the evening thinking and praying and searching for courage – wrestling with my anxious thoughts and trying to reason with the voice inside. What if the truth really could set me free? Whatever the outcome, it had to be worth the risk.

I had to find a way to get it out.

The new day dawned with fresh determination. It was time. The fear remained and the voice inside persisted, but this time hope was stronger.

Would it be strong enough to break the stranglehold of fear?

Delving deep, I drew my story out, and this time it came. Faltering and fearful at first, but then the words began to flow. Uncorked at last, they poured out – now it seemed they were impossible to stop!

A long journey lay ahead – of sifting and sorting, processing and healing – but as I found the words at last, I saw only compassion in my friend’s eyes, and finally the voice inside began to fade away.

I knew I had made the right choice.

Longing for a Blether

Dini Armstrong

‘So, where are you really from?’

It’s the second time the taxi driver has asked me since the start of our journey, five minutes ago. It is the fourth time I have been asked today: ‘That’s an interesting accent you’ve got. Where are you from?’ I am asked this question a lot. At the supermarket checkout. In the post office. Even the GP spends more time investigating my origins than the presenting medical complaint. Today, it was the Hermes delivery driver, the receptionist at my gym and the waiter in the restaurant where I had lunch. Alone, because I have not made any friends yet.

The taxi driver is number four. ‘That’s an interesting accent you’ve got. Where are you from?’

I take a deep breath, and with the friendliest voice I can muster I reply: ‘From Helensburgh.’

This does not amuse him. He adjusts his Sikh turban for a while before asking again, this time with emphasis: ‘So, where are you really from?’

I am never quite sure how to answer this question. Selfishly, I am bored having this conversation. I know where I am from, I have heard the story. Again and again and again and again. I have been having this conversation since 1998, when, after living in Germany for 28 years, I decided to go back to my roots and move to Britain. This is the template of the groundhog dialogue:

‘That’s an interesting accent, where are you from?’

‘I grew up in Germany, but I am British.’

‘Oh, Germany, I have a cousin/brother/distant uncle’s ex-teacher who went to Germany on holiday. Whereabouts?’

‘Hamburg.’

‘Oh, nice.’

And then we have run out of time and I have to pack up/pay/sign the delivery slip. What I don’t tell them is that my surname, Armstrong, is not my husband’s surname. That I did not come to live here because I married, but because I wanted to. That I love this country, and the people in it. That my father was a Geordie and my mother Dutch. That my sisters are German but that even they called me the little British girl. That, every time I told someone my surname in Germany, they said: ‘Armstrong, that’s an unusual name. Where are you from?’ That I moved to Britain to finally escape that conversation.

I have considered working with a speech therapist, but then I would have to choose a local accent to replace mine with – and I am not sure which one to go for. Should I speak in a fake Glaswegian? Even if I could manage that, it feels dishonest somehow, farcical. I am a mental health therapist, and congruence is important to the therapeutic relationship. If I suddenly turned up speaking pure Shettleston, they would think I was taking the mickey.

What I would like to tell the driver is that I have just been to the museum and saw a painting by Dalí that really knocked my socks off. That my youngest has just passed her final exams at uni, my oldest got engaged and the one in the middle is travelling the world – all by herself. That I love chocolate but hate cinnamon,

which makes Christmas tricky. I want to brag about the fact that at almost 50, I climbed a Munro last weekend, for the first time in my life, and that I am hooked. How my Fitbit told me to slow down and that I was fighting for breath the entire time, with red blotches in my face – how I got to the top and saw the most beautiful view I have ever laid my eyes on. That I am worried I am getting a bit fat, that I sometimes binge-watch TV and mindlessly devour anything in the flat that has so much as a trace of chocolate on it or in it. How I am struggling with the fact that my three kids have flown the nest and how I miss talking to them.

This time I am standing my ground.

‘No, really, I am from Helensburgh. I am British.’
The driver frowns, I can see it in the mirror. His next question is not so friendly:

‘Are you lying to me? How can you be British? I can hear it in your accent.’

I feel like the air has been sucked out of the cab. For a brief second, I consider jumping out of the vehicle. But I believe doors are locked in taxis. I have broken the rule of the game. Player 1: You are not one of us. Player 2: You are correct, I am not one of you. Player 1: I knew it. I like you for agreeing with me. I decide to appease him and get back in line.

‘You are right, I do have a German accent, but my mother was Dutch, and my father was from Newcastle. I was born in Germany and spent the first 28 years of my life there, that’s why I have an accent.’

‘Oh, whereabouts in Germany?’ he asks.

While I play the groundhog game like a good little girl I long to ask him about his family. Does he have children?

Is he proud of them? Have they left home, too? Does he miss them? What is his favourite TV show, and does he sometimes binge and watch six episodes in a row? Has he stood in front of the same painting I saw today, full of awe?

But I don't get a chance to ask. We have arrived. His cousin was in Germany once, on holiday. He is not sure where exactly. Maybe I have met her. Maybe she introduced herself to me, and I to her. And then, most likely, she told me that Armstrong ... is an unusual name.

Lend an ear

Blether

Chris McQueer

While the rest of the lads talk coupons, fitbaw, burds and bevvie, Jamie plays absent-mindedly with a beer mat. Slumped back in his seat, he is a spectator to this gathering. He doesn't want to be here. Or maybe he does. Maybe he's needed this. We can't tell.

'Ye hear that wan, Jamie mate?' Wiggy asks him. Jamie smiles but Ross notices it's not a real smile. It's not Jamie's usual smile. Instead of the usual big daft glaikit grin he does when he's hearing a funny story, he just smiles a wee bit and keeps looking down at the beer mat which he's ripping wee bits off of, piling up the fragments into a bundle. Ross knows the script here, he's seen Jamie like this before, last year or the year before, he can't remember.

Ross watches as Wiggy makes a face to the rest of the lads in response to Jamie's silence, a face that says, 'Wit's the matter wi him.' Jamie takes a deep breath and scratches at the back of his head. He takes a gulp from his pint. He puts the glass back down then pulls his fags from his pocket and slips away from the table. No one notices but Ross.

'He's a dour-faced bastard, man,' Wiggy laughs. 'Int he?' Two of the lads laugh at this quip.

Ross glances through the window to see if he can see Jamie. He can see him take a drag from his cigarette and exhale, his head slightly tilted back.

'I'm gonnae make sure he's awrite,' Ross says, getting up from the table.

‘Tell him tae cheer up,’ Wiggy shouts after him.
‘Putting us aw oan a downer here, man.’

As Ross gets outside, Jamie is walking towards the car park at the back of the pub, keys in hand.

‘Hawl you,’ Ross shouts, putting on a faux-intimidating voice. Jamie turns round with that same smile from earlier. ‘Wit ye dain?’ Ross nods at Jamie’s keys. ‘You’ve had three pints, ya madman?!’

‘I just ... I just need tae head up the road, mate.’

‘Right, well, yer no driving. Moan, I’ll walk ye up.’

Jamie stuffs his keys back into his pocket. The two lads trudge through the smirry rain without saying anything. Ross doesn’t know quite what to say, he hopes Jamie will break the silence but, from the look on his face, he can tell he won’t.

‘Been a while since you’ve been oot wi us aw, mate,’ Ross ventures.

‘Aye, I know. Few weeks, eh.’ Jamie doesn’t look at Ross as he says this.

‘Wit you been up tae? You’ve been quiet oan Twitter and that as well, I’ve noticed.’

Jamie shrugs his shoulders. ‘Och, I don’t know, man.’

‘Wit’s the script? Is everything awrite?’

‘Ach it’s wan ae they wans, mate, ye know how it is.’

Ross gives a wee laugh at how Jamie has just delivered the vaguest answer of all time. ‘I see, mate. That’s awrite.’ He pats Jamie’s back. He does this almost automatically, without thinking at all. To Ross, it’s an almost meaningless gesture. To Jamie, it’s massive. It feels like Ross has touched a secret panel on his back, making him open up and say out loud how he’s actually feeling. Admitting not just to Ross, but to himself.

‘It’s just ...,’ he starts to say. ‘Och, mate. I’ve just no really left the hoose at aw recently. Just cannae bring

maself tae go oot. Don't know wit's the matter wi me, man.'

'Aw mate, am sorry tae hear that.' Ross doesn't know what else to say here.

'Then I dae finally get myself ready tae come oot an come tae the pub and the boays call me a dour-faced bastard and aw that.'

Ross stops walking, they're not far away from Jamie's house. 'Mon back tae the pub, mate.'

'Nah, honestly, mate. I'd rather go hame.'

'Naw, c'moan. We'll have a laugh, I promise. We're pricks tae each other but we're still mates, the boays will understand if yer no feelin yerself.'

'I don't know ...' Jamie looks along the road to his house then back to Ross.

'Just come for wan mair,' Ross says. He doesn't want Jamie to be on his own tonight. 'Wan mair an I promise naebody will gie ye any grief. Unless it's about the fact that yer in dire need ae a haircut.'

Jamie gives a proper laugh at this, Ross realises it's the first he's seen him laugh like this in ages. 'Aye, awrite. Wan mair pint.'

The two lads head back to the pub. The rain is easing off now. They can see Wiggy is standing outside on his phone as they get closer. He hangs up as he sees Jamie and Ross coming towards him.

'Wit yous two been up tae?' Wiggy asks. Ross looks at Jamie who is giving Wiggy a death stare.

'Eh, I'll be two secs mate, I'll get ye in there,' Ross says, putting his hand on Jamie's back again, guiding him into the pub. Wiggy looks at Ross with a confused face.

'Wit's up wi him?' he asks.

'He's no dain brilliant the noo,' Ross says. 'He needs a blether wi his pals, ye need tae pack this in.'

‘Pack wit in?’

‘Gien him a hard time, you’ve been oan his back since he goat here, man.’

‘Right, awrite, awrite, calm doon. I’ll no say anyhin.’

As Ross and Wiggy enter the pub, they can see instantly that Jamie is in a better mood, laughing and smiling, engaging in conversation.

‘Wit yous talking about?’ Wiggy asks the group, sitting back down.

‘We’re trying tae decide who’s goat the worst haircut,’ one of the lads replies to him. ‘You or Tom Hanks in Castaway here,’ he nods at Jamie who laughs and jokingly rolls his eyes.

‘Wit’s the matter wi ma haircut?’ Wiggy asks.

‘Well yer no called Wiggy for nothin, mate,’ Jamie says to laughter from everyone at the table. Except Ross who’s not laughing. He’s not been listening. He’s just smiling, glad to have his pal back.

I Come From a Distant Land

The Syrian Women's Group Poem

I come from a distant land
Ana jeet min makan baa'eed
I know wala shi (nothing)
It's a new world
Everything is different
My voice has tghayar (changed)
Weak and hesitant
I want to speak out
Bas shu Isah? Shu Ighalat?
(But what is right? What is wrong?)
I am angry nothing byeshemi (flows)
Sawti makhnuu'
(My voice is suffocated)
I come from a distant land.
Ana jeet min makan baa'eed

انا جيت من مكان بعيد

لمجموعة المرأة السورية

انا جيت من مكان بعيد

I come from a distant land.

ما بعرف Anything (ولا شئ)

بعالم جديد

كل شئ مختلف

صوتي has changed (تغير)

ضعيف ومتردد

بدي إفصح

What is right? What is wrong?

(بس شو الصح، شو الغلط)

انا معصبة، ما شي Flows (بيمشي)

My voice is suffocated

(صوتي مخنوق)

انا جيت من مكان بعيد

I come from a distant land.

Twa Haufs o the Hale

Bill Cox

My ithers hauf his aye bin a blether. She's got the gift o the gab, far I got the gift o the ackwart silence. Ye ken the kynd o silence I mean – the kynd at juist hings there atween twa fowk, fa then hiv tae dee onythin bit catch each other's ee.

Ay but her, weel, she can tak at silence an fill it wi ease. Nae wi juist ony meaningless jabber, bit wi something appropriate at will let the conversation flow past the awkward dam that I hid erected in its wey.

I've niver met onybody that's sae good at lettin a cantation flow. Watchin her is like watchin an artist at wirk. There's a craft tae spikkin, a craft that I dinna hae an 'o' level in, nae e'en a foundation credit – an at's the class that a the numpties sat in! But her, min, she haes a first-class honours degree in spikkin fae ane o those fantoosh universities, like Yale or Cambridge. If they hid a hall o fame o blether then her waxwork model wid be greetin the visitors as they came in.

She juist maks awbody feel comfortable. She disnae hog the claick, disnae let her tongue wag uncontrollably like some fowk I ken. Min, fan ye get trapped by ane o yon, a clashie tellin ye story efter story wi nae break in atween, ye juist stairt tae despair o yer very existence. The time afore ye were trapped in this cantation seems like a past life, fan the world was bricht an new. Yer een glaze ower and yer mynd stravaigs, but ye still hiv tae follow the social niceties, so ye nod alang an grunt noo an again. Ye juist hiv tae accept that this is yer life noo.

Na, mi quine is nae like at at a. She's mair like a cantation whisperer, guidin it alang, keeping awbody included, throwin the odd laugh or bonny smile in there tae grease the wheels o human interaction. Noo, if she's got ony flaw, it's mebbe that she likes her detail a wee bittie ower muckle. Me, I'm a big picture mannie. Juist gie me the braid strokes, the general ootline an at's eneuch for me. Now mebbe it means I miss oot on a significant detail or twa, that will nae doot cause me a stooshie doun the road. At's me juist bein a typical mannie, fa disnae fash tae read the instructions afore he dives heedlins intae somethin that instructions are maist likely a necessity for!

I've nae time for details, I'm a busy man wi heaps o TV tae watch. Houiver, she likes her details, an noo an again it seems, details hiv tae be repeated a puckle o times tae mak sure that they sink in. Even there, tho, she's nae as bad as twa or three I've encountered. If ye combine the storytelling blether wi someone wi a love o pointless details then ye can literally be trapped for an eternity, yer een rolling back in yer heed as ye suffer an oot o body experience.

Even waur is the tag-team blether, twa folk fa should hae niver hiv been allowed tae meet, bit fate haes drawn them thegither tae tell their yairns in the maist protracted and detailed way, tae the detriment o a fowk fa juist want tae get on wi their lives.

'So there we were, Bill. It was a Tuesday nicht ... fit, Marjorie? ... No, it wisnae a Wednesday because we hid fish at nicht ... fit, we didnae hae fish ... oh, wait maybe it wis a Wednesday efter a ... onyways, it wis about three minutes past seiven ... no, Marjorie, it wisnae juist efter six, or I wid hiv bin watchin the news ...' an so on. Ye get the pictur.

In sic a situation yer enemy is the tangent, a conversational deed-end that soaks up the minutes o yer life bit disnae get ye ony nearer the end o this interminable tale. There's nae muckle ye can dae in sic circumstances but fake a health emergency, which is entirely understandable tae get oot o the clutches o sic a sowel!

No, I'm fain wi ma own wee cantational superstar. She mair thin maks up for my deficiencies in nae been at good at uisin ma mooth tae connect tae ither human beings. I ken, thare's an obvious joke in thare, but instead I'm juist gaun tae let the silence stretch, until we baith feel uncomfortable, leuk at oor feet for a bit, mebbe tak a sip o oor drinks an stairt tae leuk around for a reason tae slowly drift awa ...

The Great Philosopher

Ann Craig

Oor Scotland's gripped by a credit crunch,
there's nae sich a thing as a free lunch.
It's time folk realised it isnae a bottomless pot,
these politicians, well – they're the worst o the lot,
did their mammies no teach them how tae save money?
Cos life disnae flow aw milk and honey.
Hiv they nuthing pit by fur a rainy day?
A budget means buy things when ye kin pay!
Ma mammy's best motto was *never ever*
buy oanythin oan the never never!

Nellie shouts at aw they mugs oan the telly.
Her man says, *calm doon, oor Nellie*
bit there's nae stoappin Nellie wance
she gets gawn; men loosin their joabs
aw the wee shoaps closin, shut that Parliament
doon, that'll save a few bob, cos ah cannae
see they're oany good at their joab,
how come wae aw their education an brain,
they didnae see us gawn doon the drain?

Ah, well, says Nellie, puttin oan the kettle,
us Scots'll make it, we've goat loats o mettle,
ah wonder if it'll be like the nineteen
fifties, when loads o folk jist goat up
and shifted, severin their ties wae
a lang distance knife, they hid tae leave hame
tae mak a new life. That's why
we hiv tae open oor doors, we hiv tae

welcome folk tae Scotland's shores,
cos ye never know where yer ain heid'll lie,
Nellie's man jist noads, lets oot a sigh.
Och, Harold, she smiles, ahm gled ye agree.
Noo wid anyone like a waarrim cup o tea?

By Chance

Carolyn O'Hara

Up ahead
a figure rounds the corner,
an alien silhouette
encompassing wheels and angular legs.

Slowly the puzzle is resolved:
an elderly woman trailing trolley and bags,
clutches a small table,
its dark wooden limbs
making good its escape from
the carrier bag stretched pointlessly over its top.

Her each step is a feat.
Rain hat pulled low over silvery curls,
its ties dissect folds of neck;
a slash of red lips
below rheumy eyes
punctuate her parchment pallor.

'Can I give you a hand?'

Across her face splashes
a cocktail of emotions
settling into startled relief at my offer,
and so, with mutual baby steps, we journey slowly
homeward,
her bound legs
sausage-like in shape and hue.
We begin to blether,
exchanging glances and snippets –

our shared neighbourhood;
the similarity of our names;
the duration of her life, alone;
the table –
newly purchased for a pittance,
just the thing, in time for tea.

With rasping breath
final stairs are mounted
and fumbled keys open wide the door to home
where the precious table is safely stowed.

Now, for me, the hardest part:
to leave amid a shower of thanks,
confirming isolation so intense
that such an act,
should 'make' her lonely day.

Jason

Seonag Monk and Calum MacKinnon

Tha mi fhìn dhen bheachd nach eil dad cho math airson sgilean sgrìobhaidh a leudachadh, fhaobharachadh 's a ghleusadh na bhith a-muigh an lùib dhaoine, a' coimhead 's ag èisteachd agus aig amannan a' farchluais air còmhraidhean beaga an siud 's an seo. Cho fad 's nach gu bi thu cus nochdte mun ghnothaich! Bi socair, gleusta, agus cò aig a tha brath dè na cnapan òir a dh'fhaodadh tuiteam a-steach do làmhan an sgrìobhaiche.

Bha mi anns a' bhùth aon latha nuair a chuala mi guthan cruaidh dithis chailleach a' cladhach naidheachd bho ghille beag: shùigh mi a-staigh a h-uile facal agus mi nam chabhag faighinn dhachaigh gus am faighinn gach lideadh sìos air pàipear.

Gu h-obann thàinig an rocaid gu stad. Thug an Caiptean sùil timcheall air.

'Diabhal!'

Chuir an gille beag a làmh suas gu bheul ach bha e ro anmoch.

Thug am fear òg, a bha ag obair air Ainsley Harriott a chur air an sgeilp, droch shùil air a' ghille òg, ach thionndaidh e air ais gu na pacaidean brota le srann gàire air aodainn.

Bha an Caiptean air an rocaid a stiùireadh chun an àite cheàrr – cha robh e ag iarraidh a bhith am measg nam beans, brot agus paidhichean Fray Bentos, 's e bha a dhìth airsan ach suiteas. Loisg an Caiptean òg einnsean na rocaide a-rithist agus rinn e às.

Le brag thàinig an rocaid gu stad agus e air bualadh ann am planaid mhòr. Planaid le fàileadh Lily of The Valley a' strì an aghaidh samh an fhallais.

'Agh! A mhic a damnaidh!' ars a' phlanaid.

Thug an gille beag sùil suas. Cò cnap planaid a bha sin ach Mina Mhòr. Chuir an gille beag an t-einnsean gu dol a-rithist agus chaidh an rocaid an comhair a' chùil.

'Jason! Cha bu chòir dhut a bhith a' ruith timcheall ann am bùth!'

'Duilich,' ars Caiptean Jason ann a guth ìosal.

'Bu chòir nàire a bhith ort, cha mhòr nach do leig tu Mina bhochd,' ars an guth a bha dìreach air nochdadh a-mach o chùl Mina Mhòr. Cò bha sin ach a piuthar, Cathy. Cò eile? Far am bitheadh aon, bhitheadh an dithis.

Chrom Jason a cheann, agus e a' feuchainn ri tuigsinn ciamar a dhèanadh e an gnothach air Mina Mhòr a leigeil far a casan agus còrr is fichead clach do chuideam innte. Fiù 's nan robh rocaid aige.

'Dè cabhag a tha ort co-dhiù?' 'Chan eil fhios 'm.'

'Ò, bidh e ri blaighteachd air choireigin,' ars Cathy ri piuthar.

'Tha thu dìreach mar a tha d' athar. Cà' bheil Dadaidh co-dhiù? An do thill e air ais gu Mamaidh fhathast?'

'Chan eil fhios 'm.' 'Ò nist, a Chathy,' ars Mina Mhòr.

'Tha fios agad gu bheil e trang air na rigs.' Thug Mina Mhòr putag dha piuthar le gàire.

'Och tha, agus feumaidh gun do dh'atharraich iad na shifts aige cuideachd gu three months on, three months off!' ars an tè eile.

Rinn an dithis aca gàire shuarach ri chèile.

'Ah, salachar esan – cha do rinn e fiù 's an gnothach air tighinn dhachaigh airson na Nollaig, an do rinn?' Cha tuiirt Jason sìon.

'Cuiridh mi geall nach do leig a chruadhas dha

preusant sam bith a chur thugad airson a' Christmas?'
ars Cathy.

'Chuir e thugam Selection Box!' ars Jason le
spionnadh.

'Ooooh Selection Box! An cuala tu siud, a Chathy?
Selection Box! Nach e, a m' eudail, a dh'fhosgail a thòin!'

'Fhuair mi cuideachd baidhsagal.' 'Baidhsagal? Ciamar
a fhuair thusa baidhsagal?'

'Fhuair mi e bho Ghrandpa ùr.' 'Grandpa ùr!?' ars na
peathraichean còmhla.

'S e,' ars Jason agus e a' toirt ceum air ais.' Grandpa ùr?
Cò nist a' Grandpa ùr a tha seo?' ars Mina Mhòr ann a
guth socair.

'Chan eil fhios 'm.'

'Aw, nach eil sin laghach, a Mhina, gun d' fhuair Jason
baidhsagal ùr bho Ghrandpa ùr. Agus tha fhios aig an
t-saoghal mhòr gu bheil Jason airidh air. Nach eil, Jason?
Chan eil fhios agamsa am faca mi riamh gille beag
cho modhail riut. Agus am bi thu a' dol air spin air a'
bhaidhsagal ùr agad, Jason?'

'Bidh.'

'A' dol air a' bhaidhsagal ùr agad Jason, a-null gu taigh
Granaidh, an e?'

'S e.'

'Och 's e, tha sin laghach. A' dol a thadhail air Granaidh ...?'

'S e.'

'Agus am bi Granaidh trang a' bèicearachd?' ars Cathy
agus i a' gabhail thairis bho piuthar. 'Tha Granaidh
math air bèicearachd, nach eil, Jason? Tha i cho tric a'
bèicearachd nach eil? Dè nist as toil leat ...?'

'Pancakes.'

'Oh pancakes, an cuala tu siud, a Mhina?'

'Uill chan ann bodhar a tha mi!'

Thug Cathy sgailc dha piuthar.

‘Pancakes le ìm ’s silidh, an e?’

‘Le lemon curd.’

‘Lemon curd. Thusa agus Granaidh nar suidhe an sin sa chidsin ag ithe pancakes le lemon curd. Aw, tha sin laghach, agus tha fios gum bi Grandpa ùr e fhèin ag ithe nam pancakes, am bi?’

‘Uaireannan ...’

Thoisich solas rabhaidh a’ priobadh ann an cèaban na rocaide.

‘Thu fhèin, Granaidh agus Grandpa ùr a’ suidhe ag ithe gu toilichte an sin, nach e? Tha fios gum bi Granaidh a’ fàs sgìth a bhith sa chidsin fad an latha, a’ bèicearachd, a’ còcaireachd, a dèanamh nan soithichean ...’

‘Ò bi Grandpa ùr a’ dèanamh nan soithichean còmhla rithe.’

‘Am bi, Jason? Grandpa ùr a’ cuideachadh Granaidh. Agus nuair a tha Granaidh sgìth am bi Grandpa ùr a dol sìos leatha chun na leapa ...?’

‘A’ dol a shìneadh còmhla rithe ...?’ ars Mina.

Bha an solas rabhaidh a-nist ag innse dha Caiptean Jason gun robh feum air stiùireadh air falbh bhon chunnart.

‘Uill ’s e cuideigin eile a bha san leabaidh còmhla ri Granaidh a-raoir.’ ars Caiptean Jason.

‘Dè thuirt thu? Cuideigin eile?’

‘Cuideigin an àite Grandpa ùr?’ ars Cathy. ‘S e!’ ‘Cò nist a bha sin?’ ars Mina.

‘Uill cha bu chòir dhomh innse.’ ars Caiptean Jason. ‘Is dòcha gun innsidh mi ma gheibh mi not.’

‘Not?’

‘An duine,’ ars Jason.

‘An duine,’ s e, ma tha cuimhne agad air ainm an duine, bheir mise dhut not,’ ars Cathy.

‘Chan e,’ ars Jason, ‘Not an duine agus innse mi dhuibh.’

Thug an dithis pheathraichean sùil air cach a chèile.

‘Uill, seall de fhuair mise nam phoca, Jason. Not! Bheil not agadsa cuideachd, Mina?’

‘S ann agam a tha. Siud agad dà not ma tha, Jason. Nist feumaidh tu innse dhuinn cò bha san leabaidh còmhla ri Granaidh a-raoir?’

‘Mise!’

Rinn an rocaid aig Caiptean Jason sgreuch gàire mus do dh’fhalbh e a-mach à sealladh am measg nan lofaichean.

Jason

I am firmly of the opinion that there is nothing as effective in broadening, sharpening and fine-tuning the writer’s skills than to observe, and at times eavesdrop on, people’s conversations. As long as you are not too obvious about it! Be circumspect and who knows what nuggets of gold may fall into your lap (top).

I was in a shop one day when I heard the cruel voices of a couple of old biddies interrogating a little boy, I made sure to commit every word to memory as I hurried home in order to transfer every precious syllable to paper.

The rocket screeched to a stop. The Captain took a look around.

‘Damn!’

The little boy put his hand to his mouth, but it was too late.

The young man, who was busy arranging Ainsley Harriott on the shelf, shot the little boy a look, but returned to the soup packets with a wry grin on his face.

The Captain had navigated the rocket to the wrong coordinates, he didn't want to be amongst the beans, soup and Fray Bentos pies, what he wanted was sweets. The Captain ignited the rocket engine and took off again.

With a bang the rocket came to a stop as it collided into a large planet. A planet where the aroma of Lilly of the Valley fought a losing battle against the stink of sweat.

'Agh! You wee bugger!' said the planet.

The little boy looked up. The planet was identified as Big Mina. The little boy ignited his engines again and put the rocket into reverse.

'Jason! You shouldn't be running around in a shop!'

'Sorry,' said Captain Jason in a small voice.

'You should be ashamed of yourself, you almost knocked poor Mina off her feet,' said the voice emerging from behind Big Mina. Her sister planet Cathy. Who else? One orbited the other.

Jason lowered his head, as he tried to work out how he could possibly knock the twenty stone mass of Big Mina off her feet. Even if he did have a rocket.

'What's your hurry anyway?'

'I don't know.'

'Oh he'll be up to some mischief,' said Cathy to her sister. 'You're just like your father. Where is Daddy anyway? Has he come back to Mammy yet?'

'I don't know.'

'Oh now Cathy,' said Big Mina, 'You know he's busy on the rigs.' With a sly smirk Big Mina nudged her sister.

'Och yes, and they must have changed his shifts too, to three months on, three months off!' replied the other one.

The two sisters laughed raucously.

'Ah the rotter, he didn't even manage to make it home for Christmas did he?'

Jason was silent.

'I'll bet he was too tight fisted to even buy his little son a present for Christmas?' said Cathy.

'He sent me a Selection Box!' retorted Jason with bravado.

'Ooooh a Selection Box! Did you hear that Cathy? A Selection Box! My word, didn't he crack open the piggy bank!'

'I also got a bicycle.'

'A bicycle? How did you get a bicycle?'

'I got it from new Grandpa.'

'New Grandpa!?' said the sisters in unison.

'Yes,' stuttered Jason as he took two steps back.

'New Grandpa? Who is this new Grandpa?' inquired Big Mina in a low voice.

'I don't know.'

'Awh isn't that nice Mina, that Jason got a new bicycle from new Grandpa. And heaven knows Jason deserves it. Don't you Jason? I don't know if I've ever seen such a well behaved little boy as you. And I'll bet you go for a spin on your new bicycle too Jason?'

'Yes.'

'Riding your new bicycle Jason, going over to Granny's house is that it?' Asked Mina.

'Yes.'

'Och that's lovely isn't it? Going to visit Granny ...?'

'Yes.'

'And will Granny be busy baking?' asked Cathy taking over from her sister, 'Granny is good at baking isn't she Jason? She's always baking isn't she? What's your favourite ...?'

'Pancakes.'

'Oh pancakes, did you hear that Mina?'

'Well I'm not deaf!'

Cathy gave her sister a shove.

‘Pancakes with butter and jam is it?’

‘With lemon curd.’

‘Lemon curd. You and Granny sitting there in the kitchen eating pancakes with lemon curd. Awh that’s lovely and I’ll bet new Grandpa eats some pancakes too, does he?’

‘Sometimes ...’

A warning light began to blink in the cockpit of the rocket.

‘You, Granny and new Grandpa happily eating there is that it? Granny must get tired being in the kitchen all day, baking, cooking, doing the dishes ...’

‘Oh new Grandpa does the dishes with her.’

‘Does he Jason? New Grandpa helping Granny. And when Granny gets tired does new Grandpa take her to bed for a wee lie down ...?’

‘Lies down beside her ...?’ asks Mina.

The warning light now indicated to Captain Jason that he needed to take evasive action.

‘Well it was someone else who was in bed with Granny last night,’ said Captain Jason.

‘What did you say? Someone else?’

‘Someone other than new Grandpa?’ asked Cathy.

‘Yes!’

‘Who was that then?’ inquired Mina.

‘Well I shouldn’t really say,’ said Captain Jason. ‘But perhaps I’ll tell if I get a pound.’

‘A pound?’

‘A person,’ said Jason.

‘A person, yes if you can remember the name of the person, I’ll give you a pound,’ said Cathy.

‘Not,’ corrected Jason. ‘A pound a person and I’ll tell you.’

The two sisters exchanged a look.

‘Well look at what I found in my pocket, Jason, a pound! Do you have a pound too, Mina?’

‘Yes indeed, there you go Jason, two pounds. Now you have to tell who was in bed with Granny last night?’

‘Me!’

Captain Jason’s rocket made a screeching, laughing sound as it disappeared amongst the loaves.

R-E-S-P-E-C-K

Janet Pelerin

Dear sister in Christ,

You blether awa' in the pews
Every Sunday morning
Throughout the choir practice
As if your life depends on it
And mibby it does
But we need to hear each ither
And you're louder than the lot ay us put the gither.

Ye seem tae think
Fir some unco reason
That yer voice disnae travel.
But it reaches us awright,
Soomin' roon the roofspace,
Stottin' aff the stanes,
Dirlin' in wur lugs
An rattlin' the windae panes.

It's distracting,
Infuriating
And disrespeckfu'.

Sometimes I've almost had wirts wi' you:
'Eh, d'ye mind hen? We're practising here
– cannae hear wursels think.'
Once I even felt so disjeckit
That I asked an elder
Tae raise it wi the session.
And did he?
Aye, right!

But it disnae stop there, naw.
'Cos when we sing the introit
You seem tae think that whatever you have ti say
Is still mair important.

I daur say you're the best bletherer in the hale kirk,
But ah really dinnae care:
When the choir sings, zip it, right?

Ye ken fine well
We're supposed to treat ithers
As we would want them to treat us.
You talking while we're singing
Is like us pulling a the flooers
Oot your arrangement,
Lobbin' them through the air,
An flingin' them on the flair.

So ahm tellin' ye
That if ye blether onymair
I swear ah'm gonnae huv ti fight the urge
Ti hurl a hymn book
In yir distinct direction
An if ah miss
Ahll be sair tempted
Tae lob a daud o communion breed
At yer heed!

So jus' tae make it crystal clear
What ahm sayin' here
Is
There's a time tae haud yer wheesht and a time tae blether
An' if ye dinnae believe me
Jus' hae a deek in the Bible,
Ecclesiastes 3 verse 7 tae be exact.

Ah'm no' wantin' tae preach at ye, ken?
But ah really feel this strongly,
In fact ah couldnae feel it mair strongly
– dinnae speak when the choir's singin', right?
Just dinnae.
'Cos ahm no wantin' ti hurl hymnaries at ye,
That's no whit they're fur
An I dinnae think God wid like it
– do you?

Ye bletherskate ye
But a'hve tellt ye now,
So you've nae excuse:
Stop the chinwag
Ye windbag
– aye, the *peace* o Christ be wi ye.

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