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Rebel

scottishbooktrust.com

First published 2018 by Scottish Book Trust, Sandeman House, Trunk's Close, 55 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1SR

scottishbooktrust.com

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

Typeset by 3btype.com

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

Scottish Book Trust makes every effort to ensure that the paper used in this book has been legally sourced from well-managed and sustainable forests

Cover design by O Street

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COMHAIRLE NAN LEABHRAICHEAN
THE GAELIC BOOKS COUNCIL

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Patter

Whit Did You Ca Me?

Am I a Rebel?

* 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.

Yer No Tellin Me Whit Tae Dae

The Cold War

Michelle Frost

It was a stand-off. Two equally opposed enemies facing each other across the vastness of a darkened classroom. I stared her down, unflinching from my position on top of a desk. She stared back, eyes narrowing against the glare of the school film screen behind me. I knew this was a battle to the death. When you take on a nun, there will be no survivors.

I was in trouble again. Not because I'd been reading a book instead of watching the movie, but because I'd spoken back when she'd told me to stop reading. I hadn't been reading the stupid book: I actually liked the movie better. The injustice of being reprimanded for something I wasn't guilty of had led me to reaching this lofty and somewhat wobbly position. The nuns polished everything. Standing on a desktop was like standing on ice. My punishment was to stand there for the entire movie, my rebellion was to turn my back on the screen and stand watching her throughout the whole film. An eleven-year-old girl standing on a desk glaring at a teacher was probably more comical than creepy, but at that moment I felt EPIC. I was an owl in the darkness, looming over this black and white Dominican mouse with her little pink rodent hands working the old projector. I was a panther in short socks, teeth clenched and eyes fixed on my prey.

It was only one of many battles between us that year. I was raised to respect adults, but not to take abuse from them. I was always polite when I spoke back in self-defence. Sister B was the kind of teacher Dickens may

have written of. She had various forms of punishments, from throwing a tennis ball or chalk at your head if she thought you weren't listening, to making you stand on your desk, often holding a pencil above your head – sometimes for up to half an hour. My very existence was a serious offence. I was left-handed. Sinister. Devil-pawed from the start. I'd spent the first four years of junior school at a modern school that saw nothing wrong with that. I had been taught a modern form of writing. Now, thanks to my parents moving countries, I was in a Catholic school where the writing style was as old-fashioned as their ideas. As I struggled to adapt, my writing degenerated, fuelling Sister B's righteous belief that being left-handed was utterly wrong.

Our relationship became a Cold War. The unspoken rules written on our own invisible iron curtain. She would nag and pick on me – I would ignore her. I would try to best her – she would ignore me. When she took it too far I'd speak out . . . and get punished again. I was the only child she ever sent out of the classroom.

I hated her with a pure, clear intent.

One day, she lost it completely. Raging about my 'spider scrawl' as she threw my book across the room. She yelled, 'I cannot mark what I cannot read!' My book slid across the floor and stopped, with perfect irony, in front of my desk. I sat by the door, so the book was now in the doorway. I could feel her waiting for me to go pick it up. I could feel the class watching me. I left the book where it was. All through that day, I left it there. When I went out for lunch, I stepped over it. When I came back, I stepped over it again. The whole class whispered, 'Pick it up'. NEVER! This was a COLD WAR. There could be no showing weakness to the enemy.

At the end of the day, I packed my bag, stepped over my

book, and went home. The next morning, it was on my desk. I have no idea who put it there. We never spoke about it. Those are the rules of a Cold War.

Sister B had one soft side to her ferocious personality. Every time a child had a birthday, she would call them to the front of the class and give them a gift: one little keepsake and one sweet. When my birthday arrived, I entered the classroom wondering how this would go down. Would she lose face and give me a gift? Would she keep up the war and ignore my birthday in front of every other child?

That was exactly what she did. No mention. No calling me up. The others in the class were appalled but I was not surprised. This was a war after all. At the end of the day, I went past her with my head held high, feeling the smug superiority of the martyred. The next morning, I was the first in class. I opened my desk to put something away and there in the corner was a single sweet and a tiny, ancient folded paper holding sewing needles.

I never forgot that gift. I used those needles for decades. I still have them.

After I finished that school year, she managed to stun me again by writing in my final report that I was her favourite student and that she would miss me. Who was this doppelgänger? Surely this wasn't written by Sister B! It took me years to realise that she had respected the fact I met her fire with equal fire. That she'd admired me for never backing down. I was in my twenties when I saw her again. She was on holiday with a group of nuns. Even though she was older, I knew her instantly. I stopped the car and ran back, calling out her name. She yelled mine back with genuine delight: 'FROSTY!' She took my hand and we stood there smiling. Equal adversaries finally acknowledging that we had always been kindred spirits.

Hell Bent

Jayne Baldwin

Thundering down the stairs in her new Doc Martens, Lizzie lurched into the dining room and shouted 'That's me away', knowing there wasn't much chance she'd be able to leave without some comment. From the kitchen beyond, where she could hear the distinctive sound of the pressure cooker building up a head of steam, came the call of 'Wait a minute madam, where do you think you're going?' Her mother emerged from the engine room of the house, where she spent most of her time washing, peeling, chopping, cooking. Lizzie had timed her escape in the hope that the various stages of making a meat and potato pie for her grandmother would mean she was too busy to bother with her daughter. She was too busy to bother with her daughter most of the time after all, Lizzie knew somewhat bitterly, unless it was to criticise her and threaten her with her father's disapproval, while kid brother Graham could do no wrong. Wiping her hands on a tea towel, Lizzie's mother took up her usual position at the kitchen door, dressed as always in her sensible shoes, floral dress and flour-covered apron.

'I'm just going to Rachel's.'

'Not dressed like that you're not.'

Lizzie tried not to smirk, knowing it would further antagonise her mother and elicit the familiar threat of 'wipe that look off your face or I'll wipe it off for you.' What amused Lizzie was that her outfit was a massively toned down version of what she would be wearing later for the gig. Her Docs, tight black jeans, black t-shirt and her Harrington jacket. Already planted at lead singer and

rhythm guitarist Gary's house were a customised torn t-shirt with zips, safety pins and the band's name, Hell Bent Bitches, scrawled across in scarlet lipstick – along with her bass and Jez's leather jacket. To finish the look she'd be backcombing her hair and adding striking black eye makeup in the style of her idol Siouxsie Sioux. Her own mother wouldn't recognise her, not that her mother would ever set foot in the kind of pub where they were playing their debut gig, supporting The Akryliks. Luckily Rachel's parents didn't have a phone and her friend was used to her company being given as cover for band practices.

'I can't have Rachel's mother seeing you dressed like that, what will she think? She sits in the next pew and she's very good friends with the minister's wife. What will people think of me? It'll be round the congregation before Sunday. Upstairs with you and get into something where people can at least see you're a girl.'

Before Lizzie could think of a smart answer, her grandmother appeared fresh from holding power in the front room, probably needing to supervise the pie making or wanting another cup of tea or, Lizzie suspected, she'd heard the raised voice and came to put her oar in. Every Thursday was the same, Graham couldn't watch Blue Peter and Lizzie couldn't watch Top of the Pops because her grandmother controlled the tv, and it was the same meal, meat and potato pie with Yorkshire puddings, week in week out. Her grandmother took one look at her and began cackling like the old crone that she was, Lizzie thought, knowing if she'd taken to the stage she'd have been a natural for any production of Macbeth.

'Is it Hallowe'en already or are you auditioning for a freak show? You look like a fright, what's the matter with

you girl? What's happened to your hair, you could be so pretty if you just tried, look at…' Lizzie knew what was coming next, she'd heard it before, once or twice; she was about to be compared to her cousin Carol. What a lovely girl Carol was, so clever, so pretty, so docile, the shining example of everything that Lizzie wasn't.

Trapped by a very familiar pincer movement, Lizzie looked from the scowling face of one woman to the other. She'd had years of this, the disapproval, control, look like this, don't look like that, are you going to let her speak to me like that, wash out her mouth with soap and water. Lizzie had vented her pent up anger in a song, and later on at The Fox and Hounds, Gary would be shouting her lyrics to a crowd of pogo-ing punks. It was time to leave. She took a deep breath and moved past her grandmother and away from her mother towards the front door, behind her their voices winding up to a shrill chorus along with the pressure cooker.

'Are you going to let her go out of this house like that? Looking like that? What will the folks at the Darby and Joan say next week?', the words went on, 'Don't you dare leave this house young lady, get yourself upstairs, you haven't had any tea apart from anything else… just wait till I tell your father about this… and don't think you're coming back here later if you go out of that front…'

But Lizzie had left the building.

Rebel Boots

Amy Moreno

Rebel boots, big and clunky
Their rubber soles, thick and chunky
Worn through the years on my changing feet
Rebelling, learning, itchy, neat

Worn to stomp 'round in my teens
Underneath angry, baggy jeans
Not for me, high heels, designer
I'm Grandad's little 5-foot miner

20s: travel, music, books
Pink hair, piercings, eclectic looks
Worn to parties, lectures, interviews
No trainers, pumps, or black court shoes

Still clunky, comfy, keep me grounded
But these 30s shapes are softer, rounded
Wee handprints on my clothes and boots
My rebel feet have put down roots

Not itchy feet now, but here to stay
To read bedtime stories, cook, and play
But I still wear my clunky boots
With my two little rebels, in cahoots

Fairy Cakes

Zoe Sutherland

My mum is good at baking. She makes lovely fairy cakes. When I was a little girl I would help her. When they had cooled down my mum would put the icing on them, and sprinkles. I would have to wait until it was time to eat them, but sometimes that was quite hard so I would pinch one and lick off the icing.

Am Brùnaidh/ The Brownie

Anna Frater

Dè an aois a bhithinn –
seachd, no ochd bliadhna dh'aois?
A' seasamh dìreach
nam fhroca dhonn
le crios ùr leathar mum mheadhan
agus taidh bhuidhe mum amhaich
a' feitheamh ri bràiste.

Cha robh agam ach ri na bòidean a ghabhail
gus an t-seamrag airgid a chosnadh.

A' togail mo làimhe deise.
Òrdag agus lùdag paisgte nam bhois
na trì meòir eile air an cumail suas
agus mi a' tòiseachadh…

'I promise that I will do my best
To do my duty to God'

Ach an uairsin
nuair a bha agam ri gealltainn
dìlseachd
do bhanrigh anns nach robh mi a' creidsinn,
bha corragan mo làimhe clì
rim dhruim

a' dèanamh breug de m' fhacail.

The Brownie

What age would I have been –
seven, or eight years old?
Standing straight
in my brown frock
with a new leather belt round my waist
and a yellow tie round my neck
waiting for a brooch.

All I had to do was take my vows
to earn the silver shamrock.

Raising my right hand.
Thumb and little finger crossed in my palm
the three other fingers held up
as I began…

'I promise that I will do my best
To do my duty to God'

But then
when I had to promise
loyalty
to a queen I didn't believe in,
the fingers of my left hand
behind my back

gave the lie to my words.

Continue the story . . .

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Solidarity

A Ravenscraig Picture

Des McAnulty

Hello. My name is Felicja. I would like to tell you a story about what happened to me not long after I came to live here in Scotland. In August 2004, I moved to a town just outside Glasgow called Motherwell. I left my home in Krakow, Poland, where I had lived all my life, to start a new life with my daughter, Dominika, and her husband, Bartek. We chose Motherwell because it already had an established Polish community, and people from our country had been coming here since before the War. Our decision to emigrate was brought on by a number of factors. Dominika had always wanted to train to be a nurse. She spoke often of working within the great NHS in the United Kingdom. Bartek was a joiner by trade but struggled to find regular work in Krakow. They both enrolled in English classes and remained determined to leave Poland for a new life here. I was very happy with this and encouraged them in their collective endeavours. It was not unusual for Polish children to work in another country and send some money back home. I admit the idea of some extra cash coming to me regularly was something I was quite happy about!

Not long before Bartek and Dominika received their papers to come and work and study in Scotland, we had some bad news. My husband Olav, who had been suffering poor health, sadly passed away. As Dominika was my only daughter, the thought of being alone in Krakow scared me somewhat. So much so, Bartek suggested I came to live with them in Scotland. I reluctantly agreed.

Uprooting my whole life and moving it to another country was daunting for me. I tried to put a brave face on, my anxiousness the polar opposite of my daughter and her husband's excitement. We managed to find a nice little flat on Watson Street, which was near the town's main centre. Dominika enrolled in a nursing degree and Bartek found work in a nearby building site. I wanted to make a contribution, so, for the first time in my life, I found a job of my own. I was to be a cleaner for an office on Merry Street. I was to clean for two hours in the morning and two at night. It wasn't much, but it allowed me to meet some local people and learn more about the town I now called home.

One night when I was just about to finish my shift, I happened upon a framed picture that caught my attention. It was a striking image of what looked like a massive industrial plant. It showed two large, looming, blue towers, with a distinctive 'S' displayed on each. Parallel to them were what looked like two great big cooling towers. Behind them, was a solitary flame that seemed to be burning from a chimney, like an Olympic torch. I was so taken by this that I stopped in at the library on my way home to try and learn more about this wonderful image I had just saw. The librarian was very helpful. When I told him I wasn't very good with computers, he gave me some old paper cuttings and books. The place was called Ravenscraig. It was the biggest steel plant in Scotland, and it was situated a mile from where I was now. I poured over the books and cuttings. I read about how Ravenscraig was the lifeblood of the town, and generations of men would work there together. I read stories from former workers, from wives and mothers of boys who grew into men at the plant. I also read of its sad demise. Of how its closure affected

the whole area, and the politics that were involved. More importantly though, I read about its legacy, and how the people of Motherwell and Wishaw still hold it close to their hearts and why it will always be a reminder of the town's history.

All of this had a profound effect on me, so it came as a great surprise when, the following week, as I was doing my cleaning, someone had taken the picture down and replaced it with a more modern looking effort. A sky line of some American city! I could not believe it. This was a symbol of Motherwell, and all it stood for. I immediately made my way down to the bins outside. Unfortunately they were gone. Taken by the bin men. That night, I walked home with tears in my eyes. How could young people discard history in such a way, like it was nothing?

That night I found myself in Motherwell library again. This time I asked the same Librarian to go onto the internet and find what I was looking for. I gave him my post office card that had my meagre savings held in it, and, with my permission, he made the purchase. (Wiping out nearly all I had!)

Two days later it arrived. I ripped open the package and there it was. The same picture, only an artist's impression. I carried it to work and waited till everyone had left. When I was sure I was alone, I took down the new picture and discarded it in the outside bins. I replaced it with the Ravenscraig picture I had purchased and awaited my fate!

Sure enough, the next day I was called into the manager's office and told I was being dismissed for gross misconduct. Apparently I had been caught on a camera, disposing of the new picture. I had no regrets. I felt I had done what I had to.

I have a new job now, working for a family on Hamilton Road, cleaning their lovely big house. I never found out what happened to the picture. They never asked if I wanted it back. I hope it's in a place where it can be seen, for a long time to come.

An T-iasg Nach B' urrainn Snàmh/The Fish That Never Swam

David Eyre

Bha sinn air ar cuairteachadh. Air an taobh far an robh mise, bha eich a' dèanamh oirnn. Shuidh mi san rathad. Rinn daoine eile an aon rud. Chum na ridirean orra ge-tà, agus sin aig astar nach robh slaodach. Thàinig each mòr liath gam ionnsaigh. Nas fhaisge. Nas fhaisge. Glaodhraich air mo chùlaibh. 'Stad! Stad! Tha clann an seo!' dh'èigh tè. Agus bha i ceart. Cha b' e deugairean a-mhàin a bha an làthair, ach leanabhan. Anns na seachdainean roimhe, bhiodh pàrantan gu tric a' tighinn dhan iomairt le an cuid cloinne.

Cha do stad na h-eich. Bha m' aghaidh ri casan an fhir liath – mo cheann aig an aon àirde sa bha a ghlùintean. Thog e cas. Chaidh e os mo chionn agus a dh'ionnsaigh an suail mhòr de dhaoine cruinnichte air beulaibh an amar-snàimh. Bha sreath tiugh de phoileas air an taobh eile agus, le sin, cha bhiodh cothrom ann do dhaoine fhaighinn air falbh. 'S docha nach e sin a bha fainear dhan phoileas. 'S docha gun robh iad dìreach airson feagal a chuir air daoine.

Sheas mi agus chaidh mi a dh'ionnsaigh doras an togalaich. Bha dealbh nam cheann. Poileas air each le maide na làimh, a' dèanamh deiseil ri slaic eagalach a thoirt air boireannach, 's i le a làmhan an àird, a' feuchainn ri dìon a chur oirre fhèin. Fotograf a chaidh a thogail ann an Sasainn nuair a bha stailc nam mèinnearan a' dol.

Choimhead mi air an doras dhearg. Beagan sheachdainean air ais, bha mi air taobh eile an dorais ud, 's mi fear dhen na daoine a bha a' cumail smachd air an togalach. Amaran Shràid Chaladair ann an Cnoc a' Ghobhainn.

Nuair a dh'ainmich a' chomairle gun robh iad airson an amair a dhùnadh, thoisich daoine bhon choimhearsnachd ag iomairt. Ath-chuinge. Litrichean do luchd-poilitigs, dha na pàipearan naidheachd. Caismeachd. Iomairt taobh a-muigh Sheòmraichean a' Bhaile.

Cha d' rinn e diofar sam bith. Agus le sin – thòisich sinn a' bruidhinn.

Agus air an oidhche mu dheireadh 's an amar fhathast fosgailte, chaidh cuid dhuinn ann, agus thuirt sinn ris an luchd-obrach gur ann leis a' choimhearsnachd a bha an togalach a-nist. Dh'fhalbh iad. Chaidh glas a chur air na dorsan.

Bhiomaid ga dhèanamh ann an sioftaichean – daoine a' fuireach san àite airson oidhche, neo dà oidhche, neo nas fhaide na sin nan robh sin comasach dhaibh. Air taobh eile an dorais, air Sraid Chaladair fhèin, bha loidhne-phiocaid le daoine ann a h-uile uair dhen a h-uile latha airson còig mìosan. Dh'fhàs e a bhith na àite far am biodh daoine a' cur eòlas air an nàbaidhean. Ceanglaichean ùra. Daoine a' tighinn le briosgaidean, neo pìosan, neo samosas. Teatha 's cofaidh. Òg 's seann. Dubh 's geal. Bha deasbadan ann, agus chaidh planaichean a dhèanamh gus impidh a chumail air a' chomhairle.

Bha mi air iomadh uair a chur seachad air an loidhne-phiocaid, gu tric tron oidhche. Agus bha mi air trì sioftaichean a dhèanamh am broinn an amair cuideachd. Rinn mi agallamh le Coinneach Mòr airson Radio nan Gàidheal, 's sin air fòn-làimhe – inneal a bha fhathast ùr dhomh aig an àm.

Gach turas agam san togalach, ghabhainn snàmh san amar mhòr. Cha robh e comasach dhuinn an t-uisge theasachadh, agus cha robh na pumpaichean-glanaidh a' dol, ach cha do chuir sin dragh orm. Bha e na thlachd dhomh a bhith a' snàmh nam aonar ann an amar a bha cho tric loma làn. Suas 's sìos fichead tursan aig astar meadhanach, agus an uairsin air mo dhruim dìreach, nam laighe air uachdar an uisge fhuair, a' coimhead suas air na maidean-tarsainn mòra dearg, agus suaicheantas bhaile Ghlaschu anns an uinneag leth-chruinn – 'Gun Soirbhich Glaschu'. An t-iasg nach b' urrainn snàmh.

Às dèidh an sioft mu dheireadh agam, bhris luchd-obrach on chomhairle a-steach, agus chuir iad às dhen uisge.

Beagan sheachdainean às dèidh sin fhuair mi gairm air an fhòn tràth sa mhadainn. Bha na poileas air nochdadh gus smachd fhaighinn air an togalach. Chaidh mi shìos. Bha mu fhichead poileas ann. Agus cha robh e fada gus an robh nas motha de dhaoine bhon choimhearsnachd an làthair na bha oifigearan. Rinn sinn ùpraid le a bhith a' bualadh poitean air an t-sràid, agus a' seinn.

Nuair a dh'fhalbh mi son m' obair bha mi dhen bheachd nach rachadh leis a' phoileas. Bha cus dhuinn sa choimhearsnachd a bha deònach nochdadh gus an amar a dhìon. Ach nuair a thill mi air an fheasgar, bha e follaiseach gun dèanadh na poileis rud sam bi gus smachd fhaighinn air an àite. Oifigearan nan ceudan. Eich. Heileacoptair. Feumaidh gun robh cha mhòr a h-uile oifigear bho cheann deas Ghlaschu an làthair.

Bha bràist a' bhaile cuideachd ri fhaicinn air clàr-aghaidh an togalaich, gearrte sa chlach-ghainmhich os cionn an dorais, 's am poileas a-nist ann an loidhne air a beulaibh. Choimhead mi suas oirre, 's air na daoine a bha fhathast a' feuchainn ri tighinn eadar a' phoileas agus an

dorais. An clag nach b' urrainn seinn. An craobh nach b' urrainn fàs. An t-eun nach b' urrainn sgèith.

Ach ann am meadhan nam poileas – na còtaichean buidhe aca a' coimhead coigreach an aghaidh dhathan ruadh nam flataichean – bha na daoine fhathast a' cumail ri chèile san dorchadas: meuran am beathannan a' neartachadh; am freumhaichean san àite seo fhathast a' fàs; agus na faclan aca fhathast a' sgèith, a' dèanamh mac-talla tro na sràidean – "Sann againne an t-amar! 'Sann againne an t-amar!'

The Fish That Never Swam

We were surrounded. On the side where I was, horses were making their way towards us. I sat down in the road. Other folk did the same thing. But the riders kept coming at a quick pace. A big, grey horse came towards me. Closer. Closer. The noise behind me. 'Stop! Stop! There's kids here!', a woman shouted. And she was right. It wasn't just teenagers that were there. There were youngsters too. In the weeks previously, parents would often bring their children to the protest.

The horses didn't stop. My face was looking at the grey one's legs – my head at the same height as its knees. It lifted a hoof and went over my head towards the great swell of people in front of the swimming pool. A thick line of police was on the other side, so there was nowhere for people to go. Perhaps the police didn't want them to go. Maybe they were just looking to scare people.

I stood and went towards the main door. I had a picture in my head. A mounted policeman with a baton in his hand, getting ready to strike a young woman, her hands raised in an effort to defend herself. A photograph that was taken in England during the Miners' Strike.

I looked at the red door. A few weeks before I was on the other side, as one of the campaign occupiers. Calder Street Baths in Govanhill.

When the council announced that they were going to close the pool, people in the community began to campaign. A petition. Letters to politicians, to the newspapers. A march. A demonstration outside the City Chambers.

It didn't make a difference. And so – we began to talk.

And on the last night when the pool was still open, some of us went in, and told the staff that the building was now in the hands of the community. They left. The doors were locked.

We would work in shifts – people staying in the building for one night, two nights, or longer than that if they could manage it. On the other side of the door, on Calder Street itself, there was a picket line with people there every hour of every day for five months. It became a place where people got to know their neighbours. New connections. People coming with biscuits, or sandwiches, or samosas. Tea and coffee. Young and old. Black and white. There were debates, and plans discussed on how we could keep up the pressure on the council.

I had spent many hours on the picket line, often through the night. And I had also done three shifts inside the pool. I did an interview with Kenny MacIver for Radio nan Gàidheal, on a mobile phone – something that was still so new to me at the time.

Each time I was inside the building, I'd have a swim in the big pool. We weren't able to heat the water, and the cleaning pumps weren't working, but that didn't bother me. It was a pleasure to swim on my own in a pool that was so often full of people. Up and down twenty times at a medium pace, and then on my back, lying on the cold

water, looking up at the great, red, roof trusses, and the symbol of the city in the semi-circular window. Let Glasgow Flourish. The fish that couldn't swim.

After my last shift, workers from the council broke in and drained the pool.

Some weeks after that, I got a phone call early in the morning. The police had appeared to take over the building. I went down. There were around twenty police. And it wasn't long until there were more people from the local community than there were police officers. We started making a racket, hitting pots against the street, and singing.

When I left for my work, I thought there was no chance the police would succeed. There were were too many of us in the community who were willing to turn out to defend the pool. But when I returned in the evening, it was clear that the police would do anything to get control of the place. Hundreds of officers. Horses. A helicopter. Nearly every officer from the southside must have been there. The city crest was also on the front of the building, carved into the sandstone above the door, now blocked by a line of police. I looked up at it, and at the people who were still trying to come between the police and the door. The bell that never rang. The tree that never grew. The bird that never flew.

But in the middle of the police – their yellow coats looking strange and foreign against the russet colours of the flats – the people were still staying by each other in the darkness: the branches of their lives strengthening; their roots in this place still growing; and their words still flying, echoing through the streets – 'Whose pool? Our pool! Whose pool? Our pool!'

The King's Shilling

Ronald S Bell

Expectant of something long forgotten, they wait. Chins rest on chest, vacant television eyes, gaping-mouthed snores, their minds drift and bob like the peas in yesterday's soup. They wait for bed, they wait to get up, they wait for the visiting relation they can't quite place, they wait for the silent ambulance. In a quiet corner of Hawthorn Vale's musty lounge George waits for eight o' clock. Tonight George will check out for good.

His overnight bag is packed and safely secreted by the garden shed. Hairbrush – he still has hair – toothbrush and toothpaste – likewise teeth – spare spectacles, socks, cap, wallet and bus pass. The cheap clock with its large stupid face ticks on. Coronation Street finished, George, as quickly as his rheumatic bones will allow, springs into action. Giving the duty nurse the 'going to bed early' routine he heads for his room but instead he slips swiftly – as he has for seventy something years – toward the garden door, gently closing it behind him. Crossing the wet lawn he retrieves his bag, pulls his cap down, turns up his collar and like Harry Lime disappears into the shadows. The chill air catches in the old man's chest and he splutters into his handkerchief whilst in the still mist and drizzle the street lights hang like patient angels.

George's bifocals steam up as he boards the bus and, contemptuously ignoring the 'Please give these seats up for the elderly' sign makes his way to an empty window seat congratulating himself on his successful escape. With the steady hum luring him to sleep he is barely aware of the adjoining seat being occupied by a mobile

phone with a fresh faced youth attached to it. Outside the night rolls by shrouded in deceitful mist. George wakes with a start.

'Is that thing permanently attached to your hand?'

The youth looks up from the screen, 'I'm booked into hospital next week to have it removed.'

Inwardly, the old man smiles, rather taken with his new companion.

'I'm George.'

'Callum.' He replies.

'So Callum, where are you headed on this cold, dreich night?'

'I'm going to Inverness for the week, I'm staying with my uncle for the school holidays.'

'Oh, me too,' says George, adding hastily, 'Er, not staying with your uncle I mean, going to Inverness'.

They both laugh which brings on a coughing fit for George who hastily covers his mouth.

'Well I actually get off before that, my uncle stays in Culloden village.'

'Well that is a coincidence. I'm staying in Inverness tonight and heading for the battleground tomorrow morning.' Says George. 'Don't your parents take you on holiday?'

'Oh they do, especially in the summer. They've flown off with my wee sister to Costa del something. I get fed up on the beach, with the heat and hotels where everybody smiles too much.'

'Ha, I know what you mean.'

'My uncle and I go fishing or walking in the hills.'

'Aha, my kind of holiday too. Out in the drizzle with the midges!'

The bus cuts on through the night, by orange-lit towns, by curtained windows, by shops closed for the night, by

shops closed for good, by the half empty pubs and forgotten churches.

'You laugh at me and my phone, what's that you're hiding in your hand?'

Startled, as if his mind had been far away, the old man opens his hand. 'It's an old coin, I've had it since I was younger than you.'

'Is it valuable?'

'Only to me, my friend. I guess you might call it my lucky charm.'

'And has it been lucky?'

'Sometimes I think yes, other times… ach it's just an old coin, who knows?'

'It looks old.'

'Oh it is, you can just about see the King's head; I've nearly rubbed him away.'

The old man hands Callum the coin.

'Where did you get it?' He asks, gently smoothing his fingers over it.

'Well, that's the funny thing. When I was a wee lad, in the days before fancy visitor centres and cream scone cafes, when you just louped the fence, my father took me to Culloden Moor. Anyway, he was rummaging about amongst cairns and ditches when he picked this up from the peat bog. I can see his smile yet. "Aha,"says he, "the King's Shilling!"'

The boy eyes him quizzically.

'The King's Shilling was a bribe, nothing more. They used to hand it out to boys like yourself, to join the army and fight for the King.'

'For a shilling? Stuff that!'

'A shilling was a lot to young lads with nothing. They'd even pop one into your beer and when you'd drank up and fished it out, they had you; you'd accepted, fame,

fortune and glory, God Save the King! I always imagined some young lowlander caressing this coin as he died, chopped up by a claymore no doubt, thinking of home and his sweetheart. What a waste, all for a doomed rebellion.'

George coughs heavily into his bloodied handkerchief, removes his bifocals and wearily wipes his eyes.

'Anyway', brightening up, 'I thought I'd take it back, return his coin, if I can remember the spot.'

'Would you like a mint for that cough George?'

'Thanks son, I will.'

'Are you ok?'

'Right as rain, right as rain.'

'I think that's great George – taking it back I mean; kinda lays it to rest.'

The old man looks out of the window at the black shrouded night. Soon the expectant orange glow of Inverness will appear.

'My stop is just coming up, George, here's your coin back.'

'I tell you what, why don't you keep a hold of it for me.'

'But won't your luck run out?'

'I don't think so Callum. Goodbye, son.'

George watches through the window as the lad collects his suitcase. The bus lurches on and his smiling face disappears into the dark, as if he had never been there.

Wisconsin

Alex Porter

It was the sixties – to be exact, the summer of 1969; the sputtering embers of that hot, fervid decade. Of course, we didn't know that at the time. The 'sixties' is a later invention – a social, political and cultural inferno that, safely over, has been elevated to the realm of untouchable saintliness. It's what happened to Martin Luther King, Muhammad Ali and John Lennon. Now they are celebrated, but 'at the time' they were a menace to J Edgar Hoover and all things decent. They became truly good only by being truly dead. Like the 'sixties'.

I was 15 in 69. A schoolboy at Stirling High School. A not very good schoolboy, shortly to be expelled. Bob Dylan had just been installed as the soundtrack to my small existence and the rest was fitbaw. Or not quite. In the evenings, through the medium of my family's crackling black and white telly, the revolution was, indeed, being televised. Berkeley, Vietnam, the Sorbonne, Martin, Malcolm and 'float like a butterfly, sting like a bee'. A single blow to the top of the TV (you had to synchronise vertical and horizontal hold) and this world came into our wee council hoose. I lapped it up. Then, one day …

She was from Wisconsin. A student teacher doing one term at Stirling. Blonde, early twenties, bespectacled. Let's just call her 'Missconsin'. Our regular teacher introduced her then left her to it. It was Modern Studies, period 1, a Monday in May. Ooh the smell of napalm in the morning.

She walked into it. I'm sitting there with the rest of the class – all pictish, proletarian and slightly perplexed.

A *real* American in front of us! Well if that don't beat all. She introduced herself geographically – 'Wisconsin is the dairy state. Lots of cows'.

Then, 'Ah come from a town just a horse-ride from Milwaukee.' That's what she said, a 'horse-ride'!

Then she gives us the patriot riff. My country. Big country. Beautiful country. Powerful country. Space age country. Why, just the best darn country in the world.

Then she reaches into her bag on the desk, plucks out a picture frame, walks across the classroom and places the frame on top of the tannoy speaker. She turns to the class and says, with a big smile (what immaculate dentistry), 'This is our president'.

That's how I come to find myself staring into the droopy, bloodhound visage of Richard Milhous Nixon.

I could practically hear a smile rippling through that classroom. My classmates sat back, pens and pencils were laid down and I heard someone behind me say 'YES!'

See, they all knew what was coming –there would be no work done this period.

In retrospect, someone should have warned her. Given her a hint. The 'revolution' had only reached Stirling in a heavily diluted solution but, darn it, someone had to keep our end up. I had taken to discussing 'contemporary events' with certain teachers. Invariably that meant that the normal educative process was suspended. I could keep it going for an entire period. I was the darling of my classmates. I even got free ciggies at the smokers' union. Missconsin was, well, what yanks would call a slam dunk!

I'll give you the staccato version of the duet. I put my hand up. She went for it.

IMPERIALISM – *FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY* – SELMA, LYNCHING – *MY PRESIDENT IS A GREAT MAN* – NAW HE'S NO – *HE IS* – HO CHI MINH –

COMMUNISM IS EVIL – AGENT ORANGE, BURNT WEE LASSIES – *WE PUT MEN ON THE MOON* – CHE – *THOSE STUDENTS SHOULD BEHAVE* – THEY ARE BEHAVING – *JOHN WAYNE* – SITTING BULL – *ELVIS* – LENNON – *BOBBY DARRIN* – WHO?

Some of my fellow pupils had their heads on their desks. Some extra zzz's courtesy of yours truly! I was at least two ciggies up!

SLAVERY, PANTHERS – *DR KING WENT TOO FAR* – KHE SANH, THE KLAN – *LAW AND ORDER IS THE AMERICAN WAY* – MUHAMMAD ALI – *HIS NAME IS CASSIUS CLAY* – CUSTER HAD IT COMING – *OUR BOYS, MARINE CORPS* – HENDRIX – *JUST NOISE* – DYLAN – *GENE PITNEY* – WHO?

GENERAL MOTORS – JANIS JOPLIN – *OH COME ON!* – OLYMPIC GAMES, CLENCHED FISTS – *TRAITORS TO THEIR COUNTRY.*

Then the bell goes. End of period 1. *We aint gonna work on Maggie's farm!*

Thursday evening. Same week. I slip into school easy. (Always clubs and night classes on.) I sneak upstairs. Modern Studies. The classroom is unlocked …

Friday. Period 1. Modern Studies. Nothing is said but I know all eyes are fixed on me. When Missconsin arrives she simply stops, hesitates for a moment, and steps over the glass and paper debris at her feet. 'Good morning class' she says as she removes her spectacles, wipes them on her sleeve and puts them back on. No one says a word. We're just waiting. Then she walks over, picks up the twisted portrait frame, and very slowly and deliberately, she pushes all the broken glass into the corner with her foot. Then she bends down and picks up every torn fragment of the picture of her president and places them in the bin.

She looks at me and smiles. That big smile. Behind her glasses I can see a wee twinkle in her eyes. She goes to her bag and pulls out a clone, a replica. The next moment I am, once again, face to face with 'tricky dicky'!

Then I realise, Missconsin doesn't just want to win – no. She wants FULL SPECTRUM DOMINATION. *A hard rain was gonna fall.*

Rebels Apo da Bus

Jacqui Clark

Da bus is usually quiet.

Some haes peerie plugs in dir lugs we variations on dir choice o tunes. Heads nod – occasionally banging up quickly tae see whaar dey ir fae da zeds o dir unsettled snooze.

A Wednesday is different. Dat's Coort day. Da rebels drag demsells fae dir pits tae join wis on da ten tae eight tae toon.

Dis twa ir Coort day regulars. Followin da inevitable path laid afore dem be midders at wirna midders.

Dey nod at me whan I sit doon opposit dem.

Dey're usually quiet but dis day dey're a bit spicky.

'I'm wantin a dug man. Wan o yon staffy tings ken lik.'

'Ya got a train it – canna just hae it lik doin whit it wants an shit man.'

'Watched a YouTube did'n ah.'

'What if it shits an stuff in da flat?'

'Ah'll train it.'

'Whan it's a puppy it's no trained.'

'I'll clean it eh.'

'Aaah right man. Sounds good like.'

Da dream o da dug distracts dem as silence faas ageen. I glance troo da window covered in da drips o aabody's breath an winder at…

'Has you seen at skate park thing at ey've pitten up at da Knab man?'

'Ah loved skateboarding whan I was peerie.'

'Mind we used tae say at youthie gonna gee wis a skate park so ats like somewhere to go at night an shit. Dey've

finally listened tae wis.'

'Got lottery money or summin? Stupid place tae pit it tho.'

'Better in da centre skitterin around folks' feet man.'

'Yea lik Auld Betsy shoutin "get yon skateboard away fae my feet boys!"'

'Shu wis a cookie her. Shu used tae gee wis fags man.'

'Oh yea at wis right eh. Shu didna see da sense o a skateboard tho. "Whit's wrang we usin da legs da guid lord geed you boys, redder as rollin aboot on yon plastic hellery?"'

Dey look awkward we dir memory an correct demsells at da same time – shiftin uncomfortably in dir seat an pushin dir shoulders back in order to regain dir personas.

'Ah geed lik.'

'Whaar?'

'Fan an auld skateboard to try it oot lik. Wis too peerie.'

'Eh?'

'Ah cooldna get nuff speed or dat. Too peerie lik.'

'Man du has shit fur brains.'

'Ah know eh.'

'Coorse it's too peerie – it's fur bairns eh. Too peerie! It's no gonna be fur lik grown ups or at is it.'

'Why no? We both did lik skateboardin an shit eh – nothin stoppin us doin at noo lik.'

'Na na. Eh? Whit wid we o said if dey'd a pitten in a skate park when we wir peerie an a great bloody idiot lik you cam along eh – we yer rotten teeth an fags hingin oot yer erse.'

'I'd a said "hey gee us a fag man".'

'Yer spikken utter shite.'

I lift me head a peerie bit tae see whit dey're doin noo. Wan is rollin a fag ready fir da journey's end an da idder is clutchin his hands fae da cauld air o da bus.

Da cauld air o judgement at he gets ivverytime he sets

fit ootside. Folk keen whaa he is. Folk ken at dey wirk shite an folk read dir names in da paper in da coort roond ups.

'Here's da ting though.'

'Wha?'

'How do they mak da concrete curve?'

'Eh?'

'At da skate park lik. How is da concrete curvey?'

'Shit man I donno eh. Is it lik a man on his knees we a thing smoothin it?'

'Ah donno.'

Somebody on da bus most keen? No? I want tae keen. Whit a question. It's da biggest question I'll hear dis day.

Dey press da button tae stop da bus outside da coorts.

I look up. Dey nod.

'See you later boys.'

'Aye – see you.'

'I keen da boys of coorse fae youthie.'

I wallow, as I do most Wednesdays, in my guilt at contributing tae da years at followed whan dey rebelled firenest aabody an aating.

Da rebels at wir handheld aa da way but never really listened tae.

I smeeg as a towt enters my head.

How rebellious tae write dir we dunna spik dialect onymair wirds. Da Dialect Dictionary huggers wid hae something tae say aboot dat – an my badly spelled and grammatically incorrect wirds.

It's a livin fing lik ken whit ah mean. It's no longer wit you lot fin in da aulder books o words – an ah nose ah'm right … man.

Nun of Your Business

Novice Carmen Eileen

It's 10am on a warm May morning and I'm walking into Aberdeen city centre with my friend. A man's jaw has just fallen open, and he's walked several feet into the road to avoid being near me. A woman in a Range Rover has nearly crashed because she's staring so much. It's almost as if the North of Scotland has never seen a drag nun before.

We're used to seeing nuns portrayed as sprightly, twinkly eyed singing Marias or austere, disapproving matrons in grim convent dramas, but queer ones covered in greasepaint and glitter don't spring instantly to mind. Once they do, it's somewhat hard to shake the image.

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence were rebels at a time of devastation in the gay community of seventies San Francisco. The Catholic Church had turned their backs on the suffering of AIDS victims, and there was nowhere else for them to seek comfort. So, on the pretence of staging a performance of *The Sound of Music*, three gay men borrowed some nuns' habits and toured the bars of the Castro District, drawing attention to the social conflicts there. This small act of rebellion spread like sparkly rainbow wildfire, and now there are Sisters all over the world, ministering to the queer masses.

That's why I'm standing on Aberdeen's main street, with a growing crowd cooing over my glitter makeup and jewellery so copious it would put Lily Savage to shame. Because there's no better way to draw attention to the crimes still committed against the LGBTQ+ community than to turn up to Grampian's first Pride as a Sister.

At a time when homosexuality was still taboo, the Sisters appearing in the streets was the ultimate act of defiance. So great was the Sisters' reach, that by the late eighties one ran for office in San Francisco, listing her occupation as 'Nun of the above'. A law was swiftly passed requiring candidates to use their legal name. The Sisters elegantly stuck the boot (or stiletto) into the establishment, and they continue their colourful activism to this day.

I've made it several yards into the Pride march, and I've already been photographed for a newspaper. Some awestruck teenage girls have asked me how long it took to do my makeup (an hour and a half, most of that clearing up glitter). They tell me my rainbow eyelashes are beautiful (I'm glad, because they took up the rest of that getting ready time).

But being a rebel involves more hard work than putting on makeup. Sisters take vows like any nuns, to spread universal joy and banish guilt. You might see them handing out safe sex packs or shaking buckets for LGBTQ+ charities. Sometimes, they're just there for people who have recently come out, who might face being disowned by loved ones. The veils and fancy dresses look happy, but there's an anger bubbling beneath the surface of many of my fellow activists.

I'm eating a 99 on the beach in glorious weather, with hindsight a foolish thing in pristine white makeup. My friend's sticking to me like glue in case we get any trouble from locals, but our worries melt faster than the ice cream when a young boy gives me a bashful wave. His parents smile and say 'isn't that nice, those two men in love?' Like many others, they assume I'm a man in drag. Nobody needs to know what's really under the greasepaint. Gender doesn't matter, anyway.

No organisation's perfect, and Sisters squabble like any family. But having a worldwide bunch of glamorous siblings, choosing to be angry, deciding to be visible for those who can't, makes me feel like the rebellion might just win the day. And look fabulous while doing it.

The Right to Read

Angie Walker

'Don't do this. You won't win. You'll be financially liable, and it'll cost you a lot of money.'

But we did it anyway. And won. We started as many, and then we were two. In the final hurdles we grew to eight, on the final lap to victory. Eight from a possible 6000 is no mean feat … eight from just the two of us, often seemed impossible.

In 2016, our local Council took the decision to close the village library to save money. The only free resource available for some 6000 people in the community. The Community Council initially fought the decision to close the library and brought in enthusiastic, passionate members of the community to help. We were two of them. We were all of them, really. And it went well. We gathered signatures on petitions, online and 'in real life'. We wrote editorial and press releases for the local papers. We brought the community together, from babies to seniors. We made, and waved, placards. We brought a Yeti across the border! We used our collective voice. And because I was involved, we made a music video with the band I was singing with at the time – The Scottish Pink Floyd. It's on YouTube and it's called 'Leave Our Books Alone' – a parody of 'Another Brick in the Wall'. We begged donations, and signed books and auction items, and hosted a fundraiser. The people of our community raised in excess of £1000 to save their library from closure.

Politics, local and regional, is a complex playing field. Personally I couldn't even master the rules of rounders so I was on the backfoot from the start. What I learned is

that it's a dirty business. There is a lot of back-scratching that happens and it's all perfectly legal and above board. That doesn't mean that it's right. My cohort and I became privy to 'plans' afoot. Basically we were confided in, and expected to be grateful and go along with it. There was to be something of a takeover bid. A deal whereby an application was made to take the library off the Council's hands and turn it into a 'Community Hub'. The two of us thought about it, and talked about it, at length. The bottom line was that it didn't sit well with either of us. We researched extensively, and spoke to campaigners across the UK. We swithered and dithered but essentially we knew that what was being proposed was not sustainable, nor a suitable community-focused response to this budget cutting exercise. We approached our elders and betters in their office-bearing positions of authority and they … well, they didn't agree. They had plans of their own and we were getting in the way of that. We lost friends. We were sniggered at and made to feel like the most ridiculous women in the world. Yet still we fought.

Contrary to popular belief, we didn't fight for ourselves, or to get one over on anybody else, or even to prove that we could win – because we were certain, at points, that we wouldn't. The principle of the thing was the driving force, and what kept us going in the face of adversity we could never have imagined. We were doing what, to us, was RIGHT. Libraries are not, should not, be the preserve of those who can choose to use them. They are necessary. Libraries are safe havens for children afraid to go home after school. A wee sit down and a read at the papers that a shirt-and-tie retired gentleman cannot afford to fund for himself. Access to the internet for free; computers, where you can do homework and research. And job search. Do you know what it's like to

claim unemployment benefit now? The hoops through which you must jump for the privilege of a weekly pittance? We fought for all of this, and more. We fought for our children to have the right, and ability, to access free books and learning on their doorstep. Not two expensive bus rides away.

I realise that this all sounds very valiant. It wasn't. It was emotionally, mentally and physically draining. We were (ironically) ostracised by the community we loved. Our partners, and our children, were angry. We weren't there for them during months of researching legalese. Our children feasted on chicken nuggets for half a year. And they were dragged along to official meetings because we had no other option. They were given some crisps and juice and warned to play nice and to BE QUIET. By us, their mothers. Because we knew that those times would pass – but we had to see it out. We wanted to show our children that you must FIGHT for what you believe in – whether you are directly affected or not. Both of us could afford to buy books for our kids. We fought for the people who couldn't. So that maybe, one day, our own children would forget the frozen food diet and frequent absences and remember the women who stuck their necks out, dug their heels in and said, 'NO! Enough. No more.'

And stick our necks out we did. We sought legal advice. And the powers that be didn't like that one bit, and tried to intimidate us into giving up. Two Advocates took up our case, free of charge, because they knew we could win it. In the end it didn't go to court because the Council capitulated. They 'saved the library'. One could argue this was a 'good move' in advance of local elections. The reality is that WE saved the library. The big boys lost and two wee middle-aged Mammies won. We did it again a

year later and we will do it every year until the people we pay to serve us realise that our community has the right to influence decisions which affect us. Every child. Every woman. Every man.

On Primrose Hill

Wayne Price

In the summer of '84 I was 18 and my one close schoolfriend – throwing over family, final exams and an offer from Oxford, explaining nothing, saying goodbye to no one – suddenly escaped the dirty pinched seams of the Welsh valleys for the deeper, richer filth of London. Of course when he called my Aberystwyth University digs from a payphone, almost too drunk to read out his address, the endless traffic of the capital roaring like a stadium in the background, I caught the overnight bus out of sleeping Wales and followed after him.

In those days there was political glamour in squatting. Horror stories of Knightsbridge Pieds-à-Terre taken over by roving anarchist cells peppered the Thatcherite press, but the reality was very different. I found Benny in a burned out upper flat on King Henry's Road. A bed fire had smoked the place out, killing the old man who'd owned it, and the downstairs flat was in the middle of being gutted by builders, so no-one seemed to mind the little crowd of misfits and dropped-out students camping there. Benny was proud of the tiny room he'd snagged for himself; everyone else had simply spread out sleeping mats in the big, bay windowed living room. He needed privacy to read and write, he explained, and the box room's back window, slender as a castle's arrow-slit, had a view of nearby Primrose Hill where, Benny told me, drunk but deadly serious, Blake had not just *seen* but *conversed* with the Spiritual Sun.

We'll have to sleep head to foot, he announced, pointing at the skinny bedroll taking up most of the floor.

What's that smell? I asked.

Jimi Hendrix. He jerked his head towards the hall: we were being watched by a sleek, long-faced cat. He brings in dead stuff.

In fact, the smell was Benny's feet, but I wouldn't discover that until night.

I'd arrived before 8AM and Benny was already drinking Newcastle Brown. Nobody else was awake, and in the shuttered gloom we'd been stepping softly around the mummy-like forms of bedrolls and blankets. He squeezed past me and padded into the kitchen to find another beer.

The other squatters liked Benny, especially the contrast between his heavy valleys' accent and his scholarly otherworldliness, but they were suspicious of me from beginning to end. The dominant presence was Mo (Mo for Mohammed, I assumed, but months later, in court, discovered it was Mo for Moroccan, and his name was Ismail). He ran the place like a family business, importing hash from his home village and paying the other squatters to do the menial jobs of weighing and cutting and selling. He was older than the rest of us, and rarely spoke even to his girlfriend, Kat, a nervous college drop-out with a tight little pot belly. She cried a lot over random things, like Jimi Hendrix not wanting a titbit, or the workmen hammering in the flat below. Officially, Benny was the lookout, but he was always blind drunk at his station near the foot of the stairs. Despite the dereliction of duty, I think Mo liked the fact he kept to a constant diet of Newcastle Brown: it meant he never bothered smoking the merchandise.

Never entrusted with a job, I spent my days wandering the neighbourhood – the Jewish Museum when it rained, The Roundhouse if there was a band rehearsing (Kat

worked part-time in the ticketing office and would let me slip in) and the crown of Primrose Hill when it was fine. I saw druids there once, chanting in white robes, and realised to my suddenly homesick amazement that their chant was in Welsh.

Every so often I would try to persuade Benny to come home. Not to his family in Pontypridd – that was hopeless – but to Aberystwyth where he could sleep on my floor and maybe even take some evening courses once he'd dried out a little. Or a lot.

One July night, the air still soft like afternoon through the letterbox window, there was a moment when I think he nearly relented. I'd exhausted all my arguments again, but for once he was thoughtful afterwards, nodding over the book he'd been reading. The voices of drunks sifted in on the warm breeze; a young man and woman, shouting nonsense on Primrose Hill. Benny stirred, a strange, concussed smile on his face, though instead of agreeing to leave he simply quoted from his book. Listen to this: Caradoc Evans on love. *So few people have met her, and those who could describe her as she is are afraid of the police*. Ha! he laughed, and that was an end to it.

Instead of going home, Benny followed Mo to squat after squat, staying one step ahead of the law. Despairing of him, I'd left London for a while, but in a fit of remorse took the long bus trip back at the end of September.

By then it was just Benny, Mo and Kat, who looked more than ever like one of the Hungry Ghosts in Buddhist hell. Benny looked even worse: he'd been beaten senseless a week before. They'd found a top floor flat in a condemned high-rise near Brixton. Benny wasn't reading any more – his books had all been lost or stolen along the way – and he barely noticed me for all the week or more I spent there, the last days I'd ever spend with

him, but he'd scrawled some lines of Dylan Thomas' on one of the empty walls:

Why don't we live here always? Always and always. Build a bloody house and live like bloody kings!

So high up, those desolate, scraped bare apartments were filled each day with astonishing, streaming light. I picture him, sick and bruised, scribbling those words above his bedroll like a prayer, or spell. From just one corner window, if you knew where to squint through the haze, you could see beyond the copper snake of the river to the green rise of Primrose Hill.

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I'll Show You a Rebel!

Rebel

Sara Sheridan

Words are easy. Words are cheap. When people say where did you get the idea for your book, words are what they want, and words themselves have nothing to do with why I write. Because I'm not really a writer. What I am, is a reader. That's me. Curled up somewhere so deep inside a story that it's more real than the real world. If it's night time in that story I'll look up confused at the sunshine coming through the window. Daydreamer. Fool. And when I sit down to write a book it's not some grand idea – it's because I want to read that book and I know nobody is going to write it except me.

It is the maddest job. And along the way you have to pretend that you had an understanding of critical theory or at least that that was important to you. I think that lots of writers work that way – because they have something they want to say. Me, all I have is something I want to read – a feeling of what it would be like to read it, not a finished story. And maybe that's why I don't fit in. Nowadays I give it a title. I'm an outsider, I say. Get me. It's not that I don't like other writers – I do. But I don't fit in. I've tried. I've joined every club going – the crime writers, the historical writers and just the plain, old writers. But for me it's not something I have in common with anybody else because like I said, I'm not a writer and honestly, I'm not much of a brainbox – I just get interested in a story. For me, when I actually have something to say, it's more visceral. And that's how I ended up taking my top off.

I am not a nudist in the normal run of things. Honest to God. But I was provoked. In the book industry men get

paid more than women. Averagely I mean. It's like most other industries on the planet, right? So obviously, it was a male author who provoked me. Not that he was trying to. Not that he was even thinking about me. It was at the Edinburgh Book Festival four years ago and he was talking about his writing (which, incidentally, I really enjoy). Crime writing is a broad church – it accounts for around a third of all fiction in the UK – and I write traditional crime because I like to read traditional crime and it's historical crime too cos I like history. So this author who doesn't write anything like my stuff said during the course of what was a high profile event, that traditional crime was (and I quote) 'a bit spineless'. What he meant was that it isn't overtly violent. Then he went on to say traditional crime wasn't really Scottish because there aren't a lot of us writing it in Scotland. I knew the lad was just trying to pitch himself as a great Scottish novelist with all the grit that entails but I was raging. Of course I was. Those of us north of the border who write traditional crime, are just as Scottish as the lads who make up stories set in the seamy underworld of Glasgow's sink estates. For me, that's a principle. That's a point of order. And if you're a reader like me and you live the story, forensic crime is horrifying. My imagination takes me in a different direction – I don't need the detail about the blood. So, anyway, it felt as if I was being dismissed or at least, the kind of books I enjoy reading were being dismissed and I wasn't having that.

I could have gone back to words. I've written for blogs and newspapers loads of times, but that would have been an intellectual response and me being a Scottish writer and not being spineless (in my own opinion) was a visceral matter. So I decided instead of making an argument, I'd make an image and the festival

photographer said he'd shoot it and put it up with the rest of his exhibition, around the festival square.

The image is of me, topless with a thistle drawn the length of my spine. Posing for it was one of the scariest things I have ever done. We started before the festival was open. A critic hovered outside the tent backstage smoking a cigarette and peering at me, trying to figure out what we were up to (or, maybe, just trying to get a look at my boobs – I don't know). I considered, momentarily, being just a bit spineless and putting my top back on but I couldn't do that. One of the festival managers came out, very uncomfortable, and said we ought to be quick but there was no way we could rush what we were doing. The lighting had to be right so it was going to take a bit of time. We got it in the end, though. Just as the manager was working up to some kind of frenzy because the festival was opening its doors. The shot we chose was one of the last ones taken. Me, from behind, not scared any more, as it happened, and the very personification of having a Scottish spine.

I spent the next two days guiding my aunt and elderly mother around the book festival campus avoiding the shot. Then when they saw it, they loved it and brought their friends. There was a group of grannies hanging around it, accosting complete strangers and saying 'I know her'. They don't do that in the bookshop when something I've written comes out. I didn't make a statement – not a written one – but I think (I hope) I made my point. Several writers were mystified – properly uncomfortable because we novelists are supposed to stick to words but hey, sometimes it takes a little extra something to make a point. Oh, and the photographer made postcards from the image and, as I understand it, they sell rather well.

Mibbees Aye, Mibbees Naw

Anne F Brown

I've niver thought o masel as bein any kind o rebel an I canny mind o a time when I rebelled against anythin. Mibbee I'm a wee bit 'thrawn' as ma mither used tae say but then she always hud a front fur folk. Dinny be yoursel, behave, dinny show me up! Repression wis her byword. Like when I wanted ma ears pierced when I was fourteen an ma mither prattled on aboot 'if the Lord meant you tae huv holes in your ears you'd be born wi them' and mair nonsense aboot it makin you look cheap. I wis thrawn aboot it an borrowed some studs fae a pal, raided mithers sewin box fur a darnin needle an did it masel. The blood runnin doon ma neck an tears an snot fae greetin wi the pain daein the first wan made me stop fur a minit though. Dae I carry on? Mibbees Naw! It's sair, ma mither will kill me, it's sair, I'll be in the bad books fur years, it's sair, I'll huv tae get earrings o ma ain, it's sair! Mibbees Aye? I'll huv pierced ears. Aye won.

This thrawn bit o me wis missin when I married ma first man, though. I wis sixteen and thought it wis a good idea but once it wis a' booked I jist kent it wisny right. I tries tae call it off but ma mither went daft! So dae I call it off? Mibbees Aye, an heave a huge sigh o relief but huv ma mither oan ma back again. She'd be black affronted an I'd niver live it doon. Ma life widny be worth living, everybuddy wud be talkin aboot me. Mibbees naw, and dae what she wants, go wi the flow, dinny rock the boat,

what canny be cured must be endured, you've made your bed, lie in it, dinny get above yoursel, dinny let folk doon. A' that burled roon in ma heid an I ended up goin wi Naw.

Thirteen miserable years later I hud the same thoughts. Dae I run fur the hills? Mibbees Aye, freedom, a life, the start o somethin good. Mibbees Naw, an stay in the rut o my life. Mibbees Aye won, so I went tae college, found stuff I wis good at, found folk I liked, found ma voice, an found me. Then I ran fur the hills, an freedom. Well, as free as you can be wi two weans, two dugs, a horse, a wreck o a car an nae money.

That same streak got me through gettin a cooncil flat, startin fae scratch wi furniture, gettin a job, gettin anither horse, carryin on studyin tae get a better job, gettin thegither wi sumbuddy I'd been pals wi fur years, movin in thegither, buyin a hoose thegither, gettin married and huvin a great job, great life, holidays abroad, the weans growin up an leavin hame.

I'd found mysel an ma future then M.S. found me…

It barged intae ma life an changed everthin I knew aboot masel. Wis I gonny huv tae reinvent masel as bein a 'disabled person'? A puir wee soul that folk looked at wi' their pityin expressions, rubbed your arm an spoke at you loud an slow. 'Are you a' right there?', feelin smug that they're daeing a good thing. Was that ma future?

Mibbees Aye, an I'd turn intae this helpless person that folk expected, an be grateful for them even spendin a bit o' their day tae chat tae me. I'd huv nae expectations o achievin anythin in the future, just become what folk's perceptions of a wee disabled person shud be an dae. I'd huv tae be grateful fur what I've got an no push against it as I 'shudny be daein stuff wi my condition.'

Well if that wis the deal then I didny huv a choice MIBBEES NAW it wis, wherever that took me.

When I hud tae gie up work it took me tae studyin nutrition, gettin a fitness regime an fightin tae be the best I can be.

Wis that bein thrawn, or rebelling against a label an a shrinkin world? I dinny ken but it's got me oan the back o a horse an, after years o workin at it, a the way tae RDA National Championships daein dressage where I wis 4th in ma class. I've jumped oot a plane, twice did a firewalk, got ma erse tattooed wi the RDA's slogan (it's what you CAN do that counts) an volunteered tae keep me sane an productive. This year I hud a BIG Birthday an I'm still semi upright so I decided tae spend it huvin fun and raise money fur charity. I've been white water raftin, hud 13 inches of my hair cut off, did a Vaultin routine (gymnastic moves oan the back o a movin horse), went tae Wales tae ride the fastest Zipwire in the world wi pals. Five o us, two broken auld women an three fit, gay men, whit a road trip that wis! An there's still mair planned.

I dinny ken whit a this says aboot me except I've decided that I huv MS but it disny huv me or define who or what I am. So does that make me a bit o a rebel efter a? Mibbees Aye.

Wetsuit

Irene Mackintosh

The water.
Dark before me, cold – that crushing, heartstopping chill –
The ice-laced memory of youth, ebbs and flows there, in North Sea waves.
A rebellion now: this body, its years of life – of life-giving and life-living – marked across the skin;
stretched scars of joy, of tears, of memories – the sag of days passing; wrinkles etching recollection.
Yes, a rebellion then, to pull on this neoprene suit,
its inky thickness wrapping this aging self of mine, warming these bones which now feel the ache of years in their joints,
folding into myself: zipping in yesterday, last week, the decades.
I stand in sand – smooth.
I brush slategrey hair from my eyes, breathing,
stilling and steeling my heart and then,
suddenly submerged, subsumed,
shrieking as I rise again –
a teenager raging against it all, swimming beyond my depth, against the current.

Drinking Games

David Lamond

I used to think drinking was cool. I longed to be 18 so I could sit in the pub and get royally hammered. And that's what happened. I spent the best years of my youth drinking my ass off. Is there a bar here? What time is it open until? Do you mind if I get messed up?

These early years of drinking coincided with the onset of my mental health condition. I drank when I was up. I drank when I was down. I drank when I was only halfway up. The Grand Old Duke of Booze! Everything I learned as a young adult was learned under the influence or hungover as hell. Bring paranoia and depression into the mix and I'm lucky that I didn't cause myself more damage than I did.

Drinking for me was a rebellious act. I started boozing on holiday in Switzerland at the age of 13. After that I was always looking forward to events where I might be able to score a few drinks. However, this isn't really a tale of alcohol woe. It's more one of how I deal now with the desire to get drunk and how rebellious this state of mind is and how it might help you or someone you know.

During one bout of heavy drinking I was surprised to hear that anything over 5 or 6 units of alcohol was classified as a binge. For me, 5 or 6 units was a regular mid-week mini session. I think in the future the government will dispense units of alcohol to your house 1 or 2 units at a time. The alcohol would have to have some massively corrosive half-life to stop you stockpiling it around Christmas time, though. I can remember telling this tale of what essentially amounted to Civil

Servants becoming the milk men of an alcohol delivery service. This one chap thought it such a good idea that he bought me a drink.

One of the things I miss the most about drinking is the way it opened up your mind. Ideas and jokes seem to come quicker after a drink. But it's a small price to pay really.

Then there is stuff which you bleat out and think 'I'd never think of that in a month of Sundays'. You declare your genius to the world with stuff like:

'The trouble with Kafka was that he was an intolerable Czech lightweight.'

Essentially I was throwing a massive degree of caution to the wind. I am now teetotal and never allow a drop of alcohol to pass my lips. Now that I have stopped drinking, when I am at my best I see it like a game. A game that you win by not giving into the desire to get drunk. For me this means total abstinence. I am sorry for having allowed alcohol to take over my life. It's the same with cigarettes. Philip Morris and I are toe to toe in a fist fight! He tempts me with half-finished cigs left in bus stops. I run around town like a manic preacher slapping fags out of the young ones' mouths.

So that's it. Life is hard. But it's only made harder by cigarettes and alcohol. This story is ongoing. The game is never won. It's more like trying to keep a clean sheet. I thought that when I was drinking and smoking I was being a rebel but really I'm more of a rebel now. I am changing into a better human being. I do get help from my medication but the side-effects make them as much of a hindrance as a help. As far as the meds versus booze debate goes you really just have to trust your doctor. I've learned that through painful experience. Booze is a bad medicine.

I read somewhere that Bill Hicks stopped drinking and smoking before he died. He still espoused all the rebellious, humorous claptrap he was famous for though. That's how I see myself now. A sober Bill Hicks but not as funny – and hopefully not dead before I'm 40.

It seems to me a sober rebel is somehow more difficult to control than a drunken one. Sobering up is like a drug in itself.

Not in Tonight

Janette Black

Sometimes after a busy day all I want when I get home is peace and quiet.

So now and then, not often, but just on an occasion when there is a knock at the door I don't answer it. I pretend I'm not in.

A bit naughty maybe but sometimes my visitor would arrive at tea time. Most of the time I would let them in and offer some soup or something but, now and then I would say 'shove it!' and hide.

We're none of us perfect.

Prisoner of Suits

Dinah Kolka

I was sitting down, my bruised knees peeking out shyly from a skirt a little too short. I was watching the purple kaleidoscope of pain forming on my skin. I was surrounded by smiling strangers, their faces grey and sorrowful. The mindless silhouettes – females wearing long skirts and blazers, mainly brown, grey or black.

Men – rows of simple, a little too big, second-hand suits. They were all staring at the person standing at the podium, they were looking at him with the expression of the godly devotion on their rough bland faces. The man seemed bigger and angrier than them and he was swinging the Bible in his hand, telling all of us not to talk to people who weren't following the divine orders. However, I was not paying attention. I was sitting down wearing a red tie, a dark red lipstick and my red hair was falling gently on my punk rock vest. I was told off again because I looked inappropriate. I was 17.

I was sitting in my room looking at my bruised knees. I was drowning in my own anxiety, increasingly uncomfortable. On the sofa in my room sat two men with Bibles in their hands. You should not be playing these games. You should not be reading those malignant books. You should not be listening to this devilish music. Would Jesus be proud of you? I was told off again because my personality was appalling. I was 20.

I was sitting on the kitchen floor looking at my knees. There was a lot of blood. I could see constellations in the creases of my skin, now filled with a carmine substance. I didn't wash the dishes correctly. There was a little bit of

soap on one of the wine glasses. They needed to be clean, they were used all the time. I could taste the salty flavour of the tears streaming down my cheeks. I got told off again because I was not enough. I was 21.

I was sitting at the job agency, looking at my knees. My brother was talking at me while I was trying to stop hyperventilating. You will apply for a job in the factory, this is going to be your bank and this is going to be your phone provider. You will give me half of your pay to cover the rent you will help out with the chores and my baby. Why are you making this face? All the immigrants stick together, we all do this. It's best for you. I was 22.

Wear this hairnet. Wear this overall. You must not bring food to this place. You have to be faster. You're not packing these bottles the correct way. Why are you wearing jewellery? Why are you trying to make only British friends? Why are you not like us, we speak the same language, we need to stick together. Where are you from? Why are you speaking with them? I don't like the face you're making. Please, don't come back tomorrow.

If you're living with us, you will clean the flat every day, wash dishes in the cold water, we need to save money. Don't forget the bathroom. Also, please do the laundry. I need you to help out with the garden. Could you look after my child for a second? Why are you going upstairs? I need someone to talk to. Why are you making this face again?

I don't think this guy is good for you. He thinks of leaving the religion, he abandons his own family. Do you want to be like him? He's a cancer to your faith. You need to break up with him before things will get serious. Are you surprised your brother doesn't speak to you? Well, you shouldn't have kissed that other boy. It's all your

fault. I can't believe you're still single. Why are you making this face?

I kissed a boy in his car outside the cornfield. He saw the book I was reading. He told me I was intelligent and he told me that I could achieve things. There was a strange spark in his eyes. It was an appreciation. He told me he loved me. Next day he put his hand on my breast. I felt a fire deep inside my chest.

Since I remember, I was restrained. The chains of religion, the responsibilities towards my family. Menial jobs I had to resort to. I was self-harming my own personality and beliefs. Growing a thick skin of resentment, hatred, and indifference. Although the blood was boiling under my skin, waiting to burst open.

I sat among the rows of people in suits. Grey faces, long skirts, the same old story, the same view on the world I've had since I was little. The person was talking from the stand again. As I was scribbling down my unholy poetry I could hear him saying that the body is a temple. People will be expelled from the eyes of god if they engage in the sexual behaviour. God will be displeased. I looked around. My former friends, the young people were there no longer.

It was the breaking point. I stood up and left, feeling the eyes watching my every step. I ran back to the flat, packed my bags and bought a one-way ticket to Scotland. As far up north as possible. I stopped by the convenience store, threw my Bible in the nearest bin and I bought my first pack of cigarettes.

I took a deep drag. The future starts here. If God is displeased I'll make sure he has a reason.

Bad Widow

Julie Galante

My husband just died but at least I'm taking it well. Everybody tells me so. 'Oh Julie, you're just handling this all so well', they gush, willing it to be true. Insisting upon it.

At first I tried to play along; I wanted to believe. The love of my life died at 43 after a grueling duel with leukaemia, but whatever, I'm so strong. I'm so competent. Look at me, I'm handling it. Just like you all want me to.

But you know what? I think you may be wrong. What makes you think I'm handling it well, anyway? What evidence can you cite? The fact that I still get out of bed most days? That I'm not wasting away due to malnutrition? That I haven't forgotten English, or where I live?

My brooding public appearances in ill-fitting mismatched clothing haven't given you pause? The six months which have gone by with no response to your email? The fact that I haven't yet bothered to change the utilities from his name to mine?

Screw this. From now on I am officially handling things badly. Go on, try and stop me. I don't know what it will take to convince you of my utter failure to grieve with grace, but I'm going to give it my all. I shall cry in public. I will tell people about his death in completely inappropriate situations – at the car dealership or, say, a professional networking event. I will scrawl lovesick graffiti on the walls of my flat, late at night, sobbing and drunk. I've done all of these things already, but perhaps you may have missed them. Time to up my game.

Here are some ideas. Which ones do you think best fit with my new identity of Widow Handling Things Badly? I will go on lots of dates, or refuse to date, whichever you find least appropriate; stay out every night, sleep all day; get nine more cats; dress said cats up like babies and push them around town in a pram; not leave the flat for days at a time; get a life-sized blow-up doll and insist you address him as my new husband; join a cult; found a cult. (Note to self: think up ideas for a cult.)

Will you stop telling me how well I'm widowing then? Don't make me have to try even harder to get this wrong, because I will. What will it take? Face tattoos? A total disregard for the conventions of polite conversation? Stripper clothes? Not returning my shopping trolley to the designated area? Would that make you finally turn to the person next to you and whisper, 'Oh my, the Widow Galante really isn't handling things well, is she?' Because that's what I want you to say. Stop telling me that I'm good at this. I don't want to be a good widow.

Ikke mÃ¥l min. = Not My Language.

Elspeth Cargill

Eg se bø inn skriva
dað heder Broser.
Eg bresta skriva mål min.
De draga frå.

Dog må skriva i engelsk.
Dog kunnu skriva i irsk og skottenne.
Dog munu skirva ikke mål dinna.

Eg er broser
eg hevi gert skriva min
i Norn.

(Translation)

I see an invitation to write
it is titled Rebel.
I rush to write in my tongue.
They draw a line.

You may write in English
You can write in Gaelic or in Scots
You will not write in your language.

I am a rebel
I have done my writing
in Norn.

Thelma and Louise, Bitch

Anna Stewart

How me and mum came tae be *livin it up* on the Forfar Road is a pure massive saga. So I'm just gonnae tell yi the best bit: the end.

We were visitin Edinburgh fae Dundee, stayin at my Great-Auntie's flat on the other side o The Meadows. It wis a summer night and we were walkin back fae toon through the line o trees cawed Jawbone Walk, and that's when my Mum's husband put his hand up my skirt, right in front o her.

Years afore this man laid hands on me, but that time it wis mair in violence, no like this. This wis somethin a wee bit different, even fir him. That time, he'd tried tae persuade everyone it hadnae happened coz I wis a teenager and he wis a man, a heidie o a school, a responsible adult. And yi ken what I'm like: volatile, a shouter, a screamer then, I'd those hormones and that attitude. Bitch.

Back then, I didnae tell Mum ootright coz I couldnae speak the wurds tae her. So he got tae do the talkin. He'd a hold ower her: her money, her sense o wha she'd been, and slowly, *slowly* he cut her aff fae her ain life. 'Fisty cuffs' are the wurds he used, coz as it happens, sometimes a forty-year auld man needs tae use fists on a girl o seventeen. A few years went by I didnae see that much o Mum, but enough time had passed fir us tae draw a line under it. Until this night on Jawbone Walk when I wis grown; twenty-five or twenty-six. This night, I didnae shout and scream – I got a minter. And even though it was dark, she'd seen what he'd done. So there wis shame again between us.

Except, twelve years he'd spent tryin tae rip us apart and he couldnae do it. He'd a need tae break things but didnae ken how, there's an unpredictable quality to a desperate man. He tried so awfy hard tae be different. He wore rainbow coloured waistcoats, deliberately odd socks and a fidora hat. He wis a member o Tony Blairs Labour and liked singin Cher,

Do you believe in life after love
I can feel something inside me say
I really don't think you're strong enough

But that's fae his story, and I dinnae care tae tell it.

Soon, it would be the day we'd hire a van and pack up aw Mum's stuff when he wisnae in. He'd come back tae an empty hoose, and we'd wash the flairs o a rented flat in a closey only a few streets away, but wi a pretty efficient buzzer-entry-system and twa auld Italian sisters that lived side by side underneath keepin an eye on things. No long efter, me and the lad I wis livin wi split up and I came tae live on Forfar Road wi a sair hert, and weight issues fae eatin too many hot dinners.

Thats when the fun began.

Every night Mum came hame wi wine. Aw I'd tae do wis put dry pasta in a pan and she wis poppin the cork, fillin the glasses. I'd never had a better flatmate. We went on holiday tae Finland and swam in ain o their fifty-five-thousand lakes, we took saunas and joined a gym, got back massages and had oor hair done. I did a master's degree, and Mum went on dates wi guys that wernae psychotic. We watched Thelma and Louise on TV and got in debt, then got oot it again. We had pals ower and Mum threw pillows and broke loadso glass. I mooned a bus fae the windae. Mum went aw the way tae Ayrshire tae get a dog that turned oot wild. We telt each other the stories fae oor lives. We joined groups, then unjoined them

thegither. We cleaned up shite spewin fae the saniflo toilet oor landlord wouldnae fix. We learned tae faw asleep in the dark. I graduated, then signed on the dole and we started a book club that wis just her and me. We sang songs and took photographs, and once, I saw a squirrel eat a nut oot Mum's hand.

Fae the windae, fireworks blasted different coloured light year efter year while we waited fir her divorce tae come through. And aw that time he wis draggin it oot, we lived life and were defiant in oor happiness, free tae be a family again: free

Free.

Free.

A few years later, Mum wis sat ootside the maternity ward readin a book and waitin fir hours, just incase I needed her. And as it happened, I did.

Through aw they antenatal classes, naebody tells yi that the border o birth and death is paper thin. Naebody tells yi how it *feels* bein there in-between, or that yir mind might try tae reach that place again and again, coz there's comfort, and sometimes a grippin fear – knowin what it'll be like tae hand yirsel ower at lifes end tae that naewhaur-room.

Mum wis in there wi me.

She cut the cord when my boy gulped air that first time and now they play the games I remember as a bairn, and I see my Mum fae back then, before the bruise o that man took hold: I see how oor happiness has erased him.

How we've rubbed the fucker oot.

Continue the story . . .

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Patter

The Conformist

Bletherin Skite

Yer wanting a story aboot a rebel? Well, yer no getting wan.
Ye hear me?
Yer no telling ME whit tae say,
Ah write aboot what Ah want tae,
Ah winnae dance tae yer tune,
Yer terms and conditions,
Yer perfect renditions,
O' some snoff's idea o' po-yeah-tray

I'll. Break!
All, You're?
Roolz
Make … U.
Luke.
Like,
~~FOOLS~~

DICTATORS
(See – I even left in my mistake),
How will that sit with the neat Nanny State
that wants all its words on a neo-liberal plate?

Hey! I think I'll put a wee bit o' politics in the middle o' the story.
Something like 'ALL VOTE TORY!'
(just fur a laff)
Where'd ye get aff,
Telling me whit's funny or no?

Ahm gonnae say wot Ah want,
Ah might even huv a sly rant,
Shoutin and screaming, ma words like litter,
The junk-food o' feeds, the hash plants of Twitter

YOU WINNAE PUBLISH MA WURDS ONYWAY –
YER NO BRAVE ENUFF

You'll be like – 'she said this – so she's a wee besom',
'Full o' cheek and whatdaeyemcallit-ism'.
Shut her up fast, she needs a guid shushin',
Inject her wi' poison, tell the world it wis the –

THAT'S IT! END OF DISCUSSION.
(See? I know what you were thinking even if you didnae say it)

(and no, I winnae 'read your rules carefully' before I apply)

Beer, Loathing and Air Piracy

Docboy

Ca' me Demian.

Ah've drank well oan this story o`er the years.

The tellin' is an organic process. Ah wid say it wurks like this: yer in a bar somewherr and some punter wants tae gab. Someone tae temporarily take them away fae whitever swamp o' keech they are drooning in. And there ye urr, between the pulls on thon amber pint at the bar, ye go through the necessary friendly formalities, smile, ask them about themsels and discuss the current shite that the loonies runnin the world are up tae. Ye establish rapport. Ye listen tae him, nod, sigh, smile and look doon, appropriately.

'Aye, ye've certainly hud an interestin life.'

Noo, by this time they will either a' hud the grace tae ask ye about yerrsel, or ye need tae use plan B fur the narcissists:

'Hiv ye ever met anywan unusual?' Maist wid say naw, the occasional nutter, but niver hid tae deal wi them. Then you flick oot the baited line.

'Hiv ye ever met a pirate?' Inevitably, naw.

'Hiv ye ever met an air pirate?' Also naw.

So ye push oot yer chest, arms akimbo and smile bigtime. Once ye`ve clocked them goaggling, ye look at yer watch and say nice tae meet ye, etc and say ye goat tae be up the road. They stare at ye as if ye've just grabbed an et their pie in wan.

'Naw, ye cannae leave noo – ye got tae finish the story.'

They plead like wains. 'Haw Jim – a drink fur ma freen here please.'

Hooked.

Ye mak yer protestation, but dinnae refuse the pint … and a wee hauf, ye say, wid go wi it nice, if that's okaydokey.

Then, ye gie them the story.

'It was on a trip hame fae Canada – hadnae bin back in awhile. Wiz gaunae see the folks and femily, mates, freens. The hale jimbang, ye know. They had poured me ontae the aerieplane in Toronto. Even the staff laughed at ma trauchles wi' pittin my jaicket oan at security, but that wiz the days afore 9/11.

'Onywey, it wiz a guid flight, goat in therr at the fronta the aerie, jist efter the cockpit and lavvy. Ya dancer! The folks ah wis seated wi' wur lucky enough tae sleep – ah kinnae sleep on thae rid eyes. Ah read aw the peppers – still wisnae sleepy. But they kept coming roon wi' the bevy – free of course. Well, yiv paied fur it oan yer ticket. Besides, being next tae the lavvy gied us a wee bit mer, ye know, sense o' adventure. So why naw? So ah hud a beezer oan the cheeky watter.

'Next thing we wur skyting o'er the Campsies, Glesga a big grey jumble tae the left. The seat belt sign went oan. I needed a gish and stood up. The cabin staff goat all crabbit, telling me tae sit doon … ah telt thim ah wiz burstin. Ah rebelled and stood ma grun – the lavvy wiz only four feet in front o' us. Ah looked aroon, aw thae punters an' cabin staff gien us growlers. But if ye got tae go … Dry troosers wiz wurth mair than therr scunner. Ah fired intae that wee daft lavvy. Some jobsworth wiz hammerin oan the door tellin us tae cam oot. Well, whit kin ye dae when yer in fu' stream? Then, fillet o' fish done, relief.

‘When ah cam back, they had moved ma neebors frae the front seating. Och well, but mair elbow room. I wiz almost nodding aff when the wheels hit the tarmac and bounced me awake. Dozed again. Next thing, three cops breenged oan like the SAS. Shouty, pointy, an a Mrs Wummen thit seemed less emotionally aff the jetty, thin the ither twa. Jeez – anywan wid hae thought thit there wiz a terrorist oan board. Ah mean ah wiz puggled, but no maroc.

I wiz equally pissed aff.

‘Haud the bus, am urnae leaving withoot ma gear.’ And comically, the SAS operation stoapped while Ah ransacked the lockers to retrieve my gear. Funnily enough, when they clocked that I had goat my bags, the shouty nonsense started agin.

We went doon the stairs tae the tarmac. They made a show of hauling me tae the doorway, but efter that, hauns were aff. Pointy indicating where we were going. He shot the craw, leeing me wi Shouty – who hud breath like a burst lavvy, and the doll cop. We sped alang glass corridors overlooking the runway. Jeez, we wer away like a toly doon the china telephone tae Goad.

We goat tae the main bit and Shouty talked oan his radio tae a high heid yin. Ah stood wi’ the bonnie wummen. I tried the patter.

‘So how has your shift been fur ye? Goat plans fur the rest of the day?’ Rejection. She wiz nice, but wis geein’ uz the boady swerve.

I was keeping an eye on Shouty and he seemed to sag against the counter, despite the rising tone in his voice. He cam back. Ah wiz like Captain Willard in ‘Apocalypse the Noo.’

‘Whit are the charges?’

He looked as mean as he probably could and said

'Air piracy.'

'Air piracy – yer jokin! Whit was ah supposed to dae – pish my pants?'

The doll cop cracked up, giggling. Shouty goat humpty dumpty but seemed sooked oot, in the face o' her laughter – it wiz ma first hint eh optimism. Shouty took anither call oan his radio. He wiz beelin, but ah wiz telt tae get offski. Nae charges.

At the luggage carousel, ma suitcase wiz aff the plane an in ma hauns before the rest of the punters even goat aff. Ah stoatered aff intae the grey Paisley mornin.

So therr ye go ma China, ye kin tell everyin, yuv met an air pirate.

Rebel with a Scotch Pie

Karen Riddick

I'm going back a few years now, but when I was a lass,
I took work as barmaid, in a bid to earn some brass,
A nice hotel, but staff were starved and often half awake,
Cos ten hour shifts were normal, and we rarely got a break.

Of course, the staff had just the trick if stomachs started twitching.
They'd sneak off for two minutes and steal something from the kitchen.
The chance of decent left-overs was usually remote,
So, folk would grab what they could find and ram it down their throat.

But I was vegetarian; my hunt for meat-free pickings,
Often meant some cold chips or a yoghurt lid for licking.
Until a rebel force stemmed from starvation and torment,
A day I'm still not proud of, but I'll tell you how it went.

There I was with morning coffees, lunches and day trippers.
I rushed about for hours 'til I had the hunger jitters.
Then rushing to the kitchen, praying for a meat-free prize;
My hopes were dashed cos all that I could find were two Scotch Pies.

Disgusted at the sight of them, my stomach gave a heave,
I covered them back over and then quickly turned to leave.
But survival is an instinct, when your body needs some food
It's funny how a warm Scotch Pie can suddenly smell good.

I don't know quite what happened next but soon those pies were gone,
I brushed the crumbs and fled the scene before the boss caught on.
But just my luck, because he planned to have them for his dinner.
No wonder he was in a rage, about the pie thief sinner.

Stomping round the building, he questioned all the staff.
But when he got to me, I had to quell a nervous laugh,
Cos I was vegetarian, so when I stood accused,
I reminded him that Scotch Pies were the last thing
I would choose.

I stress it only happened once, but still, it was a shame,
Cos with nobody confessing, the head waiter got the blame,
And though I still recall the joy of pastry stuffed with mince,
This Rebel with a Scotch Pie hasn't touched another since.

They Boots

Davy MacFarlane

Hey you get Jerry me you Davy Jerry load the big motor wi cable Drumchapel watch oot up there young team mental runnin in an oot the closes playing tig wi hatchets cable aff heids doon erse up dig like fuck see you at the end cut aff the non ferocious metal flog it tae that wee robbin' bastard scrappy in Springburn him wi that huge ulceration dug twenty quid on the first favourite the rest fur bevy plank the motor where the gaffers canny find it Boundary Bar bevvy oh day pick up the weans fae school drive hame fill the weans wi crisps and ginger an pretend tae sleep afore she gets hame fae her work an sees am fullyit see that in the papers joabs in Libya pittin up cables nae bother tae us me you Davy Jerry buy they boots desert boots canny bevy ower there ten bob a tail for white men missionaries heids are souvenirs worse than Drumchapel poles up cables up work like fuck get a tan hame tae Glesga loaded new suit new car doon the Ashfield Club me you Davy Jerry wearing they boots bevvied magic.

BAD WURDZ

Marc Innis

The social worker's name was Teresa. She had glasses and short blonde hair. She looked like a teacher, except she was younger.

She'd be there every second Tuesday when me and Bex got hame fae school.

Me, Bex and Sarah would be on the sofa. Mam and Teresa would be at the table, talking, drinking coffee.

Aye, athing's fine, said Mam. *Apart fae this ane and his cursin and swearin.*

Mam said it like it was just something funny but, Teresa didn't take it that way.

Oh, she stood up. *Andrew, have you been using bad language?* She looked at Mam, *Can you take the girls into the other room?*

Bex and Sarah got off the sofa, went straight to the bedroom. I looked at my hands. Teresa sat down next to me, knees together.

Would you like to tell me some of these words you've been using?

I kept my head down. *No*, I said.

Why not? If you can say them in front of your mum, why not in front of me?

Dunno. I was shaking a bit. The words were going through my head. I bit my lip, clasped my hands.

Well, she said, *If you won't tell me these words you must be ashamed of them don't you think?*

I didn't answer.

Tell you what, since you're too ashamed to tell me these words, what if I give you a piece of paper? You can write

a list of all the bad words you know. She got up, went to her briefcase.

Oh, that's okay, said Mam. *We've got plenty paper. And he's got his pencils. Haven't you?*

I didn't answer.

Well, time's nearly up, said Teresa. *You will write this list for me, won't you Andrew? I can read it next time I visit. Then we can talk about it. That's all I'm here for. Just to talk and help you. But remember, we need a list of all the bad words you know. All of them. Okay?*

*

After supper Mam tore a few sheets out her notepad. I sat at the table, pencil in hand. I wrote slowly. My letters were big and clumsy. Some of the words I'd never seen written down but, some I'd seen on the toilet walls at school. I wrote the first ones that came to mind – shit, piss, bloody, bugger. I stopped. I couldn't write the worst ones. Teresa would be shocked. I read the ones I'd done then wrote bastard, bum, willy.

Mam, I dunno how tae spell some ae them.

She looked up fae the telly. *Fitch anes?*

How d'ye spell arse? Is ass and arse the same word?

Uncle Robbie laughed, got the big red dictionary down off the shelf.

There ye go laddie, jist like hamework eh.

I opened the dictionary. The words were tiny. There were millions of them. I would never find the ones I needed. I looked over at Mam and Uncle Robbie then back at my sheet.

I'd never fill the sheet unless I wrote down everything. I wrote arse, ass, shite, pish, hell, fucking hell, fuck. I closed the dictionary. I didn't know whether to spell c***

with a K or C, so I wrote it both ways. I wrote prick, c***, fud, fanny. I stopped worrying about the spelling. Ye could tell fit each word sounded like. I wrote bloody bastard, fucking shit, bloody hell … my page was nearly full. I couldn't think of anymore. I didn't want to write God, Jesus or Christ coz Dad had given me a row for saying Jesus in his house one Sunday. Every second Saturday he'd drive through to take me and my sisters to his house for the weekend. He took us to church on the Sunday, we had to say grace before dinner.

What if Dad saw the list?

I'd never said any of the other words in front of him, and I felt a bit sick at the thought but, God, Jesus and Christ were the only ones he'd told me never to use because they were offensive to God.

I thought to myself, how come fuck and c*** are the worst ones instead of God and Jesus when fuck and c*** are just dirty words that dinna mean anything. I asked Mam and that's what she said, They're jist dirty words, they dinna mean anything.

Mam.

Fit?

Is Dad gona see this list?

Dinna be daft.

Uncle Robbie laughed,

No, I don't think that'd be a good idea.

I wrote God, Jesus, Christ then felt a bit guilty.

I read the ones I'd done, realised I'd missed out bitch. I realised I should've done it alphabetically. I turned the sheet over, wrote arse, ass, then stopped and thought – any more beginning with A? I couldn't think of any. I wrote bastard, bitch, bloody, cock, c***, dick …

I'd missed out bugger.

Mam.

Fit?

Can I get another piece of paper?

Why?

I've missed oot some words.

Gie me a look.

I sat back while she read over the list. She looked at me, shook her head. *This'll be fine.*

Aww Mam, it's good practice for ma writing.

Uncle Robbie looked over, *Gie the loun some paper ye aul skinflint.*

She tore some more sheets out her notepad.

I wrote 'til bedtime. When I went through Bex was asleep. I put the lists under my pillow, got into bed.

The next night after supper I went out. The lists were in my jacket pocket. It was cold and windy. There was nobody about. I wandered around the caravan site kicking stones, jumping over pot holes. I put a list on the ground. It blew away. I ran and caught it, put a stone on top of it. I went all around the caravan site putting lists where I thought they'd be seen. I imagined folk reading them and laughed. They would be shocked. They wouldn't know who'd done it.

How tae Inadvertently Start a Coup!

Wullae Wright

Wit am a daeing?

A sat there watching a guy picking at his bum crack. Then wae a secretive wee glance aroon the auditorium he began sniffing his fing'ers. A shook ma heed and quietly glanced aroon at aw the other vulgar animals. Future leaders, academics and inevitable dropouts trying tae impress each other. A wis bored listening tae how great college will be fir me until…

'*I introduce your newly elected Student President…*'

Wit!? The statement hit me heavy heard, a bit like the wae a bird keich slams aff a car windscreen. A didnae vote him in, a wisnae even offered a vote! A'd never seen this guy before in ma life. He hid a black and white hairdo, like his maw had pumped a skunk. Ma brain powered through hunners a thoughts like that wee energiser bunny oan the eccies. Ma over-thinking clouded ma ain thoughts so much that a wasnae prepared fir wit a did next…

'*I will endeavour to listen and speak on behalf of all stude…*' the Skunk Tits stoapped stunned.

'*NAW!*' a exclaimed '*Hod oan here! A never voted you in! Who voted him in?*' A glanced aroon the room as if tae go '*Aye, none of ye voted this loser in!*' A continued, '*A want tae put ma name forward tae be thee student president!*'

The auditorium was stunned tae silence. *Dear God in Jesus*, a thought, *wit am a daeing!?* But then a started to like it when the wee Skunk Tits responded.

'*Who even are you?*'

'*Who even am a!?*' 'Even' he says! A have tae admit a gave the ultimate rebel's retort:

'*A'm yir worst enemy wee man!*'

Gasps and '*ohhhhs*' filled the auditorium. *Go oan yersel*, a thought, *you tell that wee Skunk Tits.*

'*I am the new president and there will be no change to that*', said the Skunk Tits. The student coordinator interjected tae:

'*Yes the voting for president was done before the new college year began so unfor –*' Here a go again, ma retorts became as bold as a junkie oot his face oan Buckfast, '*This sounds like a dictatorship tae me! A don't like dictatorships!*'

Mer gasps and folk quietly murmuring hings like '*oh my god*'. Then the wee Skunk Tits tried tae get wide wae me:

'*Please sit down, this matter is not up for discuss –*'

Right! That wis it, a laid intae him like a chubby devouring a deep fried Mars Bar:

'*Spoken like a true dictator! I'm gonny set up an alternative Student Council, and a'll be the president . . . anyone up fir being ma deputy!?*' A exclaimed wae such vigor that a wee fart burst oot me in aw the excitement. A wee dude wae ginger hair slowly raised his hand.

'*You're hired, ma wee ginger rogue!*' Ma wee ginger pal gave me a wee sleekit smile which could hiv meant wan aw twa hings: he wis loving this inadvertent coup, or he wanted tae pump me. A like tae hink it wis the former, no that a wouldnae hiv been flattered. The Skunk Tits tried to say mer but the coordinator, like a wee cheeky stealth ninja, intervened:

'*Now we will move on to tell you about events running throughout the first semester . . .*'

The Johnson

A wis shaking mysel efter a wizz and oot fae naewhere popped the Skunk Tits. *Oh Jesus,* I thought.

'*I would like to speak with you about what happened in there*', stated the Skunk Tits.

'*Mate, I hivnae even put ma dong away yet. D'ye mind!?*' A sorted masel and then sauntered er tae the taps wae a heavy big swagger, like the jakeys in taps aff weather. A started washings ma hawns and gave the Tits some banter.

'*So ye looking forward tae hivin'a bit a competition? See who will dae the students proud!?*'

Skunk Tits wis visibly no pleased, '*You can't . . . I am the . . . look just go away! I am the president!*' Then he escaped oot the toilet faster than if he were being chased by a pack of cosh wielding neds.

Skiddie Skants

The ginger wan and I sat chatting in the guys toilets, laughing aboot our alternative student council shenanigans: pummelling their oaffice door wae posters sayin' hings like 'Doon wae the Student Council' and constant attempts to get an oaffice fir the 'Alternative Student Council'; the college always responded wae a 'naw'.

A lost masel getting aw deep and emotional speaking tae the ginger demon, going back over the months since the auditorium. A described how it wisnae a conscious decision oan ma part tae challenge Skunk Tits. That everything wis getting oot a hawn, but aye a would hiv loved being the College King. A wis exploring how this rebellious side a me hid influenced and changed me

when aw'e a sudden the ginger wan, who clearly hidnae even been listening tae a single word a hid been saying, turned roon hawding a pencil wae a used jonny swinging oan the end of it. We both stared at it in silence.

We heard pretentious chatter coming along the corridor. The ginger wan and I glanced oot to see our rivals, the Student Council! The Skunk Tits and his associates were waddling our way. We jamp oot in front of them and a swear a heard skiddies hitting their skants. '*Afternoon all*,' I said with friendship and open arms tae gee them a hug.

'*Go away, and take the posters off our door!*', said the Skunk Tits, with a vile tone.

'*Aye awright. You guys hiv been excellent opponents and we have been privileged to be yir opposition*,' A stated,

'*You were never our opposition!*', the Skunk Tits blurted.

'*Listen, we will be stepping aside and closing doon our Alternative Student Council. Tae be honest a cannae be bothered wae ye any mer. Ye hiv annoying faces. Good luck tae ye aw*'. The ginger wan and I sauntered away like free men stepping oot a Barlinnie prison.

Continue the story . . .

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Whit Did You Ca Me?

Rover

Todd Sharkey

We all went round to Steven's house that afternoon. Me, Dario, Craig and the twins, Derek and Brian. It was 2003 and we were all ten years old apart from Craig, who was not only older but taller too. Even at such a young age we all felt the seriousness of the situation. It was the day of Steven's dads' funeral.

It was supposed to be summer but the weather had a Scottish sense of humour. It was the kind of rain that hit you on the way down and splashed you on the way up. We walked in silence around the corner of the terraced house to Steven's front door. That's where we found him, sat on the doorstep in a black suit and tie, head hanging as he stared at the concrete. He heard us splash towards him and looked up.

'Are you okay Steve?' I asked, knowing damn well that was a stupid question.

'I'm fine, just tired, want to go for a walk?' He said, trying to shrug off the enormous elephant.

We all agreed to go for a walk through the park. It was our favourite place to be when things were good but, on this day, the rain-drenched national park seemed to be a cold and unforgiving shadow of the past, creeping over our shoulders and whispering into our ears that life would never be the same again.

Steven's dad was one of those people that could make anything fun. He was a bricklayer by trade but a comedian by nature. He always treated us as family. We all felt a pain as we watched the cancer eat him alive, we could never have imagined how it affected Steve.

Steve stopped and leaned against a twisted tree trunk, the rain got heavier so we all huddled beneath its branches. Right then I wanted to hug my friend, I wanted to tell him that everything was going to be okay – it wasn't, but damn it I would lie to him until he believed me.

I found out recently that we all had that same instinct, hell, Dario actually went in for the hug but patted Steve's shoulder instead. I couldn't muster that embrace, boys don't cry, fair enough.

'Mum gave the car away,' Steve said. It was the first he had spoken in a while and it took us all by surprise. 'A big lorry came this morning and took it away.'

I looked around at the others, they all had the same look on their face, trying to look concerned but being totally confused at the same time.

'I liked that car, it was a nice colour.' Craig, simple Craig, bless him, at least he said something.

'Beetroot. Dad said it was the colour of beetroot, he hated beetroot.' We all saw it, the small smile appear on Steve's face, but as quick as it came, it vanished. 'Dad and I left something in the car, I wish I could have got it back before they took it away.'

Derek jumped on the spot. 'Let's go and get it,' he said, excited. 'Do you know where the car is?'

'Banks Scrapyard, or that's what the lorry had on the side.'

It was Brian's turn to jump. 'Come on! Let's go.'

The next thing I knew we were loitering around outside the fenced-off scrapyard. Dario was the smooth talker so we sent him to the office to explain the situation to the owner. He returned with bad news.

'He said we can't go in and your mum should come along if she wants something from the car. If he catches us sneaking in he's calling the police'.

I took a leg up from Craig to get a better angle at the yard. There it was! A Beetroot-coloured Rover 416. I read out the registration plate to Steve and he confirmed it. We needed a plan.

The twins were the fastest runners so they would stay outside and distract the man. Craig would give Dario, Steve and I a leg over the fence. Dario said he could pick locks so he was the locksmith. Steve was going to grab the treasure and I was the lookout because I had elf eyes, like Legolas.

The twins did their part bashing on the windows of the office with sticks and rocks. The man flew out and chased them, they booked it for Main Street.

I put my foot in Craig's hand and he threw me over the fence. Steve came next, then Dario. Craig stayed by the fence as the rest of us made for the Rover. We all did our best James Bond impression, rolling around in the mud, leaping over scrap metal and sliding over the bonnets of cars. This was serious work but goddamn it we were having fun.

We met at the car and it was time for Dario's bullshit lock-picking skills. He picked up the nearest brick and smashed the driver side window. The alarm began blaring instantly. Steve opened the door. I kept my eyes trained on the gate. Steven pressed the tape eject button and the cassette popped out, he pocketed it and we sprinted to Craig. I could hear the yard owner screaming above the alarm behind us. We scaled the fence ourselves with the miracle of adrenaline and ran all the way back to Steve's.

The twins were waiting on us when we arrived. We went inside and upstairs to his room. He found his dad's tape player and snapped the cassette inside. He pushed play.

The first thing we heard was John Wayne shouting 'Fill your hand, you son of a bitch!' then it went straight into Bob Dylan's 'Subterranean Homesick Blues'. Steve put his head in his hand and broke into tears. We huddled around him and joined in, arm in arm we supported him and each other. Sometimes boys do cry.

Rebel With a Cause

Nancy Clench

I am a rebel with a cause. As a drag queen, there's a sense of duty. We're leaders, performing in venues across the world every night of the week. We stand out from the crowd and use our microphone or social media reach for good. We're a strong voice in the campaign for LGBT rights, and more.

I stand in at over 7ft tall. I call Scotland my home. Back in 2013, with Glasgow as my canvas, I was performing in the gay bars, DJing in the clubs and telling jokes to anyone who wanted to hear them. Stories started to appear in the press about Russia's Anti-Gay Propaganda law that was being pushed through by Putin's regime. It heralded a new and vicious form of homophobia that saw gay people being beaten for walking down the street.

Scotland stood in solidarity. United with one powerful voice, we called for our politicians to advocate on behalf of LGBT people in Russia, to give a voice to the voiceless and use diplomacy to end this homophobic tirade. Yet amongst this activism and campaigning, Glasgow City Council was twinned with Russian city Rostov-on-Don and our Lord Provost was scheduled for an official visit.

I was angry. Russia was becoming the centre of a storm of homophobia that prevented LGBT charities from existing, pushing LGBT people back into the speakeasies and yet our Lord Provost was happy to accept a formal visit to the country.

I wrote to the Lord Provost. I asked if she was willing to cancel her visit to send a message that Glasgow didn't support the Putin regime's actions. I published a petition,

demanding the Lord Provost cancel her visit and withdraw the twinning arrangement. The petition gained traction and support, media outlets picked it up and yet the Lord Provost remained committed to visiting.

When asked if she would meet with LGBT activists in Russia, she avoided the question. When asked if she would meet with LGBT activists at Glasgow Pride, she avoided the question. I believe that the message we sent was that it was okay to push forward this legislation, because we would remain their friend.

At Glasgow Pride, from the main stage, we sent a message of solidarity, in Russian, to LGBT people. We stood for solidarity, yet our Lord Provost was prepared to visit. The campaign united Glasgow, and Scotland's LGBT community standing in solidarity with Russian LGBT people. We stood on the steps of the Russian Embassy in Edinburgh. We chanted. The Equality Network delivered a letter on behalf of the LGBT community condemning the Embassy's actions.

The Lord Provost still made her visit, but we're told she took the message of Glasgow's LGBT community to the Mayor of Rostov-on-Don. I hope she did.

Weeks after the campaign, a friend recounted a story that during a meeting with the Lord Provost she had mentioned a woman named Nancy that kept emailing her about Russia. She supposedly said 'I don't even know if she is a real woman.' I'm not a real woman. I'm a drag queen, and I'm a rebel with a cause.

In Between Days

R J Davies

A crack, and everything changes.

Miss Coakley appears in the window, a shrunken head framed by fizzes of grey-black hair. Behind her, the girls bob in unison, ponytails twisted on the top of their heads so you can't tell who's who.

Mike's giggling with the sort of glee that bubbles into your words, climbing down to find more stones, and soon I can't hear him, only the sharpness of that rock hitting the window. It sits in the dense quiet of an afternoon that is heavy with the weight of all the summer that has passed.

Coakley disappears, like the sun behind a cloud. I am a bird now, exposed, straddling my branch, sky blue in a football top that gums to my back and my armpits with sweat and listening to nothing, just the faint tappity-tap of their shoes, the piano trundling on.

I hear her before I see her.

'The two of you. Get here. Now.'

Then she's there, right by the fence, eyes boring into me. The ballet school squats behind her like a frog, green-grey and knobbly, smeared in the flaking paint we used to pick off until our fingernails were ragged, exposing a pale, dirty pink.

'Get here now,' she says, anger spacing her words, 'or I'm phoning your parents.'

I'm stuck to this branch like an idiot, but then I see Mike's upturned face through the leaves, blazing with sunlight, cupping his hands to make a megaphone, and shouting, 'RUN!'

He's already off, already miles down the path, jumping the dried-up dog poo, running a stick along the fence, whooping for me to follow the golden trail it leaves. He's in red, but that's OK. Everyone gets so wound up about football but I don't get it, it's just different colours. We all like the same thing underneath.

I slide one foot down the smooth bark but there's nothing to hold on to and I judder to the ground, the trunk against my chest like a cheese grater. Down my side is a mess of raw pink dots of blood blooming through the fabric, but there's no time to hurt, Coakley is banging on the fence, so I'm running and running towards our base, like we'd practised.

I run along the fence then through the undergrowth, where we sometimes find bits of muddy underwear and where Paul Whitelegg once dragged us, eyes gleaming, to reveal a single folded page, glossy with bare, curved flesh. I burst into the wide space of the park, past the swings, to the circle of trees where we hide our crisps and Coke under stolen crates and plan our adventures.

But Lee Oldham is there now, sitting on my crate, opening a can with an aluminium click as Mike pants, laughs, spills. Lee has no dad so that makes him hard, which is funny because you'd think living with just your mum would make you soft. Mike dared me to ask him where his dad was once and Lee punched me in the stomach, hard enough to bruise and fold me in two. Mr. Littlewood went mental, thundering across the playground like a bull and tearing him off. We'd never seen him like that before.

Mike's stuffing in Quavers, three at a time, telling Lee how hard he hit the window, how angry Coakley's face was, when he stops, suddenly, staring.

'Hey, man. You're bleeding,' he says.

It's just words, but they're soft, and in the cool space between the trees he takes his hand and gently touches the rip in my shirt, my blood on his fingers.

This is worse than Coakley's face, worse than my ruined top, but I don't know why.

There is one moment, a pause in time, as Lee's roving, imbecile eyes pass from me, to Mike, and then: 'WHAT, IS YOUR BOYFRIEND HURT?'

Mike's hand zips away. 'Get lost, Lee,' he says, his face stinging with pricks of red.

'Yeah, shut up, Lee,' I chime, but Lee is roaring and jabbing at Mike's ribs, staggering, drunk with delight at what he's done.

'MICHAEL'S GOT A BOYFRIEND, MICHAEL'S GOT A BOYFRIEND.'

His song echoes out across the park, to the toddlers on the swings, to the teenagers clumped at the gates. It dances in the wind, circles the mums gossiping at the ballet school gates, ribbons through the knots of twittering, wriggling, pink-scrubbed girls, winds round the school then past Mike's house, past the newsagents, past my house, back into the sky. His song soaks up the air like a sponge, getting bigger and heavier until it is everything.

I watch as he flings his Coke can into the bushes and burps, a pop of air. He turns. 'Want to call on Paul?' he shouts, and I know I'm out. Done.

Mike jumps up from his crate, not meeting my eye, as if I don't already know.

I am home in minutes, slippery and new with sweat, taking the stairs two at a time as the rain begins to spatter across a washing line pinned with blues and oranges and greens, my mum reaching to them, listening to a radio humming with voices that don't sound like ours. I'm about to slam the door when I hear it.

My name. It's a question, floating through a window cracked open with CDs and magazines I have pillaged and hoarded from my brothers, manuals on how to be.

The name is mine. I hold it in my mouth. It tastes like peach barley sugars, strawberry-red sunsets, the flutter of downy dander across soft hills. It tastes of rounded cheeks, sweet plump smiles, girlish blushes. It is a herald. 'It's a girl! You must be delighted!'

My mum sticks her head around the door. 'Rosie?'

My voice is lost in her warm neck, in sodden sobs, as she holds my wet cheeks to hers and rocks, slowly, a ritual. It's lost, but it's still there, saying: 'Robbie, my name's Robbie, I don't want to be her.'

The Revolt of the Socks

Jo Clifford

One day, when my grandson was still just a baby and the Health Visitor had come to check he was OK, my daughter was just putting his socks on him when the Health Visitor said:

'Trying to cause gender confusion are we?'

And my daughter said 'What?'

And looked at the socks, which happened to be pink.

Just then I dropped by, and she said to me 'Hello dad!' and then to her baby

'Look, here's your grandma'.

And then to the Health Visitor

'This is my dad Jo. She's my son's grandma', and carried on as if nothing had happened.

And the Health Visitor was so shocked she never said a word.

Now I'm really just an inoffensive soul and I don't really want to shock Health Visitors.

But I often do.

And I wonder if she put a note in my grandson's file along the lines of query gender confusion or something.

Or whether she's another one of those to mark me down as a bad and corrupting influence.

My grandson's much bigger now, he goes to school and everything. And he's the most charming most boyish boy you could ever meet.

And I wonder: should I explain?

Should I warn him that because his family's a wee bit different he might turn out to be different too?

I wonder if I should tell him that his mum was bullied

because she brought a lunch box to primary school with a picture of Asterix the Gaul?

Or that his aunty was considered stupid because her amazing gifts did not conform to what the school called intelligence?

Or that his other grandma was placed at the back of the class and left to herself because she only spoke English?

Or that when I was young I did everything I could to be the same as everyone else and it didn't work. Because I was different no-one in my school spoke to me for a whole term and acted like I didn't exist.

I could say that everyone's different and because lots of people are frightened nowadays lots of people want to be the same as everyone else.

And to be considered a rebel is the easiest thing in the world.

I want to make sure he knows his dad's different too. And that his mum's a structural engineer. And his aunty is a magazine editor. And his other grandma wrote books.

And that as for me I had to find the way to accept I was different before I could get anywhere in this world.

That we all go through that. Him too. He'll need to find himself somehow.

So I think I'll say:

'Be yourself, dear loved one. It's the only way.'

And his wee sister wears the pink socks now.

And also the blue.

Làmh ri Gleidheadh/ Hand to Hold

Marcas Mac An Tuairneir

Tha cuimhne leam an là
chùm thu mo làmh na do làimh-s',
's sinn air coiseachd an àrd-shràid
bhon fhlat agam dhan bhaile.

Thuirt thu air an là sin: "S dòch'
gur sinn an fheadhainn neartmhor,
oir ma chì òganach gèidh sinn,
chì e gu bheil e ceart gu leòr.'

'OK', ars mise, dòchasach,
gun cumadh tu i an-còmhnaidh,
ach cha do chùm thu riamh a-rithist i,
is chùm thu do làmhan-sa nad phòca.

'OK', ars mi rium fhìn, an uairsin,
is dh'fheuch mi cruaidh do thuigsinn,
an dòchas gun cumadh tu mo làmh,
an dùil gun dh'ionnsaichinn foghidinn.

Mu dheireadh, rinn thu ar dealachadh
is thog mi slighe eile;
bhon uairsin riamh an dòchas
ri làmh eile a ghleidheadh.

Thuig mi air an oidhche sin,
gun tigeamaid gu crìch;

cha b' e mo nàire-s' a dh'fhairich
mi ach an nàire bha nad chridh'.

Hand to Hold

I remember the first day
you held my hand in your own
as we walked along the High Street
from my flat into town.

You said to me that day:
'maybe we're the strong ones,
because a young gay man might see this
and know this isn't wrong.'

'OK', I said, forever hopeful
you would always hold my hand,
but you never did again
and in your pocket yours remained.

'OK', I said, then, to myself,
and tried hard to understand,
took the exercise in patience,
hoped your hand-hold might return.

Eventually, you made your break,
I took a different course;
from then on I have been hopeful
to hold a different hand from yours.

I understood that very evening,
that it would come to a conclusion;
because it wasn't my shame I felt
but your own, in your foundations.

Continue the story . . .

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Am I a Rebel?

Rebel Bombshell

Ruth Ford

I am NOT a rebel. I am one of life's rule followers. But I broke a rule once and was branded a rebel by the ultimate of rule enforcers: a policeman. The shame lives with me still.

I like rules. I like to know where the boundaries are. I get a bit tetchy if someone steps outside the boundary – I worry for them. It's like stepping onto a minefield. Stay to the path and you are okay. Step off the path and there could be anything out there. Stick to the path. It's safe.

I am such a rule follower that I tut (inwardly because I don't want the skirmish if someone hears me) if I see someone not following rules in life. Parking cars in bus stops. Litter louts. More than seven items in the seven items or less checkout in the supermarket (yes, I will count the beeps for you and exhale deeply at beep eight). Queues – now there's a rule we all know and love. It defines fairness. But it comes with a subsection which is applicable to many rules. If you see a queue-jumper/aka rule-breaker, don't challenge them. Because you risk confrontation. And there is a rule in life about avoiding conflict. Us rule followers often find ourselves quietly going backwards in queues rather than forwards because the rebels skip ahead of us.

And that pretty much sums up life. Free thinkers are destined for either greatness or jail. Rule followers are just that, followers, not leaders. So we get stuck behind the rest of you.

There is the murky area which us rule followers are a bit uneasy with and that is the difference between

written rules such as laws and game instructions – we like those – and the unwritten rules which include etiquette and tradition. We would love a bit of clarity on those unwritten ones. Someone writing down unwritten rules would be handy.

I admit my rule following does make me a bit grey and boring, which is ironic given I broke a rule trying to be colourful. And for the first, and likely last, time in my life I was branded a rebel. Worse than that, like I told you, I was branded a rebel by the most authoritarian figure in rule following, the grandmaster of the rule book: a policeman.

It all started when I read an article about seed bombs. I admit the word bomb was alarming but reading the article further I discovered the only thing 'exploding' would be flowers into life. How nice does that sound? And the idea was to put seed bombs in drab places where flowers would become most welcome in aesthetic and wildlife terms.

I loved the sound of this. There is an unwritten rule in life that nothing should become neglected or unkempt. Things should be cared for and nurtured. If you follow the rule of looking after things then there is no chance of things going a bit derelict on you.

Seed bombs sounded perfect. I failed to do further research at the time to discover that seed bombs were the tried and tested artillery of the ultimate in free thinkers: hippies.

So I rustled a few seed bombs up. A simple recipe (a rule follower loves a recipe – instructions in their finest form) and there I had it: seed bombs.

The idea is you put these balls – the actual idea is to throw them, but I was worried about hitting someone or something – in drab, sad places and wait for rain to soften the bomb and then the seeds grow.

I went to a derelict area near me where a factory once stood. It used to be a magnificent factory churning out jars of famous marmalade. But the fame of the brand had been cashed in and the product and jobs shipped out and now it had become just a sad area of skeletal buildings, and weeds. It had also become blighted by the ultimate rebels: graffiti artists.

So this was the perfect area to put my seed bombs. I parked up and started off leaving my seed bombs near the entrance and then getting braver went further into the site.

I did feel a bit self-conscious being at the abandoned spot. It was such a large, derelict area and I was the only person there.

Except I wasn't the only person there, as right behind me appeared a policeman.

He demanded to know what I was doing. The thing about a rule follower is when confronted with authority your heart beats faster, you instinctively feel guilty, lose all rational thought, panic and the words just don't come out in the right order.

My blabbering of seed bombs caused the police officer to think that I was planting ACTUAL bombs. My inarticulate efforts to explain they weren't explosives took a while to sink in amid the very verbal panic between us. Me being on the wrong side of authority; him at thinking he was ill-equipped to deal with a terrorist.

Both slightly embarrassed by what had occurred, he threatened to charge me as I was trespassing, committing a littering offence as well as potential graffiti. I felt crushed. I was a criminal. He ordered me off the site and told me never to return. I was to keep seeds to my own garden in future and then he dealt the final blow: 'Pack in being a rebel.'

A rebel. Me? I didn't even eat food after its best before date.

The outcome of my ill-fated foray into becoming an unwitting rebel is that I can no longer bring myself to eat marmalade. Seeing it in the supermarket makes me get a bit hot and clammy and my heart rate goes up as the guilt sinks down.

And these days the most rebellious thing I do with seeds is plant one in June when the packet clearly states planting dates are March through to May.

The Book

Kathleen MacDonald

I have a book.

It is a little book.

It is a book where I write down the names of all the people who have been naughty.

Jim has been in it, more times than I can remember, Lynn has been in it a few times and Mike too.

I am not a rebel but I think maybe everyone else is.

Jenny's Well

Rae Cowie

I didn't have room. Not with my sandwiches, fruit gums, bag of Salt 'n' Shake and bottle of orange squash.

The new jersey was all thick and scratchy. Knitted with sickly green Aran wool. Night after night Mam's needles kept clicking. Every now and then, she would measure it against my back. She sewed it up, the chunky needle flying back and forth, back and forth as she watched *Coronation Street*…

Sunbeams were bouncing off the pavements. It would weigh me down.

But nobody argued with Mam.

I stuffed the woolly mass into the plastic carrier bag, on top of my picnic, and set off with my pal. We traipsed downhill, beneath heavy stone viaducts, past the circle of caravans that came in the summer with waltzers and sticky candyfloss. We nipped over the golf course, across sandy links with the whole day stretched ahead of us, bright as the glistening rollers rumbling ashore.

We picked our way steadily between briny rock-pools, slipping sometimes, causing a salty trail to rim our leather sandals. That would be another telling off. I licked my fingertips, bending to rub at the worst of it.

We tore off our sandals, letting them dangle in our grasp, as chilly waves sucked on our anklebones.

High above, gulls squawked for attention in the overhang of the cliffs, as we clambered over boulders until we made it to Jenny's Well.

Someone had traced her name in beach pebbles; letters stuck roughly in cement. Not that it mattered. Nobody

remembered much about Jenny. Some said maidens, all dressed in white, used to come on May Day to drink from the well to ensure good health. Maybe Jenny was one of those? But we doubted it. It didn't sound like the kind of thing folk round here would do.

We preferred creepy stories of the mad woman who lived in a nearby cave, or of the poor travelling girl who died and was buried there. Tales guaranteed to make us shiver.

The water ran clear and fresh as we cupped our hands, dipping our heads, making a wish as we drank.

We tucked our picnics amongst the rocks and stripped off to our swimsuits, screeching at the sky as the sea clasped first our calves, then our thighs, then our waists, until we could wait no more for it to swallow us. We took short, sharp strokes that matched our breath, until our stomachs reminded us it was lunchtime.

I munched on limp ham and swigged at warm squash. I knew I wasn't to leave litter, so stuffed the ball of tinfoil and greasy crisp packet back into the carrier.

Heat from the rocks seeped through our towels, warming our backs as we whispered about boys.

It was the chill in the air that warned us we should think of home. Supper, maybe a plate of macaroni or pie and beans, would be waiting on the table sharp at five.

I'd be in for another row.

The sun slid behind clouds and I remembered the knitted jersey. I tugged it free from the bag, staring at Mam's intricate handiwork. She'd taught me how to do some of it, dainty moss stitch, as well as cable stitch winding like fisherman's ropes.

What was left of my drink had leaked across the front of it.

I dunked the dainty moss and winding cable stitches

beneath the flow of the well, scrubbing them as best I could. The wet wool weighed as heavy as my heart when I hauled it up onto a clean boulder, the cloying damp smell of it turning my stomach.

If I held it in shadow, maybe Mam wouldn't notice the stain.

My tongue clamped hard to the roof of my mouth, dry as the seaweed littering the top of the shoreline, near the spiky grass.

I squeezed at the jersey until my knuckles grew white. Then my pal had a go, just to be sure. Then I thought it might dry with my body heat. So I pulled it over my head, brushing aside the fact that now it almost touched my knees. But wool shrank when it was washed. My jersey just needed time.

So we dandered back across the rocks and the sands and the golf course, past the show caravans with their flashing lights. The jersey clung to my thighs as we dragged our feet uphill, until the smell from the chippers became too much and we stopped to eat some that turned dense and claggy in my mouth. I rummaged in my plastic bag, unscrewing the bottle top, guzzling the remaining dribble of squash.

Once she'd finished with the chips, my pal made for home. But my jersey was still soaking.

Then I remembered Mam hangs jerseys out to dry.

There was a swing set beside the chippers. So I gripped the rusty chains, kicking high as I could, then higher still, swinging on and on until the sea turned peach. Darker pink near the horizon. Past the viaducts and the pulsing blink of the waltzers, dark shadows of the cliffs began stretching like fingers out over the sands. It was too dark to see Jenny's Well. And still I kicked, back and forth, back and forth.

I knew by the way the car door slammed that it was Mam. I didn't need to hear her roar.

I tucked in my chin and flung myself back, forcing the swing to creak as the salty toes of my sandals reached for the first of the evening's stars.

Who Wears a Purple Hair-net Anyway!

Margaret Bowman

'Where dae ye think yer going?' said ma mither fae
below,
'Ye'll need tae dae the hoovering before ye cross the door.'
'What! I'm off tae see ma pals,' I said, 'the weekend's here,
ye know!'
'Aye, after the upstairs cleaning's done, and definitely no
afore!'

Now I'm a busy lass, ye see, things tae do, places tae go,
But I'm no a housekeeping slave, which is what she
thinks I'm for.
The upstairs rooms and landing wants hoovering, that's
required.
'an mind tae dae the dusting tae', essential, even if am
tired!

A teenage life can be such a drudge wi all this bleeding
cleaning,
A mother's slave, I held a grudge, could really feel like
screaming.
'Oh, what the hell, I'll run around wi a hoover, it'll no tak
me long,'
'But the dusting, now that's a different thing, in fact
"that's just a liberty!"'

So, what I'll do to speed things up, I'll dust wi the end of the hoover,
Kill two jobs at once, deep joy, I think I'm oh so clever.
So, off I went with my powerful 'duster' an' all the enthusiasm I could muster,
Getting on great, I'll no be beat, be finished quick time, I've friends tae meet.

So, all goes well until it came tae ma mither's cabinet top,
A bright purple hair-net lay on the glass, but the hoover sooked it right up!
'Oh, my, I'm done for, she'll be mad when she finds oot,
That her precious purple hair-net went straight up the hoover's spoot!

'Now, what to do, what's next,' I thought, 'will I own up and risk being grounded?'
'Well, what's the risk?' I ask myself, a 'get-out-clause' is well-founded.
Do I just ignore the fact it's gone, hidden inside the machine?
Or dispose of the paper dust-bag, removal of evidence… clean!

A cunning plan, and it could work, no lie or mistruth spent,
If I keep quiet about the missing hair-net, and where it actually went.
So, that's what happened, Mither pleased wi the cleaning that had been done,
She was also extremely impressed, ye know, wi the attention to detail performed.

So, off I went to socialise, have fun, and hae a laugh,
Relaying the story of the cleaning charade, oh, how we hooted about that gaff!
It wisnae until night-time, that ma mither came tae ask,
'Did ye see ma purple hair-net when ye were on yer cleaning task?'

I looked at her, and rolled ma eyes, 'A what?' wi a teenage torn face,
'Ma hair-net, hiv ye seen ma net? It keeps ma perm in place.'
'Oh, how am I supposed tae know when something goes astray,'
'I'm a teenage lassie, don't ask me, ye'll no get a right answer, no way!

Let's Build a Morgue!

Professor Dame Sue Black

Roger Soames, former Cox Professor of Anatomy at Dundee University, used to sigh with exasperation and his shoulders would slump in resignation every time I burst into his office to announce with bounding enthusiasm: 'I have just had a brilliant idea'. It is fair to say that most were utterly bonkers, a few had some latent usefulness and one or two even had merit. But you need to have at least 50 barmy flights-of-fancy before one genuine gold nugget is conceived. This is the story of one of those rare and successful ideas.

The true study of the human anatomy can only be achieved through hands-on, physical dissection of the human form. For this to happen today, donors must be prepared, in life, to bequeath their remains to an anatomy department when they die. However, in the past, we have had darker episodes where the demand for cadavers has far outstripped the supply, and nefarious individuals have resorted to despicable acts to secure the dead. This was largely resolved when we learned how to embalm and so preserve human remains for longer and, of course, when legislation made 'body snatching' a hanging offence! For the last 100 years and more, cadavers have been embalmed using a solution called formalin which contains the toxic substance formaldehyde. It has an unpleasant smell that is so strong you can taste it, makes your eyes sting and is mildly carcinogenic. In the early years of this millennium, the European Union began to consider a full ban on the use of formaldehyde and anatomists around

the world feared the consequences for the future of the profession. Hence my 'idea of the day' to poor, beleaguered Roger: let's find something else to embalm bodies with that is not toxic, not prohibitively expensive, will preserve them for at least 3 years (our period of legal retention), be more environmentally friendly and retain realistic colour and flexibility of the tissues.

We learned that in the post-war years Walter Thiel at the University of Graz had experimented on preserving legs of pork, following the success of his local butcher to retain the natural colour and texture of the meat, whilst ensuring that it remained edible for a long period of time. Walter felt that he could extend the same logic to human anatomy and although it took him over 30 years of experimentation, he was ultimately successful. Roger went on a trip to Graz and came back to Dundee full of enthusiasm that this might just be the way forward for anatomical embalming. We made the decision there and then, that we would be the first anatomy department in the UK to abandon formalin entirely and switch to Thiel soft-fix embalming. We would blaze the trail – we just hadn't got a clue how we were going to pay for it. We needed to raise £2 million to build a bespoke mortuary. That's when I had another 'idea'.

I thought about all the crime writers who had approached me over the years to help them with the plots for their novels and I wondered if they would be prepared to pay some of that time back to us. I contacted the Doyenne of the genre, Val McDermid, and together we launched the 'Million for a morgue' fundraising programme. Never had the public been approached to help fund something as unusual as a mortuary, but that made it all the more media worthy. Val persuaded 9 of her crime-writing colleagues to sign up to the cause.

Their job was to persuade fans to vote for them, as their favourite author, via a very modest online donation. Our rationale was that whoever helped us to raise the most money, would have the mortuary named after them.

We attended book festivals, gave lectures and interviews, the authors auctioned characters in their books, we hosted dinners, we wrote a cookbook (an odd thing to publish from an anatomy department – and it was shortlisted for a European award), Stuart MacBride wrote a children's book (*The Wholesome Adventures of Skeleton Bob*, just in time for Christmas), Jeffery Deaver auctioned a CD of his music. All these efforts and more allowed us to raise the money we required, and we started to build the Val McDermid mortuary.

However, the equipment we needed didn't exist and in partnership with a manufacturer, we designed submersion tanks, lifting mechanisms and body storage racking. By 2012, the mortuary was funded and fully operational and Dundee University opened the first Thiel cadaveric facility in the UK. In 2013, we were awarded the Queen's Anniversary Prize for excellence in higher education, the first time such an accolade had ever been bestowed on a department of anatomy. Since that time, the facility has gone from strength to strength, helping countless other departments around the world to set up similar facilities. We have trained surgeons in new approaches, we have trialled new medical devices and we have researched areas that will benefit patients in terms of both their recovery and indeed their survival.

A rebel? A maverick? Or just a risk-taker with bonkers ideas? Most likely the latter, but I know that I only stand on the shoulders of giants who have gone before. Professor Walter Thiel and Professor Roger Soames were such men.

Au Revoir, Petites Rébellions

Alisdair L R I Hodgson

There is no such thing as a free ride, unless the ride in question is on the Paris Métropolitain.

But even then…

Sweltering, you descend underground into Laumière, shunted to and fro amidst the late afternoon chaos. You are tethered to your petite amie by palms loosened with sweat – or loosened with something psychological, an unconscious choice. The boiling sea of heaving, sweating bodies pulsates and shifts around you, never casting the same shadow twice. Everyone has somewhere to be and nobody can spare a second of the time it takes to get there.

At the ticket gates, she usually scans her pass and raises her arms, you grab her waist, press your bodies together, and the pair of you slip through as one. Maybe you plant a kiss between the freckles on her sun-soft neck. On any other day, you revel in the intimacy, the sensation of sharing this modest act of defiance.

But this time there is distance.

It doesn't feel intentional, but it doesn't feel like an accident either.

This time she's a step too far ahead and you're weighed down with the ballast for a return flight. You pass through the turnstile but your heat-seeking charcoal holdall snags and the body-length barrier ahead snaps shut. You try to retreat but the turnstile – aptly named *tourniquet* – has locked in place, as securely as the

barrier, leaving you marooned, constricted between the two.

You panic, but the only alarm bell ringing is deep between your ears, vibrating the length of your spine. She waits impatiently, back to the filthy tiled wall, toe-tapping, Parisian pout saying she's as unimpressed with you as she is with the rest of the world. And this might be the beginning of the end of your world – the short time you have enjoyed – together.

A murmured commentary begins from the commuters in what passes for a queue behind you: 'putain,' 'imbécile,' 'espèce d'idiot!' From the ticket booth, an attendant's eyes watch over the top of a newspaper, rolling with haughty indifference as only the eyes of a Parisian official can do. You're just another Brit, a tourist, taking the piss. *If you're going to jump le tourniquet, at least do it discreetly, if not quickly, if not stylishly.* There is an art to it, a finesse, a certain 'je ne sais quoi' that you do not seem to possess.

You hoist your holdall over the top and sprackle up after it, springing off the barrier with a gallant, gallus flourish, as though you're hopping styles, field to field, in the Selkirkshire valleys. Suffice to say, no matter how much you think you look like the leader of your own private revolution, no dignity is recovered.

You get away with it, at cost to your pride instead of your wallet, and a heightened sense of sticking out like a sore thumb in a land of manicured fingers. You thought you could walk the walk, you thought you knew the lingo, but, as it turns out, you simply do not speak their language.

You don't know the Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens who advertise themselves on every ticket you don't buy – and you don't need to. You're transitory,

passing through in your own awkward way, never around for long – and the very definition of a poor student. A poor student in Paris: not a great combo. A poor *vegetarian* student in Paris: even worse. But you'll be dining in Scotland tonight.

Small comforts.

Now you're on the other side, down some more steps, shrugging off her hand with your embarrassment. A welcome blast of air announces the train: the orange line to Gare de L'Est, where you will connect to Gare du Nord. You are bound for Charles de Gaulle – another place named after some dead French rebel.

You won't be coming back.