



*Journeys in Narrative*

A collection of students' short stories

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## *Foreword*

The idea for a students' collection of short stories occurred to me three years ago. It was the end of the winter semester. As usual I was checking my students' short stories, which they had written as their final assignment for the Creative Writing course that I convene. I was reading them and... I couldn't believe my eyes! These were not the typical stories that students tend to write. Their plots were well thought-out, the characters were original, and they were written in decent English. At last, reading my students' papers was more of a pleasure than a chore. That year, however, I did not manage to gather the stories in an independent collection.

The following year, in February 2019, I received more good stories. But again, nothing happened with them.

This year I said: The time has come! The stories are too good to be read only by me and other students on same course. And this is how it all started!

The book you are holding in your hands is the first collection of short stories written by first-year B.A. students of English Studies at the University of Humanities and Economics in Lodz. Writing a short story is the final assignment in their Creative Writing course, which is part of the Practical English module. The students spend the first semester learning how to write a short story. They read for inspiration. They study contemporary writers' advice – to learn from the best. They browse books, paying attention to the first sentence so that they know what works best. They bring their favourite stories to class to discuss what makes the greatest impression on the reader. They experiment – with language, style and genre. They discuss their drafts with their peers, comment on what they like and what needs further revision. But most importantly – they have fun writing and reading their short stories.

I always tell my students at the beginning of the Creative Writing course that “Anyone that picks up a pen is a writer.” And I always have a feeling that they do not really believe me. A writer? When I think of a writer, an anecdote comes to my mind which I read in one of Paulo Coelho's books. When he was fifteen years old, he told his mother that he would like to be a writer. She asked him whether he knew what it meant to be a writer. In order to answer her, he did some research. Coelho found that a writer in the early 1960s:

... always wears glasses and never combs his hair. Half the time he feels angry about everything and the other half depressed. He spends most of

his life in bars, arguing with others dishevelled, bespectacled writers. He says very “deep” things. He always has amazing ideas for the plot of his next novel, and hates the one he has just published.<sup>1</sup>

When the teenage Coelho shared his findings with his mother, she was slightly surprised and said: “It is easier to be an engineer then. Plus, you don’t wear glasses.”

If my students had ever come across Paolo Coelho’s understanding of the profession of a writer, they may have every right to doubt my words. However, what is writing? To me, writing is like a journey. It requires a lot of motivation, preparation, time, and patience. You experience uncertainty, not knowing which way to go; you may even go astray – it happens. You will doubt your skills, or even the very point of writing. As in every journey, there will be setbacks. However, the moment you reach your destination and find yourself at the top of the mountain, you feel the wind on your face and see an unforgettable view, which is worth every effort made on the way.

And this is such a moment. We have reached our destination. After the semester of preparations, hard work and time spent on improving subsequent drafts, we have published this book.

But as it is good to have somebody beside you to share the beauty of a journey you have just made, writers need an audience to share their stories with. Once a book is finished, the writer invites the reader to enter

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<sup>1</sup> Paolo Coelho, *Like the Flowing River*, London: Harper, 2007. [Retrieved from:] <https://books.google.pl/books?id=SYPrC72RyAEC&printsec=frontcover&hl=pl#v=onepage&q&f=false>.



the world she has created. Margaret Atwood once said: “As a writer, your goal is to keep your reader believing in your story, even though both of you know it’s fiction.” I hope that the short stories in this collection will hold your attention and take you, My Dear Reader, on an unforgettable journey. Where? It all depends which story you pick first ...

*Ola Majchrzak*  
Tutor of the Creative Writing course



Weronika Dyla

## *Hidden Kingdom*

Cold. The first and only thing that I could feel after I woke up was that stabbing, overwhelming cold. In that moment of emotional numbness, I took a deep breath and for a second I was no longer Aurora Blake. I was nothing and everything at the same time. I didn't feel anything: no emotions, no sensations; even that terrible coldness disappeared just for that one moment. But nothing lasts. Even that second of hollowness had to come to an end. And when it happened, everything came back out of nowhere at once, just running into me like a speeding train. Fear, pain, sadness, desperation, hunger, disorientation and that damn cold attacked me from every single side, just like a wake of starving vultures lacerating their prey. The harder I tried to push back those emotions, the stronger they became. All that mess inside my head was unbearable.

My uneven breath was the loudest sound – there, wherever ‘there’ was, but it was not the only sound in that dark, cold place. When I focused enough, I could hear those weird, muted noises like they were coming from far away – bizarre noises; I didn’t know how but I was sure that a human being is incapable of making that kind of sound. *Are the creatures I saw earlier making these noises? What are they? What do they want from me? What are they going to do to me?* And with that terrifying thought, I tried to focus my mind on anything else and started to look around. I was in a dark, small room, which smelled as if something was rotting and the only source of light was a lone torch hung on the wall in front of me. After a while I noticed that there was something between me and the torch. It looked like dark stripes cutting through the air. When I moved closer I realized that those weird stripes were indeed bars, cell bars. But they were not normal bars. There was something odd about them. They looked like they were made out of stone, shimmering black stone, with purple dots that were only visible in the torchlight. Curious about this phenomenon, I reached out my hand and touched the bars, not knowing how huge a mistake I was making.

Right at the moment when my fingers met the stones, I found myself lying on the floor, a couple of steps from where I’d been, as if something had pushed me away. I felt like a thousand icicles went through my entire body at once. The coldness was painfully overpowering. I tried to scream, but I couldn’t get a sound out of my mouth. I thought that the tears streaming down my face would freeze. I felt like someone drained me of all of my energy. I had no idea how I forced myself to crawl back to the wall, as far from the bars as I could. There was no escape, no saving, no hope for me. And here I was sitting on the floor in some kind of dungeon, shaking and wondering how I ended up in here.

*~ earlier that day ~*

I took a couple of steps back and looked at my work. A small bay with vibrant flowers and plants was covering the canvas. The water was dark blue, almost black. In the middle of the water there was a woman in a long azure dress with white hair. She looked like she was part of the sea. I bit the end of my paintbrush and looked around, searching for a place to hang my new masterpiece. It was a hard task, because all the walls were covered with drawings and paintings; even my furniture was cloaked with paint. I sighed and took one of my books in my hand.

‘Well, if I can’t paint scenes from the books on the walls anymore, I should start to paint them on the book covers then,’ I said to myself.

My monologue was interrupted by my mother’s voice.

‘Aurora, can you please come here?!’ she shouted. ‘Today, if it’s not a problem!’

I rolled my eyes and headed downstairs. Going towards the voices, I found myself in the kitchen, with my mom, dad and a woman in an elegant black suit.

‘Good morning, I don’t think we’ve met. My name is Aurora, and you are..?’ I asked the woman in the suit and raised my eyebrows.

‘My name is Nancy, I’m an old friend of your parents and dean at the Yale School of Medicine,’ she said.

‘And what brings you here?’ I asked Nancy, already knowing the answer.

‘Your parents showed me your exam results and your grades, and I would like to invite you for an interview. I think you could achieve great things at Yale,’ she said and smiled friendly at me.

‘That is a great honour, but I’ve already chosen my university. And it’s not Yale,’ I shrugged.

‘Well, your parents told me a different story,’ she nodded politely.

‘Of course, they did,’ I whispered and glared at my parents.

‘I apologise for my daughter, Nancy. We’ll talk some sense into her. Please come back tomorrow, and we’ll discuss the details,’ my mother said to the woman.

I was standing still in the middle of the kitchen while my parents were saying goodbye to Nancy. I tried to take a deep breath and calm myself down, but I didn’t succeed.

‘We are not having that conversation again,’ I warned my parents when they came back to the kitchen.

‘I agree,’ my father replied, ‘You are going to study at Yale. The decision has been made.’

‘Are you sure?’ I asked. ‘Because from what I remember, I decided to study at the Academy of Fine Arts.’

‘Your plans are indeed ambitious, but they are not very wise,’ my mother said. ‘Thanks to Yale, you will have a great future and a good job. You will thank us one day for this, trust me.’

‘Thank you?!’ I laughed. ‘You must be kidding me. For what exactly should I be thankful? For you living my life? Making my decisions? Not caring about my feelings?’ I asked and squeezed my hands into fists to stop them from shaking.

‘You should go to your room and calm down,’ my father said. ‘Tomorrow you will behave in front of Nancy, and you will impress her. Then you will go to Yale, and you will show us your gratitude. You must.’

‘You will do what we expect from you,’ my mother added.

‘We’ll see,’ I replied and ran out of the kitchen.

I took my coat and ran out of the house into the forest. I was running as fast as I could. I didn’t know where I was going. All I could see were blurry green shapes. The branches were hurting my face, but I didn’t care about that. I kept going as if I were trying to run away from all of my problems. Then I fell to my knees. My lungs were burning as I tried to catch my breath. Tears were streaming down my cheeks.

‘Why are they doing this to me?’ I asked myself out loud. ‘They are impossible! How can I be happy if they force me to do what they want all the time? Maybe it’s finally time for me to take my life in my own hands. Maybe I should just go as far away from them as I can get and never come back.’

After a while I pulled myself together and decided to stand up and walk around until I figured out where exactly I was. I knew this forest like the back of my hand. I wandered down all of the paths in there after every fight with my parents. Yet I couldn’t recognize the place I was in. But it was getting dark and even if I didn’t want to come back home, I had to get out of the forest before nightfall. I started looking around and searching for something familiar, but instead I found odd-looking green stones stacked in a circle. They were blending into the grass, but when I came closer I noticed that the rocks were shining. It looked like the stones were emitting light. I stepped into the circle to have a better look, but before I could discern any details, all of the rocks lit up and blinded me. Then I felt like the ground was falling away from underneath my feet and I fell on the cold floor.

I was in a huge room, with a black floor and grey walls. On both sides of the room there were large columns positioned symmetrically through the whole room, from the double door to a platform with a black throne in the middle of it. Behind the throne, there was a huge window,

the only window in there. Behind it I could see soaring dark towers and black shapes flying between them.

I was drawn away from admiring the views by the sounds behind the door. I came closer to hear the conversation a bit better, but then the doors opened, filling the room where I was with the light from a hall. The voices belonged to a middle-aged man with greying brown hair and a young boy who looked like the shadow of a person. They both stopped their conversation when they saw me.

‘Who are you? How did you get into the throne room? Did someone send you?’ the older man asked.

‘My lord, I think she might be the reason why the travelling stones woke up,’ the young boy said.

‘It is impossible, Niran,’ the older man replied. ‘I only knew four magicians able to use travelling stones. Two of them are dead and I’m sure that it wasn’t the Lady of the Darkness. The last one is the princess, but she was sent away years ago.’

‘What if she came back?’ Niran asked and looked at me.

‘If you are right, that means that someone helped her, someone sent those stones to her,’ the man said. ‘Whoever did that, did us a favour because now the most powerful weapon in this war is in our hands.’

He came closer and looked at me with his black piercing eyes.

‘We will have so much fun, your grace,’ he whispered and smiled triumphantly. ‘Guards!’ he shouted. ‘Take this lady downstairs to her new chambers.’

I tried to run, but I was immediately surrounded by enormous beings, with human bodies and animal heads. Some of them had tentacles instead

of fingers or additional limbs. When one of them tried to grab me with its claws, I crouched down and rushed forward between its legs. I almost got to the doors when the boy named Niran caught me and bared his sharp teeth at me.

‘You are not going anywhere, princess,’ he said.

‘I am not the person you take me for! I’m here by accident!’ I told Niran and felt the tears streaming down my face. ‘I just want to go home,’ I whispered.

‘This is your home,’ he replied.

Before I could say anything else, I felt a dull pain in the back of my head and everything went dark. The next thing all I could remember was that awful coldness.





Wiktor Jarecki

## *Darkwood*

I wake up in a forest. Strange, I don't remember anything from the past few days. I look around and I can't see anything but a wall of trees and a narrow path in front of me. I start walking.

On my way I see a bunch of unrelated objects: a broken car, a bunch of clothes, a lighter, a hatchet. All of them look like they have been here for a very long time.

Something feels off. After a while I understand why. The silence. Deep forest, middle of the day, yet I can't hear any birds, no rustling of leaves, no wind, nothing. As if the forest were lifeless.

After some time I stumble onto a small wooden hut. The building looks very fragile and abandoned, but, with some effort, I open the door and walk in. Inside there is an improvised den made of sticks and leaves,

a small table, an old radio and a note. There is also a strange contraption, some sort of a boiling machine with weird-looking plants sticking out of it. I take the radio and try to turn it on, but I only get static. Probably I'm too far away from anything for it to pick up any signal.

I look at the note. It looks like someone was in a hurry. The words are written very clumsily, and then suddenly cut off, as if someone was forcefully pulled away from writing it.

If you're reading this, beware. You are not in an ordinary wood. It may seem normal now but YOU WILL SEE. They will come for you. These things ... I can't tell what they are. All I know is that you don't want them to get you. They come at night, and they will look for you. They won't stop until daylight, and if you're spotted, you're done for. They are blind but very sensitive to any movement, the slightest noise. I don't know how I'm still alive. They caught me multiple times. Use this boiler and boil those plants. The fumes dull their senses, but they won't defend you completely. No matter what you do, do not...

I feel fear slowly taking over my body. Absorbed by the note, I don't notice that it is getting dark. I look out of the window. Between the trees I spot some movement. At first, I take it for a boar, but boars don't move so horribly. And don't have red glowing eyes. I grab the table and barricade the door with it. Then I sit in the corner and freeze in place. I hope it's enough. I hear something running near the hut multiple times. I hold my breath, trying to calm my heart, which is beating like crazy.

Suddenly the radio turns on and starts making horrible noises similar to screams of pain and incoherent words. All I can understand from it are two words: Give in. As carefully as I can, I try to make it to the radio and turn it off. Suddenly the floor creaks under my foot. The door explodes

into pieces and a black shape runs at me with inhuman speed. The last thing I see before I fall into darkness are red, insane eyes a few inches away from my face.



I wake up in a forest. Strange, I remember nothing from the past few days.

I feel as if I have been here before many times, but I can't quite connect it. I start walking down the narrow path in a wall of trees. The forest is very quiet, the trees are grey, without any leaves.

Quite unusual for the middle of summer.

There is some rubbish beside the path. I pass it without giving it a look, but then something comes to me. I need something from it. I don't know why, but it is crucial. I start to ransack the trash near a broken car, finding a lighter. Fortunately, it works. I look at the rest of the rubbish, but nothing looks useful. I continue my way down the path.

I find an old hut. It looks awfully familiar, but I don't know why. I walk in. A strange metal contraption, some roots, an improvised bed made from leaves, a table with a small radio and a note. I go to grab the note, when a realisation freezes me in place. I know what is on the note. I know what that machine is for. I know this hut. And I know what is coming.

I take some leaves from the "bed" and light the little fire under the boiler. After a bit of struggle the flame grows big and fumes from the machine fill the hut. They smell horrible. I go outside for a bit of relief. I see that it is already getting dark. I spot some movement between the trees, so I rush back into the smelly hut. I barricade the door, sit

in a corner, trying to keep myself from coughing. I realize that I'm not scared. Somehow, I am unable to feel fear of anything that's currently running near the house. Moreover, I feel like I want It to find me. But at the same time, I feel that's a terrible idea.

The radio turns on. After some static noises there is a moment of silence, before I hear a repeating whisper.

I start shaking. It feels like a command. Suddenly I feel an urge to run outside and find that thing. I can barely keep myself still, as if I were fighting to take control over my body.

The whispers from the radio turn into a voice. Give in.

Unable to stop myself, I jump, making a noise. The barricade explodes, and something leaps in.

I can't believe my eyes. The creature looks humanoid, but in a horrible way. Black, oily, hairless skin. Awfully skinny, like it is starving. Twisted spine and long limbs with sharp claws. A featureless, mouthless face with red eyes. I stare death in the face.

The fumes seem to be working. It has not spotted me yet. It stands there, completely still, waiting for a sound.

I try to keep myself still, at the same time fighting the urge to show myself to it.

The voice in the radio turns to a terrible scream. GIVE IN.

My body obeys. I stand up against my will and take a step toward the creature.

It jumps at me. The last thing I vaguely remember is a bunch of figures in strange clothes looking at me from above.



I open my eyes, standing on a plain covered in thick fog. I can't see anything around me apart from the enormous silhouette of a tree a few metres away from me. My eyes can't reach the top of it. I notice something strange about the tree itself. It is black as a coal and covered in something red. After closer examination it turns out to be fleshy veins covering the whole trunk. Suddenly a root shoots out from the ground and slashes my wrist. Blood splatters on the bark and gets absorbed like water into arid sand. The veins start pumping, and the whole tree comes to life.

I begin to lose consciousness, faintly seeing roots cover my entire body.



When I open my eyes, I see myself tied to the tree with roots, the red veins covering my body, hanging a few metres from the ground. When I look down I feel terror. My legs are one with the trunk, as if I am being absorbed into it. Near the tree there is a big crowd of people in strange, church-like robes. Seeing them brings back my memory.



I was going back from work to my home, my wife and kids, and decided to take a shortcut through the alley. I saw a man in similar robes standing in my way. Before I said anything, he rushed towards me and put a syringe

in my neck. The next thing I knew is when I woke up in a forest. Whoever left the note, made the boiler, probably escaped this hellhole. Or was it even real?

The voice stops my train of thoughts. The man with robes darker than the others speaks up:

‘Do not fear, my child, for you have been chosen to be enlightened by our great lord.’

‘What have you bastards done to me?’ I ask.

‘We didn’t do anything to you. It was all preparation of a sacrifice, by our lord, for our lord.’

‘Let me go!’ I shout.

‘It is too late for you.’

The main cultist pulls out a sacrificial dagger and cuts his wrist to fill a golden goblet. Then he splatters his blood on the trunk under my devoured legs. Then they all start to chant a prayer in an unknown language. The veins on my body start to pump the blood, the roots cover me entirely. The last thing I see is the cultist’s face with a malicious smile.

I wait in the darkness, feeling my body being mangled and twisted into horrid shapes. I don’t feel any pain, I accept my end.

And then I see it.

Their lord. A horrifying, enormous abomination, too awful to describe with words. Immeasurably powerful and old.

In a brain-blasting realisation I understand that everything I have known and seen is nothing compared to this otherworldly being. That humanity is nothing but food for it. Unable to stand it and its presence, I fall into insanity.



Darkness. Then a command: Hunt them. Make them give in.

I can't see. I can hear it. The breath of a scared man. I can feel it. His clumsy run. Toward the small hut. I don't want to hurt him. My resistance is shattered by mental torture.

The more I try to resist it, the more I suffer. Their lord took my soul, my life has ended.

I have no mouth, and I must scream....

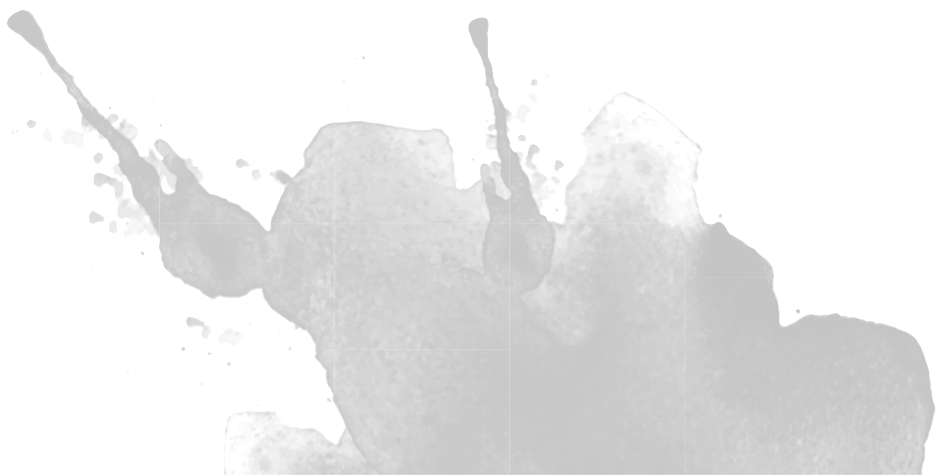
On the verge of insanity, I rush toward the source of noise, tearing the man to shreds.

His remains disappear. I retreat back into the woods, waiting for his return.

Because he will return.

The cycle begins anew....





Adrianna Krawczyk

## *And I Live*

Twenty-nine years. I did not expect to end up in Gregswell after twenty-nine years. When I received a letter with aunt Lydia's name on it, I knew something was wrong. We hadn't stayed in touch. She wouldn't have written to me if it hadn't been necessary. She wouldn't have written to me unless something terrible had happened.

The envelope was grey and dirty. The glue barely held it closed. My name was written in messy handwriting. I could tell my aunt was in a hurry. With shaking hands, I took out the letter. On lined paper, carelessly ripped out from a cheap notebook, were five words:

*Maria is dead. Come home.*

And I did.



The air in aunt Lydia's house felt heavy. Words left unsaid filled the room with bitterness. All those people. They knew exactly what had been happening here. I couldn't look them in the eyes. I went outside to clear my head. I leaned on the rotten fence. 'I'm here for Maria,' I reminded myself.

'Do you have a light?' I heard a hoarse voice behind me. A voice I could not forget no matter how hard I tried. Joseph. He took another step in my direction.

My muscles tensed. 'Don't,' I stuttered. 'Don't do this.'

I tried to keep it together. To prove to myself, or maybe to him, that I was stronger than this. Maybe I really was. I didn't have to deal with it. I took a deep breath and walked away. Head held high, but legs stiff.

I walked ahead. Down the path behind the house. I felt the wind strong on my face. It smelled unnatural. The neighbours were burning something questionable behind their house. Then I saw the tree.



We would often run out to the field, Maria and I, far behind the backyard. There, a lone tree stood tall and proud. It must have been ancient. I never figured out what kind of a tree it was. Each year it was the last one to lose its leaves and always seemed to be clinging onto life. We would play tag, running around until we were out of breath. Then we would lie down, the grass cold beneath us, hold hands, and Maria would somehow mention the soldier every time.

Years, and years ago, during the war (whichever war it was, we were too young to care), an army was stationed around here. A young man like many others, Charles was his name, was drafted. From school straight to the battlefield. It was hard for him to adjust; he wasn't made for this. He was made for studies, for writing, for art. None of the men wanted to be there, but they were ready to do their duty, to fight honourably and save the nation. Charles could not hide how terrified he was and that was his sin. Because when times are difficult people need to have fun. And what's more fun than teasing someone weak? Each time they hurt Charles more. The more he was embarrassed or in pain, the harder they laughed. On one dry summer's day, they pretended to lynch him. It was supposed to be a joke. Until it wasn't. The tree lives to tell his tale.



Slowly, with a steady walk, I headed into the woods. The air became more humid with each step I took. A mosquito got caught in the web of my hair. A herd of deer dispersed in a hurry at the sound of a breaking branch. I was an outsider. A disturbance. A threat.

The earth beneath my feet was getting marshy. Only when I felt the moisture inside my shoes did I awake – in an instant – as if from a deep slumber. My heart pounding in my chest so hard I felt sick. I knew that place all too well.

‘Can you at least try to be quiet?’ Maria would always whisper to me as we were getting near the bog where the deer would stop to quench their thirst. She didn't want to intrude, she believed in the power of blending in.

I didn't think anyone could get that close to a deer, to have a wild animal look patiently into your eyes as you pet it. Maria liked to prove people wrong.

My sister had a dangerous habit of going too far, too close to the bog. She wanted to get into a trap, just to have me pull her back. So she could imagine what it feels like to escape. To make it out alive.

She had once told the story of Eddie and Susie, a brother and sister who became frequent visitors to this part of the woods years before us. They would come here whenever their father got angry. And their father got angry whenever he drank, which was quite often. He would curse their names as they ran out of the house to save themselves from a beating. They ran straight ahead, through the fields into the woods, until they could no longer hear the man shouting. But one miserable day the kids ran out too far. Both of them were caught in a deadly trap, and with no one around to save them, they drowned. The marshes live to tell their tale.



With my heart still racing I turned around. I knew where I was going to go next.

As I got to the river, the sun hid behind heavy clouds. I felt the goose bumps rising on my skin. Was I cold or scared? That place had always been rather unsettling.

The tall trees surrounded the tiny meadow by the river, keeping it in shade at all times and cutting it off from the outside world. There was nothing there except for an old rotting wooden house.

'I dare you to go inside,' Maria once said to me with a smirk.

She knew I wasn't brave enough to go in so she went in by herself. I heard her walking around inside, the floors creaking under her steps.

After just a moment she came back and, standing on the threshold with her head held high, called me a coward. Maria was good at pretending not to be scared, but as soon as she was back by my side I noticed that her hands were trembling.

We sat down with our feet in the cold water, and she told me about Bert.

Until the age of fourteen all he knew was the love and warmth of a happy family. As an only child, a miracle born to parents long thought infertile, the boy had always been spoilt. But he was a good kid. Kind and friendly. He seemed to have everything. Everything except for freedom, he thought. His parents would keep a close eye on him at all times. Out of love, of course. They didn't want anything bad to happen to their son. One day the boy had had enough and decided to get away for a few hours – to taste the freedom at the tip of his tongue. He got to the meadow by the river. There, a kindly middle-aged man living in a small wooden house invited Bert for tea. The man complained he hardly ever had any visitors. And he decided he was going to keep this one.

Everyone in Gregswell looked for Bert. They found him after a week. The man was arrested, but the boy was never the same again. He never spoke of what happened, but it was killing him on the inside. So he stole his father's gun and went back. In the house by the river Bert took his own life. The house lives to tell his tale.



My sister told many stories, but none of them was true. I knew Maria had made them all up, so we did not feel so alone in our sorrow. She would make them up so we wouldn't be the only ones hurt. The one true tragedy of Gregswell was our own story. And I live to tell the tale.

Maria was buried. Her coffin was laid in a dark corner of the graveyard, by the broken fence where the trees were trying to reclaim the ground. They used to bury the suicides and the possessed there. It seemed they had kept that tradition.

There were just nine of us at the funeral. Joseph was the first one to throw a handful of dirt. Looking at his face, you couldn't see any guilt. But they all knew. They had stayed silent for decades. He was a murderer with clean hands.

Anna Krawczyk

## *The New Beginning*

*Speed. Wind. Frost. Turn. Darkness. Screams. Silence.*

A very loud melody, one of my favourite songs, now fills my entire room and every nook and cranny in my head. The vibrations created by my tiny smartphone reach up to my bed, which means that it's the end of sleeping for today. I reach out my hand towards the bedside table and, with my eyes still closed, I look for a magic button that will mute the noise. When the wonderful silence comes, I pull the quilt over my head and enjoy every moment of the warmth that surrounds me. I rub my eyes with my hands to fully wake up. When I open my eyes, I see a small streak of light break through the gap in the curtains, straight into my room. I decide to get up and suddenly the chill of the morning hits me. I let some light into the room, opening the grey curtains. I love the view from the window, even if it's just a street and a series of houses opposite.



I approach the mirror, stand in front of it and see the morning zombie girl in the reflection. However, I must admit that I look charming in these blue fitted pyjamas, which perfectly emphasize my small and slim figure. I try to somehow control the storm of black hair on my head, so I tie it in a ponytail.

Walking downstairs, I feel the wonderful smell of breakfast. Entering the kitchen, I see my mother setting the table. She turns and looks at me with her beautiful shining blue eyes. I definitely have her eyes.

‘Hi mum, can I help you with something?’ I ask.

‘Hi honey, no thanks. Everything is ready, you can sit and eat now. Dad and Mia should be here soon.’

The moment I take the third bite of the toast with ham and cheese, I see a younger copy of me, my 15-year-old sister Mia, who enters the kitchen, wearing a thick colourful jacket and winter pants, as if she were going to Alaska. It would surprise any normal person, but I got used to the fact that my younger sister gets stranger with age. Most important is the fact that I can’t laugh at it or comment on it; otherwise, I get a reprimand because I’m older.

‘Mia, take those clothes off, you don’t need them yet, and they will only get in your way,’ mum asks.

‘But these clothes are so pretty and I can’t wait to go on a ski trip. I’m also waiting for Ruby to get angry and comment on them,’ says Mia, pleased with herself.

‘My dear, I appreciate your efforts, you almost made it. If you want to know my opinion so much, I wouldn’t show up anywhere with you because you look like a parrot,’ I answer. We love arguing with each other. I know she will now start playing the victim when I suddenly hear:

‘Mum! Did you hear? Ruby has insulted me.’

‘Girls, don’t start a quarrel. Ruby, get dressed and get your bags ready, and you, Mia, take your jacket off and eat breakfast.’

Going out of the kitchen I can’t hide the smile of satisfaction that Mia’s provocation didn’t work out. I pass my dad, who’s probably going straight from the garage for a sip of hot coffee. He greets me and kisses my forehead. Seeing Mia in the kitchen annoyed me and spoiled my good mood; he knows perfectly well that he’s come at the right moment to avoid intervening in the war that was just beginning.

I pack the rest of my stuff and take the suitcases down. I hear a knock at the door. I approach it quickly and open it. A small, broadly smiling blonde girl appears in the entrance – my friend, Lucy Tomlinson. We have been friends since birth and she is like a sister to me. Lucy walks inside quickly, takes off her silver winter jacket and her shoes. She looks at me with a cool look and crosses her arms.

‘Hey, nice to see you,’ I say. Lucy doesn’t answer. She stares straight into my eyes and doesn’t move. ‘Lucy, I’m begging you, I don’t have time for your behaviour. What is going on?’

‘How can you leave without saying goodbye?’ She said, wrapping her arms around my neck.

‘Lucy, chill. It’s only for two weeks. Sometimes we don’t text for one week and everything is alright.’

‘I know, but now you know ... it’s about the mountains,’ My friend, seeing my worry, pulls me into the living room and points to a place on the sofa. ‘Tell me how you feel. I know that it’s been a while since “that incident” and you’ve been there several times, but every time you go to the mountains I’m worried about you.’

‘Don’t worry about me, everything is good,’ I answer quietly. In fact, it makes me sick when I think about going back to the mountains. I loved the place, the views. The mountains were my greatest passion. Until ‘that incident’. Everyone around me is afraid to use the word accident. I am almost 23 years old, and six years have passed since the accident.

I started skiing at the age of five. My grandmother lives in Switzerland and we visit her as often as we can. When my parents discovered that I was good at skiing, they started sending me on courses and more frequent trips to the mountains. At the age of fifteen, I took part in numerous competitions. I started becoming more and more successful. I competed in several European competitions and always took a place on the podium, but never won. The last race I took part in was extremely good. I was confident, well prepared, brave and full of energy. For a second I lost control of my body. It happened on the slope bend. I skied too fast and flew out beyond the track boundary grid, then I skidded a bit further, bouncing off every small bump until I skied into a hole full of rocks covered with a thick layer of snow, which probably allowed me to survive. The force of the impact was so great that I lost consciousness and the last thing I remember were the screams of the audience and the organizers of the competition, and then silence and darkness.

My accident caused not only serious physical but also mental damage. From that moment I couldn’t look at the mountains, snow and skis. After the surgery, I went to rehabilitation. It took a long time to heal my broken limbs, head trauma, and internal anxiety. I met several psychologists on my way, but ultimately, with the help of my family, I managed to deal with the greatest trauma. Three years ago we went to the Alps. I had a panic attack, but I broke through it and my fear began to slowly diminish.

I hadn't put on skis for six years, because until now my health wouldn't allow it, but last time it was simply an excuse not to ski, so that none of my family would guess what was in my head. I don't dare to talk about all that or even think about it.

Lucy pulls me out of my thoughts.

'Hey! You're not listening to me.'

'I'm sorry Lu, I was pondering. I admit I'm a little nervous, because when I'm there and I feel the whole atmosphere, my memories come back and are stronger than when I'm sitting here. But don't worry – as soon as something bad happens, I will call you immediately.'

'I'll take your word for it. I look forward to getting photos and stories every day. Maybe you'll even meet someone there,' she winks at me with a playful smile.

'Stop it!' I answer and smack her gently on the shoulder. 'I would like to talk to you, but I don't have much time, we're leaving soon.'

'I understand. I just came to say goodbye. Just one more thing,' she looks at me seriously. 'Ruby, start a new chapter in your life and close the old one. Let nothing limit you anymore. This is your new beginning.'

'Yes. Ms Tomlinson,' I say with a sincere smile. I call her that whenever she tries to play my private psychologist. Finally, I hug her tightly and we both burst out laughing. I walk her to the door and say goodbye. I turn towards the suitcases and lean against the door. Now I realize where I'm going again. I'm getting dizzy. It will be a long journey.

We pack our things into the car quickly and easily. It is a mild winter outside, but the wind is quite cold. Unfortunately, there is no snow, which I like so much. I am comforted by the fact that in a few hours I will see white fluff around me. I look out of the window and admire my

beloved city, London. Don't get me wrong. I like peace and quiet, but in a big city I feel alive and I would not exchange it for anything else. I'm watching people and wondering what their story is. I sit comfortably in the car and put my headphones on. Dad watches the road closely, and mum sets the navigation. Mia starts watching something on the tablet, so for a few hours we have respite from her talking. I lean my head against the cold window and float away into the world of slow melody pouring straight into my ears. The pictures outside the window pass quickly, and my nerves are temporarily under control.

After fourteen hours of driving, we finally arrive. I have already forgotten how beautiful the mountains are in winter. As every year, Bern attracts many tourists, including us. I love this landscape and atmosphere because it reminds me of the wonderful time I spent here as a child. Grandma's house is not the biggest, but there is enough space for all of us. Grandma lives alone because my grandfather died eight years ago. I always feel sad that she is left on her own when we leave, but when we offered to move her to England, she refused.

As usual, a delicious dinner is waiting for us. We talk about how the trip went smoothly and what happened recently. We keep in touch with my grandmother by phone, thanks to which we know what is happening at her place and she knows what's going on at ours. I am so exhausted by the travel that I go to bed right away and the rest of my family does the same. While they sleep, I look at the wooden interior of the room, which is like a second home to me. It is dark all around, but the soft moonlight peeks through the roof window, dispersing the darkness. I can't sleep because I'm still thinking about tomorrow. Tomorrow I will be there again, I will

see a place that turned my passion into horror. I wrap myself tightly in the quilt and blanket because it is colder here than in London.

The next day, from early morning I feel terrible. My stomach twists with pain, I don't have the strength to eat anything, I didn't sleep well, which doesn't help. My sister has an infinite amount of energy and as soon as she gets up she decides to wake everyone up. Going outside I see my dad checking the condition of the car and skiing equipment. He is a great skier and I am 100% sure that my talent is thanks to him. I approach him and lean on the car, watching what he's doing.

'Hey, are you ready?' he asks me.

'Yes,' I nod.

'Listen, I know that every arrival here is connected with big emotions and stress for you, but it's probably time to move forward. You look terribly weak today,' dad says. I hear it every time. I love my parents and I'm happy that they are trying to help me, but sometimes it overwhelms me. 'I came up with an idea, but please let me finish before you say anything,' At the moment I feel anxious about what he's going to say. 'I think you should put on your skis today. We will help you, we will be next to you. Nothing bad will happen to you, and we will break another barrier,' he continues. My dad always says what he thinks. He knows perfectly well that I'm able to deal with physical exertion.

'I don't know ... I can't promise anything,' I say. At the same time my mother comes out of the house with Mia and saves me from further conversation. I need to quickly figure out how to avoid skiing this year.

The road to the slope is not long, but very narrow and winding, which I really don't like. Once out of the car, I stare straight ahead. I can see

this place. My nightmare. No one but me sees it. It's quiet and peaceful here as if nothing had ever happened. I see happy families around me, children sledging in the snow, slopes full of skiers. No one even guesses how much every turn, which they are slowly and joyfully overcoming, means to me. I look away and head for my favourite tavern where I know everyone because I have been coming here every year for many years. I enter a wooden building and immediately feel the heat coming from the fireplace. There are tables all around and a bar with a cash register. I sit on a stool and wait for a member of staff to appear. A blond man of medium height, with a well-groomed light beard, comes out of the kitchen. He stops when he sees me and gives me a broad smile.

'Our star! Ruby Brown! Why didn't you tell us that you were coming?' He says. He comes up to me and hugs me.

'Hi, Noah,' I hug him back. 'You know that I don't like it when you call me star. And as to my arrival, I wanted to surprise you,' I announce. Noah laughs and goes back behind the counter. Noah is my age and has lived in this town since birth. He likes cooking and helps his parents run this business. We have known each other for ten years and he supported me a lot after the accident. He even visited me once in London.

'If we had known you would be here today, we would have prepared your favourite dinner. Where's the rest of your family?'

'They went to buy passes and are getting ready to ski.'

'You are still not planning to ski?' he asks.

'I don't know. Something pulls me to try, but then I lose courage,' I answer.

Suddenly a large group of tourists comes inside and they head to the counter to order food.

‘I see that you have work, I won’t disturb you, I’ll come later.’

‘This is not the end of the conversation,’ he warns.

I nod and walk away from him calmly. I pass a group of people and go outside. I can see a colourful character from a distance and I know that she is my sister. I head towards them.

‘Hey, here you are! We were looking for you,’ says mum.

‘Mum said you got lost,’ adds Mia.

‘Relax, I know this place too well, and even if I got lost, I would find Mia and her shiny clothes,’ I laugh. ‘I visited Noah, but now he has a lot of customers and he doesn’t have time to talk.’

‘I understand. Honey, are you sure you don’t want to ride with us today?’ mum asks.

‘I’m sure. I’m sleepy and I feel bad, but don’t worry about me, everything is ok.’

‘Let’s not waste time then. Everyone ready?’ dad asks.

Mum and Mia nod and start putting the equipment on. I sit on the wall, at the very bottom of the slope and watch my family go off to have a fun time. After a while, I am alone, with strangers around me. I jump off the wall and plan to return to the tavern when suddenly I notice that a speeding man is riding straight at me.

I can’t move, I stretch my whole body and close my eyes, shielding my head with my hands, getting ready for a painful collision. I feel movement and wind beside me, and a second later I hear a small bang. Is everything ok with me? I don’t feel pain, so I decide to open my eyes and find the source of the noise. I look to the left and see how the man who was riding straight at me is just getting up and shaking the snow off his pants. I run to him and say quickly:



‘All right? Please stand up carefully, it could have been a serious fall.’

‘I’m fine, I’m fine. More noise than pain,’ a pleasant, deep male voice responds. I can’t see his face because he is wearing goggles, a helmet and a scarf. ‘I’m sorry I scared you. Fortunately, I was able to pull aside at the last minute,’ he says. It dawns on me that we are having a conversation in English, and the man responds with a nice British accent.

‘Excuse me, are you from England?’ I ask.

‘That’s right. I live in a town north of London, and you? I can also hear the accent.’

‘Yes, I live in south London,’ I say. ‘You’re not a good skier.’ The man reveals his full mouth and I see a dazzling smile.

‘I am a fantastic skier. Today is a bad day and my name is Tyler.’

‘I’m Ruby,’ I answer. I wonder if I’ve accidentally brought him bad luck, as I did to myself six years ago.

‘Why don’t you ski?’ he pulls me out of my thoughts. ‘Skiing is a real pleasure.’

‘I ski, but my leg hurts a little today,’ I answer uncertainly. I have no idea what to say to him. I’m afraid of where this conversation is going.

‘You were running to me moments ago,’ he laughs.

Oh no ... He sensed my lie.

‘Right, but now I’m just resting.’

‘Admit that you can’t ski. I promise I won’t laugh,’ he says amused.

How dare he. He doesn’t even know who he is talking to. Seeing my confusion, he continues.

‘I can see I have guessed correctly! I can teach you if you want,’ he jokes. Oh no, that’s enough. Tyler is starting to annoy me. It’s time to end this conversation.

‘Listen, I’ve won skiing competitions and I ski flawlessly, and you are wrong.’

I roll my eyes, turn away from him and slowly walk away. Everyone who knows me is aware that I hate losing and I must always show that I am right. Just when I think that this guy has given up, I hear his voice:

‘Prove it.’

I stop. After a moment of reflection, I decide to tell him what I think about him and his allegations and then leave once and for all. I turn toward him and freeze in place. A few steps away I see a tall guy, about two years older than me. He leans loosely on skis and waits for my reaction. He has removed everything that covered his face. He has messy brown hair, dark eyes, a straight nose and a slightly chiselled jaw. A loose winter outfit covers his figure, but I can only guess that he has a perfect athletic figure. His cheeks and nose are slightly red from the cold. He certainly sees me looking at him, and in his eyes I can see a flash of amusement. Oh God, he looks so good. I guess he is well aware of what he looks like. I quickly remember everything he accused me of and that I must save my honour. In a fit of emotion, I answer:

‘Okay.’

My ability to think clearly only returns to me at the top. Yes, at the top of the ski slope. I am wearing ski boots. I missed this feeling terribly. It’s good that my dad always takes my equipment and clothes in case I decide to go back on the ski slope. When the emotions subside, I start to get nervous, I feel dizzy again, I can’t catch my breath. I notice I am shivering, but I don’t know why. Is it because of the cold, what I plan to do, or who I am with? Exactly. Tyler! Where is he? Suddenly someone touches my arm.

‘You look like a scared chicken. You shouldn’t be afraid if you can ride. I don’t understand you at all,’ he says confidently.

Geez, how he gets on my nerves! He doesn’t know anything about me, and I’m not going to tell him my story. On the other hand, I have no idea how I can get out of this situation. What was I thinking when I agreed to it? For so long no one has been able to convince me, and I agreed to something like this after a moment of conversation with a handsome stranger. Tyler hands me the skis. I look at them as if I’m seeing them for the first time. I need to calm down. It’s nothing. I will ski down, I will prove my point and everything will be fine. In the worst case scenario, my life will be over.

I put on the skis. I have them on my feet, but it’s hard to move without the ski poles. What a strange feeling. Just like I was starting all over again. I look at Tyler and see that he is offering me his hand. I stare at him and wonder why he is giving me his hand. He watches me for a moment and suddenly says to me:

‘Are you done staring? Will you give me your hand, princess, or should I fall on my knees?’ he says calmly, but in his tone I can still hear a note of amusement. ‘I just want to help you move.’ For him, it is a joke and fun, but for me it is something more. He doesn’t even know me and I don’t know him. I must be crazy because I just give him my hand. As soon as I start skiing forward slightly, feeling the soft snow under the skis, adrenaline floods me. I let go of Tyler’s hand, overtake him and go straight ahead as if I had never stopped doing it. I didn’t even have time to tell my family that I love them. It’s too late. I’m skiing. I think I wanted it subconsciously and I was ready for it, only someone had to awaken my character, which was put to sleep by fear. Blood is pulsing in my veins and I feel alive. I focus on

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my skills. Even the cold air is not able to cool my emotions, which warm up every corner of my body. And the same thing again.

Speed. Wind. Frost. Turn. Darkness. Screams. Silence.

This time I overcame this evil turn, closed my eyes, my mind started screaming and then there was silence. I won. Not only with Tyler, but I also won against my own demons. I remembered Lucy's words: 'Start a new chapter in your life and close the old one.' I realize that it was the end and also the beginning of something new. I have started a new chapter.

This is my new beginning.



Martyna Leś

## *Takeover*

*Darkness.*

*Nothing but darkness. No light, no sound, no one around. I have been here for so long now.*

*I don't remember my past. I'm not sure if I even had one.*

*Who am I? What am I? What is this place?*

*My thoughts are chaotic. How did I end up in a place like this? It was like I didn't exist, and then I did. Out of nothing.*

*Am I a person? Am I dead?*

*I feel empty. Not scared, not sad, not lonely. I feel nothing.*



A girl in a light lavender sweater was staring at a big pinboard in front of her. Her eyes were searching through various notes and posters hanging on the board.

‘Heather? Hey, Earth to Heather!’ a tall boy called to the girl.

‘Jesus, Tony, no need to yell,’ Heather grunted, visibly annoyed.

‘Why such a long face? It’s a beautiful morning and you’ve just stumbled upon an opportunity to eat lunch with your dearest friend.’

‘The audition results are, supposedly, posted somewhere in this mess. We’ll talk about lunch when I find out if I’ve got the main role.’

‘Oh yeah, it would be a shame if the “Heather theatre” didn’t get cast as one of the Heathers in ‘Heathers;’ Tony quipped at his friend, amused. ‘The audition note is here, by the way.’ The boy pointed at a tiny piece of paper at the top of the board, where most students’ eyes don’t usually reach. It was located in between an anti-drugs poster and a note about a lost earring. It was easy to deduce that the annual school play wasn’t as big a deal as some might portray it.

‘Okay ... I’ve got ... Chandler.’ Heather muttered, displeased.

‘She’s one of the Heathers, right? You’ve got your main.’

‘She is, but she also dies in the first act.’

‘Fear not! At least you’ll still appear sometimes as a ghost.’ Tony started laughing.

The girl rolled her eyes and smiled at her friend.

‘You sure know how to make the best out of the situation,’ Heather smirked and both of them headed into the cafeteria.



*Boredom.*

*Time doesn't seem to exist here. In this endless void, I can only stare into nothingness. Nothing changes, it's always the same. It's like I'm floating in the air, silently waiting for something. A movement, a sound, anything. But nothing changes. The grave extensive silence is so painfully boring.*

*I'm stagnant. I'm bored.*



She was tired, no, exhausted would be a better word for how she felt right at that moment. Heather was lying in her bed, surrounded by darkness. She was exhausted. Still, falling asleep seemed like a faraway concept. She closed her eyes, for it seemed like a second, but when she opened them again something felt wrong. An anxious feeling started to linger somewhere at the back of her mind. Heather suddenly realised that she couldn't move an inch of her body. She started to sweat, she wanted to move, to scream, to escape. She felt short of breath.

'Maybe if I close my eyes again, it will all go away,' the girl thought to herself. However, even an action as simple as that felt impossible to achieve. As she stared into the overwhelming darkness, the girl suddenly realised that it was staring back at her – a dark figure, standing above her, looking straight into her eyes. Heather managed to finally close her eyes. When she opened them, it was bright outside, the figure was gone, her heart was pounding and her body was covered in a cold sweat.



‘W-what happened?’ She whispered faintly, still shaken.



*Light. No. Two lights.*

*Finally, a change.*

*I feel so excited.*

*After being in this state of stagnation for so long, those two tiny beams of light are everything*

*I've wanted. I try desperately to reach them. Maybe it's my only chance to escape this horrid place.*

*My only hope.*

*I realize that they aren't lights at all.*

*Eyes. A pair of bright green eyes. Staring back at me.*

*Finally, after all this time, I'm not alone any more. And as fast as they came, they disappear. I'm alone again. No sound, no movement, no light.*

*I feel so lonely.*



Heather was standing on the stage, staring blankly at the red curtains. At least at some point they were red. Now they were more of a brownish-red colour, old and washed-out.

‘Heather, watch out!’ An elderly lady shouted in the direction of the stage. Heather, still consumed by her own thoughts, didn't hear her teacher. She only came out of her trance when a big wooden letter ‘W’ came crashing down an inch next to her.

‘My God, child, are you okay?’ the lady asked, worried. A small group of students gathered around Heather.

‘I’m okay, Mrs. Grace. The “W” didn’t fall on me.’

‘What is going on with you today?’ Mrs. Grace scolded her student.

‘I just got lost in my thoughts. It won’t happen again, I promise.’

‘Okay, if you’re fine, we’re all fine. Now, chop, chop, let’s get back to work!’ The teacher yelled and all the kids got back to what they were doing a minute ago.

‘Heaths, what is really going on?’ Tony appeared out of nowhere, as he usually did.

‘Something super weird happened last night. I couldn’t sleep. I thought I was just getting nervous before the rehearsal, but I started feeling panicked, and scared, and I couldn’t move. And then, something was in my room, it was staring at me.’ As Heather tried to retell her experience, with every word it sounded more and more stupid to her.

‘You had sleep paralysis. It’s normal. I get them all the time when I’m stressed,’ Tony replied calmly.

‘But it was so real ...’

‘That’s the point. You can’t move and you see strange things, but they’re not real. You’re just dreaming.’ Tony’s explanation seemed to calm his friend down, but Heather still couldn’t get rid of the anxious feeling that had come over her last night.



*Loneliness.*

*I felt better when I felt nothing. Now, I've seen something. A person.  
I feel so lonely.*

*Before, when I thought I had to be on my own, it didn't matter to me. But now I've seen that there are others, I don't want to be alone anymore. Now I can feel the time passing, every moment is agonizing.*

*Will I see that person again? Was that the first and the last time I saw them?  
I long to see you again. Maybe you'll save me from this endless void.  
Please, come back ...*



The sky was cloudless and the temperature mellow. On days like these, most of the students spent their lunch break around the school patio. Tony and Heather weren't an exception.

'How're your nightmares?' Tony began, as he pulled out a ham sandwich from his backpack.

'I actually slept great last night. I must admit, you were right,' Heather answered, while sipping her coffee.

'Excuse me, what? Did I hear you right? You said that I was right?' The boy jokingly bragged.

'Yes. This one time you were right,' Heather grunted, then suddenly she felt really cold. Even though it was warm outside and she was wearing a jacket, she felt piercing cold coming from behind her. She looked back and froze. The figure from her nightmare was standing next to the door, looking right at her.

'Tony, do you see something over there?'

'I see ... the patio door, a potted plant and Sharon eating her signature salad. Am I missing something?'

'No. I wonder if salads are the only thing Sharon ever eats,' Heather replied, trying to compose herself. She blinked twice, but the figure was still there. Its only recognizable feature were its eyes. Huge, black eyes that were staring intensely at her.



*Yes! She's appeared again. I'm not close enough to reach her, but it's fine.*

*I feel happy.*

*But, wait. Is that ... a second person? And another, and another. There are a lot of people. They are around me, but I'm not with them. I'm still alone. She is different. She's with all of them and they are with her. In one place. I'm somewhere else.*

*Why? Why is she so special? Am I worse than her? Why do I have to be alone and she gets to be happy?*

*I deserve to be happy.*

*I'm so furious right now.*



It was already two in the morning, but Heather wasn't even thinking of sleeping. She felt like she was going mad. This nightmare creature from before. At first, she thought that maybe she was just tired, seeing things that were not real. But throughout the day, Heather felt it lurking

somewhere in the shadows, always staring. Was she stressed? Or maybe she was sick. Her thoughts were chaotic.

‘I have to rest. Tony was talking so much about this sleep paralysis thing that I started seeing stuff,’ she mumbled to herself.

‘It’s fine, I’m fine.’ She closed her eyes. ‘Breathe in, breathe out ...’ Her breathing started to calm down; her body, so tense before, began to relax. But when she slowly opened her eyes again, she saw a pair of black eyes right in front of her face.

*‘I deserve to be happy.’*



*Happiness.*

*I’m so happy.*

*It was so easy. I finally reached her that time. Everything changed. I’m surrounded by lights and smells, and colours and movement. Everything is so beautiful.*

*I’m not in the darkness anymore.*

*I’m not bored anymore.*

*I’m not lonely anymore.*

*I’m happy.*



*Darkness.*

*Nothing but darkness.*

This thing touched her when she was trying to fall asleep. She thought she was fine.

But now Heather sees nothing, hears nothing, feels nothing. Memories seem to fade as she is falling into the void.

‘Who am I? What am I? What is this place?’ She tries to whisper. But no sound leaves her mouth.





Zuzanna Marciniak

## *Time Machine*

‘Stop, you will destroy it like everything else you touch,’ my grandpa said as I tried to fix the old radio that hadn’t worked in years. It was covered in dust when I found it.

‘What are you talking about? You mean, like I destroyed the old bicycle you gave me years ago? It was so old!’ we laughed. Grandpa liked to make me angry.

‘Yeah, I know. I’m just making fun of you. You can try to fix it if you want.’

It was just an ordinary conversation. Who would think that in twenty minutes it would turn into something so unexpected?

‘Grandpa, I need some batteries. How do you expect your radio to play without them?’ we laughed again.

‘Go get some from the basement. I’m sure there are a couple down there.’



What? What did he say? Basement? I was shocked. The basement was an unknown place for me. I was never allowed to go there. That was a little suspicious, but I thought that maybe grandpa had some adult magazines there. My grandma had been gone for seven years now. And he was only human.

It didn't matter. He said that I could go there, so off I went!

The door was locked. A minute later, grandpa opened it for me. He gave me this strange look and then I went downstairs.

I was going down in total darkness. At the bottom of the stairs, I looked for a light switch. I finally found it. When I switched the light on, nothing happened. It was just an ordinary basement. Why was it such a secret then? I started looking for some batteries. And then I heard some weird noises coming from some ... machine? I didn't know what that was. At first, I thought it was just kind of some old stuff that grandpa didn't use anymore.

'What's that button?' I thought. 'Maybe I should click it? Why not?'

I did it. Nothing happened at first. But then everything started spinning.

Suddenly I woke up. I didn't know what had happened. I was in the basement. I thought that I had just passed out, but the basement had changed. When I'd gone in, there were spider webs everywhere. And a lot of dust. And now it was very clean. Something was wrong.

I decided to go upstairs. I was walking slowly and carefully because I was a bit scared. I opened the door. Grandpa's house looked different. Everything was new. The sun was shining and I felt warm.

'Is it summer? When I was going to the basement, it was December!' I thought. 'I have to find grandpa to figure out what's happening!'

I went into the kitchen and I didn't know what to say.

'Honey, are you home already? I'm baking your favorite cake, apple pie. Would you like to try?' I recognized the voice perfectly. It was my grandma.

I was frozen. I couldn't move. But she looked younger. She had beautiful long hair the color of the sun. She was young. Very young. In her 30s, I think. Maybe my age now.

'You're not going to say anything? What's wrong?' she turned around and saw that I was not grandpa. 'Who are you? What are you doing in my house?! Get out!'

'Wait, wait! Grand... I mean, Sarah, you know me. You just don't recognize me. We went to the same primary school. The door was open ...' I hoped she would believe it.

'What? No, I don't remember you. But wait ... Brian? Is that you?'

'Yes! Yes, Brian Williams. That's me.' I was lucky.

'Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't recognize you at first. Come and sit down! Do you want something to drink?'

'Yes, I came a long way.' This comment sounded funny. 'I would like some water please ... Or maybe some tea?' I immediately remembered that grandma made the best tea in the world.

'Sure.'

I sat down and didn't know if I should run or what. The machine in grandpa's basement must have been a time machine! But how? How was it possible? Was it a dream?

'So, what brings you to Sacramento? I thought you moved to Philadelphia,' Grandma said.

'Yeah, I did. Some old stuff, you know ...' Fuck. That was too much. I hated lying, but what else could I say to her? *'I am your grandchild*

*and I am here because of the time machine that brought me here from the future?’*

‘I understand. John is at work right now, but maybe you want to see him? You just have to wait one hour. We can talk while we wait for him.’

What could I say?

‘Of course, I would love to see him! So ... how is it between you both? You’ve been married for ten years as I remember.’

‘Me and John? Oh, you know. Sometimes it’s better, sometimes worse.’ Then I looked at her belly and I saw it. She was pregnant. With my mom. Oh god ... My mom, who years later became depressed because of grandma’s death.

‘I see you’re pregnant. How does it feel?’ I asked.

‘Some say it’s the best time of your life. And I guess I can’t deny it. This baby is giving me happiness every day, even though she’s not here yet. John is giving me a lot of support and I know he will be the best dad in the world.’ And he was. He was the best grandpa, too. I wish I could have told her that.

‘You know, I should go. Now I remember that I have an appointment with my friend. Maybe I’ll see John next time.’

‘Wait! You didn’t drink the tea I made you!’ She was right. I was so stressed that I forgot about it.

‘You’re right, sorry. I’ll drink my tea and then I’ll go.’

She looked at me as if she recognized me. But it was not possible.

That moment I remembered how much I missed her. The softness of her voice. Her eyes. And I understood why grandpa didn’t find any other woman after her death. She was special. She took care of me when I was just a little child. She was a second mom for me. I loved her very much.

When the cup of tea was empty, I decided to go, even though I didn't want to. I wanted to stay and talk to her.

After one minute of the inner fight about whether I should go or not, I said goodbye to grandma. When I was going to the basement, I heard a man's voice. Grandpa's voice, of course! It was getting worse. ...

'Honey! It's our friend from school, Brian! Do you remember him? It's been so long,' grandma said. I was just standing and waiting for what was going to happen.

'Oh, of course, I do! Brian, come sit with us!'

'I'm sorry, I was just leaving. I have an appointment with my friend. I've just explained to Sarah. I'm in a hurry. Goodbye and take care!'

I disappeared behind the wall leading to the door and I quickly ran into the basement. I had to go back. I was just hoping that the button would bring me back to the future. I was afraid that it wouldn't happen. But it did. I clicked and I woke up in the same basement I had passed out in. I went out of the basement and I saw my grandpa. He didn't look surprised that I was there for an hour. He looked at me and smiled.

'I guess you don't have the batteries with you?' he laughed. He knew what happened. I was shocked.

This time I knew I would stay at my grandpa's a little longer. I wanted to talk to him about his love for grandma. I used to spend a lot of time with my grandpa, but he rarely talked about his past.

'Yeah ... I don't. Maybe we can bake an apple pie together?'

He agreed, of course. Then he showed me an old photo album.



Karol Niedźwiedź

## *The Squares*

In the living room, he poured another drink and sat in the uncomfortable enormous black leather armchair. In front of him there were two armchairs of the same type and a coffee table. On the coffee table were two weird red revolvers, which were thirsty for destiny. Behind him was a fireplace. The flame inside was getting weaker, just like his patience.

‘Should I pick this revolver, or the other one.’

He considered this as he sipped the whiskey.

Suddenly a door appeared in the room, and the darkness was gone. In the first seconds he was not able to see anything, because his eyes were adjusted to the darkness in the room. But then he saw him. It was Death entering the room. He was dressed very differently from himself.

‘Where is Liar?’ Death asked Life.

‘He should probably be here in a moment,’ Life said.

Death calmly sat down in the armchair. He poured himself the same drink that Life was drinking. He drank everything. Then strange sounds began to come out of the fireplace. He went over to see what was happening. The flame went out. The wooden logs changed into hundreds of thousands of small pebbles.

‘He’s close,’ Death said.

‘How do you know that?’ Life asked.

‘I always know where he is,’ Death said.

Liar entered the living room. He used the same door through which Death entered the room. He closed the door and poured himself a glass of whiskey. He took a sip and then sat down in the armchair.

‘I’m ready. Gentlemen, shall we start our last game?’ Liar said.

‘Speak for yourself,’ Death said.

‘So, are the revolvers ready?’ Liar asked.

‘They’ve been ready for an hour. Check if you do not believe me,’ Life said.

Liar reached out his hand towards the revolver. The moment he touched the metal grip, he immediately felt cold on his skin. This revolver was so heavy that he could hardly hold it. However, he did his best not to show it.

‘You’ve done pretty well, gentlemen.’ Liar said.

Death and Life reached out for the revolvers.

‘You came last, so you will be first,’ Death said to Liar.

Liar tossed his hair and put a revolver to his mouth. He pulled the trigger. There was no bullet.

‘I guess I’m lucky. I’m curious who will die first,’ Liar said.

‘We will see,’ Death said to Liar.

‘It always ends up the same,’ Life said.

‘And we always expect another ending. It’s kind of irrational, don’t you think?’ Life said.

‘Stop talking. It’s your turn now,’ Death said.

He aimed at himself and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened, again.

‘Watch me,’ Death said.

He aimed the revolver at his chest and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened, again.

‘You wouldn’t die ’cause you don’t have a heart, cheater,’ Liar said.

‘But I wish I had,’ Death said.

He sipped the whiskey and put the revolver on the coffee table.

‘I wish I had,’ he said.

Liar started the second round. He pulled the trigger, but there was no bullet.

‘Life, now you,’ he said.

Suddenly a man entered the room. The man wore a long black coat, which covered most of his body. None of the three characters knew him.

‘Who are you?’ Liar asked.

The stranger poured himself some whiskey.

‘I am an artist and a scientist, but you can call me Charlie,’ he said.

‘What are you doing here, Charlie?’ Liar asked.

‘I’m looking for inspiration,’ Artist said.

‘Get out of here. We’re busy,’ Death said.

‘What exactly are you doing?’ Artist asked.

They raised the revolvers.

‘We’re playing,’ Life said.

‘Can I join the game?’ Artist asked.

‘No!’ Death said.



‘Can I at least watch, please?’ Artist asked.

‘Fine. But you need to keep quiet, Charlie,’ Death said.

Another round began. Death decided to be first. Stoically, he aimed the revolver at his head and pulled the trigger. Nothing.

‘Who is next, ladies?’ he said.

‘Oh, shut up,’ Life said.

Life did the same as Death. Again, he didn’t die.

‘I’m bored,’ Charlie said.

Artist threw a glass of whiskey at the fireplace. He picked up the pieces of glass. Then he cut his veins. His blood filled the entire fireplace and rekindled the fire. He took off his coat and with a smile threw it into the flames.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Life asked him.

‘You know exactly what. And you know what you should do. Do it now,’ Artist said.

Life came over and gave him his revolver.

‘Goodbye,’ he said.

‘What is happening?’ Liar asked.

‘I don’t know, just watch,’ Death said.

Life went to the fireplace and, after a while, jumped into the flames. He died in suffering, but it was a very fast death. The artist fell to the floor and an ocean of blood began to come out of his mouth.

‘I found it, thank you,’ Charlie said.

‘What did you find?’ Death asked.

Then he tried to grab the revolver to commit suicide. He couldn’t, because he didn’t have enough strength.

‘I think he won’t say anything anymore,’ Liar said.

‘Yeah, I can see that,’ Death said.

Death picked up his revolver and shot him.

‘That was fast,’ he said.

He sipped the whiskey.

‘Does it mean that he lost?’ Liar asked.

‘If he is dead, he lost,’ he said.

‘Is it my turn now?’ Liar asked.

‘Yes,’ he said.

He grabbed the revolver and put it in his mouth. Millions of thoughts in his head stopped him from pulling the trigger. At that point, he didn’t even know who he was and what he felt. He felt absolutely nothing and everything at the same time. Suddenly he could describe what he felt: it was sadness and pain. Those feelings helped him to pull the trigger. When he did, he didn’t *lose*, but he immediately started to cry.

‘Wow, I didn’t expect that,’ Death said.

‘We’ve known each other for many years, so don’t lie,’ Liar said.

‘It always amazes me,’ Death said.

‘Just forget it. Play on,’ Liar said.

‘Ok, Mr. Sensitive,’ Death said.

‘Drop it. It’s your turn now,’ Liar said.

The game started again. After three rounds, Liar became exhausted so he sat down in the armchair.

‘Give me some time, please,’ Liar said.

‘We are not playing football, but whatever,’ Death said.

‘Just one minute, ok?’ Liar said.

After that minute, a woman ran into the room. She had tears in her eyes. It was easy to read from Liar’s face that he was happy.

‘Who is she?’ Death asked.

‘This is Victoria. She used to be my girlfriend,’ Liar said.

‘And I am still your girlfriend,’ Victoria said.

‘Could you leave? You are bothering us,’ Death said.

‘Darling, don’t do it, please!’ she said to Liar.

‘What do you want?’ Liar said.

‘I know what’s going on here,’ she said ‘It’s obvious. I love you and I don’t want to see your dead body in the coffin. Darling, it’s really reckless. Stop it,’ Victoria said to Liar.

‘You don’t get it, do you?’ Liar said.

‘What do I not understand? Darling, what happened? You can tell me,’ she said.

‘I have been dead since the day I was born and I’ve never learned to live,’ Liar said.

‘Darling, I love you. Please, stop it,’ Victoria said.

‘We don’t have time for this. I guess you know what you should do,’ Death said.

‘Just give me one minute. I will do it, don’t worry,’ Liar said to Death.

‘Do what?’ Victoria asked Liar.

‘Listen to me, we don’t have time for this. Let me say what I have to say. I am not your medicine. Don’t treat me like one. Forget about me, because I am not for you, and you are not for me,’ he said.

‘Darling, you are not my medicine because you are the sweetest candy in the world,’ she said.

‘No, I am not and never will be. I’m toxic, and I’m killing you. But now I will stop it. I just don’t love you enough to bleed all my blood, I am sorry. I really am,’ he said.

‘Do it for fuck sake!’ Death said to Liar.

Liar aimed at Victoria's head and pulled the trigger. With the shot, she immediately fell to the floor. She bled all her blood just in front of him. Her blood was changing the colour of the floor. The floor under her body was turning red. It lasted a little while before he realized what he had done. At first, he couldn't breathe, and his heart stopped beating for a few seconds. For the first time in his life, he felt alive. It was not a good feeling, he was suffering. It was pure pain, as pure as Victoria's love was to him. He wanted to forget about it but he started crying.

'Have you finished?' Death asked him.

'Fuck you, you made me do it,' he said.

'I just told you, but it was you who made the decision,' Death said.

'You always just give advice,' he said. 'You know what? Not this time. This time I'll make my own decision.'

'What do you want to do?' Death asked.

'Give me your revolver!' he said.

He didn't think long. He just gave it to him.

'Now what?' Death said.

'Now watch what you made me do,' Liar answered.

He wanted to find a reason to stay alive, but it was too hard for him. The only solution was suicide. He was afraid of dying, but even more he was afraid to live. He took a deep breath.

'Are you ready?' Death said.

'Now I am ready,' Liar said.

He picked up the pieces of glass that the Artist had killed himself with. Just like the Artist, he cut his veins, and then he shot himself in the heart. The whole living room was covered in blood, but he was still alive. In the end he gathered enough strength to shoot himself in the eye.

'The game is over and I lost again,' Death said.  
He sipped the whiskey.  
'Maybe next time,' he said.  
He left the room.



Bartosz Rybczyński

## *The Day*

I would like to tell my story, but I'm not sure if I can. Everybody has a different way to tell his own story. You can divulge it in a shorter or longer way, with or without details. I would like to convey it perfectly.

The story begins on a normal day. The sound of my favourite song woke me up as always, but it wasn't going to be an average day. When I looked at the clock, I was excited. I had been preparing for this day for such a long time that I couldn't wait any longer.

'It must be special,' I thought.

I put on my favourite shirt, took a backpack, which I had prepared earlier, and left my house in a rush. I'm sure I forgot to turn off my alarm clock. I didn't eat my breakfast either, but I didn't care. It was too important to go back now.

However, this day didn't go as I wanted. From the very beginning nothing went as I wanted.

First, my neighbour, Ms. Li, forgot to let in one of her pugs. It was a common thing for her. She had ten dogs and never cared if all of them came back from a walk. When it stared at me with its big eyes, I knew I needed to do something. I knocked on the door. I didn't have a lot of time, but I had to help it. After few moments, Ms. Li opened the door with a smile on her face and let the dog in. She asked me nicely if I would like some cheesecake. And although I was late, she persuaded me to have some.

When I left her apartment, I hurried down the stairs. And I went straight on. Although it was quite early, the sunlight was already spreading throughout the city. Going in a long-planned direction, I looked around. I have long known that this city is gloomy, but on such a beautiful day you can see this even more clearly. I watched people around me, wondering if any of them were paying any attention to me. It is amazing how many people you pass every day without knowing anything about them.

My thoughts were interrupted by the boy from the neighbourhood. He stood there with a can in his hand, and on the wall of the nearby cinema he sprayed a well-known inscription, which every resident could already recognize. Before he could finish, with lightning speed, I surprised him and grabbed his hand. It was not difficult; at the end of the day, I was taller by half. When I saw him, his face became pale and he ran like a deer frightened by the headlights of an oncoming vehicle. Before I could do anything more, he disappeared behind a nearby corner. I didn't have time to chase him, I had an important day ahead of me. I had already lost a lot of time, so I quickened my pace.

I had planned the route I had to travel and knew exactly how to reach my destination. But I was unable to plan what happened to me. Life is unpredictable. I don't know if our fate is planned in advance. If I got a chance to start it again at the end of the day ...

Another delay awaited me. Passing the nearby station, I saw a crowd of people rushing to the train. It was so full that they were packed like sardines. I saw one of the travellers looking around in all directions with stress on his face. I immediately understood that he could not find his train. I didn't have enough time to take care of him, so I called to two men standing behind a nearby pillar, smoking cigarettes, so that they would help him find the right train. I did not look back, but I believe that I did more than one good deed today.

Moving on, I reached the city border. Since these hard times began, there have been controls on every border. They checked everyone who entered or left. I never wondered why. Two officers were just busy investigating a truck that wanted to leave the city. Then I saw that a man was hidden under a car. I thought maybe he had injured himself, and the driver didn't notice him because of stress before the inspection. I had to intervene immediately. I approached the car and pointed at the man stuck under the car, which was all covered in mud. The guards from the border control thanked me, put him in the car and took him to hospital. However, they also took the driver for an interview. But I had no time to delve into further threads of this story. I just hoped that they would both receive what they deserved.

I was getting closer to my destination. Now I only had to pass huge fields extending lengthwise and across, abundantly sown with wheat, corn and other crops. I still had to travel about three kilometres to reach



the sign that directed me right. There was a lake that I was supposed to get to. That was where the meaning of my day waited. It took me another minute to think about it. Should I turn back? But I thought there was no turning back. Now I was sure. I stood under this beautiful big tree that everyone in the city had heard of, looking at this beautiful crystal lake. The forest stretched around. It was wild and unspoilt. Hard to believe that in a world filled with pain and suffering, one could still find paradise.

The meeting was scheduled for ten, but I arrived here after eleven. I didn't care. I sat under a tree, took a piece of paper and a pen from my backpack. I looked around again. I looked at the leaves flying in the wind, at the lake so beautifully rippling with waves. I thought about the fields which I had passed earlier.

I began to think about the first sentence I had written:

*I would like to tell my story but I'm not sure if I can.*

Finally, I had!



‘What do we have here?’

‘He left a letter. It confirms the version of the witnesses.’

‘Cause of death?’

‘Hanged from a tree.’

‘What have you found out from the letter?’

He confessed to everything, but did not write it directly. The deceased started the day eating cheesecake with Mrs. Li. Then he attacked a young

vandal spraying graffiti. Later, he pointed out to officers a runaway from a train to the labour camps. Next, he notified border control of human smuggling. And then he hanged himself.

‘This is a huge loss for us. I will send our supervisor a request for a posthumous medal for merit. No one has ever caught so many criminals in such a short time.’



Jakub Sygula

## *The Attempt Day*

I love watching her when she sleeps. By looking at her lovely face I'm trying to create a painting that I will never forget. A painting of my beautiful wife breathing softly. When I do this, I'm also thinking how lucky I am. Every time I show her picture to my colleagues from the unit, everyone says, 'Oh, she's such a beautiful girl.' I remember the day we first met. It was the very beginning of summer. Late night at the club. Me with some pals from the army. You know how it is after too many drinks. An excellent idea to build a paper plane and propel it right to her. It was so close, but the plane missed and landed near her glass. She saw it, turned around and said, 'Inappropriate length of wings, lack of vertical stabilizer and rudders, not recommended for flight with people.' Then she wrote her number on the right-wing and left.

One week later she explained that she was keen on aviation. I was attracted to her immediately. I noticed quickly she was a strong and wise

woman. We started spending much time together. As time passed, her love for planes grew stronger and stronger. A year from our first meeting, she decided to apply for the job of air traffic controller. She was prepared. After reading tons of books, she knew every single part of a plane. She was excited, and I was sure she would get this job. She was calm, she could control her emotions, and most importantly, she knew exactly what to do in case of any critical situation. One day we saw a car crash. 'Pull Over!' she yelled at me and ran out of the car. A young man was bleeding but he was conscious. She helped him press the wound. I only called the emergency services. When they arrived, one of the paramedics said to her, 'Good job.' I was impressed by her self-control.

The training took a very long time. I lost count after seven months. But I remember one particular day. I was washing plates when she rushed in, beaming with positive energy. 'I passed the final exam! My dream has come true!'

'So now it's time for your second dream to come true,' I said. I dried my hands and gave her tickets for the Florence and the Machine concert. Her blue eyes shone with happiness.

We got married that spring and we were so happy until that damn day which changed my wife's life forever. Now it's been a while. I still watch my beautiful wife. Even though she's sleeping, she often blinks her eyes nervously. She turns from side to side. Sometimes she whispers something. Her psychologist keeps saying it's normal that she's dreaming about what happened. So, I'm watching her, trying to understand what's in her mind. It's not my first sleepless night. I know for sure it wasn't her fault. Every morning she asks me if I'm going to work today. The Captain

has given me a few extra days because he knows how much she means to me. We both need some rest now.



‘Oh, God! Do I always have to be late? Where’s my phone? Maybe it’s upstairs. Must be somewhere ... Mark? Can you call me now?! Maaark?!’

‘Sure! But your phone is saying that it isn’t going anywhere!’

‘Oh please! I don’t have time to negotiate with my own damn phone.’

‘OK, honey, take it and take care. See you soon, my lady!’

*He’s so fucking crazy. I told him a hundred times that I have to go to work. If I didn’t have a job, he would kiss me all day. Now, focus Ava... Did you take everything? Keys, favourite lipstick, mint gum, Coco Chanel perfume... Oh no! I forgot the sandwiches. Fine. I’ll get something to eat in a bar.*

‘We have reached the airport. It will be fourteen bucks.’

‘Thanks, and have a nice day.’

*Fifth floor, sixth floor, seventh floor, please go faster, you stupid lift, ninth floor. Finally.*

*(Door opens)*

‘Good morning, Mrs. Anderson. I’m very sorry for being late. Which desk?’

‘Morning. Good to see you, Ava. Desk number 4B, approach control. William is expecting you.’

‘Hi, William. What are the conditions?’

‘Hi, Ava. There is light wind from southeast, 30 knots. A queue for 11 aircrafts. Runway 32 left inactive due to maintenance work.’

‘RWY 32L closed, roger. Who’s landing first?’

‘Aeromexico 767. Speed 180.’

‘Thanks, William. I’ll catch you later.’

*(Puts on headphones)*

‘Aeromexico seven-six-seven. This is LAX Tower. Reduce to final approach speed. After landing contact with tower on 123.9 frequency channel. Runway 44 right.’

‘Roger LAX Tower. Reducing to final approach. RWY 44R. Aeromexico 767.’

‘Continental 6118 Heavy you can cross runway 28 left on delta point 8.’

‘Crossing 28 turning left on delta point 8. Continental 6118 Heavy.’

‘3738B flight level 270 remains unchanged.’

‘Understood tower, level unchanged. 3738B.’

‘TRS217, have you got a question about your taxiing route?’

‘No Ma’am. Thank you.’

‘KLM281 Are you ready for level change?’

‘Affirmative, tower.’

‘Copy that. KLM281 descend flight level to 190. Runway 44 left.’

‘Descend to one-nine-zero – FL runway 44 left. KLM281.’

What time is it? Hmm, it’s ten o’clock. Mark is starting his 24-hour shift. My brave soldier. Maybe I shouldn’t treat him like that. If he wants to spend more time with me, I guess I should get up earlier. Mmm, it’s not a good idea. I won’t do that. We must both start to think about some kind of holiday ... Maybe in Spain? Hot days and warm nights. Italy? Great pizza and Volcano. What about Austria?

‘LAX tower. This is Speedbird 665 Heavy. We have a gear control issue. Could you just turn us out of traffic for a few minutes?’

‘That’s fine, Speedbird 665 Heavy. You can continue on this heading.’

‘Roger that. We continue on present heading.’

*O, that’s a little bit strange. Should I talk about it with Mrs. Anderson?  
Hmm, she’s busy now. First I must find out what’s going on out there.*

‘Speedbird 665 Heavy. Is it some kind of hydraulics problem?’

‘We don’t know exactly. We’re working with check list at the moment. We may be declaring an emergency but not yet. Speedbird 665 Heavy.’

‘Speedbird, please let me know if you require any assistance.’

‘LAX. This is Manhattan A6. Radio check. Over.’

‘Manhattan A6 this is Los Angeles tower. I can hear you loud and clear. Over.’

‘Tower, can you repeat what was the heading?’

‘Manhattan A6 heading two-nine-zero.’

‘Two-nine-zero. Thank you, Manhattan.’

‘MORGAN 1788 Heavy. Please tell me your gate number.’

‘This is MORGAN. Gate number nine.’

‘Thank you MORGAN. Speedbird 665 Heavy. How is everything going?’

‘Tower, please give us 2 minutes and I’ll let you know.’

‘Copy that. British Airways 238. I can offer you 390 on Charlie or 370 or 380 on Delta.’

‘We’ll take 390 Charlie. British Airways 238.’

‘Understood. I’ll call you back.’

‘LAX Tower. This is Speedbird 665 Heavy. We are declaring an emergency!’



‘Are you saying you’re declaring an emergency?’

‘Yes, confirmed. Like I told you. We have an emergency! We’ve got a major gear failure!’

‘OK Speedbird 665, I just wanted to verify. Could you accept runway 44 left?’

‘We need 44 right and all the equipment for us.’

‘Roger. Fly heading 180. Turn around to the left and land on runway 44 right. Wind 310 at 24 gusting to 34.’

‘Speedbird 665 Heavy emergency. Heading one-eight-zero. Turning around to the left and landing on RWY 44R. Tower, please remove everybody from our way!’

‘Got it. I’ll clear the area. Manhattan A6. This is Tower. Maintain 2000. I cancel approach clearance.’

‘Tower, this is Manhattan. Approach cancelled. We’ll maintain two thousand.’

‘Rescue Team 1, Rescue Team 7 and all crews. Cross runway 44R on Echo point. We have an emergency. Gear failure.’

‘This is Rescue Team 6. We’re on our way. Crossing runway 44R on Echo.’

‘I need the shift supervisor here! American 43B turn left heading 220.’

‘Heading two-two-zero. American.’

‘What’s going on, Ava?’

‘Mrs. Anderson, Speedbird 665 Heavy has announced an emergency because of a gear failure.’

‘I’m calling the chief of security and Area Control Centre. How many wheel sets aren’t working?’

‘I haven’t asked yet. KL 605. Turn left heading 130’

‘Got it. Turning one-three-zero. KL 605.’

‘This is Rescue Team 6 Leader. All units are in position. Standing by.’

‘Rescue Team 6 Leader this is Tower. As fast as the plane lands RWY 44R will close. The aircraft is still 5 miles out.’

‘Copy that.’

‘Speedbird 665 Heavy emergency. You have a clear area. Are you ready to start approaching? How many wheel sets are not working?’

‘Flight attendants are preparing passengers for landing. We’ll be ready in 2 minutes. 1 set.’

‘Would you be cleared for the ILS or cleared for the visual? (*silence*) Speedbird 665 Heavy emergency! The ILS system clearance or the visual approach clearance? Do you copy?’

‘Tower, this is Speedbird. We cleared ILS approach 44R.’

‘The emergency equipment is standing by. Wind 320 at 16 gust. Runway 44R cleared to land. To all emergency crews. The subject plane is number one for runway 44R.’

‘We are ready. Proceeding on RWY 44R.Tower.’

‘This is Speedbird 665 Heavy emergency. We’re landing. Touchdown in three! two! one ...’



Natalia Tutucka

## *Premortition*

It was an extremely hot morning. Maiko woke up in a sticky sweat. She barely rolled back over her big pregnant belly. She breathed in.

‘Come out now!’ she said to her belly.

She smiled to herself. Of course, she didn’t expect an answer. She walked over to the table where the bowl of water was standing. She dipped a small towel in it. After squeezing, she put it on her neck.

‘I will kill you, Haruto, I swear!’ she said and ran her hand through her long, black hair. ‘To do this to me for the summer!’

She was very tired but very excited. She was waiting for her kids’ birthday since she herself was a child. She had many siblings and was grateful to her parents. Her childhood was happy and full of children’s games.

She met him by chance. She didn’t like him. He was short and had crooked teeth. But when he looked at her, Maiko’s heart beat faster. She

didn't understand it but she immediately saw their future together. And now, on this hot morning, she was standing in the heat and waiting for his return home.

She knew there was a war on, but children are born no matter what. Besides, the war was happening far away. Maybe at sea, maybe in Europe, but not here – in this calm city of Hiroshima. She had never met a soldier in this area. She was more worried that Haruto would not arrive on time. She had a delivery date for August 9, but today she felt huge.

'Take it easy, my little boy, a few more days and we will finally meet.'



He always wanted to be a pilot. Maybe it was because of the environment in which he grew up.

All the boys in the area wanted to go to the army.

His father died two years ago of lung cancer. He always knew that cigarettes damage health. His father was a very energetic and handsome man. His mother was in love with him every day. He saw that and did not doubt it. He would like to fall in love, too.

'But after the war,' he said.

Finally, his dreams would come true. He was allocated a long flight. The next morning they were leaving for the island of Tinan to wait for further instructions.



She had a disturbing dream. She saw herself as a little girl in her village near the city. She was playing with other children on the sandy road next to the family's hut. The weather was beautiful, although it was humid and the sun was shining sharply. The sky was cloudless and absurdly blue. She looked at her friend – a little boy with dark eyes.

‘Why have you got such red spots on your face?’ she asked.

The boy rubbed his cheek with his little hand.

‘I don't know what it is, Maiko. It doesn't hurt. But you have the same!’

She also touched her face and looked at her hands. They were covered in blood. She looked up. A black rain of blood was pouring down from the beautiful, cloudless sky. All the children started screaming and running away to their homes. Maiko was still standing and watching the rain. She couldn't move or make a sound. She wanted to take a step, but her legs were like stone. She wanted to call her mother but her mouth felt as if it were filled with cotton wool. She closed her eyes and counted to ten. When she opened them again, a stream of blood flooded all the way. And then she emitted a terrible scream.

That scream woke her up. It was August, three days before the birth of her child.



‘It's a secret US aviation base on Tinan island. Nobody knows you're stationed here. You are strictly prohibited from contacting your family

in America. The only thing I can promise you is that we won't be here for long. You will receive further instructions directly from your commanders. Any questions?'

'No, sir!' they exclaimed simultaneously.

He was very excited about the upcoming secret mission. He was young and adventurous. He believed in his homeland. He didn't know much about politics, but he knew he could influence the fate of the world as an individual. He thought of the victory and honor that would come to him upon his return.

While he was thinking about it, lying on a narrow bunk, one of the soldiers approached him.

'How are you doing?' he asked him.

'Nervous, excited. You?'

'Same.'

'Do you know anything about the mission?'

'There are some rumors.'

'Come on, tell me.'

The soldier sighed deeply and lit a cigarette. Then he said:

'The military unit says that there have already been such flights, but none of them returned.'

'Yes, I heard it, too, but I'm calm. It's a secret mission and they can't tell what and how.'

'Maybe you're right. But if it's something like kamikaze?'

'I don't think so. The United States values soldiers and wouldn't sacrifice such good, young guys. That's why we will win with Japan. They don't give a shit about their soldiers.'

'I hope you're right. I envy your confidence.'

The cigarette ash fell on his shoe. He lit up the next one.  
‘Drop it! It will finish you off!’  
‘What’s the difference? I can die tomorrow.’  
He got up from his bunk and merely sighed.  
‘I won’t let any stupid rumors stress me now,’ he thought. ‘Tomorrow we will do our job and return home in glory.’



After the last nightmare, she was afraid to fall asleep. She realized that she needed a lot of sleep before giving birth. The evening before the baby was due, she went for a short, slow walk. She tried to calm down her thoughts and bad feelings. She repeated in her mind that Haruto would be back soon and everything would be all right. She returned home and drank a large cup of warm milk. She sat in a deep, soft armchair and picked up her favorite collection of short stories. She thought that she would read it to her son. Maybe her soothing voice would also have a good effect on the baby. She stroked her big belly and read quietly.

She didn’t even know when she fell asleep. In the middle of the night, a contraction woke her up. She’d been having such a beautiful dream.

‘No, it can’t be now!’ she said.

She waited a moment, but another contraction began. When the next one approached, she decided to go to a neighbor, a midwife in a nearby hospital. She struggled to put on her sandals and wore her sweater because the night was cold. Luckily, the neighbor lived nearby.

‘Shiori, it’s time!’ she shouted as she knocked hard on the door.

‘It’s too early!’ Shiori said when she opened the door.



She just put on a thin robe and said to her husband, ‘Don’t wait for me, it will probably take a while.’ Then she turned back to Maiko. ‘Have your waters broken yet?’ she asked her.

‘Yes, a few minutes ago.’

‘We have little time. We will go to your home. We’ll make all this mess in your place.’

Shiori was a short and fat person. She had a plump face and hands. She was very nice and she couldn’t be disliked. Maybe she was like that because she had given birth to many children. Nevertheless, she couldn’t stand opposition.

‘Quickly Maiko! Your son can’t wait!’ she said and rushed Maiko.

Maiko did not remember much from that night, only huge pain and Shiori shouting, “Push!”

‘See what a healthy boy you have!’ she said and handed the small bundle to Maiko.

‘He is perfect!’ she said and started crying.

‘What is it, Maiko? You did well. The boy is strong and healthy. You’ve always dreamt about it.’

‘But he will never meet his father.’

‘What are you talking about? Haruto will be back tomorrow.’

At this moment, at 8:15 on August 6, 1945, all this didn’t matter anymore. The women heard only the whistle. Shiori opened the window wide. She saw several planes in the sky. “These are probably military planes,” she thought. One of them dropped something from its undercarriage. It looked like a tiny plane, but it had no wings. She looked at Shima Hospital, just across the street. Forty-three seconds passed. What happened later was like a wave, but without water. The air blow was

so strong that it simply wiped the hospital and the entire surrounding area off the face of the Earth. Maiko held the boy tight, but after a while, the wall collapsed and there was a deafening silence.



They woke them up very early. It was still dark and the sky was completely black. He slept only a few hours. They gave them a cup of black coffee and a piece of bread. He quickly washed his face and teeth and put on a uniform. He never slept well outside of the house, but as a soldier, he had to get used to it. It was that day! The day of his first serious mission.

‘I am taking part in a war, damn it!’ he thought.

He had waited a few years for this moment. He was excited and very confident in his role in this case. The second ensign assigned him to the crew of a Boeing B-29 with the charming name “Enola Gay.” He wanted to do his best on that day.

His pilot was supposed to be Paul Tibbets. Engineer Parsons was personally responsible for detonating the charge. He would manage it in fifteen minutes, along with ensign Jeppson. And then they were supposed to go.

At the moment, they were flying to Iwo Jima to assess the conditions. And then he understood. They had a simple order. They were to leave our “Little Boy” in this city – Hiroshima.

‘Oh my God ... What will I say in my hometown?’ he thought.

‘The weather is good. You have permission to proceed,’ Tibbets said at 7:25.

The order was accepted. Nothing and nobody would change that. He understood what they would be responsible for. Their target was not a military unit. They were to destroy an entire city of civilians. He felt sick. His stomach seemed to have turned inside out. When sweat appeared on his forehead, his superior asked:

‘Hey, son, is everything okay?’

‘Yes, of course,’ he lied.

‘Nobody has done it yet, you know?’

They were supposed to drop the first atomic bomb in history. And they gave it such a charming name ... He felt empty inside. He had plans, dreams and a future. In this moment, he would take part in the extermination of innocent people. He didn’t fight for that. He didn’t want to bring death and destruction.

‘It’s 7:30. Engineer Parsons, you have to arm the bomb,’ he heard.

The engineer went down to the bombing chamber and carried out the order. He looked at the ocean through a small window. He felt sick again and his stomach ached. He couldn’t stand it anymore. He vomited straight on his shoes. Everyone laughed contemptuously. He didn’t care what they thought. He wanted to disappear, completely dissolve in the air, like the city they were above. And then the target was set – Shima Hospital. They were 580 meters above the hospital and then they dropped “Little Boy.” Not even a minute passed and an explosion occurred. They began to quickly move away from the great, atom bomb cloud.



He was greeted with honors in his hometown. Funny, that's what he'd dreamt about. They shook his hand and nodded. 'You are our hero,' they said. 'America is proud of you.' What nonsense. He wanted to spit in their faces and shout out all the anger.

But with a fake smile, he politely accepted the compliments.

'It was an honor for me,' he lied through clenched teeth.

'I did it for my homeland,' he repeated his favorite phrase.

He returned home. His mother prepared a lavish dinner in his honor. He ate something and went to his room.

'Maybe I should kill myself?' he thought. 'But I killed too many people. My punishment should be to live with it. I shall never find peace.'

He wrapped himself in a blanket, turned to the wall and fell into a restless sleep.

The book is the first collection of short stories written by first-year B.A. students of English Studies at the University of Humanities and Economics in Lodz. Writing a short story is the final assignment in their Creative Writing course. The students spend the first semester learning how to write a short story. They read for inspiration. They study contemporary writers' advice – to learn from the best. [...] But most importantly – they have fun writing and reading their short stories.

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