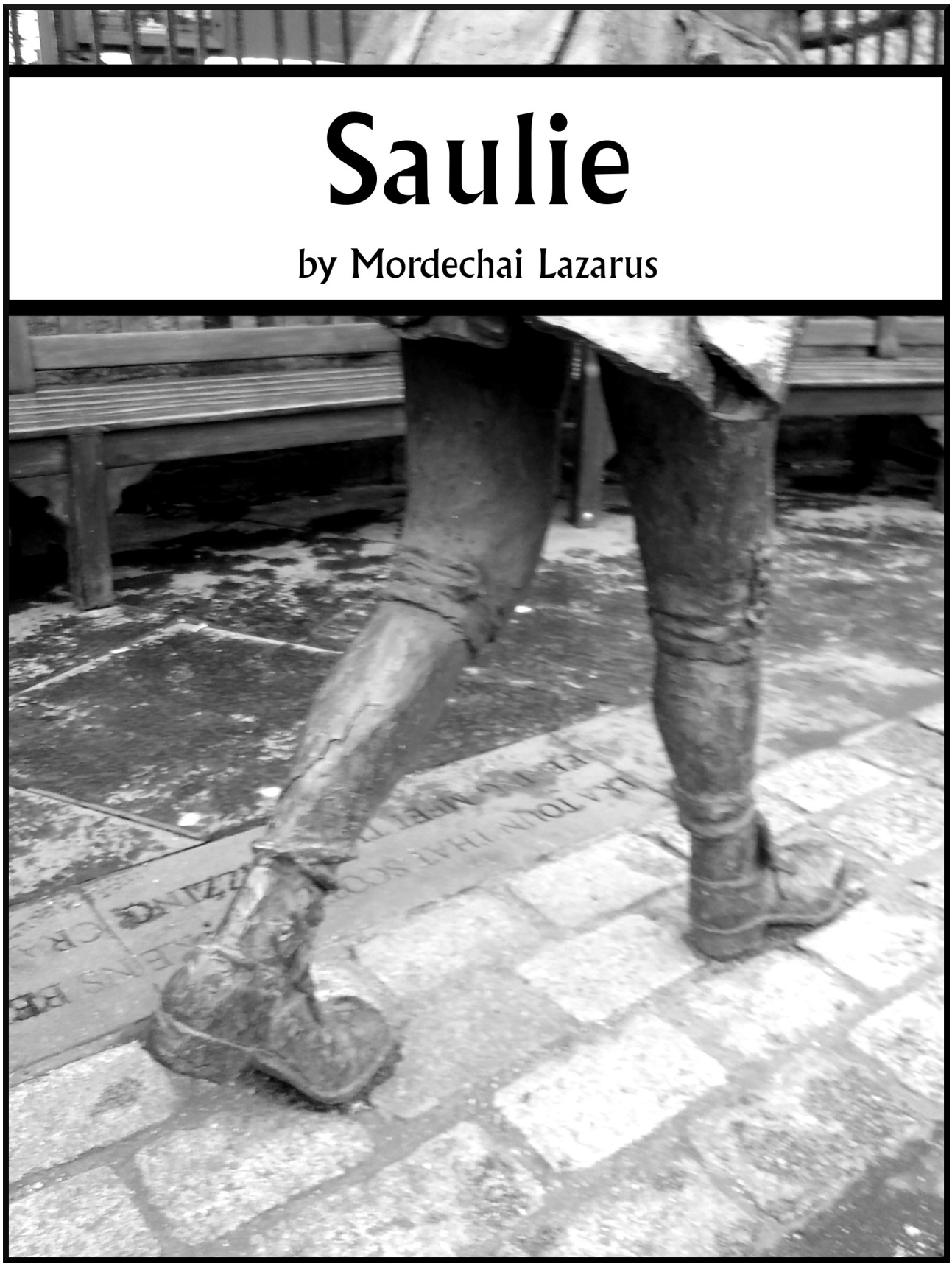
Saulie

by Mordechai Lazarus



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"Beautiful city of Edinburgh!
Where the tourist can drown his sorrow
By viewing your monuments and statues fine
During the lovely summer-time."

- William McGonagall
(Died 1902)

1. Saulie, lifelong pedestrian of Edinburgh, has died.

Saulie was, in a sense, a morning person. This was not to be understood in the normal moralising meaning of the phrase - where morning people are go-getters who leap out of bed ready to grind down the day with their pious devotion to hard graft. Saulie was often awake in the morning, but he was much too slow and absent-minded to leap out of anything. A tall, vague, thin man with white tufts of hair and a small white beard that was not entirely orderly, it was difficult to say exactly how old Saulie was, although he had clearly left the first flush and strength of youth behind him. In any case, Saulie was not the leaping sort of morning person. Although he had many good points about him, it would be hard to imagine a less traditionally industrious person. As it happened, Saulie got up early in order to see the dawn over Edinburgh. He didn't necessarily wake up entirely while his eyes sleepily admired the flecks of lights or the glowing grey silver curves of the sky, and in fact if he had undergone a medical examination when he was up at that early hour, it was perfectly likely that you would find that he was technically barely conscious. When his half-awake eyes had seen enough of the lights and darks of the sky, he would smile foolishly to himself and his feet would take him back to bed to sleep content until much later in the morning. Often he was so sleepy when he watched the rising day that he would only have the vaguest dream of the morning light, but even in this half-remembered sight of the dawn he found an immense comfort, and slept all the more soundly for it when he went back to bed. Saulie liked to try to see the dawn, just like he would try to stay and watch the sun set, partly because in Scotland a body should be appreciative of whatever sunlight they managed to get, but also because to him there was almost no sight more beautiful than the skies of Edinburgh, and especially early in the morning.

When he was more fully awake, Saulie would brush his teeth and pat fruitlessly at the unruly cloudy puff of his hair, and would start thinking about what he could say about people who have died. When Saulie was out and about, a wandering figure in his black clothes, it was understandable that to the untrained eye his air of absentness was difficult to distinguish from solemnity. In fact, he was not by nature a particularly morbid fellow, but Saulie, whose labours had been haphazard his whole life, had stumbled into the job of writing obituaries for a local and very minor Edinburgh newspaper 'New Reekie'. Or possibly website. Saulie was unclear what form the publication took, but in any case he was thankful to have the chance to do some work that someone actually wanted. Sighing Jill, the lady who had some sort of editorial role in the newspaper or website, had been kind enough to offer the job to Saulie. People were generally kind to Saulie, albeit often in an exasperated way.

There were several reasons you might choose to hire Saulie to write obituaries. He had a certain formal, spiritual, grave look about him that made him seem suitable for writing about the dead, for a start. He was also deeply interested in other people, and he could put words together passably well. Despite these qualifications and his quietly restrained enthusiasm for the task of memorialising the dead of Edinburgh, in actual fact, Saulie had been offered the job because they had forgotten to get in anyone else to do it when setting up the website or newspaper. His pal Fern often said with a note of annoyance that Saulie somehow knew almost everyone in Edinburgh. Saulie couldn't remember how he knew Sighing Jill, but she had thought of him to plaster over this minor crack in the edifice of the newspaper website so she didn't have to worry about it any more.

Historically, as his Aunt Mary had pointed out, Saulie had always lacked focus in his own life. Since he wanted to do a good job of writing memorials, and because he was a strange simple soul who cared about how people had lived, Saulie was very keen to find ways and tricks of making sure he

kept his mind suitably tuned to his job. If his mind was inevitably going to wander, Saulie thought, it might as well wander in some sort of vaguely useful direction. To this end, Saulie spent a lot of time composing practice obituaries in his head. He had discovered, however, that if he told people this it would make them uncomfortable, so he would usually think about how he would write his own obituary.

/Saulie of Abbey Hill, a man who was always trying to remember something but couldn't remember what, died this week./

/A well-known sight in the streets of Edinburgh, Saulie was taller than most everyone he had met and had hair that his best pal Fern once described as like 'a half-arsed pile of wispy snow'. Not many people knew that he was not bad at darts, perhaps as his height gave him some advantage, by allowing him to lean closer to the board when throwing. He was never able to become truly proficient at the game as he required someone else to work out the calculations needed for each throw, because he was unfortunately not blessed with a speedy power of mathematics. Despite having no firm ideas about spirituality, it was said that Saulie had an air about him of the pious. Perhaps, descended as he was from kirkmen and kirkwomen, this was some sort of genetic inheritance. His appearance, his short white beard, his habit of walking with his hands behind his back, and his tendency to dress in sombre shades - appear to have given many people the impression that he was some sort of freelance, non-denominational priest. Just as certain types of people are always asked for help in a shop when they don't work there, if Saulie was standing anywhere near houses of worship some passing tourist or enthusiast would almost always ask him such questions as the age of the church and when services were held. So as not to disappoint people in those situations, Saulie had looked up some basic information about the kirks of Edinburgh, in case he needed to pass information on to some poor lost soul who mistook him for a professional. But there must have been something inherently odd about Saulie's appearance, because once when a bunch of Rangers supporters were in town for a match, a drunk young man with the merest suggestion of a moustache had asked the passing Saulie if he was off to a costume party, which left him feeling very puzzled.
Saulie is survived by one unhealthy best friend and many Aunts./

Should his obituary have more achievements? More substance? More weight? Was it too late to improve it? Saulie had never been much good at thinking out what life should be and where everything should go. His own life tended to wander, too. Perhaps, Saulie thought to himself, it is past time that I try to plan things out? Write down ambitions and goals? It certainly felt that he had at some long past point crossed an invisible line, beyond which you were supposed to be old enough to have some sort of plan. Whereas his Aunt Mary used to say: "There is a flicker of a brain somewhere in there. It is a shame you do not do more with yourself, Saulie.", now she had simply shifted to "It is a shame you did not do more with yourself, Saulie." Perhaps it was too late. Saulie was mildly embarrassed about it, but he had never had any real sense of direction. Time had flowed out of his pockets as he had been going aimlessly about. It may have infuriated Aunt Mary, but he couldn't find it in himself to get too worked up about where the time had gone. Only a moment ago, he had been a serious-looking fellow about to start University with all of life ahead of him and great (if vague) successes to no doubt come, and then, whoosh, years had gone by and there was nothing he could do to stop them. And now Aunt Mary had moved from 'do not' to 'did not' - a gigantic sweep of time in just a few shifted letters. Saulie shrugged. Ah well, there wasn't much you could do about it, was there? And besides, there were no doubt some things to look forward to in the passing of time. Perhaps getting older would just mean finding new and exciting things to wander and wonder about. Saulie, for instance, had recently discovered that he enjoyed Kenyan food, old BBC

documentaries with John Betjeman looking at churches, and Phillip Glass' music. Who knows what he would discover tomorrow, or in a week, or a year?

For some time, Saulie had stayed in Montrose Terrace, in his Aunty Cressida's flat in Abbeyhill, that bump between things in Edinburgh. High on the top floor overlooking the road, every room in the flat was a different colour, as Aunty Cressida's husband Arthur had quietly considered himself to have a secret well of artistry, and one spring many years ago had been overcome by an enthusiasm for wall painting and decoration. The large living room that was never quite properly warm was painted a primary school blue, the kitchen was stop-sign red, and the bathroom, presumably to give a cheery start to the day, had been done in a bright yellow that often stunned Saulie when he went in to brush his teeth without first preparing himself for this burst of decorative enthusiasm.

Saulie mostly remembered Aunty Cressida's husband long after the days of colour-coding the flat had passed, when Arthur would often sadly mention that he didn't get out as much as he used to. Arthur had liked Saulie, because he could always sit in his armchair in the blue living room and talk to Saulie about football. Aunty Cressida had much less interest in football, and Saulie was a born listener - enthusiastic, nodding encouragingly, letting out thoughtful 'Hms', and 'Ahs' at just the right moments. The only other major topic of conversation that weighed on Arthur's mind was the ever-growing disgrace of traffic in Edinburgh. You could see the busy road below from the blue living room, and Aunty Cressida's husband used to stare out the window at the cars and trucks and buses like a suspicious old dog kept indoors for too long. As far as Arthur was concerned, there was too much traffic in Edinburgh, and something ought to be done about it. His plan, as far as it went, was to glare at the traffic and tut, counting cars and mumbling in quiet outrage to himself if nobody else was there for him to talk to. As far as Arthur was concerned, Edinburgh wasn't a city designed for cars at all. 'They're choking the city, Saulie! Choking it!' he would cry with concern, a little dampness in his eyes, and perhaps even miming a sort of strangulation of himself if he was feeling especially demonstrative. Arthur used to find old photographs of the city streets and say 'Look! Look at the space there used to be!' pointing out how wide Edinburgh streets looked without traffic and endless rows of parked cars. He'd beam triumphantly and slap at the old pictures as if they proved his point. Saulie used to smile and make sympathetic noises and listen carefully. Arthur seemed to appreciate this.

Of course, as much as Arthur used to say that he didn't get out as much as he used to, according to Aunty Cressida, he had not got actually about that much more in his glory days. Arthur had not been much of a one for travel. He and Aunty Cressida had been in the flat on the top of Abbeyhill for as long as Saulie could remember, and they both seemed perfectly content in their little world. One day when Aunty Cressida had popped out to the shops to get some milk, Arthur had died in his armchair. There had been a muttered discussion up and down the branches of the family about how Aunty Cressida would manage without the familiar presence of Arthur in his armchair to anchor her life, but while all this talk was going on, Aunty Cressida had decided that she was going to pack her bags and go live somewhere warm. Before anyone noticed, she had moved herself to a small mini-château in the South of France where the average number of sunny days easily trumped those of Edinburgh. Aunty Cressida had decided that while she was catching up on a lifetime of missed heat, Saulie would move into her flat in Montrose Terrace to look after the place and run postal errands so that she would have access to those Scottish bits and pieces that the Southern French were incapable of doing in the way to which she was accustomed. Saulie, who at the time (as at any other time in his life) had no particular plans, was more than happy to move into the multi-coloured flat. In fact, as Fern pointed out, if Aunty Cressida hadn't decided that Saulie would be house-sitting for her for the foreseeable, who knows where Saulie would have ended up? Out on the streets? Wandering up and down supermarket aisles to stay warm? Trying to sleep in a bush somewhere? Saulie knew he was,

in his own foolish meandering way, a very lucky fellow. He had never been much good at worrying about the important details of life and was even less competent at managing many of the small practical aspects of modern-day existence, and as such he was particularly delighted when things had worked out well, because he knew that if the universe left matters for Saulie himself to manage, the universe should not hold its breath.

And so Saulie had been living for some years now in Aunty Cressida's flat, an arrangement that allowed him to survive with his piecemeal employment. Edinburgh is very often a painfully expensive city to live in, so it was quite a piece of luck that Aunty Cressida had thought of him. He lived in the different coloured rooms of the flat, perfectly comfortable, changing almost nothing and living in the remains of Aunty Cressida and Arthur's old life.

Saulie had passed through several jobs since university, and never showing much aptitude for most of them. In fact, when he was fresh out the other side of university education, he had been fired from a bistro after only working a single shift as a waiter. Because the manager at the little French restaurant had only taken him on as a favour to Auntie Nicky, Saulie had felt a wee bit guilty about losing the job so quickly. The manager was a man who looked youngish about most of his person, but very old and very tired about the eyes, and he had assured Saulie with a mild aura of awe that in his entire life-long experience he had never known anybody who had to be fired from a waiting job quite so quickly. On first glance, things had not looked so hopeless; Saulie cut a fine figure with his slim height and his hair, which even back then was essentially all turned to white. He could even sieve some authentic-sounding scraps of French through his muddled memory to bring out if necessary. On the other hand, it quickly became apparent that Saulie was astonishingly slow in going about his duties, and inclined to forget which table was which, despite there being only ten in the small restaurant, and most drastically of all, it was discovered that plates seemed to slide slowly out of Saulie's hands with unusual regularity. It was clear that no amount of advice and training could remedy this. Saulie would regularly drift off to thinking about something else and forget he was holding dishes at all, leading to their inevitable return to earth. The manager explained with a pained expression to Saulie that he had never met anyone less suited to working as a waiter, and in some ways that showed what an extraordinary case Saulie was, but asked him please not to come back in, because the small amount Saulie would have earned was already outstripped by the absent-minded breakages he had caused.

After this failed foray into the hospitality industry, Saulie had then spent some time tutoring a thirteen year-old boy whose parents had a very cut-throat social Darwinian view of the world and were interested in getting a leg up on the competition before even looking about for a university. The boy had no discernible interest in any of the books Saulie went through, and Saulie could not blame him. The parents, however, did blame Saulie, and, after some time, Saulie was asked by the boy's mother, who seemed to be disgusted with Saulie's failure to alter the fundamental character of her son, not to bother coming back. Saulie still had occasional work helping the various young descendants of Auntie Varsh with their schoolwork, but he was never sure how much to ask for, and most often Auntie Varsh would pay Saulie in tubs of curry. He felt this was by and large a fair exchange for spending time trying to tutor Auntie Varsh's extended family because she was an excellent cook, and with every bite you could taste that she was worried that Saulie didn't eat enough, which makes all the difference to the taste.

Saulie had also worked now and then as a copy writer, although he had never met the people he was writing things for and had never really understood what this job was exactly. The work seemed to have something to do with filling up the internet with plausible-looking short essays that his

mysterious online employers would subsequently put advertisements in, or near, or something like that. Saulie actually rather enjoyed this job, and was thinking that he'd put together an excellent little thing on Egyptian imagery when he was informed that while his pieces of work were adequate, he took much too long to produce them, and you couldn't possibly wallpaper the internet with words at the rate Saulie was producing them. So that had been the end of that.

Sporadically, Saulie had also been employed to do research for eccentric amateurs with particular enthusiastic interests. Many of these employers had been infected by a sudden mania to dig deep into some stratum of local history. These people had hired Saulie to do research for them on topics of fervent interest such as the following:

1. What was the history of a hedge at the back of a building over these three addresses? Who planted it and who was traditionally responsible for it? Could you now make an argument for this hedge as a relatively recent and frankly illegal addition? Could you cut it down? I mean, obviously, surely, you could cut if down?
2. What evidence can be found for the secret occult club of the late eighteenth century that used to meet in a specific, if now unknown basement of a pub, perhaps off the Royal Mile? If there was only very little evidence for this occult club, surely that was simply a sign of how well it had hidden its activities from outsiders? Was it not entirely possible that these historical occultists were still practising secret rites even today in so-called modern-day Edinburgh, perhaps practising them in a basement of a pub you walked by every day? How many pubs in Edinburgh had cellars? Surely that was suspicious?
3. Given that there is constant reference in my family history to the remarkable wildness and hairiness of my ancestors, is it not entirely probable that there was some strain of lycanthropy in the past, some sort of biological mutation as yet not understood that may have explained many of the local legends, not as well known as they should be, of wild men and women, werewolves, and shape-shifting hairy beasties?

That last piece of research on shaggy and possibly werewolfy ancestors had Saulie working for a fellow with intense staring eyes and a terrifying explosion of jagged grey hair. He looked as if he had been recently electrocuted and wasn't quite over it. That said, besides his obsessive interest in the possible animalistic nature of his ancestors, that shocked-looking employer had been a nice enough man who, as it turned out, knew an awful lot about horse-racing and always offered Saulie excellent tips.

Although Saulie wasn't anything that you might call a success, these jobs meant he got to read interesting things and meet all sorts of interesting people. Saulie's pal Fern thought that they were, frankly, a bit too interesting, and that anyone who hired Saulie for anything was probably some variety of lunatic, drawn from Edinburgh's sizeable population of more-or-less functioning lunatics. Saulie found everyone interesting, and tried not to be judgemental, so he was perfectly happy to work for people who had decided to devote themselves to intense, bizarre, and barely explicable obsessions. Why wouldn't they want to scratch at the metaphorical dirt of Edinburgh and Scotland to see what they could find? After all, so much of the past was gone, wasn't it? Saulie liked to sit and try hard to imagine how it felt to be someone else sitting where he was, maybe two hundred years ago, and not only to think how they lived, but what it felt like to be them - what they worried about or found annoying, whether they had a hunger for some particular snack or couldn't stop picking at a small hole in their trousers. All the past was lost in a sort of deep grey fog, and it took real concentration to push your mind from here and now, all the way into the deep mysteries of there and then. No wonder some people who started thinking intently about the past ended up carried away by small madnesses of imagination. You had to push your imagination to the limits to try to sink into the barely visible past as it was. It was no doubt easy to get carried away with this sort of thing, and

Saulie felt intense sympathy for those who had been swept away by their interests. He liked to listen to them. To be honest, that was most of the job when these sorts hired him. Certainly, there was sitting in libraries and tracking down books and and maps and references, but the real meat of the job was giving them someone to listen to them. Fern thought Saulie should get some cards printed up to hand out to wild-eyed individuals he might run into in order to drum up business, cards that said no pet theory was too crack-brained for Saulie to listen to, no individual had strayed too far from regular human preoccupations into wild thoughts that Saulie couldn't hear their confessions and dreams with patient pleasure. 'The priestie for any beastie', he should write on his business cards, Fern said.

Unfortunately, while the people who hired Saulie for this sort of work were usually extremely enthusiastic about their various pet beliefs, the work itself was sporadic and unpredictable and often didn't work out paying that brilliantly by the time Saulie was done. He never minded much, since he found living in their fevered attempts to make the past speak to them a very diverting way to pass a few months. Perhaps the weather had been secretly improving in Edinburgh, and those who would ordinarily have come to Saulie struggling with the excitement of their pet theories were outdoors hiking in the crisp air, because by and large what little work he had received from the wild-eyed had gone from a trickle to a drip over the last few years. The bank of Saulie had started to look a little shabby, and concerns about money were even beginning to pierce the absent-minded fog that surrounded his snowy head. Of course, Saulie was lucky again, and it was then that Sighing Jill had thrown the obituaries his way.

Saulie wanted to do a good job with the obituary writing. Of course, he almost certainly needed the money, but he wanted to do this thing as properly as he could. Surely, as Aunt Mary might say to him, it was past time that he did something as properly as he could? An obituary was a serious business. It was trying to distil the lives and memories of the dead. He frowned to himself. Saulie thought you should try to do your best by the dead. He put hours and hours into the memorials he wrote, no matter how short they ended up. He talked to everyone he could and researched and thought long and hard. That was the most important part for Saulie. The obituary was only the end product of thinking long and hard about the dead, after trying to honour them by intense and thoughtful reflection on the person who had been.

Saulie was also making an extreme effort to be organised and meet deadlines for his obituaries, which was of course difficult because he took his time and had a tendency to get lost in thought. A small amount of this effort to keep deadlines more or less in mind was out of respect for the dead, although he privately thought they weren't really in a rush for anything any more, but the living didn't want to wait around grieving for too long while Saulie thought of the right adjective to put here or the best and gentlest way to sum up a part of a person who perhaps wasn't the prettiest to think about. But mostly Saulie was making an effort to remind himself regularly about his deadlines because of Sighing Jill, who had been kind enough to give Saulie this job when he needed it. Sighing Jill was perhaps the most stressed person in Edinburgh. She barely seemed to sleep for all her stress about getting the articles done on time, about her children's various troubles, about the very state of the world itself, which according to Sighing Jill, was as stressed as Jill herself, and seemed ever on the verge of shattering into a billion broken pieces. Saulie was always worried about making her worry even worse. Who knows what the slightest extra feather-weight of anxiety fluttering down on to Sighing Jill's besieged mind might do? She might implode from that tiny amount of stress too far, leaving nothing but a mysterious dense tar-like substance. No, it was Saulie's duty to get his work done on time, even if it was a constant struggle against the slow sweeping tidal draw of his own rambling nature. This was one thing Sighing Jill wouldn't have to worry about, Saulie promised himself. He would devote his full time and energy to doing the best

job of writing the obituaries for Sighing Jill's local paper, or website, or whatever it was, the name of which had escaped Saulie for the moment.

It seemed to Saulie that putting yourself in the right way was very important when trying to think properly about things like lives and deaths. Saulie had decided to put himself into the proper mindset for writing obituaries. He had never worked in an office in his entire life (and indeed, offices made him vaguely and inexplicably nervous), but some time ago when he first started writing obits, Saulie took to wearing a sombre black suit in the hope that his thoughts would also become sombre. In fact, wearing a black suit did help him focus, and Saulie couldn't really get into the proper business of thinking about what he would write until he was dressed in his black suit. In one of those odd but inevitable tricks of collective memory, after Saulie had been wearing his sombre-thinking suit for a few years, nobody could remember Saulie ever not dressing like that. Saulie himself had only the vaguest idea of how he dressed before, but in fact, his thinking suit was another thing left behind by Uncle Arthur. When Arthur had died, his old wooden wardrobe in the lime-coloured bedroom held a small collection of formal clothes. Saulie was not sure what Arthur had worn them for back in his day, but they were made of the sort of thick black wool that is meant to last a lifetime, and in Arthur's case, had lasted longer than that. If Saulie was going to do a really good piece of serious walking and thinking, Arthur had even left him a sort of Victorian-looking black morning coat that was long enough that it didn't look at all ridiculous on Saulie. It was almost as if these few clothes had been put there by Arthur until Saulie would need them. Saulie had never really had well-made clothes before, and besides giving him the sort of appearance he considered necessary for good obituary writing, the black woollen clothes were made for Edinburgh weather. They were protective and warm when Edinburgh was cold, but breathed well enough when the warmth of the city momentarily and randomly swelled up to something above room temperature. Saulie thought the cloth of the black suit was almost like magic. There was a subtle zig-zag herringbone pattern in the jacket that Saulie found fascinating, and staring at the little arrowed lines in the material and tracing them with his fingertips put him into a mild sort of trance that frankly, was perhaps not entirely useful for producing the writing he had promised Sighing Jill.

At that moment, Saulie had put on his black suit and was out in the open air of Abbeyhill thinking about a lady who had died recently, an artist who had lived nearby in the Colony Flats. Her name was Nellie Brown. She had made sculptures, mostly, of things she had found about the place. Piles of twigs and buttons and string, with names like 'Pickling No.2' or 'Last Call for Autumn, Please'. Saulie didn't know much about that sort of thing, and had been reading up on sculpture to try to understand Nellie Brown a little better. He had also been ringing up people who had known her, to see if those who had actually talked to her when she was alive had known her better. It wasn't always the case.

Saulie wandered and thought about where Nellie Brown had walked across Edinburgh and the countryside and out to the hills and lochs of Scotland, always looking about her for things that were right for her sculptures. The landscape she walked through, the whole wide world was the material for her work. Saulie liked the sound of this. How excellent to be able to make something valued from the smallest, least important things you picked up from the ground. He wanted to make sure that something of this was in her obituary. In the spirit of Nellie Brown, Saulie stopped and stooped to look at a crisp packet that had been wedged into the corner of a window frame. The packet was a fluorescent yellow, like a piece of a sun that had drifted down to earth. On closer contemplation, the crisps looked to have been roast beef flavour. A roast beef flavoured piece of the sun. Keeping this crisp packet in mind and handing it in his imagination to Nellie Brown for her inspection, Saulie walked on his way until, before he knew it, he was heading up the steps to Aunty Cressida's flat. He didn't even properly notice that he was back inside the polychromatic flat until his skin momentarily

prickled from the sensation of moving from the cold outdoor air into the indoors. Saulie thought how odd it was that you hardly ever realised how cold you were until you went somewhere warm.

Pushed shyly into a corner down the end of the corridor of Aunty Cressida's flat was an unassuming dark brown scroll-top desk. To Saulie's mind, the ability to draw a lid down over the desk was an extremely good invention, because once you had done with your desk-based business, you could draw a veil over the whole working day by folding down the battered lid. The roll-top desk was also an excellent spot to shove bills and important letters where they would be safe, but crucially, out of sight when the desk was closed. Saulie felt an immense sense of organisation knowing that all his important papers were there in the little wooden cavern of the desk, even if he preferred not to look at them and could not say where they were exactly amongst the accumulation of paper.

The body of Saulie's computer lived uncomplainingly underneath the desk, an old campaigner of a machine that wheezed and coughed when you first woke it up, but a machine that was steadfast and reliable for all that. Saulie liked to tap gently with his foot at the old campaigner under the desk to show he appreciated the machine's efforts. It was reassuring to be surrounded and supported by heavy, solid objects that were having a good go at permanence. Saulie disliked working on slimmer and lighter computers. They felt so insubstantial. Inside the scroll-top desk, crammed uncomfortably between books and notebooks and the wadded piles of paper was a small screen and a chunky beige keyboard that made an excellent amount of noise when you typed on it. This keyboard made Saulie feel almost musical when he was banging away on the keys, especially if he had a sentence that had a good cadence to it, like 'the whole wide world was her material for her work'. He would give that a real solemn drama when he played it out on the keyboard - the WHOLE wide WORLD ...tum tum tum... was her MAT-E-RI-AL! Saulie had once gone to hear some Bach played on the Frobenius pipe organ while sitting in the pale blue pews at the Canongate Kirk, and he was very much taken by the solemn, sturdy efficiency of the tones that came from an unseen organist, a sound that filled the whole room from floor to ceiling. He wanted his typing on his keyboard to sound a little something like that. It was perhaps a good thing, then, that Saulie lived on his own.

As was clear from the totemic significance of his black thinking suit, Saulie was a strong believer in the spirit of things, and of having the right sort of things around you when you were trying to do something particular. For this reason, and because he wanted there to be music in his keyboard when he was picking out the pieces of a memorial, he also liked to have the right sort of music playing when working on obituaries. Aunty Cressida had left a substantial collection of classical music on old vinyl records that she had no need of in the south of France, and while Saulie considered himself to be much more musically ignorant than he would have liked, he faithfully cycled through the shelf of records. He could never remember the name of the person who had composed the music, or the orchestra, or the frankly unmemorable title or number the symphony or such had, but he always liked the sense that playing some music helped fill up the flat, like it was pouring a revivifying and essential sonorous oxygen into every room. Despite being unable to recall what each record sounded like when he stared at the cover, Saulie had, however, managed to categorise two smaller sections of pre-identifiable records to be deployed when specific working conditions were needed. The first bunch of records were a series of brass band tunes (Saulie believed these had been Arthur's) that he found very useful to play when he was cleaning the flat of many colours, for the steady regimental jig it gave to the work. The second collection of records was made up of all the Requiems he had managed to discover in Aunty Cressida's collection. These, naturally, helped Saulie get his mind on the business at hand of commemorating the dead.

Besides the thinking suit and the funereal records, Saulie also liked to take long walks round and around cemeteries to help put him in mind of the kind of things he should write about when

memorialising the dead. Luckily, an old city like Edinburgh offered several well-established cemeteries nearby for Saulie's purposes. As a form of mental exercise, he would compose hypothetical obituaries, often spending a lot of his walk again trying to piece together an inscription for himself.

/Saulie, biscuit connoisseur, has died./

/Saulie, who once got lost in his own flat, has died./

He usually got stuck on that middle part between his name and the announcement of his death - the pointed, short epitaph to try to sum up a life. The problem was that Saulie was never sure what to put there for himself.

/Saulie, unsung inventor of a new kind of sandwich-spread combining marmalade, hummus and chocolate, has died./

/Saulie, possibly the tallest man in Abbeyhill, has died./

He had of course been alive for a fair while now, but what was there to say about it? In his usual way, he had sort of just wandered through his days.

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Feeling a trifle peckish, Saulie meandered into the small red kitchen and from a cupboard took out a giant tub of peanut butter. He rustled around in the cutlery draw until he found a fork, and using this he scooped from the tub what he considered to be a moderate amount of peanut butter and put it in his mouth, chewing on it slowly. Despite his chronic habit of peanut-butter snacking, Saulie was quite a passable cook, mostly because Auntie Varshika had once drilled him until he could cook what she considered to be the bare minimum number of meals. Auntie Varsh found Saulie's thinness somehow suspicious, as if it was the result of near criminal self-neglect and hopeless indifference to life. Auntie Varsh was convinced that she had to train Saulie, otherwise he might well starve to death. Auntie Varsh suspected Saulie of having developed bad food habits, like so many others (so she said) seduced by the siren lure of empty take-away culture that was, in her view, little better than eating the containers that so-called food came in that were strewn around the streets of Edinburgh. In this Auntie Varsh was wrong. Saulie had a healthy respect for fine food and home-made food and international food, and in fact, as it turned out when Auntie Varsh had him under her eye to watch him prepare a stew or roast a tray of vegetables, Saulie was perfectly competent in the kitchen. The truth of the matter wasn't that Saulie was bad at cooking, he was just bad at remembering when to eat, and as he lived alone with neither man, woman, child, dog, cat, nor even budgie or goldfish to remind him about meals, Saulie often simply forgot to eat entirely. That was why he kept up a good stock of tubs of peanut butter on hand, so that if he felt vague hunger pangs distracting him when he was occupied thinking about this or that, he could just eat a few forkfuls of the stuff and feel full enough to go on with his distracted business.

Padding around the flat and chewing over his tricky mouthful of peanut butter, Saulie scratched his head, found a single shoe left in the corridor and walked around looking for the second of the pair. Abandoning the shoe by an armchair, he tried to remember what he had been trying to remember to do in the first place. At a loss, he decided to open up the roll-top desk and check his messages on the computer. Opening his email, Saulie said 'Ah!' with satisfaction. He had just been reminded that it was his phone he had been looking for. The email that reminded him of this was from his best pal, Fern, who had written Saulie a message with a Subject in all capital letters that said: WHY DO YE EVEN HAVE A PHONE YE LANG DAFT BASTARD? Saulie patted at his springy white hair. When had he last seen his phone? Earlier, he had thought that he had heard a distant buzz that might have been Fern trying to call him. Saulie, being the sort of individual who didn't want to bother anybody, had set his phone so it wouldn't make too much noise, and it now made the phone

equivalent of diffidently clearing your throat to get someone's attention. It was quite the clever little device, really. However, because his phone was so shy and retiring, and because Saulie was so absent-minded, he very rarely knew where he had left that clever little device. It was often a slow contest of hide-and-seek to see whether he could discover where he had put the phone before the battery died. Hidden in a draw? Or on top of the fridge? Filed neatly in a bookshelf between a guide to birds and a book on Christis Kirk poems? The fact of the matter was, if you wanted to communicate with Saulie, you just had to accept that you couldn't do it in any sort of speedy way. This was true, in fact, even if you were talking to him face-to-face. His pal Fern more or less accepted the dawdling communication of Saulie, but reserved the right, as seen from her email, to be angry about it. Fern did not by and large discriminate, and was generally furious about things she grudgingly accepted, things she rejected out of hand, and everything in between.

2. Full-Sugar Irn Bru, a beloved Scottish drink, has died.

Coming down the stairs and out on to the street, Saulie saw what he suspected was the sun far off in the distance, little more than a fuzzy worn white spot in the grey wallpaper of the sky. Working under the reasonable assumption that he was late for meeting Fern, he took great spidery strides across Easter Road with his long thin legs. Fern wouldn't exactly forgive Saulie for being late, but she had known him a long while now and was at least used to his particular eccentric understanding of time. Saulie tried to work out how many years Fern had put up with him being late. It was at least since university. Saulie had finished his degree, Fern had not. Fern was short and furious, and her hair fell to spiky points. She and Saulie made for such a contrasting appearance that it seemed to delight people to see them going about town. Those people sometimes wondered how two such very different people had become friends.

Unusually, Saulie had met Fern at a party. Saulie was never terribly comfortable at parties, mostly because he was not much of a drinker. It made him feel dizzy almost instantly, and then he felt like the earth was about to slip out from underneath his feet and leave him falling forever. Whatever everyone else enjoyed about alcohol was a mystery to him. One noisy night many years ago he had been invited to come and be awkwardly crammed into a badly-lit flat in Newington with many other people he knew in passing. Being even more of an innocent about matters of drink back in the day, not to mention being especially poor at the time as well, Saulie had spent a good while at the supermarket, standing and staring at labels with intense scrutiny, before finally buying a particularly nasty bottle of red at random simply because he suddenly realised how late he was for the party.

The party had possibly been one of the many thrown by Teddy Orr, who loved nothing more than throwing parties, as it gave him a chance to let people stand around and admire him. Even if this particular party didn't technically happen to be Teddy's, he as usual was circled by a group of admirers as he declaimed loudly on some opinion or another. Saulie nodded at Teddy and his audience when he arrived and did the rounds about the room to say hello to everyone he knew. Having been once around the place and at a loss as to what he should do next, Saulie made the fatal mistake of drinking a glass of the red wine that he had brought. This was a wine not so much for connoisseurs as for hardened experts. Saulie was no match for it. He quickly felt himself become quite hot and unwell, as if the blood in his head was evaporating out of his ears. He immediately felt a gripping anxiety. To be honest, Saulie, despite being an affable fellow, was not that fond of that sort of party. Besides being hopeless at drinking, there was always very loud music playing, which meant that Saulie, being as tall as he was, would have to spend the whole night hunched over other people's heads and trying to shout down at them just to make conversation. After his deadly glass of Château Pizen, he distinctly felt himself swaying to and fro, like a flagpole at dangerous risk of toppling over in high winds.

As it happened, Fern was the only person who noticed Saulie wavering, and she was as sympathetic as Fern could be. She had shouted up at him that it was a long way for Saulie to topple down from up there, so he better watch it, pal. Although Fern was short and aggressively solid, Saulie was delighted to discover that he didn't need to crouch down to speak to her, because Fern had excellent and mighty lungs. They chatted. Almost immediately, it turned out that they were both interested in the video of the song 'Eurodisco' by the band Bis. Fern happily admitted that much of her interest in the song was probably because she fancied the singer, Manda Rin. Saulie never really had any particular opinion on attractiveness, and had no strong feelings on Ms. Rin's appearance, but he

found himself explaining that he was strangely fascinated by the music video, which took place in a sort of impossibly-shaped strip-lit limousine as the band sang about parties (possibly?) in a way that was both slightly sneery yet aspirational. Saulie at that stage of his life had not travelled any further from Scotland than England, and wondered what sort of strange lands and people the pop song promised. He may have blethered on about this song for quite some time. Fern and Saulie had been friends, for better or worse, ever since. This is not so unusual, after all. Lifelong friendships have been built on much more unstable foundations than a pop song.

Even back then, Fern clearly had little interest in University. She claimed she had wanted to study poetry to impress girls, but decided after some half-hearted attempts to attend lectures, that she had simply read too much Dickinson when she was too young, and it had affected her too strongly and tricked her into thinking that further education was a good idea. So it was not much of a surprise when she decided to drop out or, as she put it, to fire University before things got any worse. Saulie, naturally, continued on his way through the course from sheer curious inertia. They remained friends in any case, and since Saulie had a very relaxed attitude to schedules, Fern's dismissal of the University did very little to impact on their time set aside to go and see films, shows, and student pubs, where Saulie's job was to talk with Fern as she drank whatever alcohol was discounted, and then to be her designated walker and make sure she got home safely without too many fights with postboxes and rubbish bins and the like. Saulie just liked spending time with Fern. It didn't occur to her to expect anything much from Saulie, and she, despite being helplessly furious with much of the world, was much more patient with Saulie's airy ramblings than anyone else he had ever met.

Since then, Fern had gone through a succession of jobs, none of which had meant anything much to her. The one occupation she had consistently over the years, albeit one she had a very ambivalent relationship with, was performing in the Edinburgh Festival. It was basically stand-up comedy, but Fern had a very strong mental block against ever admitting this. She even had a bit about how she was too short to do stand-up that she used in the opening of her show for a few seasons. It was mostly jokes Fern did, of a sort. She had worked enough Festivals now that she could attract reliable, if humble, audience numbers to fill the small venues of Edinburgh - on top of bars, in tucked-away rooms at the back of run-down churches, and one year in what seemed to be some sort of ancient stone underground chamber that smelled of old damp and was clearly not designed for humans to spend more than five minutes inside. Saulie went, at the very least, to the opening night of her shows every year, and at most of the right times, did a sort of fluting confused laugh that was like the passing of a gentle breeze. Saulie wished he could produce a big booming laugh, the sort that Fern was after, but he just didn't have the build for it. Still, even if she couldn't hear him, she would know he would be there, sitting right up at the back so as not to block the view of anyone in front of him. Fern wasn't exactly over the moon about doing slight variations of her show every year, but she was stuck with it, partly because she needed the small amount of money it brought in, but mostly because she needed the heady instant shot of approval you could only get from an audience, even if she hated herself for needing it. It was like a mildly terrible addiction.

As far as Fern could tell, she was mostly performing for people from overseas who were in Edinburgh specifically for the Festival and to touch old buildings. She didn't know where these people came from so reliably year after year, but Fern could say things in a sort of cranky-old-woman Scottish accent and they would find almost all of those words funny. There didn't seem to be any logic to it. For some time, Fern had wanted to start playing an instrument, to do something that looked more like performance. But she wouldn't touch the guitar, or the keyboard, because too many comics used them and the idea of looking like a comedian rankled Fern. Anyway, she also couldn't actually play the guitar or the keyboard. The only thing left within her budget and her ability was the recorder, which she considered the most hateful instrument known to humanity. However, if people

came into a gig late or heckled her, Fern would punish them with a special recorder solo. It was tough on the rest of the audience, but you had to teach people manners somehow.

Despite an otherwise consistent lack of order in the messiness of their lives, Saulie and Fern would regularly meet up for lunch or coffee several times a week. They would sit and talk about nothing important. It was a pleasant enough way to check that they were both still alive. They were a stable point in each other's weeks, the sort of natural double-act of friendship that Saulie thought was one of the most rare and wonderful things in the world.

Saulie was spindlyishly drifting towards Leith Walk, where he was supposed to meet Fern at a small Italian café, one of their regular haunts. Saulie hardly ever saw any other customers at the café and wasn't sure how the place survived. Maybe they did a big plate of pasta for quick-eating students around lunch time, provided the youth shoved the food down and left in the blink of an eye, and perhaps that rush-hour gobbling of cheap pasta was enough to balance the books. What Saulie liked about this particular Italian café was that it had bottles of chinotto, a fizzy bitter orange juice he enjoyed every now and then as a treat. Sitting in the café, he was enjoying it at that very moment. Saulie supposed that the chinotto had probably come all the way from Italy, so drinking it had a pleasant ritual importance for him. With slow serious concentration, he'd pour out the dark red chinotto over ice until the tall glass was about a third full, and then stop to admire it, swishing the drink around to make it clink and bubble. He supposed this was something like how people who were into fancy expensive whisky or wine enjoyed their drinks, examining the precious stuff, reverently putting off the moment until they finally had to have their first sip.

"Just fuckin drink the thing, ye numptie," growled Fern, "It isnae liquid gold or nothing."

Fern chugged from her bottle of Irn Bru sadly. She watched the bright orange liquid tilt like a spirit level and squinted at it suspiciously.

"It doesnae taste the same since they took the sugar out," she said.

"They only took some of the sugar away," Saulie pointed out, "There's still sugar in Irn Bru."

"Ach, so they say. How can you trust people that'd take away that sort of thing? Who'd behave like that? It's like snatching sweeties from the mouths of bairns, isn't it? This stuff tastes of nothing now. Naw, for full experience, Saulie-boy, you want all the sugar owed to your drink, every last gram of the stuff, and you want your full-blooded Irn Bru in a nice big glass bottle that you could cradle happily besides you when you sleep."

Saulie looked thoughtful and squinted one eye at his chinotto.

"I don't think I could drink a whole big bottle of Irn Bru," he confessed.

"Disgraceful. It hurts me to hear that, Saulie. But you are right. You'd leave it somewhere and forget it when ye was only halfway through," sniffed Fern, "No respect for tradition, some people. Huh! Fancy, Irn Bru in these manky plastic bottles. Ye widnae drink top shelf whisky out of a paper cup, would you? Or eat a Michelin star meal using nothing but that dirty clarty old circle of cardboard that you get from underneath a frozen pizza for a plate, would ye?"

Saulie shook his head firmly to show he wouldn't dream of it.

"Well, there you go then!" Fern said triumphantly.

Taking a train ticket out from his pocket, Saulie read his small neat writing on the back.

"A word!" he announced, "Bubbly-jock: a turkey, as in, a turkey bird. Used in the phrase 'hauden doun by the bubbly jock', which means to be completely overwhelmed by having too many things to do, the turkey perhaps being the symbolic bird of frantic gobbling overwhelmingness."

Fern applauded politely.

"I once ate so much turkey," she said, "That I went and slipped into a sort of visionary trance," she said, "Ah went slidin out of ma puir auld turkey infused body and off travelling the universe in some kind of mystical astral form. Didnae see much to write home about in the cosmos, I don't mind telling you."

Two arancini had appeared on the table when they hadn't been paying attention. There was a thin smear of oil where they lay on the plate. Fern attacked hers with enthusiasm.

"Christ, Ah'm starvin," she said.

Saulie got a knife and fork and hovered over the plate, uncertain where to begin, before he carefully cut a small section off his fried rice ball and popped it in his mouth. He smiled foolishly as he chewed.

/Saulie, Chinotto Connoisseur, Died today from choking on an arancini,/

he thought to himself as he ate. What was the singular of arancini? Arancino? Fern had wolfed half of hers down before Saulie had even finished chewing through his first bite. He turned and stared towards the wall like it wasn't there. Saulie's distant stare this time was due to his wondering what the worst food you could choke to death on might be. The thought of dying from cucumber slices suddenly struck him as a personally ignoble way to go. There was something unprepossessing about thin slices of cucumber, and losing to them in a battle to the death would be most dishonourable.

Fern took his far-off look to be guilt-inducing.

"What?" she said with a mouth full of food, "I telt ye I was starvin. It's eatin me up inside. I've given up smoking."

"Ah well done, Fern!" said Saulie encouragingly, "How long's that been?"

"Couple of hours," grunted Fern.

Saulie nodded.

"Right, well, you have to start somewhere, don't you," he said.

"I've done nothing since but think about smoking every single moment. Lovely, disgusting, stinking smoking."

"Yes, but I'm sure not smoking will make you feel much better," Saulie hazarded.

"I don't want to feel better. I want to set fire to things and suck up the smoke right down into my lungs."

"If you do keep on stopping smoking," Saulie pointed out brightly, "It will mean that you will stop leaving lighters in my pockets."

"Huh!" Fern bristled, "You hardly noticed them, did ye? What are all them pockets in your big black jacket for, anyway? It's dead convenient to know where my lighters are. It's like when you keep something in a special bowl in your hall table."

"But in my pockets," Saulie protested.

"I don't know if we could fit a special bowl into your pockets, lad, but Ahm game to give it a gae if you are."

Saulie had a quick dig through his pockets and soon found (among many other items he had himself left there) a blue plastic lighter and a sort of knockoff cheap metal one with a laughing cat badly etched on the side. He began to place them on the table carefully in case Fern should want them back, but then decided that he shouldn't tempt her. If she had a lighter (or two) she might decided that she may as well have some cigarettes to go with them. Saulie put the lighters back into random pockets.

"Anyway, anyone new recently turned up deid and provide you with work?" Fern asked through a mouthful.

"I've finished on Nellie Brown," said Saulie.

Fern took a swig of Irn Bru.

"Who's she when she was at home and alive then?"

"A local artist," Saulie explained. He was always enthusiastic to talk about people whose obituaries he was writing. He spent so much time thinking about them, it felt good to be able to share what he knew about them with someone else. That someone else was inevitably Fern. "Nellie Brown made these interesting sculptures and, as far as I could tell, even when for the majority of her time nobody thought the things she did mattered or were interesting, she stuck to it, because she never stopped thinking that her sculptures were important, that they were good work. And she lived most of her life

just down the road from me and I never knew her until she died. Isn't that odd?" A flicker of sadness passed over Saulie's face. "I sometimes think it's a shame that I only get to know all these things about these people when they've stopped being alive."

Fern shook her head.

"Ach, you already know half of Edinburgh, don't you? Although I dinnae know if you could say that people in Embrah are necessarily alive. If you ask me, the evidence for life here is very, very, doubtful. I couldn't put up my hand and say I'd definitely met anyone who was absolutely alive here." Saulie was about to protest that he had definitely met people who were alive in Edinburgh, but Fern ignored him and went on. "As for your deid artist, who knows if you missed out on anything not knowing her when she was walkin about? Maybe she was rude, or boringly self-obsessed. Been around artists a lot, Saulie-boy, and as far as I'm concerned the whole lot of 'em are only good for one thing: free booze at exhibition openings."

"Sometimes they also have little snacks," Saulie pointed out.

"Aye, those are some top-tier proper artists right there," said Fern, smiling as she chewed at the thought, "I cannot lie, Saulie-boy, I am very partial to small food. Take a quiche, or a pie, or a sausage roll and make them wee enough that I can hold a whole fistful to eat, and I feel colossal. A mighty giant gloriously stuffin her face. Magic. Sadly, an overly stretched creature like you couldnae appreciate it in the same way as I can. The only other time I ever feel anywhere like so gigantic is when I drink those tiny bottles of French beer."

Fern waved her fork at Saulie. "Anyway, now you've done for this departed artiste and written her all up nice and neat, did you mind to send your wee graveside football card in to Sighing Jill?"

Saulie's dreamy smile slid slowly off his face.

"Ooyapig," he burst out angrily at himself, "I knew I'd forgotten something important."

"I think it's always safe to assume you've forgotten something, Saulie, ye heid-in-the-clouds."

A horrified thought struck Saulie.

"Sighing Jill will be worked up."

Fern waved her bottle around.

"Ye oughta be more careful, Grave-legs. You have to take more care with us poor mortal fowk. There you are, walking around with all that deadiness on you, you could rub some of that off by accident, and who knows what terrible results it might have? It's a big responsibility you've got. And you know you have to be extra careful about Sighing Jill. She's the sort of nervy person who could pop off at any time. You could be writing about Sighing Jill next, if you don't watch it. You know how she lives everyday life at a pitch of high blood-pressure, like she's ill with a horrible fever but forced herself to come into work anyway. That woman lives everyday like that. You don't want to be responsible for her having a stress-induced embolism, do you?"

Saulie looked aghast.

"What’s the date today?" he asked desperately.

Fern shrugged, looked it up on her phone, and told him. Saulie heaved a sigh of relief and trouble cleared from his face.

"That's alright then. She doesn't want the obit until tomorrow. I got confused about the dates, I think. I'll just remember to send it when I get home."

Fern snorted.

"Ye big dafty, you. Reckon I might just send you a few messages about that in case you get confused about dates again in the vast stretch of time between now and when you get home," said Fern, shaking her head affectionately. "Saulie, some might trust you with their lives, but I wouldnae trust you to make a cup of tea."

She glared at her Irn Bru with disdain. "Fech! This lifeless ghost of a drink does nothin for me." Fern sighed pitifully. "Christ, I'm dying for a smoke."

"D'ye ever think," said Saulie, "That maybe the memory of old Irn Bru is tastier than the thing itself?"

Fern looked doubtful.
"Ye what?"
"What I mean," said Saulie, waving his hands slowly in the air, "Is that, maybe, when something is in front of you, when it is too close in time, it can be hard to appreciate it. When you could have as much super-sugared drink as you wanted, when you could have enough to make you sick, you didn't think about it. Now you can't have it, not that precise thing any more, and so old Irn Bru has become something bigger, special, more strange, a memory you can dream about in its absence."
Fern stared at him.
"You mean the best way to appreciate a tasty drink is not to have it at all."
Saulie beamed.
"Yes, I think so, maybe," he said.
"Then have I got good news for you, auld pal," said Fern, "While you were philosophising about the appreciation of absence or whatever, I ate your arancini. Now that it doesnae exist any more, you should be able to enjoy the memory of it good and proper."
Saulie gaped at the crumbs on his plate.
"Aw, don't look like that, ya gawk," sighed Fern, "I'll get you another one if you want."
"Oh, I don't want to bother anyone."
"It's nae bother," said Fern, leaning forward, "And that lassie behind the counter won't mind. I reckon she's one of that lot that thinks you are some sort of holy-man priest."
Saulie protested. Fern jabbed at the table with a forefinger insistently.
"Stands to reason, doesn't it?" Fern said, "She's going to be from one of them default Catholic countries. You know, the sort of place where you can't trip over without falling into a cathedral. Sort of place with lots of serious auld ladies in black aboot the place. The kind of place where everyone is taught to nod respectfully to priesties from the time when they are just wee weans. It's probably just a sort of childhood reflex when she sees a long solemn streak like you in your black, and there you've got your snowy white hair and beardie. She can't help herself. I swear I saw her do a little curtsy-bob one time here when she gave us our food."
"Really?" said Saulie, looking back behind the counter guiltily.
"Aye, you must have missed it, Saulie-boy. Spending all your time looking at ghosts of drinks past, I'd imagine." Fern tutted.
Saulie sat bolt upright.
"I've just remembered something else, Fern. D'ye want to come with me after this? I've just remembered that I have to go see one of the Aunties later today," said Saulie.
"Which one?" said Fern, suspiciously.
"Aunt Mary."
Fern shook her head vehemently.
"Naw, forget it, pal. She cannae fuckin stand me. Aunt Mary cannae see what I'm for, and that makes her furious. Let's be honest, she does not know what you are for, either, Saulie, and I reckon that's why she has you round hers, so she can make you do odd jobs, trying to make something of you by the sheer white hot blaze of the will shooting out of her eyeballs. Best of luck to her, as far as Ahm concerned. I've had a lot of time and experience, I reckon, I'm basically the expert on you, and from my long years of research I can tell ye, a Saulie isn't good for anything much except being a Saulie. But if she works out what I should be doing with ma life, you can pass on the glad news. I'd be interested to know, in an academic-like way, because it's too late now to do anything about my whole lot now, as far as I'm concerned. I'm not currently in the market for self-improvement, no matter what Aunt Bloody Mary thinks. Naw, yer on yer own for that one, pal. Anyway, I'm busy after this."
"What have you got planned?" asked Saulie.
Fern gave him a dismissive look, as if the answer was obvious.
"I'm planning to take up smoking again."

3. The Old-Fashioned Work Ethic, as conceived of in a small room in Morningside, has died.

Saulie caught a bus to Morningside, or, as Fern (and many others) would pronounce it in an extended sneering nasal tone - Mooorningsiiide. He stared out the window and watched the shops and flats go by. Opposite him a small child was strapped into a stroller and staring fascinated at Saulie. Without breaking eye contact with Saulie, the child repeatedly dropped a tiny juice bottle to see if the mother would pick it up again. So far, this experiment had shown the young scientist that it seemed to be a law of buses that when a juice bottle was dropped on the floor, the reactive force of mothers would return it to your hand. When Saulie saw his stop creeping up, he took the same genuine small pleasure he had his entire life in pressing the button and making the bell ring. Saulie was certain there would never be a time when he wouldn't enjoy the business-like ding of the bus' bell for the next stop. When the bus lurched to the side and pulled in, he nodded goodbye at the child, thanked the driver, and stepped off onto the pavement.

Aunt Mary lived on a broad, quiet street several blocks back from the noise and bustle of the main artery of Morningside Road. It was important to Aunt Mary to live in a noise and bustle-proof flat, a sort of castle fortified against the outside world. She could not stand noise made by others, and saw it as an entirely uncouth and thoughtless intrusion perpetrated by the most selfish types of people. Aunt Mary despised the sound of cars, tractors, any music played in the open from speakers, loud conversations on mobile phones, trivial gossiping, construction work, and drunken carousing. Because of her hatred of the sound of any traffic, she very seldom came to see Saulie in the flat of many colours in Abbeyhill. The last time she had visited had been something of an awkward occasion, because while Saulie was bumbling around in the little kitchen desperately trying to put together a cup of tea and a plate of biscuits for her, Aunt Mary was sitting in the blue living room that overlooked the road and wondering aloud with restrained horror how Saulie could stand the noise of all that zooming up and down all day. It took Saulie a moment or two to work out what she meant, because he hardly noticed the sound of the traffic at all. Aunt Mary insisted that it was not healthy for a body to live in such an audible atmosphere, and then spent a good while listing the many other things that Saulie should be doing to improve his lot. In any case, Saulie decided that in the main, it would better to only see Aunt Mary where she was comfortable, in her Morningside tower of solitude.

There was a long austere line of similar silent buildings on Aunt Mary's street, an unbroken bulwark guarding against the tides of the world of change. These flats were so similar-looking that Saulie often forgot where exactly he would find the particular door that belonged to Aunt Mary. Once, when his mind was especially on other things, he had knocked at a door that he had realised with embarrassment was several numbers down from Aunt Mary's. Luckily, nobody had answered that time, although Saulie had prepared himself for the awkward situation of having to apologise to a stranger and offer them a rambling, incoherent, and unsatisfactory explanation for why he had knocked on their door. Thinking of this past miss of Aunt Mary's door, Saulie double-checked he had the right number. He took a step back and looked up to triple-check, although there were few distinguishing features on the outside that Saulie could recall, no matter how he racked his brains and squinted at each of the windows for signs of familiarity. Aunt Mary's house was three stories high, and had rooms Saulie had never seen. Although Aunt Mary was no longer a young woman, it would be audacious to bring up the question of whether she would be able to manage so many stairs

in the coming years. Almost everyone was intimidated by Aunt Mary, who had what you might euphemistically call a 'strong personality'. Even Saulie, who only had one foot in the daily attentions of waking reality, found himself nervous around her. Yet he was here. Although he never really thought about this consciously, for Saulie, duty, especially to Aunties, was something you could only avoid for so long. Besides, Aunt Mary had been there for as long as Saulie could remember. You couldn't just ignore that.

/Mary Millar, Epitome of Stern Auntliness and a Pillar of Her Community that everyone assumed could not be removed, has died./

Aunt Mary was grey-haired, small, and wiry, but was one of those prim ladies who managed to have an air of towering intimidation despite her size. She had a presence beyond the physical. She never allowed herself weakness. She was the sort of person who could manage anything. The idea that she should move from her tower because she couldn't manage a staircase seemed ludicrous. In any case, her staircase wasn't just a staircase. It was a sort of gallery, where paintings were on display, pictures somewhere halfway between abstract and realistic with fierce scrapes of colour hung on the walls. There were also vases and small sculptures collected from around the world that sat on the ledges as you climbed up the stairs. Naturally, there were also the two inevitable white porcelain Wally dog statues. Saulie had never been into an older lady's home where you wouldn't find porcelain statue Wally dugs. The two in Aunt Mary's staircase sat on their own ledge and kept guard over the collection, staring at you as you went by. One of the Wally dugs had a mis-painted wonky eye. Saulie tried not to let that one bother him. He supposed that was one reason that Aunt Mary couldn't move house - if she didn't live here, where would she find space to put the stairway exhibits? It'd be a shame to have to uproot the Wally dogs, too. It was also reasonable to assume that Aunt Mary needed a large house to keep a good amount of space between herself and the rest of the world. By and large the people of Edinburgh were a thing she tolerated through gritted teeth, a thing she would interact with out of a sense of duty, but something she did not especially approve of.

This was not to say that she was not busy with the ins and outs of humanity. Regardless of her general low opinion for the entire world, Aunt Mary constantly set herself plans and projects and followed them through with military determination and without any of the distractions of allowing herself a sense of satisfaction or joy. She was, frankly, extremely suspicious of happiness, especially large, open expressions of happiness, which she essentially categorised and convicted as another species of selfish public disorder. For Aunt Mary, work itself must be pure and without disruption. Regretfully for Saulie, this meant that he would often become an object of Aunt Mary's need to work upon the world for its improvement, Saulie by his own admission being a tall scrap of the world that was neither as orderly or well-directed as Aunt Mary would prefer.

Thankfully, however, even Aunt Mary had her limits. She had, after several years of insisting that Saulie should get married, finally cut her losses with disgust and moved on to other projects with more possibility of reform. But for a long time, Aunt Mary had been of the strong conviction that Saulie should marry so that he would always have somebody by his side to monitor him, direct him, and make sure he was hard at work, someone who would whip him into shape and keep him on track. A sort of live-in life jockey, if you will. Even the eternal-seeming grey edifice of Aunt Mary knew she could not live forever, and she despaired of Saulie's shapeless and shambolic existence if she was not there to direct him from time to time. She did not trust Saulie to live meaningfully on his own. Saulie tried to explain that he wasn't interested in getting married. In fact, he wasn't especially fussed about romance of any kind. He had never felt that way about any sort of person, really, it just wasn't in him, and the thought of marriage had never really even occurred to Saulie. He explained that he knew lots and lots of people in Edinburgh and never felt lonely. Why, he even had

a best friend in Fern, and it was few people, as far as he could see, who were lucky enough to say that they'd had a friend for such a good while, and was someone they still delighted in seeing and talking to every week. In a moment of unguarded foolishness he had even once pointed out that Aunt Mary lived alone and had done so for some time.
"That," Aunt Mary had said in a cold and final tone, "Is an entirely different matter."

There had been a husband in Aunt Mary's tower a long time ago. A doctor of some kind, presumably the successful kind, if the Morningside money had come from him. The husband died a long time ago, when Aunt Mary was still young. She probably stopped being young then, left in the three story house. The husband was never mentioned, and Saulie had heard whispers that he had died early in the marriage because he had drunk himself to death. There was exactly one photograph of the doctor in Aunt Mary's house that Saulie had seen, a portrait of a surprisingly ruddy-faced man, with thin swept-back hair, a broad and healthy-looking image, which just goes to show that you can never tell what or who is going to last. Aunt Mary never discussed the late doctor, and any attempts to probe at this wobbly tooth of history would be met by an icy but intentional obliviousness to these questions.

Saulie rang the bell and waited for Aunt Mary to journey from wherever she was deep inside the building. Looking left and right down the broad and silent street, Saulie could not see a single living person. The streets here, he thought, were also notably much cleaner than where he lived. In fact, this street was pristine and empty, except for the neatly parked range of shiny, well-washed, expensive cars. Rubbish, it seemed, was not allowed here. Nobody thought to abandon empty bottles of Buckfast and tins of Polish lager in little clustered offerings. Paper bags that had held sausage rolls were not permitted to blow like tumbleweeds down this street. Presumably, those bits of rubbish wouldn't dare to even chance the beginning of a movement around here. There was a creaking noise and the serious heavy door of Aunt Mary's house opened. Saulie reminded himself that he should oil the hinges sometime when Aunt Mary was otherwise occupied. He smiled serenely at Aunt Mary, who squinted carefully at Saulie and examined him. She made a disappointed noise, resigning herself to not being able to see any noticeable improvement, and said:
"Here at last, Saulie. Come on in then. We've lots to do."

Despite the size of Aunt Mary's fort, Saulie mostly only saw his Aunt in the same modestly-sized room at the back of the first floor of the house. This room was pleasant and comfortable, with just about enough room for four squat armchairs, although Saulie, as he often did, had to be careful to keep his long legs tucked up out of the way. There were some lovely old bookshelves built into the walls - a dark chestnut colour, and although it was hard to make out clearly, if you went up close, there were strange and intricate carvings along the wider panel of wood that made up the outer frame. A high window at the back of the room looked over a garden, and presumably this was also part of Aunt Mary's domain, but Saulie could not recall ever having gone out into that greenery. To him, the view of the garden was like a rather beautiful landscape painting, ever changing, perfectly realised, but not something that really existed on the other side of the glass. Saulie was walking into the room and thinking this when he banged his shin on the side of a large heavy stack of filled cardboard boxes.
"Ow," said Saulie, hopping on one foot.
"What is it?" asked Aunt Mary suspiciously, fearing that Saulie would never be old enough to be trusted not to accidentally smash the treasures she had on display in the house. She frowned at him. "You look like a giant flapping pelican, jumping about like that. What are you doing?"
"Oh nothing, nothing. How are you, anyway, Aunt Mary?" Saulie said with an attempted air of nonchalance, which was somewhat ruined by his trying to surreptitiously rub his shin.

"I? I go on, my boy, I go on," said Mary in solemn tones, looking up to the ceiling, and presumably through the floors above towards heaven.

/Mary Millar, Aunt and guardian of the fort of solitude, died today. After many years of putting up with life, it is understood that this came as something of a welcome break./

"What are you staring at over there?" Aunt Mary demanded, "Honestly, you have never been able to concentrate."
"Sorry Aunt Mary," said Saulie, "I was just thinking."
Aunt Mary looked doubtful.
"And what have you been doing with yourself lately, Saulie?" she said, without much expectation.
Saulie waved his hands vaguely.
"Oh, you know, the usual sorts of things," he said.
Aunt Mary gave a small but decisive snort.
"A life without purpose is not a life lived at all, I've always said," she declared.
Saulie nodded contritely, as he had so many times before, but this didn't stop Aunt Mary. "To work, to strive, to improve - these are the things that give value and grace to a person. When we are gone, the works we have done are all that are left behind, so only a fool would not make sure he leaves behind good works. Without striving for good work in one's heart, what use is there for a person? You can't spend your whole life sitting around and doing nothing."
"Well, I wouldn't say I only sit around and it isn't always nothing-" protested Saulie.
"Close enough to nothing as makes no difference," sniffed Aunt Mary.
"Well, if you say so, Aunt Mary," Saulie said with a smile, but just in time remembered that it was probably better to bow his head just a little contritely so as not to irritate her. It was the strangest thing, but although he was really very much taller than Aunt Mary, he often felt like she was looming over him. He had always known, instinctively, that there was no point trying to argue with Aunt Mary on the idea of spiritual and personal fulfilment through hard yet definite work. Steel-nerved Aunt Mary had never been much interested in changing her mind, something she considered to be inherently feeble, and so she was not inclined to take up the habit now.

Besides Aunt Mary checking to see if Saulie had made something of himself since the week or so since she had last seen him (perhaps this was a sort of chilly optimism?) and making him drink a cup of tea, it was generally Saulie's regular duty to visit Morningside as a sort of dumb beast of burden, moving piles of one thing elsewhere into piles of another. Aunt Mary might live in protective solitude, but she certainly lived up to her ethos of constant joyless but productive work by joining a remarkable and seemingly unending number of committees, community groups, charities, and organisations. She was, in many ways, supremely evolved for this sort of work through generations of flinty-eyed women who did things while others talked. She had the time, she had the drive, and she had the unflinching vision for neat order. Saulie often thought that if Aunt Mary had decided to take her terrifying skills for work and organisation into the private sector, she could have been successfully running any multinational company under the strictest lines of efficiency within a month. Perhaps she still could, Saulie thought to himself. It was never too late, until it was too late.

/Mary Millar, Aunt and Aristocratic Lady of Corporate Business, has died. Many have paid tribute to her tireless and sentimentless career, which started remarkably late, although Mrs. Millar had a habit of staring down anyone who mentioned her mature rise to fame in the international world of commerce. She is mourned by a host of cleaners, who had never worked for anyone who kept an office so orderly that there was never any cleaning work to do wherever she had been./

Aunt Mary clapped her hands and Saulie shook his head.

"Let us get to work," she said crisply, and then added by way of magnanimous compensation, "And then afterwards I will give you a cup of tea."

Today, the job at hand was sorting the contents of the boxes Saulie had already painfully found with his shin, boxes that were presently cluttering up the small sitting room. Aunt Mary handed Saulie an old but sharp small knife with an white enamel handle, a knife Saulie thought of as the box-opening knife, which he imagined was not in polite and genteel society to be used for any other purpose. Saulie liked to think that Aunt Mary had long ago acquired a complete set of useful cutlery for every occasion, from a tiny elegant sickle for cutting grapes to a sturdy miniature crowbar for opening pistachio nuts. Perhaps she would have obtained her full and unabridged range of cutlery as part of a trousseau when she first married, and naturally the box-opening knife would have been part of that same set. With the white-handled knife in hand, Saulie crouched over one nearby box and deftly cut and removed the thick chunks of brown tape holding the lid together. He unfolded the box and peered curiously inside. The box was stacked almost to the brim with books, and they were mostly hardcover books from the look of them, which explained why Saulie's shin had come off so badly when he knocked up against them.

One of the small regular ways Saulie was called on to live up to Aunt Mary's idea of usefulness was to help her with sorting through boxes of donations. Very often someone had died recently, or was planning to die in the near future, and a tidy-out was needed. There was no better individual for keeping things tidy than Aunt Mary. The work was never-ending, what with people continuing to live and acquire things day after day of their lives, and then inevitably dying. The problem was what to do with all the stuff a person had collected over the years, now that they were dead and definitely no longer needed any of it? You couldn't bury all of these possessions with the dead, there wouldn't be room. You'd be left with substantial pyramids of grave goods, the earth bulging with objects that had gathered around a life like a shell formed over the years. You also couldn't just make a pile and burn these accretions, because the fumes would often be very unpleasant, and in any case it would look grotesquely wasteful. Throwing these collections of objects away was often impractical because of their size, and it felt mildly disrespectful to the late owner. No, the best way to pay tribute to the dead person in this case was to try and find new homes for their things, so something that had been part of their life might go on to slightly improve the existence of someone still alive. Often a kirk or some charity would be approached to clear out the accumulated objects of a lifetime. Of course, someone needed to decide where this or that should be donated, who might be interested in clothes, or in old records, or a collection of football cards from 1982, and unofficially for many of these community organisations, the person you wanted to decide what from these remains could be salvaged and where they might best be sent was Aunt Mary.

Aunt Mary's ruthless eye was excellent at sorting out the jumbled remnants, giving them order and making sure that they were donated where they might do the most good. She sat and acted as judge for the afterlife of these boxes. Saulie's job, on the other hand, was mostly to be an extra pair of hands, and to move things from one room to another. Most often the boxes that came into the tower before Aunt Mary's judgement were filled with books. She had developed a particular reputation for this speciality, able to sort the piles into different degrees of interest, eccentricity, and saleability. Saulie assumed Aunt Mary must be constantly reading things to keep on top of how to weigh the value of one paperback versus another. Did this mean she was up to date with everything that had been published over the last few months? Saulie couldn't imagine her sitting in front of a computer all day, clicking through reviews, but how else did she know what was what in all these piles of books? Was it something to do with the weight of the book? Had years of doing this given her an almost mystical ability to in fact judge a book by its cover? All this sorting of objects she did for no reward besides a cold satisfaction. Saulie, on the other hand, apart from the tea and biscuit offered, was pleased when it was books that were passing below Aunt Mary's eyes, because, although they

were horribly heavy to move en masse, he also got to take home an excellent random range of reading material. Saulie needed a constant flow of books, not because he necessarily got through them quickly, but because he had a bad habit of mislaying whatever he had been reading halfway through, and as he thought it best not to waste valuable reading time by trying to hunt the missing book, he might as well start reading something new until the old one turned up. The result of this was that Saulie tended to read several books at the same time, and they would get all jumbled up in his mind, but he was entirely satisfied to read things in this way, and in fact enjoyed this method of randomly switching from one book to another because it meant, even if there was a certain amount of inconsistency to what he was reading at any given moment, nothing he read could possibly stay dull for very long, since another book would inevitably take over.

The box Saulie was now peering into in Aunt Mary's sitting room was filled with detective novels. Hardback detective novels. He wondered what sort of person bought that many hardcover murder books. He flicked through the pages and was disappointed to find they were pristine. No pencil jottings, no last-minute Christmas dedication scrawled hastily in the front. Saulie felt ever so slightly uncomfortable handling books that were unmarked. It felt like they had never been opened at all, and as a naturally polite fellow, he had the awkward feeling of being at the front of the queue, as it were, and thought that somebody else should get to open up the pages before him. What could you want with so many untouched detective stories? Perhaps they looked nice on display? Or maybe they had come from someone who had no real interest in hardback detective books, yet was constantly being given them as presents by friends and relatives, and was too polite to say anything about it? He could respect the heft and grandeur of a big solid hardback cover on a book, but, well, you couldn't put it in your pocket, could you? If you were waiting for a bus and had nothing better to do, you weren't likely to find a large hardback book about your person to pass the time. But a paperback, that was another thing. Saulie loved a good thin paperback. They were the snacks of the book world. When Aunt Mary wasn't looking, Saulie peeked into his own pockets and was satisfied to find a tatty old paperback of Hume's 'Essays' tucked in one of them. Saulie preferred a worn-out second-hand book. That way, he wouldn't feel guilty if he pressed a partial fingerprint of mustard on the bottom border of the page, or if a stain of coffee splashed out onto the top corner. He liked how gentle and soft and worn-in a second-hand book felt. You didn't have to worry so much about a book that had already been places. And if an old book fell apart, well, what of it? All things fall apart in time. It was stubborn hard-headedness to pretend otherwise. If the book was important, you tried to keep it together as best you could. Saulie, for instance had a cheap Italian dictionary that he had inherited from someone else's long forgotten bookshelf, and it was held together by all sorts of clumsy but inventive wrappings of cardboard and tape, all of which made him all the fonder of the decrepit lexicon.

Aunt Mary and Saulie worked side by side, going through the boxes with a practised silent efficiency that was pleasant. Saulie enjoyed the handling of the books, the little excitements of seeing what titles turned up, and he liked wondering what people had been behind each one he held. He was also pleased that Aunt Mary was pleased, or at least, occupied. He worried that she had little enough enjoyment in her big empty house. When each box had been re-sorted to Aunt Mary's satisfaction, Saulie would lug them into a large room just to the right of the front door. Besides walking everywhere, moving things for Aunt Mary was Saulie's main form of exercise. It was not something recommended by the N.H.S., but Saulie felt sure it kept him in a kind of shape.

When Aunt Mary decide that sufficient boxes had been sorted for the moment, they sat in the small back room and Aunt Mary brought through a tray with a white and blue teapot, a milk jug in the shape of a cow, two thin cups and saucers decorated with flowers around their edges, and most importantly, some biscuits. Hewn as she was from the stone of an older, sterner generation, Saulie

liked to think that Aunt Mary could only convey affection secretly. He imagined that she mostly expressed her secret affection through the medium of biscuits, which she always provided for Saulie after he had done the work for which he had been summoned into Morningside. Today, Bourbon biscuits were on offer. Saulie bit the end off the rectangular dark brown biscuit and was delighted by the full-bodied, regal, confident chocolate taste, the restrained sweetness, and maybe even the slightest hint of salt. He remembered that he and Fern intended to sit down in the apartment of many colours some time and conduct a biscuit tasting. They were both insistent that they would treat this event with the utmost seriousness, nibbling at each offering thoughtfully to fully understand the taste complexities of each, taking notes, and swishing their mouths out with milk between biscuits so as not to contaminate their palates.

Saulie ate his Bourbon biscuit slowly. If left to his own devices, he could scoff fistfuls of them, like an ecstatic child, but you couldn't do that in front of Aunt Mary. She herself would eat one, and only one biscuit when she had tea. To Saulie this amount of self-control was frankly almost inhuman. Saulie held his tea cup daintily in his fingers. He wasn't especially fussed about tea, but Aunt Mary would serve it no matter what. If the world was about to end and the sun was going out for good, Aunt Mary would serve tea and have a look about her with disdain as if to say that the end of humanity was just about what she expected. The tea cup felt tiny and fragile whenever Saulie held it, and he took exaggerated care when handling it, because it felt like it would crack like an eggshell at any moment. If only Aunt Mary could see her way to having tea in mugs, that at least would make Saulie feel a wee bit more comfortable when it was tea time. It wasn't that Aunt Mary would be adverse to the amount of tea you could get in a big solid mug. Her blue and white teapot held enough tea to fill a good row of proper mugs, and for such a slight elderly lady, Aunt Mary's capacity was no less impressive. She could sip cup after cup of the stuff, and Saulie was sure if you measured the amount of liquid she drank, you would have a hard time figuring out how it all found room inside Aunt Mary.

Aunt Mary took a silent sip from her cup of tea and fixed Saulie with a determined look.
"Now, Saulie, you aren't doing anything much at the moment," she said. This was a statement, not a question, but Saulie felt he should protest.
"Well, Aunt Mary, I wouldn't say that exactly, not nothing. I keep myself occupied, in my own sort of way. For one thing, I've recently finished an obituary for-"
Aunt Mary nodded.
"Yes, your wee memorials. I suppose you've had a smattering of those over the last few years, even if it's not what you'd really call a profession, is it? But as it happens, it was something related to that I wanted to discuss with you."
Saulie swallowed. One of the terrible downsides of Aunt Mary being certain that he was not living up to his full potential was that she felt it her duty to give what work she could find for him. Generally, Saulie was protected by his natural unsuitability from many of the things Aunt Mary suggested, which was no doubt the cause of no end of frustration for her. It was, however, possibly even more satisfying for Aunt Mary when she did come across a rare new duty she could give to Saulie.
Aunt Mary put down her cup and saucer on the small table between them. She rotated the square coaster underneath the saucer a degree or two to the right, so it faced square at Saulie.
"Now, pay attention," she said to him, "This is important."
Saulie nodded and squinted his eyes to try and look perceptive and wide awake.
"Four days ago," Aunt Mary began, "A woman who had been attending the kirk community group for one and a half years died. It seems she only moved to Edinburgh a few years ago, and to the best of our knowledge, she left no family behind that we can find. We do not know if she had any friends or acquaintances outside our group."

Aunt Mary turned to look out the window.

"We have thought that it is simply not right, Saulie," she said, "That this woman should die after being among us and should not have been properly and decently memorialised. We on the committee have decided that this will not do."

Saulie nodded in agreement. He wondered if the We of the committee was mostly a pseudonym for Aunt Mary herself.

Aunt Mary pursed her lips.

"It is regrettable, Saulie, but it must be admitted that we on the committee do not know enough about this woman to do justice to her life. It's sad, but there it is. Such things happen, all over the world and every day there are those whose lives drift away, poor folk without any roots or family. But for the committee, as I think you'll agree, that isn't good enough. It simply wouldn't do. Efforts must be made." Here she fixed Saulie with a steely eye. "And you, Saulie, are the one to make the effort."

"Oh, of course, more than happy to, Aunt Mary," said Saulie, scratching at his white beard nervously.

"You will find out what you can about this woman and write a short memorial for her. There will be a small but suitable remuneration for your work, if it is of adequate standard," Aunt Mary said primly, "A few pages will be sufficient. If the committee approves of the text, the memorial will be read at our next meeting."

Saulie beamed.

"You don't need to worry, Aunt Mary, I have never had any complaints from Sighing-, I mean from my employer, about my previous obituaries, well, not many complaints, anyway, and not normally about the obituaries themselves."

"Saulie." said Aunt Mary.

"Yes, Aunt Mary?"

"You are babbling."

"Yes, Aunt Mary."

She neatly unfolded a piece of paper and handed it to Saulie.

"Now, don't lose that."

"No, er, of course," said Saulie, who had tucked it deep within one of the inside pockets of his jacket.

"The woman's name was Therese Lane. You have there the very few details we had about her."

Saulie beamed reassuringly and patted the pocket where, as far as he remembered, he had secured the relevant paper. It occurred to him that at some point in the last few minutes he must have put his teacup down somewhere out of sight. Maybe on the bookshelf. Had he finished his cup? He resisted the urge to look around the room for it. Best to leave it, Saulie thought. No doubt his cup would show up sooner or later.

4. The Water of the South has died.

While walking back from the Abbeyhill bus stop, Saulie ran into Rear Admiral Bobby Waddles and Mr. Walker. Rear Admiral Bobby Waddles was an old West Highland Terrier, and Mr. Walker was an old man, although they both had fairly similar wispy white moustaches. Rear Admiral Bobby Waddles' name was in fact just Bobby, but Saulie privately considered that the dignified way the small white dog took his time strolling about had the air of a retired personage who was chewing over the reminiscences of a life of glory upon the seas. Mr Walker's name was, presumably, also not actually Mr. Walker. Saulie had been running into Mr Walker and Rear Admiral Bobby Waddles on their strolls for a year or two now, but somehow, although a detailed introduction had been made for Bobby the Westie, Saulie and Mr. Walker had never got around to learning each other's names, and it now felt like it would be silly to ask.

Saulie and Mr. Walker exchanged the usual seasonal pleasantries, discussing when they thought the central heating should go on, and more importantly, when Bobby should be put into his hand-knit pullover, which was a beautiful sunset-orange colour and even had little reflective squares sewn along the sides for strolls when the days got shorter. Saulie was especially lucky that day, because Admiral Bobby deigned to let Saulie give him one of the small dog treats that Mr. Walker always carried around on his person.

Admiral Bobby gave Saulie a nod of acknowledgement, and then giving the impression of being a dog of some importance who regretfully had places to be, started his slow walk away, Mr. Walker shuffling attentively behind him. Saulie said his goodbyes to the pair of them, and as Rear Admiral Bobby Waddles moved slowly into the distance, Saulie thought about how often he had seen West Highland Terriers in fluffy-bottomed pairs in Edinburgh. They must usually be the sort of dogs who needed company to stave off loneliness. How did Admiral Bobby survive without a second Westie to keep him company? Perhaps Mr. Walker was as close to a West Highland Terrier as a person could be and was an adequate substitute.

On returning home to Montrose Terrace, Saulie was just stepping into the entrance hallway of the block of flats, when he was arrested by the noise of his neighbours arguing. These noisy arguments were often a fixture in and around the ground floor where these neighbours lived, and such sounds were regularly produced by two particular individuals who lived in that flat, Poppy (age seven) and her little sister Eva (age five), who, even when they weren't having spirited public discussions, quite rightly (to Saulie's mind) considered the world their playground. They were standing in front of the open door of their flat, and as part of their enthusiastic and vocal disagreement, Poppy was trying to run her little sister over with a scooter, while Eva was fighting back by trying to push Poppy over. They stopped when they caught sight of this new arrival.
"Saulie!" Poppy shouted and threw her scooter to the ground, rushing over to him.
"Hello!" shouted Eva, and came running up behind.
"Poppy, stop hitting your sister!" came a voice from inside the apartment, belonging to their mother.
"I'm NOT!" Poppy shouted back, with all the lung power she could muster.
"Yes, you are, and you killed me," insisted Eva, who looked pained. Being shorter than her sister, slower, weaker, and more prone to falling over on hard surfaces, Eva always tried to make the most of what injuries to her pride she had to offer up. Poppy, on the other hand tended to walk lightly on the tips of her toes and enjoyed bossing others around, as a sort of ballet General in pigtails.

Their mother, Mrs Annie Young, popped her head out the door. She was a round-faced, cheery-natured woman, who laughed so freely that Saulie was often confused about what he had said that was funny.

"Are you coming in or not, girls?" she said.

"Not yet," said Poppy with a sniff and a smart stomp of a foot to indicate that she thought it was perfectly obvious that she wasn't ready to go inside at this particular moment. "We," she said in a tiny aristocratic tone, "Have some things we still got to do at the moment."

"I had a sausage roll today!" Eva declared, who also wished to be involved.

Mrs. Young laughed and made a wry face.

"Well, don't bother Mr. Saulie too much will you?"

"We ain't gonna bother Saulie," declared Poppy with hauteur.

"Just gonna tell him about the sausage roll I eated!" added Eva, who was miming chewing to explain.

Poppy snorted.

"No, stupid, not about your sausage roll," she said disdainfully, "I bet he's had lots of sausage rolls already. Five or six or ten hundered thousand sausagesrolls probably."

Saulie nodded in agreement that it had probably been something like that number. Eva's eyes grew in wonder at the unimaginable prospect of eating so many sausage rolls.

"Don't be mean to your sister, Poppy!" Mrs. Young shouted over her shoulder and ducked back into the flat.

Poppy leaned forward conspiratorially. Saulie dutifully folded his legs and crouched down so that he was at least somewhat closer to the Young sisters' level.

"Saulie," Poppy whispered theatrically, "We've got something to ask you."

"Yes!" shouted Eva and nodded her head. Eva had not quite got the hang of whispering yet.

Poppy shushed her sister, which made Eva scrunch up her face and pout.

"We wanted to know..." Poppy continued, when she felt the tone had returned to a suitably serious level, "If you've ever seen...ghosts!"

"Goats!" exclaimed Eva, and ran up and down impersonating that animal.

"No, ghosts, Eva!" sighed Poppy rolling her eyes.

Saulie scratched the top of his head thoughtfully, which made his white hair puff up.

"Well, that's quite the question, and I can't say for certain. I've seen awful strange things, but I don't know if they were always there, or if I was just sleepy or imagining things." Remembering something, Saulie's eyes went big, and his small neighbours looked up at him expectantly. "You know, once," he said quietly, "In the middle of the night, when everything was dark and it was very, very quiet, I woke up because I was terribly thirsty. And, it was the strangest thing - there at the end of my bed, I thought I saw a big animal standing there looking back at me, a sort of large chunk of a thing with its two front legs lifted up and resting on the end of my bed, but when I rubbed my eyes, it disappeared."

Poppy puffed out one cheek thoughtfully and tapped on it.

"It was probably a goat," insisted Eva.

"A ghost goat?" said Saulie, stroking his beard, "Perhaps, perhaps."

"Could you see through it and did it go through walls and did it go wooo? Like this?" Poppy asked waving her hands to indicate what a ghostly wooo should look like.

"I suppose it might have done, although, if it was there, which I'm not sure if it was, I'm not sure if it even had hands."

"Ghosts have...horns!" insisted Eva, and then for good measure, added "Woooo!" herself.

"I'm not afraid of ghosts!" said Poppy.

"Me neither!" added Eva, lifting herself as high as she could stand.

"No indeed," said Saulie, "They're probably not real, after all."

An idea occurred to Poppy.

"But just in case, you can cast a spell on us, Saulie, and the ghosts can't get us?"
"Can I?" said Saulie doubtfully.
Eva nodded that he definitely could.
"Just go like this," said Poppy and swished one outstretched hand around wildly, her other hand on her hip, "And cast a spell."
"Like this!" added Eva, swishing both hands in the air madly.
"Ehm, like this?" said Saulie, and made a vague gesture over the heads of the two girls, and mumbled a few half-remembered lyrics from the theme song of 'Ghostbusters', which was the first thing that popped into his head. This seemed to satisfy the Youngs.
"Now a ghost won't be able to get us, even if they do come through the wall in the night when we are sleeping," Poppy declared confidently.

Poppy then proceeded to show Saulie how she could do a handstand, and simultaneously Eva wanted him to inspect an interesting stone she had picked up in the park. It was a good while before Saulie could make his apologies to the girls and make his way up the stairs to the apartment of many colours, Poppy and Eva madly shouting goodbye to him all the way up the stairs.

After the traditional search at the threshold, Saulie eventually found his keys and let himself in. When he first walked through the door, it always felt to him as if he had just walked in by surprise on its emptiness. There was a strange cool feeling to the air and a very distant, gentle smell of wood and paint from long ago that he was not even sure was really there. These sensations went away after a moment or two, and sometimes Saulie liked to just stand inside the door until he felt like the flat had gotten used to him again. Nodding to himself, Saulie went to the little red kitchen to eat a forkful of peanut butter. While chewing, he admired his drinking water glass. Saulie had a special glass for drinking water that he kept on the kitchen window sill. It was a very long tumbler made of cut glass, and was covered in raised segments, like a kind of thin glass pineapple. Saulie kept his drinking glass in this spot because he was terrible at finding things and, because of that, it was comforting to be able to reach out a hand and have the very thing you were thinking of, an occurrence very rare in his life. Also, leaving the glass on the window sill meant that the light from the window refracted through the material and made thin leaf and dragonfly-wing patterns of colour where the light dribbled out the other side. Chewing the peanut butter thoroughly, Saulie reflected that given the size and somewhat odd shape of his tumbler, in fact, he was not entirely certain it was properly a drinking glass at all. It might well have been a vase. Either way, what was good for flowers was good for a body, he figured.

Holding the glass up carefully for a moment to look at it, then lowering it into the sink, Saulie half filled it with tap water. He closed one eye and raised the glass in the air, swishing it around and examining the contents intently. He took a sip. Ah! Yes! Good! he thought to himself, Scottish water! Saulie loved the water in Edinburgh. And it just came out of the tap, for any fool like him who wanted it! It was a marvel to Saulie several times a day, the clean cool taste of the stuff, the way it soothed and spread through him and made him feel new again. It felt like a ringing perfect pure note, and he never got tired of it. Once, when he had spent a weekend in London, Saulie had been horrified when he was in a cheap hotel and had poured himself a glass of tap water. As soon as he had his first swallow, he realised something was terribly wrong with the water. It felt like someone had poured ground-up pond stones into the system. Did people know about this? Had they seen the terrifying white-grey scale that built up inside their kettles from repeated exposure to this unkind water? That couldn't be right, could it? Surely having that coating your inside wasn't healthy. Should he inform anyone? Saulie felt strongly that spitting was unpleasant except in emergencies, but this

mouthful of chalky wet glass particles made him dribble the water back into the glass and pour it down the sink.

Saulie loved his Scottish water because he relied on that regular dose of something that made his day feel nicer. However, because he relied on drinking lovely water regularly from his kitchen-sill vase, Saulie always became mildly anxious about travelling elsewhere. He had never understood why anybody would buy water in plastic bottles until he left Scotland, and discovered that not everywhere has lovely tap-water. Sometimes the stuff in bottles you could buy in newsagents and express supermarkets in train stations and airports all around the country was fine enough, he supposed, but it was always haunted by an unpleasant plastic taste. It was only-okay water for people in a terrible rush who didn't have time for anything nicer. Saulie didn't want to drink plastic, he wanted to drink water. Then you had to get rid of the plastic bottle, and even if it was recycled, it felt wasteful to Saulie, piling up thrown away materials somewhere vague. In an ideal world, Saulie thought, everywhere would have Scottish water, and there would be taps and fountains all about the place, just like in ancient cities, and people would carry around little tin cups if they wanted to sip a little drink. You could all stand around the public tap with a nice cup of water and nod to your neighbours or meet people who were passing through that part of town and had found themselves suddenly thirsty.

Delicious water for all was something Saulie wished very strongly for the world. It would be much better if his tap water could travel with him. As he had never been fussed about drinking alcohol or juice, having to rely on local water was a small predicament when Saulie left town. It was all to do with the social politics of liquids. If he was in a situation where everyone was sat down in a pub or a bar or a café chatting and buying each other drinks and having a good time, he was obligated to have a drink of some kind in front of him too, or people felt awkward in a way that they were only semi-conscious of. But in such situations he would rather not have a pint of lager or a gigantic bowl of wine or something sweet and fizzy, no, all Saulie really wanted was a nice glass of water from his kitchen tap. But if he was in other parts of the world, it was entirely probable that he would be stuck with a glass of something not at all nice. Saulie had a few simple daily delights, and drinking lovely perfect water from his special glass made any day more pleasant. When he travelled back from England, and the train passed the point where the landscape changed, Saulie's spirits lifted. He was always glad to get back to Edinburgh, back to Abbeyhill and Montrose Terrace and his extraordinary kitchen tap and his special glass waiting on the window sill.

Having enjoyed his glass of water to celebrate returning to the flat of many colours, he checked every one of his pockets several times, uncovering three small pencils, a pamphlet for a plumber, two unused napkins, one pound twenty-three pence in change, a silver button, a small white sea shell he vaguely remembered putting in his jacket pocket from a beach several years ago, and eventually, the card Aunt Mary had given him with his marching orders for putting together a memorial. He went to the roll-top desk and opened it, clearing a space by shuffling some of the mess of extremely important papers and shoving them towards the back. Saulie smoothed down the card and stared at the name Aunt Mary had written in her perfect handwriting.

Therese Lane.

Saulie said it quietly out loud to himself a few times. Propping the card up against the monitor where he was less likely to lose it, Saulie switched on the computer underneath the table and waited for it to grind its way into life. When the old computer had yawned, grunted, and stretched to its satisfaction and was ready for work. Saulie opened a plain text file and at the top typed:

/Therese Lane has died./

Underneath this he typed up the few details Aunt Mary had written out, mostly about the committee where Ms. Lane had hovered on the borders but never been especially central. Nobody who had met Therese Lane had actually known very much about her. Aunt Mary, for instance, had not even known how Ms. Lane had died. Saulie imagined this would have felt untidy to his Aunt, and probably left her feeling mildly irritated. He pulled at the end of his beard. If nobody remembered you after you had died, it was like you were just blown away like dust. Not even dust. Dust at least left traces on things and the particles danced in the air for a moment longer. Saulie tugged at his white hair anxiously. What if he couldn't find out anything about this lady? How do you write an obituary about someone you don't really know anything about? Make it up? General platitudes? The sort of stuff about how kind and good they were and what a fine member of the community, things that could be about anyone? What do priests and the like do when they don't really know the person who has died? Use it as an opportunity to preach about something else entirely, something sombre and deep-sounding but unconnected, while hoping that nobody notices? Could he do that somehow?

No, Saulie couldn't do that to Therese. He couldn't do that to anybody. Everybody, in Saulie's view, deserved to be remembered for themselves, not sent off with a lot of generic empty phrases. The one thing he always tried to do was to make a proper effort to remember the dead. If he couldn't do that, he'd just have to let Aunt Mary know he couldn't write the memorial for her committee. Saulie swallowed. Aunt Mary wouldn't take that well, and although she wasn't the sort of person to get angry, she did get thoughtful, which, in many ways, was much, much worse. If Saulie didn't come through with this memorial, Aunt Mary might decide that she would have to devote even more time to fixing Saulie's life, and that didn't bear thinking about. Saulie thought he was content with his life the way it was. No, he had to find a way to put together something to save himself from Aunt Mary's improvements. Well, he would do his best to find out something about the dead woman, even if no one else could.

Saulie quickly lost track of time as he worked on searching for traces of Therese Lane. He sat hunched at his desk and rang up other members of the committee. All of them said much the same sorts of things, about how Therese had been the sort of person who was very quiet, and how it was terribly sad. The only picture Saulie managed to uncover of her was in a photograph taken for a charity bric-a-brac sale that had appeared on a local website, sent to him by one of Aunt Mary's associates who had pointed out that Therese was the one in the back. Saulie squinted at the image on his screen and zoomed in. It was not a very good photo of Therese. In fact, she was barely in it. She was standing at the back of a group of women, slightly turned away. She was wearing what looked like a blue-green raincoat, and her hair was dark, unremarkably cut, and came down to her shoulders. Because the picture had caught her as she was turning away, Saulie could hardly see her face. All he could see was an angular cheekbone, the outline of a nose, and a reflective glint that must have been from her eye. It wasn't much, as traces went. He spent a good long while staring at this picture.

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Mid-yawn, Saulie eventually noticed that the world outside had gotten dark. He had no idea what the time was, but he had a crick in his neck and the sun had gone, so that was as good as sign as any that he should probably think about eating a meal. If he didn't eat regularly, Auntie Varsh would know. He wasn't sure how she knew, since Saulie was always tall and thin no matter how often he remembered meals, but somehow Auntie Varsh could tell. Perhaps it had something to do with how she stared at him and rattled through her questions about his health until eventually Saulie felt himself umming and aahing, knowing that the battle was lost and that Auntie Varsh would be so

exasperated with him she would click her tongue and send him away with more plastic containers of food than he could carry. Saulie had tried to remind her that he was perfectly capable of cooking, he was just incapable of remembering to do it, so that loading him up with leftovers was very kind, but may not actually help with the problem at hand. Auntie Varsh did not believe this for a moment. Indeed, Auntie Varsh believed everything could be fixed with food. This outlook appeared to have worked out fairly well so far in her life. Saulie shrugged. Come to think of it, just thinking about Auntie Varsh had managed to remind him to eat just now, so maybe her food did have some sort of power, even if it was just sitting in the freezer.

Saulie stretched, pottered through to the blue room and put on a random record. It was some opera or other where a lady was very angry in Italian, no doubt justifiably, at someone. He made up some words to sing along with the angry lady, fossicked through the fridge to find some vegetables, and started cooking himself some pasta.

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It was grey and overcast the next morning and the sky looked like a used mess of steel-wool. This was good weather for having certain parts of Edinburgh to yourself, so Saulie decided he would take a walk around the Eastern Cemetery to get his thoughts in order. Although he was aware in the abstract that walking was good for your physical health, and indeed he knew a doctor who had insisted that once you stopped walking you were basically done for, Saulie liked walking because it helped him to think. It was good for mental exercise, and that, as far as he was concerned, was the main health benefit of walking. Possibly other forms of exercise had similar effects, but he had never experimented with anything else besides strolling. To be honest, Saulie had never really thought about his health, because he had never had any problems with it. In fact, being at hand to see Fern's binges of drinking and smoking, and her terrible weakness for being unable to say no to the most limp old undead piece of pizza sitting behind a greasy window made Saulie feel positively healthy just by standing next to her. Forgetting the health side of walking, Saulie just liked walking, in the same way, he imagined, a gull liked to open wings wide to glide, a dog to careen madly, or a squirrel to twitchily hop. It was a delightful piece of nature to Saulie to just stretch out his long legs and be carried about the place, the motion and the open air doing something to jumble and shake out all sorts of thoughts as he went.

A strong wind blew up and whipped about the tails of his jacket as he turned down the side street off Easter Road to the cemetery. Saulie stopped outside the gate and looked over the signs there. He had an uncontrollable habit of reading random things, since you never knew if you might discover something interesting. The last notice he read on the gate of the graveyard was the one forbidding dogs inside. Just then, as he looked down, a small Jack Russell terrier was coming out of the gate, giving an untroubled and guilt-free delighted smile to Saulie. Close behind followed a middle aged woman who was simultaneously pretending that the Jack Russell didn't exist and anyway, it was her right to walk her dog wherever she wanted even if it did exist. Saulie stepped aside to let them pass and started doing laps of the Eastern Cemetery. He wondered if dogs were banned from graveyards because they liked to dig up graves. Perhaps they could smell the bones?

The Eastern was an unimposing, modestly sized cemetery. To the west, you could see the surprisingly understated grey panelled back of a supermarket rising a few stories above the fence. To the south loomed Easter Road Stadium, home and temple of the Hibernian Football club. There were several things that Saulie appreciated about the Eastern Cemetery: firstly, outside the stone wall it was surrounded by everyday buildings and activities, and at its best, the Eastern was like a small oasis, a pause from the living. Secondly, it had some nice trees. Saulie thought that putting trees in

graveyards was an excellent idea. Treeless graveyards that were just rows of similar stones on a mowed level plain reminded him of a car park. Trees were an excellent feature of a cemetery. They were peaceful and long-lived, casting sombre cooling shade. Trees were a kind of memorial marker themselves, standing sentinel over the brief years of scurrying humans. Saulie had once been south to visit Oxford, and by wandering about aimlessly had ended up in the cemetery of Saint Sepulchre in Jericho. Like the Eastern, Saint Sepulchre was a sort of lacuna in the city, a stopped place, but it had been intentionally left to be partially overgrown by trees and bushes and weeds, which Saulie frankly thought looked wonderfully messy and not a little bit gothic and melodramatic. The Eastern Cemetery didn't have quite so many trees, and was perhaps less fancy when compared to Oxford's Saint Sepulchre, but you wouldn't want graveyards to be exactly the same anyway. They should each have their own particular characters, their own locally-grown form of memorials.

If the trees has been there long enough, he supposed part of them had grown by using the remains of the people under the grass. Saulie liked the idea of having a tree as a silent growing tombstone. /Saulie has died today from forgetting to eat too many times. He is survived by a tree, a messy willow./

If he wanted a memorial tree for himself, he imagined he would have to plant it now to make sure it would grow big enough and be ready for him when he had to be buried. The problem was that he didn't have anywhere to plant a tree. Saulie had never had a garden that was just for him. Maybe there were little patches of forest somewhere in Scotland where you could plant a tree for someone dead and go and visit through the years, but Saulie didn't know if you'd be allowed to plant one to be buried under. He wondered what sort of trees were here rustling above the grass in the Eastern Cemetery. Ash, maybe? Was there any particular significance to planting ash trees near the dead? It was entirely likely that they weren't ash at all. Alder, perhaps? Elm? Sycamore? Oak? Beech? Actually, now that he squinted at the leaves and concentrated, clearly some of the trees were of a different type all together. He had never noticed that before. He picked a leaf up from the ground. The leaf had three large pointy bits and two less pointy bits on the bottom. He folded the leaf, and put it in a pocket. Saulie wished he knew more about plant life, as well as birds and flowers and that sort of thing. It must be wonderful, he thought, to see a tree and at a glance know precisely what it was and where it came from and what soil and weather and seasons it represented. Knowing about nature would be like being able to read the landscape. He had tried to get books about how to identify plants in the past, but once he read through them the knowledge never stayed in his head long enough to be applied outside, and besides, he found himself instantly confusing one type of plant with another. Perhaps he had a mild form of nature blindness?

The third thing that Saulie appreciated about the Eastern Cemetery, besides that it was a patch of quiet and that it had trees, was the fact that it was mostly flat. Much of central Edinburgh is not given to flatness, but the Eastern must have been built far enough away from the stepped and hilly city centre that it did not have much more than a gentle slope. This was extremely useful to Saulie, because the cemetery was laid out with a looping but fairly circular path that he could walk around while concentrating on thinking, all the while reasonably confident that he wasn't going to trip and fall down a hill. The downside of a flattish graveyard in Edinburgh was that when it rained, the earth held the damp and large muddy puddles appeared on the path. No longer supported by the mushy ground and worn away by weather, here and there older headstones had fallen over and lay there looking mildly embarrassed.

The Eastern wasn't a showy graveyard, and Saulie respected that. Some cemeteries have areas that had sprung up when people suddenly had too much money and a fervent desire to construct impressive monuments, but there was nothing really on that scale in the Eastern. There were of course a few bigger and older graves about the place, but even these had an element of restraint.

Overall, there was an everyday, working quality to this place. Indeed, unlike more ancient parts of Edinburgh, this particular graveyard was clearly still in use by everyday alive people. The contemporary markers were all fairly samey, usually a dark grey stone with a modern glossy shine, and sparse information carved on them - how the dead were related, maybe their nicknames, not much more than that. There were a few little signs of individuality on the recent headstones - sometimes there was a photograph in a little window, or somebody had paid extra to get an image carved in that represented something important to the dead - a golden outline of a football, or a bicycle, or a horse, or a pair of boxing gloves. A good proportion of the recent gravestones were in the shape of a cartoon heart. Saulie had once made the mistake of letting Fern come along with him on a graveyard walk in the Eastern when she was at a loose end and bored, but it was impossible to do any thinking when she had muttered the whole time and insisted that the heart-shaped graves looked more like plump bottoms.

Whatever the tombstones looked like, Saulie liked that you could see that this place was still being used. Perhaps that was why most of the stones only mentioned names, dates, and relations - because these markers were for those who knew who was buried there, who remembered them when they had been alive, and who still came to the graves of their friends and relatives to think about them. Visitors left bouquets, they tied jaunty floating helium balloons to graves, and bought pre-packaged flower arrangements that spelt out 'GRANDAD' in large colours, reminding Saulie of the sort of too-sugary lettered cake that might be organised to announce a birthday. One grave, Saulie noticed, had overdone the whole display thing so much that the flower arrangements covered not just the entire length of the grave, but spread out to completely swamp the graves on either side as well. This was perhaps going a bit too far in demonstrating your affection for the deceased, but at least you could tell from the newly spread expanse of flowers that the living still came to the Eastern Cemetery and that they still remembered the dead.

5. The Art of the Sophisticated Cocktail has died.

One morning when the sky outside was the colour of imaginary seas, Saulie was searching around in the flat of many colours and found his phone in the pages of a book. He was delighted at his own cleverness at having, detective-like, traced his own tracks. He must have left it there between the pages as a bookmark. To enjoy this small triumph, he put his phone in his pocket and walked around the apartment clearing up odds and ends and periodically giving a celebratory pat where his phone was safely tucked away about his person.

After a while it occurred to him that he had not checked what the phone had been left in the book to mark exactly. He then spent a considerable amount of time trying to find the book the phone had been left inside, because he had forgotten to check what it was he was supposed to re-read. It was no doubt a significant or moving passage in the book, although he couldn't quite remember what that particular book had been about just at the moment. Saulie often left bookmarks to remind him to return to a passage he was reading. The intention was always that he would come back later and write out the whole thing on a piece of paper, or type it up. As these bookmarks could turn up weeks, months, and more often than they should, years later, there was often an exciting bit of mystery to hunt down exactly what particular phrases from across the double page spread were supposed to be preserved for future Saulies to examine and appreciate. This all presumed that the improvised bookmark was where it had been left in the past, and had not slipped out to travel from its original home. Because he was so regularly wanting to make a note to come back to a page later, Saulie would tend to use tiny torn slivers of whatever paper was at hand to mark books, but as these weightless shreds would often flutter out and leave Saulie at a loss where they were supposed to go back in the pages, he was perfectly happy to use anything else that could potentially serve for a bookmark - cutlery, toothpicks, serviettes, pencils, another book, and in this case, his phone.

Saulie was convinced that the missing book he was looking for had probably been greyish with a painting of a young person on the front, and he was just trying to picture the blurry features of the face on the cover, when his phone rang. This delighted him, because Saulie was almost never where his phone was when it was ringing.
"Hello, Fern!" he said cheerfully.
Fern, as surprised as Saulie was that he had answered at all, much less bang on before the third ring, was currently speechless, and made confused gurgling noises.
"You don't happen to know where I left the book I'm looking for, do you, Fern?"
"Wha?" said Fern, and coughed wetly on the other end of the line.
"It must be around here somewhere," insisted Saulie, holding the phone to his ear, and lifted a cushion up with his free hand to see if anything was underneath, put it back, and then lifted it again to double-check.
"Yagoddacome to the pub with me," Fern groaned piteously on the phone, followed by what sounded like a desperate damp sigh of life leaving her body.
"Are you all right? You sound terrible," Saulie said.
"Come an' meet me at the pub," Fern insisted.
"I don't want to go the pub." Saulie explained.
"Yer a bad Scot, then. Come oan. Meet me at 'The Bad n' the Ugly'. Very important."
Saulie squinted out the window, "It's too early for pubs still, isn't it?" he said uncertainly, since he had only a vague idea of what the time was, and if pressed, would put it at 'late-morning-or-so'. "Anyway, what do we need to go to the pub for?"

"Fer yer auld pal Fern, that's what for, you treacherous lanky long legs, you big cotton-faced spidery stroller. Ye haunting spectre of sobriety." Fern groaned from the mere effort of talking on the phone. "Ah, keep it down will ye?"

"I didn't say anything," Saulie whispered.

"Sha! You didn't say it, but very loudly. Ah, I've got a terrible heid. It's cos of one of them tragic unavoidable situations that are always not avoiding me, Saulie. No human power could have prevented this awful pain in ma heid. It's proof that there's no meaning to the universe, no caring higher power up there, Saulie, because that's the only thing that could have stopped this shattering in ma skull, but clearly god isnae fashed or doesnae exist, which is the only rational, logical conclusion based on how awful I feel."

"Were you in some sort of accident? Are you okay? Do you need help?" Saulie asked, walking around in a tight anxious circle in the blue living room, looking out the big windows as if he might see Fern lying down there on the street.

"I told you how you can help me, Saulie-boy. Come to the pub with me. It's the only medicine that can save me now."

"What? Medicine?" Saulie mumbled in confusion, almost tripping himself up in his pacing. He took a sensible, safe seat. "But what happened to your head?"

Fern sighed.

"There I was doing some temp work for them conference people last night, y'know, movin chairs an' that and carrying plates of terrible wee sandwiches, and you know how those conferences can't help but leave their cheap, awful, tempting wine just laying about the place at the end of a triumphant day of toasting their success at fully strategically optimal maximised conferencing or somesuch pish?"

"Oh, Fern, you didn't," Saulie said, chewing the side of his fingernail.

"Of course I bloody did! What d'ye think of me, Saulie-boy? Well, the rate they pay, you'd be crazy not to down a bottle or two at the end of the night. They're just standing there all lonesome an' forgotten, Saulie. Think of 'em! Think of the waste! Think of the planet! Anyway, what are they going to do with the leftovers of half drunk bottles of red, ey? Give them to the poor? Saulie, I am the poor. Le poor, c'est moi. Anyway, as happens so mysteriously often to me, those bottles must have gone bad or been somehow poisoned or something, because today I feel like a sad reekin pig jobbie left out in the sun fer too long."

"I hate to bring it up, out of respect for your mighty track record, but, ehm, ... how to put this delicately? Isn't it possible that you might have to face -" Saulie ventured.

"Wha' you on about?" Fern interrupted, "I am not facing anything, thank you very much, Saulie. I can barely open my eyelids without ma eyeballs feeling they're gonnae spontaneously combust. The burning fires of hell are all within me, Saulie. Say a prayer for me, auld pal, use your holy priestly powers to cure me, I beg of you, Saulie-boy."

"I just mean," Saulie went on, ignoring this last speech, "Well, maybe you can't drink all that alcohol down like you used to, Fern."

She let out a disgusted grunt of outrage over the phone that made Saulie grimace.

"It's just the way of things," Saulie went on, sticking to his guns, "Time is not cruel, it just is, isn't it? You had a good run, of course, nobody can deny that, Fernie, but like all champions, you need to know when your particular time has come. You need to know when it's the moment to retire and go out on top, leaving behind a glorious reputation to posterity. It seems to me that a sensible way to live life it to use some of it to prepare yourself for when the unavoidable times come, such as when we get older or weaker or less able to drink random bottles of cheap wine left out on conference tables in an evening."

Fern made a sort of weak howling noise that was a mixture of disdain and confusion. Saulie sighed.

"It's too bad I can't convince you to take better care of yourself, Fern. And anyway, you don't really think that drinking more is a good idea, do you?"

"It's crazy enough to work, Saulie-boy," said Fern, who had only been half-listening and had been making piteous little groans. "At this point I'd try anything."
"Maybe you should try not drinking more?"
"Dinnae be daft, man. I'm not trying that. Have some sense. Pub is the only thing that can save me. If I can just get enough booze down ma neck, I'll be able to nullify the effects of the cheap red wine. They'll cancel each other out. That's just science, boy."
Saulie cleared his throat.
"Well, I don't know, Fern, I have to respectfully disagree. I think maybe a pint of water, a packet of fizzie sweets, maybe a greasy steak-bake and a coma would probably do you more good. If you want to go to the pub, go for it, but please leave me out of it, won't you?"
"C'mon man, you know I hate drinking alone."
"Well, that's good news, I suppose, since pubs tend to have other people in them."
"Naw, man, what if one of they lot tries to start talking to me? Have you seen the sort of people who drink in 'The Bad 'n' the Ugly'? I'm not a hunner percent convinced that all of them could be classified as proper people. I don't need that right now. I can feel my will to live fading by the moment. No, the only logical solution I can see is for you to meet me down the pub in twenty minutes or whatever that is in Saulie-time, so I can safely down enough medicinal drink to keep my skull from crumbling into itty-bitty sharp-edged pieces."
Saulie sighed.
"Fine, but I can't stay-"
"Guid man! I already feel better," she said with a note of delight in her voice, "See you at the battlements, Saulie-boy."
"Yes, Fern, I just wanted-"
But she had already hung up.

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Saulie picked up Fern just off Leith Walk. Literally picked her up. She was lying slumped on the ground wearing ridiculous white sunglasses in the shape of hearts, her head leaning at an uncomfortable angle against a wall. Saulie suspected she had seen him coming down the street and had assumed the position on the ground for maximum pathetic effect. He crouched down, took her hand, and slowly struggled to pull her to her feet, while she offered no help at all, but only kept crying out for Saulie to go on without her and to leave her to die and to live his own life in her memory. While wrangling Fern, Saulie sang Ivor Cutler's 'Gravity begins at home' to her in order to encourage her to give standing on her feet a try. After about five minutes, Saulie managed to shuffle her into the pub and on to a stool in front of the bar. Uncertainly, Saulie sat down next to her, but felt ridiculously tall next to the collapsed form of Fern, so he stood up again and sort of leaned awkwardly on the bar stool. Saulie was not very fond of bar stools. They were almost always uncomfortable and he looked like a folded crane bird sat there looking over the top of everybody else's heads.

Fern took off her heart-shaped sunglasses which Saulie absentmindedly put away in his pocket for safe keeping while Fern let her head drop heavily to the sticky wood of the bar. Saulie was impressed with the amount of solid, unyielding noise Fern's head made. It was like a bowling ball being dropped.
Saulie found a flyer in his pocket that was protesting against the building of more student flats. On the back was something he had written down.
"A word for sore heads," said Saulie, reading from the back of the piece of paper, "-'gilravage': to eat and drink excessively, to live the high life; to enjoy yourself a bit too noisily. Also, to roam about and plunder, probably after getting a good head of steam up from eating and drinking excessively

and noisily. Hence, a 'gilravager' a wild or lawless person, the sort of person who would probably drink in this particular pub, if we're honest."
Fern made an unappreciative grunting noise.

Since it was still daytime, it was much too early for the lights in the pub to be switched on, and the sluggish sunlight barely trickled through the big glass windows. The pub looked particularly shabby by natural light, as Saulie thought a good many of the pubs did in this part of Edinburgh. The 'Bad and the Ugly' was not designed to be seen awake so early, and if caught at this time, looked like a bit of wreck that hadn't quite got itself together yet. The owner of the pub had a particular fascination for cowboy and sci-fi movies, and the walls were covered with old posters and little toys and figurines left perching high up in nooks and crannies to watch over the room. In fact, the pub was not called 'The Bad and the Ugly' at all, but Saulie had several times found himself unable to remember its actual name (something to do with a mountain? he thought, uncertain even now), and had started calling it 'The Bad and the Ugly', since the first thing that came into his mind were the cowboy posters. Fern had been very taken with that name, and they had never called it anything else since then. It wasn't an unfit name for this particular place, Saulie thought, because other pubs in Edinburgh were for auld boys to sit and watch sport on screens, or they were slickly designed-to-the-point-of-anonymity bars aimed at the youthful. 'The Bad and the Ugly' was like a pub in a Western, with shady regulars and all manner of wretched desperadoes and curious drifters who came in on their way passing through the dusty road of Leith Walk. Ideally, Saulie thought, there should be a grizzled individual playing plink-plonk piano who would stop when Saulie came through the door so that all the regulars could turn creakily from their drinks to stare at the stranger. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough room in 'The Bad and the Ugly' for a piano. Possibly a small electronic Casio keyboard could fit, although cute squeaky notes would not have quite the same effect. In the absence of someone sitting in the corner with a Casio on their lap, Saulie softly hummed some suspenseful Morricone-sounding Western music to add to the atmosphere.

"If it isn't the Long and the Short of things," someone announced from the gloom at the other end of the bar, jabbing a thick finger in the direction of Saulie and Fern. The finger belonged to a rotund, red-faced, bald man sitting next to a pint of cola. He had a newspaper spread out importantly in front of him, held a pencil in one hand, and was hard at work at the crossword. When the man concentrated, his forehead furrowed into fleshy ridges like the grooves left in sand by passing waves.
"Hullo Hogg," said Saulie.
"Pissoff, Hoggie," moaned Fern from the surface of the bar.
Hogg shook his head in a disapproving fashion. Saulie glanced over at him and thought to himself:

/Alasdair Henry Hogg, a spherical man who was surprisingly light on his feet as a demon bowler in the Leith Links cricket XI, and renowned lover of sausages, died today. A well known teller of a thing or two, Mr. Hogg is survived by the innumerable opinions he produced during his lifetime./

"Sad to see." Hogg said, "What's become of the Scottish people of today, ey? I'll bet you forgot to eat properly before drinking." Hogg slapped the bar in front of him in rhythm. "Always! Eat! A! Fried! Cheese! And! Egg! Sandwich! Before! Drinking!" He twirled his pencil. "Worked wonders for me. I've never had a single hangover in my life. Not one! Never been too drunk to drink and never been hungover, and never will be. That's how you do it."
Saulie doubted at least part of that pronouncement, as he had unavoidably and distinctly once seen Hogg topless in the cold streets of Edinburgh of a winter night, unable to stand up, whipping his shirt around his head, and singing 'Come on Eileen' at the top of his voice and with such a distance from tunefulness that the noise he was making drove off all forms of sensible life within two blocks.

"Nobody about at the moment?" asked Saulie nervously, waving generally at the unoccupied space behind the bar where a publican would normally be. He could see that Hogg was working himself up to taking a break from his crossword to tell Fern a thing or two, and although he was here under protest, Saulie's clear duty was to screen Fern from attack until she could recover enough to lift her head without too much pain. He wracked his brains to try and think of topics that might keep Hogg directed out of Fern's way.

"Difficult crossword, is it?" piped up Saulie encouragingly.

"Ah, not to blow ma own trumpet, but a piece of pish for the master," said Hogg, waving his pencil around modestly. "Here's a one you might not know yourself, Saulie, thirteen down, seven letters - 'Padding for shipping' - Something U something N something G something."

"Dunnage," said Saulie promptly, without thinking.

"Aye. That'd be it, right enough. Just as I thought," said Hogg, squinting suspiciously, then scribbling something out in his crossword.

"Iss emergenshy!" mumbled Fern from the bar.

Saulie was about to explain to Fern that 'The Bad and the Ugly' clearly wasn't fully awake yet, as pubs go, and had barely put its breeks on, so she might have to wait a bit longer for someone to serve her a drink this early in the day, but when he turned his head, suddenly there was the barman, who had silently appeared out of nowhere, making Saulie jump a little and let out a very small squeak.

From beneath wild dark eyebrows, the barman standing there was glaring intently. His name was Abe. It was well known that Abe was an itinerant pubworker all over Edinburgh, and if you regularly went into a random selection of pubs around the city, you were bound at some point to see him standing behind the taps of one of them, staring fiercely from under those very same storm-weather eyebrows. Abe sometimes slouched like he was being bent into a curve by a great internal force, and sometimes that same force seemed to stretch him out again, so it was extremely difficult to be certain about how tall he was exactly. He had what was not exactly a beard, but patches of a beard, fur-like bits of red and brown and grey about his face that never seemed to grow any longer, but Saulie had also never seen Abe clean-shaven. Abe always looked like he was about a week away from becoming some sort of semi-feral street-dwelling creature. Currently, he was wearing what appeared to be a combination jacket and cardigan made from randomly stitched-together pieces of fabric of all different colours and patterns, with zips placed haphazardly on the garment in such a way that they couldn't actually be doing anything practical. Abe was also wearing two thin scarves at the same time.

Nobody knew exactly where Abe came from originally, but he was known to have lived in cities all around Scotland and the rest of the South. It was rumoured that before his current stint haunting the pubs of Edinburgh he had been living in Newcastle, but had been forced to leave in a hurry, some said because of bad debts, some said because of a relationship gone wrong, and some said (Hogg, mainly) because he knew too much and had to escape from mysterious people with influence who were manipulating the media and politics of the United Kingdom. Hogg had a weakness for unsubstantiated conspiracy theories, and so everybody except him considered that last explanation to be extremely unlikely.

Although Saulie always tried very hard to find something good and notable and worthwhile in everybody, he had to quietly admit to himself that he found something unsettling about Abe. It might have had something to do with that way he stared at you. Abe's stare was otherworldly and a touch unhinged, as if he could see strange things, like the Man in the Moon and all the stars dancing attendance. Saulie was also uncomfortable around Abe because Saulie, even from behind his cloudy foolishness, sensed some mild hostility from him. For some reason, Saulie was not sure why, Abe didn't like him. Saulie was used to people finding him foolish, and ridiculous, and distracted, and

impractical, or even not finding him anything much of anything at all, but to be honest, he wasn't used to this unspoken seething sense of dislike that Abe projected at him. Saulie couldn't remember ever doing anything to offend him, but perhaps it had been something in passing that he hadn't even noticed. Saulie didn't even dislike Abe at all, because he didn't really dislike anyone. He found Abe odd, true, but Saulie respected how he was a fascinating patchwork individual in the way he picked up bits and pieces of knowledge from the most disparate places and topics. No, Saulie didn't even know what was at the root of this spreading growth of enmity from Abe, and he wasn't sure he wanted to find out.

"Hullo, Abe," Saulie said, smiling weakly and scratching the top of his head.

"Haaalp," groaned Fern.

"We must help her," Saulie interpreted, "She has a very bad hangover-"

"Naaaw," Fern protested feebly.

"She has extremely unlucky food-poisoning from bad red wine, I meant to say," Saulie corrected himself, and Fern grunted in appreciation, "And she said, when she could talk, that we need to find the right combination of drinks to get her back to her usual self."

"Her usual self? Whaddya wanna do that for? Doesnae seem worth the bother!" Hogg shouted across his newspaper and laughed at himself. Fern was too defeated to even swear at him, so as a proxy, Saulie frowned disapprovingly in Hogg's direction.

"You want some tequila, Fernie?" Abe muttered, reaching for the bottle.

Saulie waved his hand in a panic.

"Oh, no, no, no. Not tequila," Saulie insisted. "Sorry. Never tequila. It makes her angry. Very angry. Like a small drunk furious very angry bear."

Fern made a noise that expressed that she disputed this libellous claim.

Saulie stroked his beard.

"What we need is something healthy in liquid form to be getting on with, please." He pointed at the bottles behind Abe. "Ehm, could you please mix fruit juices in a pint glass?"

An empty pint glass was duly slammed down on the bar. Fern groaned at the noise. Abe indicated the ice bucket with an eyebrow. Saulie nodded. With a pair of barbeque tongs, Abe dropped several cubes of ice into the pint glass.

"Yes, good, excellent," Saulie said uncertainly, "Ice will help, won't it? Cool the humours. Chill the fiery Fern head."

"What fruit juices?" said Abe.

Saulie couldn't remember which fruits were healthier than others. Or which ones would be good for a hangover.

"Better put a little bit of all of them in," he insisted, coming to a decision "Just in case."

Abe shrugged and poured a succession of fruity liquid into the glass.

"And?" he said.

"Ehm," mumbled Saulie thoughtfully, "Some alcohol, I suppose."

"Yurzzz," added Fern.

"Something plain but strong," Saulie said, trying to think of what alcohol looked the clearest, presuming that was plain and strong. "Vodka maybe? Put some vodkas in, please."

"Some vodkas," Abe repeated and indifferently poured them in.

"Oh, ginger ale!" Saulie piped up, "To settle her stomach. That Canadian Dry stuff if you have it, something good and plain," Saulie waved his arms about dangerously, now on something of a roll, "And some lemonade, for sweetness. Brandy, that's what St. Bernard dogs bring to people they are rescuing, don't they? A drop of brandy to rescue Fern. Some lime, too. Vitamin C is probably good for her. How about a little of that Coconut Rum? Oh, I'm sure it's still good, even if the bottle is a wee bit dusty. Rum doesn't go off, does it? Pirates wouldn't bother with it if it was no good for long sea journeys, would they? Anyway, they put coconut in skin-care things and shampoo, so that will

probably do Fern's insides good. And maybe add a shake or two of that little flask of bitters. And how about some of that red stuff?" Saulie pointed vaguely at several bottles on the shelf behind Abe.
"Which red stuff?" Abe said.
"Why not a little dash of each?" Saulie declared with extravagance. "This is more an art than a science, after all."
Abe frowned and poured out a dash from each bottle of the varying shades of red. Looking sceptically at the mixture, he pushed it towards Saulie.
"On your head be it, pal," Abe said. "Anything for yourself." The tone was more statement than question.
"Could I please have, ehm, a lime and soda water?" said Saulie bashfully, feeling himself redden beneath his white beard, conscious that fizzy water wasn't very impressive when stood next to the hefty anti-hangover concoction he had just invented for Fern.

Abe poured the embarrassingly light-looking lime and soda. Saulie paid. He then spent several messy minutes trying to combine several straws to form a sort of makeshift plumbing to get the recovery drink from the pint glass into Fern's mouth lying in ruin below on the sticky surface of the bar. Eventually, he succeeded in getting together a ramshackle series of straws that didn't immediately collapse when he looked at them, and aiming the end of this apparatus gently at Fern, he encouraged her to have a sip.
"Go on, Fernie," he said coaxingly. She managed to get a few drops of the drink sucked down the straws before the piping apparatus broke apart in the middle. Saulie was crestfallen. Luckily, Fern was now so irritated by the whole process that she briefly had the energy to painfully raise herself up, clasp the pint glass in a shaking death-grip and take a large draught.
Saulie beamed hopefully at her.
Fern was frozen and expressionless for a moment after her first mouthful. Her face then went through several clearly expressed reactions, in this order: thoughtfulness, uncertainty, shock, asphyxiation, sourness, bafflement, horror, fury, and finally, a crinkled-up implosion of disgust.
"Hurrrrk!" said Fern. She sat straight up on her stool and slapped herself on the cheeks several times. Saulie eyed her with cautious concern.
"Fern, are you feeling...better?" Saulie ventured optimistically, smiling down at her reddened face.
"Better? Why would I be better, ya gaup? Ye've poisoned me! What's in that sorry excuse for a recovery drink? Industrial pollution? Satan's bath water?"
"Saulie waved vaguely in the direction of the fridge. "Well, mostly fruit juice, I think. To make you feel healthy."
"Healthy! Pach! I felt like death before, but you, Saulie, ye grave ghoulie, you've found a way to make your poor wee pal feel even worse! Who let this long streak of goose fluff choose what to put in a drink? I'm minded to sue for gross negligence." She glared at Abe, who shrugged with nonchalant indifference.
Saulie pulled at the top of his hair nervously, making a column of white poke up skywards.
"Ehm, well Fern, perhaps you should try another bit, just a wee nip more? Could be it takes a while to take effect."
Fern took a swig and made a lesser version of her former face of disgust.
"At least I know one thing. If I can survive this drink, I can survive anything," roared Fern, and drummed a fist on the bar.
Saulie nodded encouragingly, and gave the bar a few gentle taps in response.
"That's the spirit, Fernie," he said, "Are you not too mighty to simply lie down in defeat? You are! Don't let a little food poisoning from several cheap bottles of wine defeat you!"
Saulie beamed.
"Hn! What'll you call this mixture that flies in the face of all that is good and holy?" said Fern, "The Corpse Defiler?"

"The Grave Robber?" said Saulie, pursing his lips, "Hare of the Burke?".
"Saulie's Ruin?" put in Abe, who was pretending to polish a glass with a tea-towel.
"The Too Little Too Late," Hogg piped up from the other end of the bar.
"I shall name it in honour of you, Fern," said Saulie, raising his head with dignity, "Let it be known as Fern's Folly." He smiled at his friend, who huffed a little, took another swig of the drink and belched. It was, however, Saulie could tell, a more or less friendly burp.
"And you don't need to worry," Saulie said in a conspiratorial voice, "You'll not have to drink it ever again. I've already hardly any idea what was in it. The secret will be lost to the ages, even as people in pubs whisper the myth of the time a drink was so powerful that it brought a woman back to life. More or less."
Fern glared at him and took another reluctant sip.

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Something in the Fern's Folly drink must have had an effect, because about a third of the way down the pint glass, Fern was able to sit up straight on her barstool and shout enthusiastically back at Hogg. This back and forth kept them entertained for some time. Saulie was pleased with his success, despite, or perhaps even because of, his complete lack of knowledge about how to mix drinks. Maybe he was some sort of secret cocktail genius?

Saulie reached into his pocket and took out a scrap of paper, he unfolded it and a dried-up leaf flaked into pieces on the bar. With his tongue out and one eye closed, he tried to reassemble the parchment-like fragments.
"I have been thinking what sort of tree I would like to be buried under," he said to Fern, who was taking a break from arguing with Hogg about what beer was obviously the worst in the world. "I like the idea of my remains being part of something growing," Saulie added, "If the leftovers of me are going to be in a tree, I need to have a good think about what sort of tree I want to absorb my remains."
"Your nutrients," said Fern with a grimace. "I shouldnae think there'd be much nourishment in your corpse. Yer mostly a stretch of bone already, as far as I can see."
There was a pleasant pause in the air, which hovered for a good while and was broken only by a man in motorbike leathers walking past the pub's large windows, tapping on the glass. waving and pointing to communicate something mysterious to Abe. Saulie turned back to his lime and soda, took a gentle sip, and hiccuped.
"How are you feeling then, Fern?" said Saulie, "Cured, I'd imagine, from the look of you. Fit as a fiddle. Fitter, even. The brightness has returned to your eyes and the glossiness to your coat."
"Oh, aye, tops, Saulie-boy. Feel like a bag of lovely fresh new money. Couldn't be better," Fern said sarcastically, "All I need is for the girl of my dreams to come along an' sweep me off my feet, and I'll be ready for the happy ending and the credits to roll."
Fern got Abe's attention and demanded a nice fresh pint of beer. She took a large sip and winced.
"If you had a million or so pounds," said Fern, leaning forwards over the dregs of her pint of resurrection drink, "Or whatever the correct amount of an unimaginably obscene amount of money is in today's economy, a proper big stupid pile of cash, what would you spend it on? What would you do with yeself?"
Saulie thoughtfully stroked his white beard for a moment, and opened his mouth to answer, when Fern cut him off with a wave of her hand.
"Naw, none of that charity shite. Let's just say you've already bought yer guid pal Fernie a mansion in the Grange, and an expansive townhall to put all yer Aunties in so they can more comfortably run the world, and you've made sure all the poor kiddies have got their sweeties and a good education. Yer still rich. What d'ye spend the money on now? What sort of life are you gonna lead?"

Saulie thought some more before speaking.
"You know, I think I'd pretty much do the same things I do now. Find out about people. Try to find ways to remember them, I mean. Maybe more of that, if I was very, very rich?"
Fern threw up her hands in disgust.
"Yer a lost cause, Saulie-boy," she gave him a critical look, the big black-suited spindly cottonhead sitting there with that vague smile on his face, "Is this what you call contentment, is it? Disgraceful. What a lack of imagination. Yer an absolute failure of modern-day ambition-based capitalist society. No wonder the old battleaxe Aunt Mary despairs of you. Can you not think of one grotesque unnecessary shiny way to glitz up your life?"
Saulie thought some more.
"A nice shiny watch, maybe? I can never find my phone when I want to know the time. If a watch was shiny enough, maybe it would be easier to find, with the gleam of it attracting the eye, and all, I mean."
Fern scoffed.
"Yer convincing nobody. A watch? What would you do with a watch? It doesn't matter what fancy bright precious metal it was made out of, or how diamond encrusted the thing was, when would you ever think to wonder what the time was? Time's for other people, Saulie-boy. It doesn't suit you. Anyway, if you had a super-expensive watch, all that'd mean would be that soon you'd have lost a super-expensive watch."
"I suppose you are right." said Saulie with a smile. "Speaking of Aunt Mary, she has asked me to write up a memorial for a lady from her Kirk who died recently. But nobody seems to know anything much about her. She's a mystery, really."
"Death detective Saulie Stilts, you have forty-eight hours to solve the meaningless of life," said Fern in a terrible American cop-show accent, "And then you're off the case."
Saulie squinted into the distance.

As if suddenly remembering where he was, Saulie looked around.
"Lovely as it is," Saulie said, "To sit here in the low atmosphere of the 'Bad and the Ugly' and see all these fine people, could we not go elsewhere with more air? Newer air, I mean."
"Whaddya mean? One place is as good as another, isn't it, Lord Saulington? It's even gooder than another here, cos they have drinks here. What sort of places should we be meetin in that'd be noticeably better than here?"
Saulie waved his hands around.
"I mean, we could have a coffee in my flat, which has more comfortable chairs. I could cook us some dinner." Saulie looked narrowly at Fern and wondered if she had eaten a meal that didn't come out of crisp bag today.
Fern shrugged.
"Aye well, first of all, your place is fine and all, but it just has too many stairs to be bothered with. I'm half the size of you, Saulie, so that's twice as many steps, mathematically speakin."
Saulie tapped at the edge of his glass of lime and soda, which was still only half-finished after all this time, and was definitely flat.
"Right, well, how about I come around to your flat," Saulie suggested, "And you cook me dinner, then, if you think that's better." He wondered if he had ever known Fern to cook, but the weight of sluggishness of the pub was so strong that he couldn't for the life of him make himself remember.
"Naw, no point in going around to where I stay. All I have to show for ma years is a pokey room rented in a flat what is owned by a wee lassie a decade younger than me, a flat her rich mither and faither bought her for being such a bonnie delightful creechur. They took one look at her and were so pleased they bought her a flat so she would have somewhere nice in Tollcross to stay when she was at the University. I just pay for the privilege of sleeping there."
Fern leaned back and grunted.

"D'y'know, I think ma young landlady only let the room to me because she thought I was a novelty. Heard I did the occasional show, and thought that was the sort of shabby little thing that'd really add a touch of character to the flat. Like having a broken jukebox on display, or, or, like, a nicked traffic sign, y'ken? Ach, I tell ya, it's a rotten thing having a landlady who is that young and is living right there in the same flat with you. She could kick me out whenever she fancies, and she does that big rich person smile like she isnae thinking about it, but I can tell she is and all. Just imagine being barely out of school and having the power to boot out a worthless renting nothing like me. Must give her toothache just trying to stop herself from doing it every time she sees me."

Saulie gave a sympathetic look.

"Not enjoying living there then?"

"Naw. Like I say, Saulie boy, I try not to hang around if I can help it. We don't get along too well, me and the landlady."

"You can stay with me any time," said Saulie.

"Ph! I see more of you, lang Saul, than anyone else in the whole world already, pal," said Fern, "No need to spend even more time together. So if you don't mind, I'll not be staying with you in the chromatic flat if I can help it. I already get more than my recommended dose of Saulie chat, after all. And those stairs Saulie, I mentioned your stairs, didn't I? I couldnae face them. If you lived on the ground floor, I'd might be tempted in a moment of madness. But all those steps. Ye'd send me up and down those stairs every time I wanted a smoke."

"But you quit smoking, remember?" said Saulie.

Fern shrugged.

"The day is yet young, Saulie-boy."

6. An Appetite for Spicy Food has died.

Saulie was fussing about the memorial written for Therese Lane that he had been placed under strict orders by Aunt Mary to put together, anxiously unable to tell if it was finished or hardly even begun, and he had read over the same sentences so many times they were starting to look like gibberish transcribed from the mouths of burbling fish. Saulie was starting to wonder if he actually even knew how to read at all, or if he'd been deluding himself about that ability his whole life. Luckily, this process of spiralling doubt was interrupted by a message he received that gave him the relief of a distraction. Saulie was summoned by the competing force of another Auntie, Auntie Varshika, who had announced that Saulie was once again required to help one of her many younger relatives with their essay writing, for which he would be repaid with the princely sum of more food than one thin tall man could possibly need.

Auntie Varsh was convinced that Saulie was some sort of intellectual, and thought it helpful for the seemingly inexhaustible number of her youthful relatives to spend time sitting next to Saulie to absorb some of what she referred vaguely to as his educatedness. Whatever this undefinable quality was that Saulie was supposed to possess, it was Auntie Varsh's belief that it could somehow be translated by making these poor youths sit with Saulie as he read through whatever piece of writing their school had decided should be produced at that moment. Varsh's belief that Saulie had some esoteric and secret knowledge of inherent strange power meant that Saulie was not confined to only working through pieces of writing concerning things that he actually understood or even subjects he had a glancing acquaintance with. He had, for instance, also been asked to go over chemistry assignments, not to mention physics, geography, and most confusingly for Saulie, something to do with business and accounting. Beyond helping tweak some small expressions in whatever the assignment of the day happened to be, Saulie would often spend a good deal of the assigned time having the topic at hand explained to him in some detail and with some bewilderment by the teenager sitting next to him. He rather enjoyed listening to these nervous small lectures. It was a complete mystery to him what anyone else got out of these sessions.

Today, Saulie was supposed to meet Nisha, a daughter of one of Auntie Varsh's collateral cousins. Saulie always met the assignment-writer of the day at Auntie Varsh's house, which suited him just fine, because that meant he didn't have to spend a lot of time getting lost when trying to find different addresses each time he was called on to waft his educatedness about. Auntie Varsh's home was on the second floor. Saulie knocked at the door from habit, but immediately remembered that nobody would answer and that he had been told many times to simply let himself in, as the door was never locked, nor the flat unoccupied during the day. Inside, the hallway and much of the walls of every room were lined with stacked boxes of bulk-bought foodstuffs that contained edible mysteries shored up against the walls, along with bags of rice and flour, and colossal jars of bright pickles. Auntie Varsh was completely prepared for any long hunger-inducing siege.

Auntie Varsh was usually found in the kitchen, the largest room in the flat and ironically, the one least cluttered by boxes of food stores. In all the time he had been visiting Auntie Varsh, Saulie had never seen her sit down. She was always directing others from the kitchen while either cooking food or preparing something to be cooked. There was no place for stillness around Auntie Varsh. All the while, people were constantly coming and going from her home - children, grandchildren, cousins, family friends, and plain bystanders like Saulie who by chance had been caught up in the gravitational pull of Auntie Varsh.

"Hello, all," Saulie announced bashfully when he entered the kitchen, waving his hand in a broad arc like he was shooing a sluggish moth. Uncle Ali and Auntie Varsh greeted Saulie with so much noise and enthusiasm you might be forgiven for thinking that he had just returned on foot from a dangerous expedition of long months through the frozen and hostile far northern wastes, rather than his having just popped in after having last seen them a few weeks ago. Following this effusive greeting, Uncle Ali would traditionally corner Saulie and explain his latest passion in detail. Ali was mad for fitness activities, but he was unable to stay loyal to one activity for any length of time. Not long after he had taken up some sport for his health, he would have soon discovered some new method for ensuring he was brimming with even more vigour. As far as Saulie could remember, Uncle Ali had been completely, if temporarily, obsessed by long-distance running, sea swimming, cycling, rock climbing, aqua-boxing, tennis, kayaking, squash, gymnastics, judo, log-throwing, and something that Saulie was not even sure was real that he thought Uncle Ali had called 'speed cricket'.

Uncle Ali was more easily swayed by a new fitness regimen if it involved buying new equipment, and an activity was especially tempting for him to try if you needed a specific outfit to participate. There was a cupboard in the flat crammed full with Uncle Ali's abandoned equipment, and, as storage space was always at a premium in the old buildings of Edinburgh, this overflowing cupboard was one of the favourite topics for a really enjoyable argument between Uncle Ali and Auntie Varsh. Whenever Varsh got up a good head of steam and insisted that it was time Ali cleared some of the cupboard out, he would draw himself up on his tiptoes to his fullest height and with the utmost outrage and dignity insist that he needed to keep every item in that cupboard because they represented a sage investment not just in financial terms, but in health, and that keeping one's self strong and well was a thing beyond value. And if perhaps, he had not used some of the items all the way at the back, it was simply because he was much too busy at the moment, but he would definitely be digging out those special goggles or that bat any time now and would be happily and expertly using them with all the skill and grace of a true sportsman. It might have been noticed by the uncharitable, however, that for all the exercise he did, Uncle Ali had an unmovable, but modest round belly, but it could not be denied that there was not a man of comparable age up and down the street who was as cheerful in the belief that he was overflowing with vitality. Nobody could come close to Uncle Ali for enthusiastic faith in his health. His eyes may have strayed from sporting activity to sporting activity, but those eyes were also bright with wonder and enthusiasm at the sheer physical delight of being alive. No wonder Uncle Ali was so uncontrollably driven to convey that enthusiasm to all of Edinburgh and to Saulie, specifically at this moment.

Saulie tried to be a good audience as Uncle Ali poured forth his latest sporting enthusiasms, but eventually Auntie Varsh distracted her husband long enough for Saulie to slip into the next room. There he exchanged awkward nods with the current victim of Auntie Varsh's ideas about the value of proximity to educatedness, a young girl called Nisha, all scrawny knees and elbows, hiding behind a messy fringe, and as usual for Saulie's colleagues in these little meetings, desperate to be somewhere else as soon as possible. Saulie sat besides her and Nisha wordlessly handed him a sheaf of papers and stared, embarrassed, at a random point at the table in front of her. Saulie wished he could think of something comforting and welcoming to say, some sort of bed-side manner to assure the patient that all would be well, but when he had tried any attempt at good humour in the past with other junior members of Auntie Varsh's family, he had become easily side-tracked into talking about confusing and disconnected themes that were probably not reassuring to the youths sitting there, and that were certainly not at all relevant to whatever assignment they had been compelled to show Saulie.

Saulie made appreciative noises like "Ah!" and "Hoo!" and "Hum!" and "Of course, of course!" as he read through Nisha's work in the hope that the silence between them would not be too awkward. He was not sure if his noises were any less awkward, but he had been meeting with Auntie Varsh's various young relatives for some time now, and the reading noises had become a habit, a way of showing Nisha and those who had come before her how delighted Saulie was to get to read something they had written. Saulie, as Auntie Varsh had mentioned often, was always reading, but it was an extra sort of delight and honour to have the real and actual writer sitting right there while you were reading their work. It was almost a sort of mind-reading, and thinking this while looking over Nisha's assignment caused Saulie to unconsciously wiggle his white eyebrows up and down in what he subconsciously thought was a mystical telepathic fashion.

In fact, for all Saulie was worried about leaving Nisha in an awkward patch of silence while he read over her work, it was silly to worry about this in Auntie Varsh's home, because Saulie had never noticed Auntie Varsh's place ever being bothered by an attack of quiet. This was because Auntie Varsh liked to express instructions to the other people in the flat, but she was too busy to leave the kitchen at those recurring crucial moments when she had to let someone else know something. For this reason, she kept up the lines of communication by shouting to people in other rooms. Of course, the walls of Auntie Varsh's flat were not designed to convey sound clearly, and very often the recipient of the shouted instruction would not quite make out the message and would have to shout out their confusion in reply. This meant that Auntie Varsh would have to bellow the whole piece of information once again, but luckily, she didn't mind, and even more luckily, by nature or by practice, she had good strong lungs and an untiring voice that could probably roar out the combined works of Shakespeare without weakening even once.

Just at that moment, while he was trying to read Nisha's essay on poetry, Saulie could hear Auntie Varsh shouting something about some missing orange juice, followed by a cautious shout of incomprehension that Saulie recognised as being a return message from Uncle Ali. This back and forth went on for some time and it was lucky that Saulie didn't have something to write with in his hand at that moment (he always liked to read through things first without worrying about getting anything down straight away), because if he had, he would have unthinkingly scrawled 'where's the orange juice?' in various places on the pages. It was possible that Uncle Ali took so long to receive shouted communications from his wife because he was starting to get a little weak in the ears, but it was also possible that he enjoyed the exercise it gave him. In any case, Uncle Ali suspected that Varshika enjoyed making big servings of noise, and who was he to stop her when she had warmed up that fine bellowing instrument of a voice that he admired so much?

Saulie's concentration was also regularly broken when there was a pause in Auntie Varsh's shouting, and she would come tip-toeing into the room and put a plate of biscuits down on the table.
"You go on ahead, Saulie!" Auntie Varsh whispered loudly, "Pretend I'm not here!" which was impossible, because she stood there beaming and told Nisha "You pay attention to Saulie! He's got educatedness! You want to get big, and go to university, and get educatedness like Saulie!"
Nisha didn't offer an opinion on this, and one wasn't expected.
Saulie nibbled thoughtfully on a gingery-cardamomy biscuit and tried to remember what he had just been reading.
"Eat, Saulie, eat!" Auntie Varsh insisted, pushing the plate towards him, although he had barely taken the end off his first biscuit, Saulie paused uncertainly for a moment, put Nisha's essay on the table in front of him and picked up a second biscuit in his other hand. He waved both biscuits in a little circle, in an attempt to follow Auntie Varsh's instructions.

"You must eat, Saulie," Auntie Varsh insisted, although Saulie had now run out of hands to hold more food to eat. "You are too thin! You are starving, all on your own! You must eat, eat! Thin is no good! Thin gets sick! Too thin!"

Saulie looked bashful.

"I don't think there's much I can do about that, Auntie Varsh," said Saulie, "I have always only grown in the one dimension, mostly. But I will eat these biscuits with pleasure in any case."

So saying, he took a bite out of each biscuit in each hand and this offering seemed to satisfy Auntie Varsh enough that she returned to the kitchen and resumed one of her ongoing inter-room bellowed conversations.

What had Saulie been reading about? Yes, poetry, wasn't it? Shuffling the pages in front of him, Saulie once again tried to concentrate. He turned to smile encouragingly at Nisha, who looked despairing. Saulie pointed at a sentence and said:

"Let's see what we can do here if we jiggle the words about a wee bit. I always find that if you shake words gently here and there, get them all good and shoogly, you can eventually make them fall into a nice pattern."

He checked the pockets of his jacket and after finding and discarding a straw and a half-finished roll of mints, Saulie eventually came upon a pen.

He tapped the pen twice on the edge of the table like a conductor about to begin, uncapped it, and waved it over the page.

"Now, let's see if we change the start here. Try to make it clearer, move things about, shall we?"

Saulie started drawing some lines to indicate where various parts of the sentence should migrate, when he made a horrified noise.

"Ooyapig!" Saulie shouted and shook his head. "No, no, no."

"What's wrong?" Nisha squeaked.

"Red ink," explained Saulie, recoiling from the lines he had drawn, "I can't use red ink. No, no. Not for me. Frankly, it's the rudest of inks. Red ink is for telling off and see-me-after-class notes and general trouble. I don't even know how I ended up with a red pen. I've no use for red ink."

Swiftly, Saulie put the cap back on the pen and pushed it across the table to Nisha as if it was radioactive.

"Here," he insisted, "You take it. I'll swap you for something else." Saulie squinted over at the three pens Nisha had in front of her and plucked one. Keen to confirm this new pen didn't have a hint of red ink before making another line on the assignment, Saulie unearthed the half-finished roll of mints and peeled some of the wrapper off to expose the white interior, where he tested Nisha's pen by writing in small but neat handwriting 'Eenty, teenty, tethery, methery'. Much to Saulie's delight, the thick ink turned out to produce a sort of electric purple colour.

"That's the stuff!" Saulie said admiringly.

"It's good for drawing on things," Nisha said shyly, "Like on a bag, or on a t-shirt of something."

Saulie looked about, but couldn't see a bag to test Nisha's pen on, so he returned to making great electric purple swoops and arrows and additions on the page of her assignment in front of him, trying to demonstrate with arm-waving enthusiasm to Nisha how to shoogle up the sentences and settle them down in an order that sounded better when read aloud.

At this point, Auntie Varsh came back through with a small cup of coffee for Saulie and more snacks.

"I'm not here!" Varsh insisted, very loudly for someone who wasn't there, "Eat! Drink! Saulie! Nisha! Eat! Keep your strength up! Work hard!"

Saulie took several sips of his coffee, mildly burning his tongue and made appreciative noises until Auntie Varsh left again and he and Nisha could turn back to the matter of discussing poetry. It did not take long before much of Nisha's essay was decorated with the electric purple scrawls and glyphs Saulie had left in his wake, although he also had to find room to write things like 'Splendid!" and

"Grand!" and various vaguely positive looking symbols, so that Nisha wouldn't feel discouraged by the sheer amount of writing he had done on the pieces of paper. Whether Nisha would be able to distinguish at a glance the masses of notes from the encouragements was another matter. It may well have looked to her as if Saulie had spent their entire time together doodling manically all over her work and eating biscuits.

"When the poet MacCaig writes about burying someone in a sandy grave, what do you think of that?" Saulie said, reflectively fluffing up his white hair into a peak.

Nisha's eye narrowed and she stared at him thoughtfully. Was there supposed to be a correct answer for this?

"A metaphor?" she mumbled. Saulie stroked his beard.

"Probably," he agreed, nodding his head, "You know how poets are with their metaphors. Can't get enough of them." To demonstrate what poetic hunger for metaphors might look like if it was non-metaphorical, Saulie took a determined bite out of one of the biscuits in front of him. Nisha was still unsure what this overly tall white-haired man wanted her to say. She started to pick at a loose thread on her t-shirt nervously.

"Have you ever been buried in sand?" Saulie asked suddenly. Nisha stared.

"At the seaside, I mean, you know the sort of thing, on holidays away from everydays, a big blanket of crashing sea covering the horizon, games and sports that you never play anywhere else but on sand, family members manically digging and entombing every part of you bar your head under the sand."

Nisha shrugged. Saulie sighed.

"I admit I've never experienced that sort of thing myself. Never spent that much time at beaches. But I imagine it must be nice and cool under the sand. And you can't move, or at least you have to pretend you can't move. You are free from having to do all the troublesome things you normally have to do when you aren't buried in the sand."

"Should I...write that down?" Nisha asked uncertainly.

"Write down whatever interests you, I say," Saulie declared in an off-hand manner, "Whatever sticks in your head. That's what I like to do, personally. But back to the sand. You have to imagine that being buried in sand is not really a terrible practical place to put the dead, like in this poem. I mean, I've never experimented with the stuff, but I imagine it is much too loose. Not to mention that it is liable to be washed away at any moment with the sea right there. Would it be better to throw the body into the sea instead? But people do like to have a nice firm piece of ground they can point to when they think about the remains of those they knew. I'm not sure if sand counts as nice firm ground. Perhaps that's the point."

Nisha scrawled on a piece of paper in front of her and said cautiously.

"Maybe being buried in the sea wouldn't be too bad."

Saulie nodded. "Deep down in the waters of the Firth of Forth, perhaps. I've always liked the bridge there, even though I've never thought much about any other bridge. There's something fine and reassuring about the red bridge over the Firth. I liked to hope that it will be there for centuries to come, looking over the waters. " He shook his head, brushed crumbs from the page, and declared "Onwards!"

They moved on to discuss the importance of the imagery of boots in the poem. It was agreed that they represented earthiness, unpretentiousness, and hard work. Nisha added that they were probably also good for walking on peat, not to mention the previously discussed sand, and her colleague Saulie agreed with a learned nod. All this discussion of footwear naturally led Saulie to push his chair back and bend down to look at his own shoes to see what they might symbolise. They were black leather shoes, unremarkable other than they had to be big enough for his sizeable feet. Also, they were quite scuffed, which symbolised the fact that he never remembered to polish and look after them, which made Saulie feel guilty. Aunt Mary would not approve. In fact, Saulie was sure

she had definitely voiced her dissatisfaction about the condition of Saulie's shoes, but he was unsure if he had given them a polish even once.

"I suppose it's important to look after unremarkable things like shoes," he mused, "Things that you use everyday. Make sure they last as long as they can and do all they are supposed to do."

Saulie set his jaw in determination.

"As you are my witness, Nisha, my days of scuffed and dull shoes are behind me! I shall polish up these black and shiny as soon we are done here and I get home! Well, and as soon as I find some shoe polish. Just after that."

They turned to look at Nisha's shoes. She was sporting a pair of trainers that looked too big for the rest of her, and they had clearly been a test site for the electric purple pen, not to mention various other bright colours Nisha had discovered could leave their mark on her shoes. She had written swirled letters on the side in burning pinks, and drawn pentagrams in panicked red, lightning bolts in glittery gold, and curled waves of toxic green. Saulie marvelled.

"Now that's a pair of shoes!" he declared, "Why, they're chock-full of symbolism. You've made them all your own, Nisha. Excellent! They're a poem all themselves!"

Nisha lowered her head slightly.

"They're my favourite," she mumbled, "Actually, they're good for skateboarding," she mumbled, "I like skateboarding most of all, really."

Saulie beamed with delighted wonder at the small skateboardista.

"Then no pair of shoes could suit you better," he said.

From under Nisha's fringe and down at the very corner of her mouth, a small wary fragment of a smile broke out.

7. The Golden Boy, idol of hundreds, has died.

At a certain mysterious point as you walked south towards the centre of Edinburgh, Leith Walk changed into Elm Row, even though there was no obvious break from one to the other. There were also no elms. Still, that was one of the things about Edinburgh that delighted Saulie, all sorts of small patches had their own distinctive names for no discernable reason. There you were walking, and while one foot was half-raised in the air and while you were going innocently about your business, in that hanging moment the name of the street had changed unseen, and Saulie had no idea why. Of course, even if he didn't know the exact point where the border between street names was to be found, at least one side of Elm Row felt different from Leith Walk. While the other side of the street had perfectly ordinary coffee shops and printing places, on the east side of the street there was a distinctive row of shops and flats that were set back some way from the street, quietly flaunting that extra space that acted as a barrier from the noise of the traffic. Unused space was always a sign of prosperity in a cramped old city like Edinburgh. For this row of buildings, rather than being able to fall straight in the door from the pavement, you had to walk humbly up a few stone steps before you could start getting past their thresholds, like a suppliant ascending to a minor temple. Walking in this row towards the south, it felt like there was suddenly more money swelling up in a current in this direction, which made sense to Saulie - the centre of financial gravity would naturally be somewhere in the core of Edinburgh, a mass of increasingly fancy buildings built in the days when fine stone was more easily available, and more importantly, people weren't too fussed about where the money to construct these lovely buildings and flats came from.

Saulie thought to himself that he should really try to teach himself more about money. Aunt Mary insisted that he suffered from a form of slow-witted money stupidity. Fern, despite her own almost constant lamentable and self-destructive financial state, would agree. Saulie was very dumb at money. He struggled to think about the stuff, even though he knew he should. Even when he was almost broke he struggled to work money out and how he was supposed to be doing it. On the other hand, the history of money, that sounded interesting. The long memory of money in Edinburgh, the businesses and the hard work and the growth and the exploitation and the selfishness all transmuted into the stones of the monuments of money. His own bank details were very unremarkable, Saulie thought to himself, but the memory of money in Edinburgh, that'd be something to know about.

There was a very light tapping of rain - so light, you would suddenly notice it in passing and turn your face to the sky to see what the bother was, only to find the rain had basically stopped already. The only evidence that a smirr of rain had ever drifted past to drum you faintly on the shoulders were a few tiny splats of water on the ground, already drying away. Saulie peered into the windows of shops as he walked up the street. It didn't much matter what was actually on the other side of the glass, he was just curious to see what was going on. Nobody seemed to pay him much attention in his window-browsing, which saved him the awkwardness of the people on the other side of the glass wondering what he was doing, standing there and peering at every shop-front window. Perhaps the passing rain had dimmed the light enough that he was camouflaged out here along the street. Catching sight of his reflection in a window of what was some sort of beauty parlour, Saulie thought he looked remarkably like someone who had left something behind on the other side of one of these big ground-floor windows, a wallet, or an umbrella, or a bag, but that he couldn't quite recall in which shop it was exactly he had left that hypothetical lost umbrella or other prized possession.

A sudden glimmer of brightness waved in the corner of Saulie's eye, a sort of golden wobbling. Saulie turned and squinted. It was hair, cherubic golden curls bouncing lightly in ignorance of the overcast weather, and bouncing to the walk of a familiar rhythm. That hair was the unmistakable golden fleece of Teddy Orr, his hair still youthful and blonde after all these years. Everybody in Edinburgh knew Teddy, because Teddy knew how to be everywhere. Whenever there was a play put on, or a festival, or a book launch, Teddy was there. It was like you couldn't wheel out some local culture without Teddy's presence, as if everyone quietly agreed that it wouldn't count without him. It wouldn't really be art or music or poetry or what-have-you. Teddy Orr was popular and he made other things popular just by being there and standing near them, so why wouldn't you want him at your show? It was a strange power Teddy had that Saulie found astonishing, confusing and a little unsettling, but it turned out that some people were just like that, effortlessly the centre of things.

Saulie smiled politely.

"Hullo Teddy," he said.

The hair stopped a few feet from him and turned to look questioningly up at Saulie. Perhaps, youthful as he still looked, Teddy Orr's eyes weren't as good as they once were. He was wearing a navy blue trenchcoat that looked expensive, like it had been taken from the perfect skin of a mythical sea beast, and an effortlessly sprawling lightweight burgundy scarf that Saulie thought would look very nice as a sort of fancy display cloth to put on a very small table. Teddy blinked at Saulie. After a few silent seconds, a flush of recognition came into Teddy's eyes, and he deployed his perfect teeth in the practised smile of a professional.

"Why, if it isn't Saulie!" he declared, and jabbed an elbow in Saulie's direction in a gesture of back-in-the-days chumminess. "You look the same old Saulie, don't you? Long time no see, man! How've ye been keeping on then, pal?"

Saulie shrugged shyly.

"The usual things, Teddy. This and that. I've been doing the obituaries, mostly, still. I mean, they're the things I'm most interested these days."

Teddy waggled a finger at Saulie.

"Oh aye, I've heard something about that sort of thing, I think. Always the serious fellow, right? So you're keeping to your wee bit of writing then are ye? That's splendid, man, splendid."

Saulie felt an uncommon feeling inside his chest. A sort of ruffling, a bristling. He thought about this, and realised he didn't like to think of his memorials as just a wee bit of work. Then he felt ashamed, because wasn't Teddy right? Besides being tall, Saulie wasn't anything else big of any kind, was he? Well, there wasn't much he could do about that, was there? He wasn't a Teddy Orr, after all. Anyway, you couldn't have two Teddy Orrs standing next to each other. That would be like having two suns in front of each other, and while Saulie was hazy on the details of the physics, he imagined there'd be a good chance of the whole thing collapsing.

"Ah, what a strange sight from out of days gone by," Teddy said, smiling harder, "Solemn Saulie himself!" he chuckled. "And have you seen any of the original crowd lately, Saulie? Any other ghosts of the past still kicking about the place?"

Saulie scratched his head.

"Yes, all sorts, I suppose. Well, Fern, of course, she's well. Well, maybe not well, exactly. But she's still about, doing odd jobs and keeping at the performing during the Festival season and the like."

Teddy Orr slapped his leg and shook his arms.

"Fern still about, is she? Saulie and Fern! The odd pals! The pair of you still the same after all these years! Fantastic! High and Low, the two of you! Little and Large! The Long and the Short!"

"Yes, that's still us. The Gowk and the Titlin," Saulie offered with a wave of presentation, to help Teddy out with another variation.

Teddy put his palms on his chest and took a deep breath, then added an extra sniff of air through his flared nostrils. "Ah, it does a body good," he said, "I can tell you, Saulie, it does a fellow a power of good to see there are some things here that haven't changed, no matter where you go and what you

do! I don't know if you've experienced this yourself, but it gives a person a sense of anchoredness, that there is a grey ancient patch somewhere that remains stubbornly the same, no matter what winds of change blow though my own life. Good old Edinburgh." He laughed again and shook his head, "You and Furious Fern still pals and wandering about the place!"

Saulie nodded and looked up into the sky like he expected to see something there.

"I've always thought that there's not a lot of things more important than old pals," Saulie said slowly.

"Of course, Saulie, of course," said Teddy, spreading his hands, "That's why it is such a treat for me to have the time to come and tour the old stomping grounds. Ye ken, don't you?" Teddy hugged himself and thickened his accent, "Och, it's been a proper fair while since I last had the time to visit 'Auld Reekie'."

"You've always kept very busy, Teddy," said Saulie, thinking about how Teddy Orr had always been involved in things happening. He wondered if his Aunt Mary would approve of Teddy, and if she would suggest, in her cold understated exasperation, that she wished Saulie could be more like Teddy Orr. No, Saulie, thought to himself, that was foolish, a Saulie could never be a Teddy, any more than a thin-legged ibis could be a radiant golden sheep.

"Yas, well," Teddy went on, "I spend most of my time down in London nowadays, Saulie, and there's so much going on that it's almost impossible to get away. I'd like to visit Edinburgh more often, it's home, after all, but as you say, I'm kept awful busy. No rest for the wicked, ey?" So saying, Teddy spread his hands out again and let his shoulders droop, as if to show how weighed down by business he was.

"I'm sure you've seen some of my work about the place," Teddy said with a dash of modesty.

"Have I?" Saulie said, surprised, trying to wrack his brains and remember if he had, and if so, what it was of Teddy Orr's he was supposed to remember. Teddy looked askance at Saulie for a moment and then decided to laugh with offhand jollity.

"Aye, lad," Teddy said with a pleased expression, "There's been quite a lot of talk about this new production of mine, I'm happy to say. People have been kind enough to take to my last play. They've been most, most kind."

"I'm sure they have," agreed Saulie. People were almost always most kind to Teddy. Except for Fern. Since their more youthful days, Fern had felt like it was expected that you were supposed to be fascinated by Teddy Orr, and she for one, resented it. Saulie shrugged at this. There was no malice in Teddy, as far as Saulie could see, he was just always the centre of attention. It was natural to him, and Saulie thought it was silly to expect him to exist in any other way. There was no reason, as far as Saulie could see, to resent Teddy. Fern, however felt that there was equally no reason not to resent Teddy Orr.

"We've had a few productions now over the last year," Teddy said, "It's powerful stuff, Saulie, you should get yourself to see it next time the play tours up here. Of course, it may be a while - we've so many dates booked down south, and they've been so well received. In any case," here Teddy tapped under his eye and winked secretively, like he was going to give Saulie an excellent tip on the horses, a can't-fail sort of thing, but he should keep it under his hat. "It's all still hush-hush, but I don't mind telling you, we've got a radio version ready to go for the BBC." Saulie was still thinking, irrelevantly of horses and hats, and briefly wondered how that would work on radio, before he remembered what Teddy had been talking about. Saulie frowned and reminded himself to try to pay attention.

Teddy Orr waggled his head. "Very exciting. Very exciting stuff. I don't mind telling you, Saulie, we've put together a really fantastic version of my play. Really authentic. It's powerful medicine. And after that, it's early days yet, but the wheels are in motion."

"Oh good," said Saulie, "Are they?"

Teddy insisted that they were. "A film, Saulie, that's the next step, a moving picture, really bring the themes of the work to the biggest possible audience."

"My goodness," said Saulie, and paused, "And... what's it all about?"

Teddy rearranged his burgundy scarf and looked thoughtful.

"Well, that's a difficult one to answer, Saulie," he said, "It's about so many things, so many fundamental things. I suppose at the heart of it, the story is about the terrible duality of humanity, of the darkness. It's a journey of darkness, a journey of the darkness of self, if you follow me, of learning to delve into the darkness, to learn to accept it. I don't mind telling you, when I laboured over this play, it took a lot of blood, sweat, and tears, I had to really dig into the deep layers of the Scottish psyche, really excavate the midden of our history."

"That's fine," said Saulie, because he couldn't think of anything else to say, but Teddy was looking at him like he was waiting for Saulie to add something. When nothing more was forthcoming, Teddy went on.

"We've some really excellent prospects for the film side of things, I'm delighted to say, artists who will really do justice to the thing, really, I believe, embody the characters, and create something significant and real."

Teddy Orr then mentioned several impressive names. Saulie didn't know who any of them were, but he could tell that they were impressive names based on how Teddy said them and the way he nodded meaningfully at each one. Clearly these names were so impressive that they might even have been seen on television. Despite his ignorance, Saulie tried to look appropriately impressed, out of politeness.

"Fantastic!" Saulie said.

"Aye, things are going well. But look man, I've got to be off. I've somewhere to be. Ye ken how it is. Busy, busy."

"Of course!" said Saulie.

Teddy awkwardly tried to clap Saulie on the shoulder, not quite reaching, but if he noticed this, it did not faze him.

"Let's meet for coffee some time, ey Saulie?" Teddy said with practised enthusiasm, "Some time when we both manage to be free, man. A proper catch-up. Talk about the olden days."

"That would be nice," said Saulie, and before he knew it, the golden hair of Teddy Orr was bouncing off purposefully to its destination.

Saulie watched him go and realised he still didn't know what Teddy's play was actually about.

He thought about shouting out "Teddy, what is it actually about?" but by then the golden hair of Teddy Orr had vanished in the distance.

8. To the great sadness of the rhetoricians of history, the Art of Public Speaking has died.

How do you say goodbye to a child? Saulie realised he personally had absolutely no idea. He had been summoned to Morningside to see Aunt Mary and discuss the obituary he had written for Therese Lane. He was already nervy, as he had no idea if Aunt Mary would approve of the memorial written for the late member of her community group. Saulie was also feeling the pressure of having to be somewhere on time, something which he struggled with at the best of times. Aunt Mary believed in punctuality to an almost religious extent. She couldn't comprehend why Saulie found it so difficult to be at a specific place at a specific time, but, in his defence, Aunt Mary hardly left her Morningside fort, whereas Saulie was a wandering fellow, and not only did specific times regularly slip past and escape him in a way he couldn't explain, but quite often specific places would disappear when he was supposed to step into them.

Because he accepted that, at least for himself, time and space were vague, leaky, quantities, Saulie knew that he would need extraordinary amounts of extra time in reserve just to arrive on time at Aunt Mary's house. He had spent a good proportion of the night before in preparation and planning, finding his keys, wallet, and phone, and when he had successfully hunted them down, laying these essential expedition supplies neatly right in front of the door of the flat of many colours, so that he couldn't possibly miss them when it came to leave. This excellent plan resulted in Saulie almost stepping on the screen of his phone several times as he went to and fro in the flat on the following morning, humming 'The Cuckoo's Dance' to himself. But the important thing was that he always managed not to step on his phone each time, and that, to Saulie's mind was a success of organisation as far as he was concerned. Thanks to a piece of paper he had found in his jacket the other day that said 'Polish Shoes!' in electric purple, once he had worked out that the note was not referring to a particular type of national footwear, Saulie had even remembered to sit down and remove some of the scuffiness from his black shoes. Even if Aunt Mary wouldn't be impressed with his almost gleaming black shoes, Saulie was rather delighted with how well they had turned out. With the essentials already laid out and by giving himself a good extra length of time, Saulie had managed to set off for Aunt Mary's good and early, to the extent that he was confident that he had enough spare time in his pocket that he could miss two buses and still be in Morningside when he was supposed to be.

Saulie had danced lightly down the stairs of the building with his thin lanky legs, congratulating himself on getting out ahead of schedule, and was just about to skip out the main door when he ran into an unforeseen obstacle: Poppy and Eva. Naturally, when they shouted 'Saulie!' and clomped enthusiastically towards him, he had to pause to say hello and find out what they were up to. They had so many things to tell him, and tell him they did - about a movie they had recently watched about a superpowered dog, not to mention other notable events in their lives, like a good waffle Eva had eaten, and the time Poppy claimed to have done a somersault across her entire living room. However, because Poppy and Eva had not yet mastered the art of succinct conversation, being after all only seven and five years old respectively, and having plenty of time for that sort of thing in the future, Saulie suddenly realised that punctuality was probably sneaking away from him at that very moment.

Several times, Saulie tried to get away from Poppy and Eva, but they would always come up with something else that they absolutely had to show him or tell him about, and no matter how many times Saulie mentioned that he really had to be getting on, they either did not understand or did not want to understand that he had to catch his bus to Morningside. At his last attempt to leave, Eva had presented Saulie with a picture she had drawn of a green dinosaur called Shelley, and once Saulie had shown his enthusiasm for it, Eva had offered it to him as a gift in a spirit of great munificence. At that present moment, Poppy had declared that she was the best at a game which involved balancing on a plastic toy. To steady herself in her demonstration, Poppy had her whole hand spread over the top of Eva's head to support herself, her little sister turning out to be the perfect height to act as a prop. Eva had a pained and bewildered expression on her face, but was strangely otherwise uncomplaining. Saulie had taken tentative steps towards the main door several times and was starting to feel like he might be stuck spending the rest of his day shuffling awkwardly backwards and forwards because Poppy and Eva refused to accept his goodbyes, when he had a stroke of luck and from inside the Youngs' apartment, Poppy and Eva's mother called out that she had some bubbly-juice for them to drink. Talking to Saulie must have been thirsty work, because with a quick "Bye-bye, Saulie!" from Poppy, the sisters went tearing off into their flat, both of them trying to get in front of the other while chanting "Bubbly! Juice! Bubbly! Juice!" Saulie made a swift escape and dashed for the bus stop.

Thanks to his plan of leaving much earlier than he need to, Saulie had luckily arrived more or less on time. Finding himself nervous at the prospect of Aunt Mary passing judgement on his obituary, Saulie had hoped that as soon as he was ushered into the Morningside fort and into the snug small room in the back that Aunt Mary would get the whole uncomfortable process over with as quickly and as mercifully as possible. Instead, Aunt Mary delayed the pain by having Saulie help her unpack, sort, repack, and move a new shipment of books to be disposed of by charities. The person who had died this time and left behind their collection of reading material had invested heavily in books on theology, books on psychology, books on the psychology of theology, and books on old train stations. By the time Saulie had done his duty and shifted these boxes of books, he had almost forgotten why he had been told to come around to Morningside in the first place.

Saulie sat, trying to draw his long legs up and out of the way while Aunt Mary looked at him with her mouthed pursed, as if she could see through his chest and weigh his heart just by eyesight. He cleared his throat and wondered if there was going to be the usual biscuits. Normally, this would be the time for Aunt Mary to present the big teapot, but for some reason, tradition had been broken, and Saulie was beginning to wonder what it all about.

"Saulie!" Aunt Mary said suddenly.

"Yes!" said Saulie, starting a little, but pleased to have got this one right.

"I have read over your obituary for the late Therese," she said.

"Ah. Good?" Saulie ventured, uncertainly.

Aunt Mary leaned ever so slightly forward.

"I have come to a decision," she said.

"Excellent things, decisions," said Saulie, "I've never been much for them myself, but I have an awful amount of respect for those who can do them."

Aunt Mary ignored this.

"Saulie! We have decided that you will read your obituary at the next meeting of the Kirk committee."

"Ehm?" said Saulie.

Aunt Mary frowned.

"Don't be foolish, Saulie, what I have just said was perfectly clear. Any child could understand it."

"Yes, of course, just so, Aunt Mary, but all the same - ehm?"

Never particularly interested in repeating herself, Aunt Mary disinclined to respond to this questioning noise. She sat in stony silence and left Saulie flailing.

"I just mean," he began uncertainly, "Well, that is to say, why would anybody want to hear me read the obituary? I never even met the lady."

Aunt Mary sniffed in a superior fashion.

"As I have told you before, Saulie, if you cast your poor addled mind back to the last time we were sitting in this very same place, it is a sad truth that none of us knew poor Therese to speak of. That was the whole point, you will no doubt eventually recall, of having you write the obituary for us."

Saulie felt like the room was getting subtly darker. Was it his imagination? Was it the lack of the usual biscuits? Perhaps his blood sugar was getting low, lending an increased sense of panic to this situation.

"Yes, well, of course I remember that, Aunt Mary," he said, "But it is just, as I said, the thing is, and I don't think I can emphasise this enough, I couldn't possibly be the person for the job, ehm, willing as I am, because I didn't actually know Therese Lane."

Aunt Mary waved a hand dismissively.

"Then you are no worse off than anyone on the committee."

Saulie wasn't sure he agreed with this, but no matter how madly he tugged at his white hair, he couldn't think of the right words to convey this strongly felt belief any more clearly to Aunt Mary. As Aunt Mary had made her mind up, no doubt the right words in his mind had caught sight of her fierce determination and had suddenly scarpered, run off, vanished, as if they had never existed, leaving poor Saulie flustered and helpless before a tiny determined woman.

"In fact," Aunt Mary declared, "If you thought about it for even a moment, as I'm sure you have not yet had an opportunity of so doing, since you have written the obituary, in actual fact you now know more about Therese Lane than anybody else who is alive."

"Me?" Saulie managed to choke out in disbelief. The fugitive words that might have been able to deny Aunt Mary's determination had by now forged passports, assumed new identities, and moved to a different country.

Aunt Mary frowned, but didn't feel she had to dignify this with a response.

"Ah, no, but, well, I have to say, Aunt Mary, I don't wish-"

"Luckily, Saulie, there's no need to wish. The committee will be meeting on Wednesday. We will expect you to be there punctually at half past eleven to present Therese's obituary. There will be tea and coffee available."

Aunt Mary had spoken like the slamming closed of a weighty tome, and clearly this discussion was at an end. There was no hope for Saulie.

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"The thing is, Fern," Saulie explained as he looked wide-eyed at the ice in his glass of dark red chinotto, "I don't have much experience with the whole business of public speaking."

Fern shrugged. "If we wrote a C.V. of the things you have no experience of, Saulie, we wouldn't get it done before the death of all human life on earth."

Saulie sighed. "I just don't think I'd be much good at that sort of thing, that's all. I don't know what it is, but I've always found that it's ever so hard to keep track of what you're saying when you are standing up in front of a group of people, not to mention what you had been saying and what you are about to say. Next thing you know, you're staring at the top of everyone's head and wondering why some people have shiny hair and others don't - perhaps it's to do with shampoo, or the position of the sunbeams coming into the room?"

Fern grunted.

"My point is," Saulie said, frowning, "If I start talking, I struggle to keep off tangents. I don't know how other people stick to the point when they are speaking. If I open my mouth, any old nonsense is

bound to come out, and I haven't got the first idea how to stop that. I don't mind telling you, Fern, the whole idea is making me extremely nervous. Having to do a presentation to Aunt Mary and room full of-"

"Other Aunt Marys," offered Fern, pointing her bottle of Irn Bru at Saulie, "Just a kirk full of grey-haired, stone-faced Aunt Marys, stacked shoulder to shoulder and back to back. Crammed full of Aunt Marys. A committee of Aunt Marys. That's the official collective term for a room stuffed with Aunt Marys."

"Yes, ehm, I suppose so," said Saulie and took a worried sip of his chinotto, "Hence this emergency meeting of Saulie and Fern, Incorporated. I only have a few days until I have to face Aunt Mary's committee."

"Two days," put in Fern helpfully.

"Two days?" Saulie said aghast, "Only two days? Is that right? It doesn't seem like enough days."

Fern shrugged.

"I feel too hot," Saulie insisted and held his glass of ice and chinotto to the side of his face. Disappointingly, this did not do much to cure the sensation, but only left him with one side of his face slightly chilled.

"I don't think I am the man for this job," he said.

"Then don't do it."

Saulie tugged at his white beard.

"I'm not sure how I could do that. Or not do that, I mean. Aunt Mary insisted. You know how much trouble it is to try and get out of something when she has insisted, and in the end you end up doing whatever she insisted anyway."

"That's why it's best to avoid the Aunt Marys of the world," Fern said, tapping the side of her nose, "If you cannae see them, they cannae make you do anything."

"What, pretend I can't see her, like I'm a small dog or a bairn with my eyes closed, hoping that everything will go away if I ignore it hard enough?"

"Exactly!" Fern boomed, and slammed her bottle of Irn Bru on the table, "It's one of the many secrets of my success, Saulie. Too many people want to become problem solvers, by doing some bullshit course or reading some self-help book full of the most pitiful pissing mince. But that's the fool's way, Saulie. You don't want to be a problem solver. Why make problems your problem? You want to train yourself to become a problem ignorer. Ignore the things that you know will cause you trouble, and just keep on ignoring 'em. You may be tempted to weaken and to give them your attention, but you have to remain firm, and not even glance at them. With the right mindset, it works for everything. Wee posh landladies who want to put your rent up? Ignore it! The worry that you have never made the effort to do anything significant? Ignore it! How long it has been since you last had a shag? Who cares! Ignore it! The way you feel a weird buzzing deep in your chest after one thirty in the morning when you try to sleep? No! Ignore it! It requires a powerful will and constant dedication to not think about these problem causers. You can't relax for a single moment!"

"Your lifestyle tip sounds very stressful," Saulie said.

Fern fixed Saulie with a bug-eyed stare.

"Look at me, Saulie. Get it together. Let's give it a wee practice and see if you have the right stuff. You have to focus your mind and look at me, ignore everything else, don't look at anything else, especially not at my left hand, which is doing a lovely sort of dancing number on the top of this table at the moment."

Saulie's eyes flickered from Fern to her dancing hand. To be fair, it was a very lively number she was doing with her tap-dancing fingers.

"How was that?" he asked.

"Terrible," said Fern with satisfaction, "I don't think you lasted three seconds at ignoring possible problem causers. No wonder you can't escape from Aunts making you do things. You poor fool, Saulie, there's no hope for you in that direction."

A very large plate of spaghetti liberally dashed with oil was deposited in front of Fern. She immediately began to attack it with gusto.

"The point is," Saulie began, and furrowed his brow thoughtfully for a moment, before his eyes went bright when he remembered what the point was and he gave a small smile. "The point, the reason I've asked you here today Fern, besides watching you eat spaghetti like a wee dog who can't make up her mind whether she wants to scoff or play with her food, the reason I had to see you as soon as possible was because of this public speaking thing. You know about getting up in front of people and saying the thing you were supposed to say."

Fern slurped a piece of spaghetti and jerked her head slightly when it was mostly in her mouth, biting off the end so a fragment fell back on the plate.

"You know that public speaking is regularly rated as the most terrifying thing you can do?" Fern said, swirling more pasta on her fork, "The number two greatest fear people have is death, just after doing a speech in public. Most people would rather die than have to talk to an audience."

Saulie tugged at the end of his beard.

"On reflection, Fern, I think I'd rather not die just to get out of having to talk to Aunt Mary's committee. That seems to be a pretty strong reaction to the situation."

"Suit yourself. It's possible that you could get so worried and confused about doing your talk that your head explodes and you die anyway, combining the two most popular fears in one."

Saulie sighed morosely.

"You've been doing shows for years now, Fernie. You must have learned a thing of two. You must have picked up some tips and tricks, that sort of thing. You know, imagining your audience in their underpants to give you more confidence or something like that."

Fern shuddered.

"Yes," Saulie said, "Now that I think about it, being stuck in a room full of half-naked people, even if it is just imaginary, might cause more problems than it solves."

"I wonder what sort of underwear Aunt Mary wears," said Fern, "Something made out of steel, probably. Rigid, unyielding stuff. Good for your posture. The sort of intricate ancient metal underwear that could deflect a knife stab."

With her fork, Fern made some demonstrative stabs at her chest.

"Ping! Ping!" she said, providing some accompanying sound effects.

"Have you ever tried the underwear-vision trick? If you are going to imagine people not wearing clothes at your show anyway, you could work in some form of underwear-guessing," Saulie suggested, "Pick out people from the audience and guess what underthings they are wearing and what cosmic significance their underlying choices have. Bill yourself as Fern the pants psychic. Fern the underpantsomancer. Intimating the future from intimate-wear."

Fern chewed a mouthful of pasta and thought about this.

Saulie swished his glass of chinotto and leaned back.

"When you first started out doing your shows, Fernie, you must have been nervy. How did you deal with having to talk to a crowd?"

"Heavy drinking," Fern responded promptly, "Which in your case, Saulie, would be translated to something like one sip of a single alcoholic beverage. That should set you up to be sloshed enough to forget your worries."

Saulie shook his head.

"No, I'm afraid that wouldn't work for me. I'm already very likely to forget things. I don't think making me tipsy and more forgetful would help matters any." He leaned forward and put his pointy elbows on the table with a bony clunk. "How do you feel when you come out onto a stage and see a room of strangers, Fernie? What comes into your head?"

Fern thought for a moment.

"Audiences? Well, Saulie, I hate 'em. I'm full of rage at the whole lot of them, showing up and paying their wee stupid bits of money to buy me up for forty-five minutes, jingling an' flinging their

spare coins to come and gawp and laugh. The rotten bunch of them. Why couldn't they stay home and watch television, like they really want? When they show up, I stomp out and I scowl at them, and I think that'll show the lot of the bastards, the ugly, dumb-faced arseholes. That's what get me through, Saulie, a big fucking full pint glass of bitterness, resentment, and anger. They want to come here and waste time, I'll waste their stupid time, good and proper. Give 'em a face full of anger."

Saulie carefully examined Fern's face which was twisted into a snarling, frowning look. He tried to imitate it several times.

"What's wrong with your eyes there, man?" Fern said when she noticed.

"I'm trying to be angry at a crowd, like you, Fern," Saulie explained, and then made a sort of soft uncertain growling.

Fern shook her head.

"It doesn't suit you, I'm afraid. You're too much of a snowy-down-looking ostrich fool. You look like you've forgotten your glasses and are trying to read the number of an oncoming bus."

Saulie sighed and took a disconsolate sip of his chinotto.

"I don't know at all how to make this go well."

"Just decide it won't go well, and then you won't be disappointed," suggested Fern.

"Never!" insisted Saulie, banging the table with his glass, "Aunt Mary wants me to do this, and so I will. As Fern is my witness, I will do the best possible memorial for Therese Lane that I can! I can't guarantee success, or even that it will go at all well, but I guarantee that I will care! And by goodness I will!"

Fern applauded sarcastically.

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With the memorial presentation at hand, and finding himself unable to follow any of Fern's advice on public speaking due to his being Saulie rather than Fern, Saulie decided he needed to get his mind fighting fit for calm concentration. There was only one place suitable for that sort of preparation that he could think of (and that was within walking distance) - the Canongate Kirkyard. This was a quiet, formal, and uncrowded necropolis, whose busy days were behind it. Everything was neat, orderly, clean, and focussed. Possibly because it was stuck on the back of the Canongate Kirk itself, Saulie felt you had a reminder to be extra well-behaved as you walked around the outside of the church, like the kirk was shushing you and giving you a meaningful look. But despite its neatness, it was still a pleasant graveyard to walk in. Clean white gravel, well-kept on the paths, crunched satisfyingly under Saulie's shoes. As you walked to the back of the Kirkyard, the land dipped down a gentle incline, and at the very far end was a sort of grassy basin with a tall lonely monument left in the middle. The space here around this monument almost felt unfilled-in, as if there were plans for more graves and stones that for some reason never ended up arriving. Looming high above the back of the Kirkyard was the lofty Calton Hill, from which the Old High Royal School looked down on Saulie with its temple-like neoclassical columns.

"No need to be so snobbish, now, Old High," Saulie thought to himself, looking unflinchingly right in the pediment of the building on the hill. "You may look all solid and haughty and fancy, but you haven't necessarily got it all together either. After all, you can't decide if you are a school, or a parliament, or a hotel, or a different type of school again." With a commanding nod of dismissal at the Old High, Saulie turned and walked back up the slope.

When Saulie visited the Canongate Kirkyard, he always took a moment to visit two most notable residents - Adam Smith and Robert Fergusson.

Right outside the front gate of the Kirk there was a statue of Fergusson taking a spirited stride on the pavement. Inside the Kirkyard, Fergusson's grave itself was neatly fenced in with a small chain.

He was a poet, and had meant to write a not entirely serious epic poem about Edinburgh called 'Auld Reikie', and had written up part of this poetic tour of the town by seventeen seventy something. Fergusson's Edinburgh was messy, loud, smelly, absurd, drunken, fighty, and very much alive. A place that was both wretched and glorious, but that was worth loving anyway. But Fergusson had died at only twenty-four after sustaining a head injury and the poem had never been finished. He had also written poems about oysters, the Leith Races, paving stones with complaints, and ghosts. One of the set of rhymes Saulie could remember from the Edinburgh poem that must have got wedged into his brain at some point was:

Whan Sybil led the Trojan down
To haggard Pluto's dreary town,
Shapes waur nor thae, I freely ween,
Could never meet the soldier's een

But that wasn't very inspiring, Saulie thought, for his current situation. There was something about Muses singing about grief later in the poem that might have been more appropriate as a quotation, but he couldn't quite recall it just at the moment. In the unlikely event he remembered, he thought that he ought to look up Fergusson's poem when he got home to see if he could find something more useful. Saulie thought that he would have liked to have met Fergusson. He wondered if Fergusson and Fern would have got along.

As for Smith, Saulie knew he was famous, although he tended to be hazy on the details, but as far as he could make out, Adam Smith was a quiet philosophical fellow who had invented economics. In days gone by and in idle moments, Saulie had pointlessly worried that if he had ever met Adam Smith at a party, the sort with trays of small snacks, Saulie's terrible ignorance about economics might have made conversation tricky. Actually, he had dutifully read part of Smith's big book 'The Wealth of Nations', but had often lost track of what Smith had been talking about. The one thing that had stuck in Saulie's mind was that Smith had seemed very worried about corn.

Smith's gravestone was set up against a wall, with rays (of knowledge?) carved around the top with a little stone face in the middle looking out mildly bewildered. Underneath the declaration on the stone that Smith's remains were deposited here, before even mentioning 'The Wealth of Nations', the stone let you know that Smith had also written a book called 'The Theory of Moral Sentiments', which Saulie had subsequently got a hold of some time after trying 'The Wealth of Nations'. Saulie had actually read 'Moral Sentiments' all the way through and had to admit he very much preferred it, because he understood more of it and because it was somewhat less concerned with the fluctuating price of corn. In fact, when he had decided that he needed to come over to the Canongate Kirkyard to get in the right frame of mind, Saulie had copied out a section from Smith's 'Moral Sentiments' on the back of a print-out of his obituary of Therese Lane, which he was carrying in one of the pockets of his black suit. He took out the obituary and turned it over to read Smith again. In his subsection called 'Of Sympathy', Smithie had said:

"HOW selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane, though they perhaps may feel it

with the most exquisite sensibility. The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it."

Saulie marvelled at this stuff. It was a very long way of saying 'Human beings have the capacity to feel sad about other people's misfortunes', but this was an important thing to remember and to celebrate, surely, the fundamental potential for human beings to sympathise with the suffering of others and to think about them, and so why shouldn't it be expressed in a suitably ornate way? Whereas Smith's long sentences on trade in 'The Wealth of Nations' had left Saulie lost and wandering, he rather enjoyed them in 'The Theory of Moral Sentiments'. Here, the long sentences were like listening to the slow crash and withdrawal of the great waves of the sea, lulling Saulie into a sleepy thoughtfulness.

See, Old High? Saulie thought, waving the piece of paper with Smith on the back up at the building sitting snooty behind its columns up on Calton Hill. People are wonderfully involved! Who'd want to be just one thing, no matter how fine looking the exterior? Look at the astonishing, messy, complexity of human beings coming and going! Look properly at Smithie here - he wasn't just one thing, was he? Look at the rambling, knotty, broad things he had been interested in, that he had devoted his years to and left behind him as a memorial. Money and Morality! The Invisible Hand and the Impartial Spectator! Corn and Sympathy! What a fine thing it is to have lived, no matter how messily you went about it.

9. Therese Lane, an unknown, has died.

The night before he had to face Aunt Mary's audience, Saulie lay in bed, his feet hanging out the end of his blanket, worrying about all the things that might go wrong. No wonder, as Fern had said, the larger part of humanity didn't ever want to have to speak in public. Not only was the thing nerve-wracking for how badly it might go, and all the ways words might come out of your mouth all garbled or not come out at all while everyone kept staring at you, but to top it all off, you then had to spend all the time leading up to the public speaking event thinking about all the specific ways it might go wrong. For instance, Saulie thought, his legs might suddenly stop working, right when he was about to start reading. That would be awkward, and he didn't have any idea what he would do or say if he suddenly flopped all the way to the earth, his legs having suddenly and mysteriously lost all their legginess. But if they gave him a seat, that wouldn't be a problem, would it? Well, it would in fact be a problem, wouldn't it, if part of his brain went to sleep and he suddenly forgot how to sit properly, and after trying several uncomfortable poses and leg positionings, what if he rapidly slid off the chair onto the ground? And what if Aunt Mary's audience was so elderly that they couldn't hear him and he had to raise his voice again and again until he wore his throat out entirely and couldn't make any sound at all except a desperate gasping for air? What if there was a sudden fire, or a flood, or even an earthquake? Saulie wasn't sure if Edinburgh ever had earthquakes, but no doubt Aunt Mary would scorn to stop his presentation for a little bit of groundshakery. Saulie would be trying to read his obituary while having to keep an eye out for falling pieces of ceiling plaster, and he wasn't too good at having to do multiple things at once. These things could happen, after all, and you had to think of them, didn't you? Saulie knew he should get a good night's sleep, but who had the time, when there were so many potential possibilities branching off into tomorrow?

Becoming increasingly concerned, Saulie switched on his bedside light, rummaging around among the mess of books and pieces of paper on his bedside table until he found a pencil. Concentrating so much that his tongue poked slightly out of the left corner of his mouth, on a blank piece of paper he started writing out a list of the possible disasters (both minor and major) that could occur at the Aunt Mary committee meeting. Then he started adding little notes on how likely these accidents of fate might be, making up complex ratios and ratings that he quickly lost track of. Enough of this sort of thing eventually made him tired. Saulie switched off the light, and after what felt like an eternity, he must have finally fallen asleep while staring up at the dark ceiling, listening to the sound of ticking and the occasional lonely swoosh of passing nighttime traffic outside, thinking to himself that there was almost certainly definitely no way he'd be able to sleep.

He woke eventually, and because brightness is an unreliable indicator of day in Edinburgh, Saulie checked the time on the small, squat, square-faced alarm clock he had balanced on the pile of paraphernalia next to the bed. It was an analogue clock - something old-fashioned designed for travelling that Saulie had found in the purple spare room among Aunty Cressida's things. The alarm clock made a lot of noise when it was ticking, and, as an assertive object, seemed to get even louder when it was night-time and you absolutely had to get to sleep. Normally, he would keep it safely tucked away in the boxes of Aunty Cressida's things next to a pile of postcards of Edinburgh, but needs must, and he and the travel clock had come to an understanding that just this once they would put aside their differences and work together to make sure Saulie had a decent start on this day.

Saulie had decided to carry the travel clock around with him as he got ready that morning, so he would always have one eye on the time. He took it into the kitchen and popped it up on the small

table so it would have a good view of the little red room and of the morning getting started outside the window. At some point in the last few days past Saulie had cooked an excess of patatas bravas and stir-fried noodles and tucked them away in tubs in the fridge. He grazed on a few forkfuls from each for a light breakfast, then reflected that it wouldn't do for his stomach to start protesting with hunger when he was trying to deliver a dignified tribute to the dead, so he also ate two forkfuls of peanut butter. Now he could be absolutely certain that he would avoid attacks of weakness and would have the extra energy and get-up-and-go that he imagined, based on no nutritional knowledge, was locked away in big tubs of crunchy peanut butter.

Saulie showered and brushed his teeth simultaneously to save precious time, narrowly avoiding using his toothbrush to scrub behind his ears in a moment of warm-water-induced absentmindedness. The travel clock had been placed next to the pink soap holder on the basin, turned discretely to the one side, so that Saulie could get ready and still see the time without the clock looking at him face-on. Saulie realised too late that the glass front of the clock had fogged up while he went about his showering and teeth-brushing, and it occurred to him that perhaps bathroom steam was not necessarily good for the inner workings of a clock. Well, he would have to hope for the best, and that a seasoned traveller like the alarm clock wouldn't be put off by a little dampness and fall into a sickly, broken-down state. Hopefully this clock came from a long line of timepieces designed to sail in the olden days of ocean liners and cruise ships, and had a more than passing immunity to the waves and blows of nature.

Drying himself and unable to find where he had left his toothbrush, Saulie looked over the black suit he always wore, carefully hung up the night before and now patiently waiting for him.
"Much appreciated as always, Uncle Arthur," Saulie said in memory of the suit's late owner, "And dressed up well, here's hoping it will all go well, too."
He gave the fabric a careful brush with his hands and put the black suit on. Saulie opened the wardrobe so he could check himself in the mirror on the inside of the door. He stooped down, peered at himself for a moment, and found that he was somewhat dissatisfied at what he saw, but unable to put his finger on exactly what. Saulie attempted to pat down his white hair, but it immediately bounced back into ridiculous woolly shapes. If he had ever owned a comb, he was not sure where he would find it now. Anyway, according to the frowning travel clock that had put up with him patiently that morning, he had no more time to mess about in the flat of many colours. It looked as if this was going to be as good as he would get. He had to head off and hope for the best.

On the bus Saulie spent most of the trip re-checking that he had the print-out of the memorial in his pocket and the rest of the time was muttering the address where he had to get off so he wouldn't forget it. He was kept so busy with these two activities that he barely had time to look about him and see who his fellow passengers were and what they were up to. That was one of the things Saulie liked about travelling by bus or by train. But there was no time for any bus-watching today. Today was a day for serious business only. Saulie concentrated hard and tried to imagine himself as a man of serious business. He continued to mutter the address of his destination like a mantra, and was concentrating on it so intently that he almost missed his stop when it came rushing up. At the last minute, he poked at the bell, flung himself awkwardly to his feet, and dashed out, leaving a trail of fragmentary apologies behind him.

When he arrived after several minutes of brisk, long-legged striding, Saulie muttered the address a few more times to himself, this time uncertainly. It wasn't quite what he had expected for Aunt Mary's committee. What had he expected? Something grander, perhaps? A hall, with a pulpit, maybe, from which Aunt Mary's steely eye could lay out the law. Instead, he found himself trotting around the back of an unremarkable building and down into a basement room. A smiling elderly

woman, who seemed more knitwear than human, welcomed Saulie and ushered him into the room. It was very dim inside, with only a faint sigh of light coming through the small windows. Saulie squinted while his eyes adjusted. The committee room was extremely plain, painted a sort of off-white colour that had sat there slowly getting more off-white over the years, forgotten for some considerable time. There were several brooms leaning up against the wall in the far corner, despite the floor being a dark grey carpet that had no use for brooms. The only decoration on the walls, if you could call it that, was a poster explaining fire safety regulations and a smaller-handwritten notice insisting that the lights be switched off at the end of the day. Neither poster looked like the sort of thing anyone ever really paid attention to.

In the centre of the room, several dark green rectangular desks had been pushed together, and around this central mega-combined desk, folding chairs were arranged. There was the sharp smell of instant coffee in the room. Saulie's nose traced the smell to a spot over by the wall, where there was a trolley holding the hot drinks paraphernalia - white mugs and a milk jug, a box of Yorkshire tea bags and a bubbling urn waiting patiently until it was time to make teas and coffees. Oddly, although the smell of the coffee was very strong, the jar of instant was clearly closed shut. Perhaps there had been so many committee meetings in this room that the smell of instant coffee from past gatherings was still present in the air. Looking around the room Saulie realised he was staring, and somebody was staring back at him. It was Aunt Mary, who gave him a curt nod and said nothing. Aunt Mary did not sit here upon an iron throne, as Fern had conjectured. She sat on the same folding chairs as everyone else sitting around in the rectangular formation. Aunt Mary was, however, sitting at the other end of the room, directly opposite where Saulie assumed he was supposed to take his place. To be honest, any sort of imposing furniture would have been superfluous for Aunt Mary, since she could project authority and sternness just as well from a folding chair. Saulie could sense her eyes upon him no matter where he looked about the room. He tried shuffling a few steps to the side, but that didn't seem to help much either. Saulie swallowed nervously. He gave a little wave. Looking around the room, to his mild surprise he saw that not everyone there had grey hair. There were even two people who were not old ladies, but were in fact youngish men. The audience were mostly engaged in the desultory chit-chat of the usual sort used all over the world to fill in the little gaps before things actually started happening. One pair of ladies, however, was involved in a louder conversation than everyone else, the subject of which appeared to be which of them had the more excellent fellow come around to clean their windows, which involved a substantial and intense discussion about cleaning products used, price, the sophistication of the special window mop device, and the more difficult to judge but clearly essential topic of how charming exactly their chosen champion of window cleaning was.

The knitwear lady who had shown Saulie into the room, and whose name was apparently Edith, stood at the front of the room next to him. Knitwear Edith beamed at the audience until they received the signal and began to quieten down in bits and pieces. Edith smiled encouragingly at Saulie and introduced him to the committee, explaining that he had been commissioned to write an obituary for their late, departed member, Therese Lane, and that they were all very keen indeed to hear his memorial.

"Ehm, yes, hello all, I'm, ah, ever so pleased to be here, I mean, well," Saulie said, bobbing his head several times. "Thank you all for having me here, on this sombre occasion." Knitwear Edith placed a glass and a carafe of water on the table in front of Saulie. Nobody else had any water, and for a confused moment, Saulie wondered if he should offer to share it with the rest of the room. Knitwear Edith smiled even more broadly and waved her head. After a few more grins and head-waves, Saulie realised he was supposed to take his seat at the end of the table. It couldn't be the head of the rectangular table, of course, because Aunt Mary was surely sitting at the head.

Saulie folded himself into the guest-of-honour folding chair. The chair wobbled dangerously as Saulie sat down, and while trying to remember if this was on his list of possible disasters he had written up last night as a night-cap, he flailed around suddenly when it felt like the rickety thing was going to fall over out from under him. While he was trying to balance himself, his bony elbow caught the glass on the table in front of him and knocked it over. Luckily, Saulie's hand flashed out and he managed to grab the glass before it smashed into pieces on the desk. He righted it carefully and gave a bashful, apologetic look to the room. Everyone was waiting in patient silence. Considering the matter, Saulie would have really rather preferred if they had gone back to their chit-chatting and not paid any more attention to him.

Saulie dug into one of the inside pockets of his black blazer.
"Ah, no, ehm, wait, must be..." he mumbled feverishly. He tried looking in the pocket opposite, but instead unearthed a drawing of a dinosaur, a grey lanyard, a small packet of pepper of the sort you get at roadside restaurants, and a ticket to a concert he was fairly sure he had never been to. Subsequent frantic digging in his other pockets eventually revealed that the piece of paper he was looking for had in fact somehow been in that first pocket all along. Saulie took out the memorial, unfolded it, and waved it a little at his audience to share his small triumph. Aunt Mary stared back unmoving.
"Yes, well, found it at last. Ehm, yes, thanks for your patience and... that sort of thing," Saulie said. He held the piece of paper up in front of him and was about to start reading when he found to his horror that something was making the words on the page go all blurry and shaky. With alarm, he laid the page down on the desk, which seemed to make things better, although now Saulie himself was feeling blurry and shaky. He cleared his throat. Then he poured himself a glass of water from his carafe and drained it. Paralysed for the moment and unable to recall what he was supposed to be doing, he decided to pour himself another glass of water and drained that one too, making appreciative sounds. Because of the way Aunt Mary was staring at him, Saulie wondered if he had spilled some of his drink, so he mopped at his mouth and small white beard with his shirt cuff.
"Eh, well, yes," Saulie said, attempting once again to begin, "Therese Lane." He looked relieved that he had finally got her name out. "Therese Lane. We are here, I suppose, to try to honour her memory. Originally born in an outer suburb of Paris, to a French father and an English mother. Her parents separated when she was a young girl, and that break-up of her first home affected her greatly. There was the sense that she was always looking for something in her life from that moment on, and perhaps that was one reason why she ended up travelling the world in her youth. A year or two after her mother and father had separated, Therese's mother returned to England, to live in Peterborough. Although Therese would see her father a handful of times again in Paris, she moved with her mother and left France more or less permanently. There was a certain aimlessness to her youth. She left Peterborough and her mother as soon as she could, and worked for several years in various shops and cafés all around London. Therese, always consumed by a sense of dissatisfaction she could never properly articulate, rarely lived in one place for more than two or three years before being compelled by that itch inside her to move on again. In her thirties, she drifted further north, living in Birmingham, Nottingham, Sheffield, Manchester. Finally, she arrived here in Edinburgh some four years ago. There wasn't any particular reason for her to live in Edinburgh, and perhaps, if she had lived, in another year or two she would have drifted on elsewhere. Therese was rootless. She was disconnected."

"Edinburgh did have some charms for her. She liked the stone buildings and the steeples, the feeling of kirks looming overhead somehow comforted her. Her father had been a Catholic, and while she never spoke much about her own beliefs, the sense of religion, even if it was only in the background of her life, was still important to her. To begin with, she had struggled to get regular work in Edinburgh, but recently had spent the last ten months working in a bakery. She was fascinated by

steak-bakes. She had been a part of your community committee for more than a year, but she never talked much about why she wanted to join, whether she felt she had to do something charitable, or whether she just wanted to do something productive."

Saulie looked up and paused thoughtfully.

"Honestly, I think she wanted to be around other people. Therese Lane lived a lonely life. She might have been happy with her isolation, some people are, of course, but I don't think she would have joined your committee if that was the case. I think Therese was looking to spend time with other people, to talk to them and be with them and have their lives overlap, even if only briefly, with hers. She wasn't an outgoing and talkative person, and when you have been alone for so long, it must be very hard to remember how to spend time with other people. To remember how to approach people, how you should look, how to make small talk, how to make others feel comfortable, how to get to know them. For some people, these are habits that can be lost, and trying to relearn them later in life can be painful. Despite the struggle of trying to find a place here, to find small connections, I hope that Therese got little moments of contentment when she was here with you, with those who knew her."

His eyes blurred and he looked about the room.

"But it makes me terribly sad that I know so little about her, that there is so little of her left. Please, I urge you, try to remember the few things you knew about Therese Lane, not just now, but from time to time as you live. Look for things that remind you of her occasionally and the life that has so quietly slipped away."

At some point, without noticing it, Saulie had got to his feet and started pacing about the small space between his fold-out chair and the wall. Two steps left, and pause, and turn, and two steps right, and back again.

"We know so little about Therese Lane, so little about an entire person. Just hints. She liked older, slower horror movies. She hardly ever drank alcohol, and if she did, would only drink cider. She liked reading thriller books with happy endings. She thought cucumbers were foolish and not really a food."

Saulie stopped pacing and frowned.

"She was not famous. She was not rich. She didn't do anything remarkable except live a life, but that's enough, isn't it? Therese Lane meant something. That's another thing her life should be for us. A reminder. Remember Therese Lane for a moment or two over the years for herself, but let her memory also remind us that we have the chance to share our lives with other people every day, people who are entire undiscovered worlds to us. Entire worlds! Entire universes walking about the place all around us that we barely notice. And it wouldn't be difficult for us to learn more about these other lives, to spend a little time with them now and again, it would make us richer, and wiser, and bigger beings ourselves. If you have the chance, pay attention to the people you see when you go to work. Smile at them if they smile at you, look for what makes them delighted, listen to them even when you don't understand everything they are saying. Every passing moment is a moment when we can share our company, when we can make our selves and our experience of life broader, when we can gather and give memories, and make the fabric of shared humanity, of the remembrances of life that give meaning in death."

The room was silent and looking at him attentively. Saulie realised he had gone blank some time ago, and words had, as he feared, sort of just come tumbling out without his knowing what they were and where they had come from. He wasn't sure how much of his written obituary he had actually read. Most of it, he hoped? He gathered his courage and darted a look to check Aunt Mary's expression to see if there was any reaction there. Unfortunately, Aunt Mary's cold steely gaze was unreadable. She would be one hell of a poker player.

"Ehm, yes, well," Saulie burbled, "Yes, I suppose, well, thank you, for your attention, I mean."

The committee audience made some sort of noises in response, and then, thankfully, a different variety of blankness came over Saulie before he suddenly came to himself, standing there with a cup of coffee in his hand.

If he thought back over the last few blurry minutes (presuming they were in fact minutes), Saulie vaguely remembered a string of committee members coming up to him and talking to him while he nodded in dazed incomprehension. He was reasonably sure that most of them had said something about Therese Lane, but more oddly, he though several of them had wanted to talk about the internet, or about email, but that couldn't be right? Nobody could want his opinion on that. Perhaps they had been conducting some sort of survey? As his consciousness swam slowly back into focus, more or less, Knitwear Edith was asking him if he would care for another coffee.

"Oh, yes, lovely, thank you," Saulie had said, before looking into the cup he was holding and realising that it was still three-quarters full. Deciding it would now be rude to turn down this second cup of coffee kindly offered by Edith, and who was even now stretching out her hand and straining up on the tips of her toes to take his currently full cup from him, Saulie downed the cup he had in hand as quickly as he could, trying desperately to make it look like there was hardly any coffee left there at all and he couldn't wait for another.

"Thank you ever so much," Saulie spluttered, acting like he wasn't trying to hold back a coughing fit from poorly planned coffee-chugging. As she produced another cup of coffee, Edith said she looked forward to reading Saulie's memorial for Therese Lane when they had it printed in the committee newsletter, and Saulie agreed that would indeed be nice. As Knitwear Edith went on to talk about some of the work the committee was trying to do with food poverty in Edinburgh, Saulie found he could at last follow conversations again, and made what he thought were the appropriate comments when the opportunity presented. Edith's talk turned from charity, to nutrition, and then, by a slip that Saulie could not quite follow, to talking about the difficulties she was currently having trying to grow a type of basil.

"If it isn't the bugs," she explained, "It's the temperature. It's never quite right. Just a little too cold, of course, and I've tried to keep them inside to stay warm, but then they don't get any fresh air or proper sunlight, do they? And the leaves go funny and sort of shrivelled. The leaves are of course the whole point of the basil plant, and they never taste quite right, which is such a terrible shame and awfully frustrating. If I had a wee, modest outdoor greenhouse, perhaps that would work? But I haven't got anywhere to put a thing like that."

Saulie tugged at the end of his small white beard and agreed that it was a shame.

"Could you put it under plastic?" Saulie ventured, "Or a glass jar?"

"A jar wouldn't be big enough, would it?" said Edith.

"What about one of those gigantic jars you can get, from one of the Polish supermarkets, or the Middle-Eastern one on Leith Walk? You know, a huge thing of olives or red peppers or something like that. That might be big enough?"

"I'd have to think of something to do with all those olives," Knitwear Edith mused.

People left in dribs and drabs, shaking Saulie's hand and saying thank you. Then Saulie would say thank you too, and goodbye, and often they'd go through that all again, and the whole process of each person departing took much longer than it probably should. Eventually, only he, Edith, and Aunt Mary were left, tidying up the room.

"I know you have to get along to see your daughter, Edith," said Aunt Mary curtly, "We will finish up here. See you next week."

"Righto," said Edith, and she turned to smile warmly at Saulie, and they went through the thanks-and-goodbye routine one last time. When they got to the end of it, Knitwear Edith turned to leave.

"Ta-ta!" she said brightly, and waved goodbye, rushing off.

"Now," said Aunt Mary, "The urn is unplugged. Push the trolley along to the sink, Saulie, and let us get the cups good and clean."

Obediently, Saulie followed behind Aunt Mary, pushing the tea and coffee trolley along in front of him. The cups and saucers on the trolley clattered musically as he pushed and Saulie hummed a little accompanying tune as they went along. Unfortunately, the trolley was also very heavy with its hot drink cargo, and as you could tell from how the wheels gave out regular squeaks of protest, the trolley had seen better and nimbler days. It would often stop suddenly and refuse to go any further, until Saulie gave it a push in just the right sort of way and an encouraging word. However, Saulie had no idea where he was going, and between managing the trolley and being distracted by the various noises it made, he bumped the front of the trolley gently on one door-frame and into two walls.

"For goodness' sake, Saulie, do be careful," Aunt Mary said when he had his third minor collision. Luckily, the sink was not too much further, tucked away in a narrow corner with a few nondescript grey cupboards on either side and a small window that had a view of some stones and weeds. It was fortunate that Aunt Mary was not a large woman, and that Saulie's height meant he could reach awkwardly over the trolley to fetch the dirty cups, because there wasn't all that much room by the sink. Aunt Mary put the squat black plug in the sink and let the hot water run, squirting in precisely five doses of washing-up liquid from the plastic bottle by the sink.

"Well, Aunt Mary, how did you think that went?" Saulie asked as Aunt Mary pulled on a pair of pink washing-up gloves with all the professional snap of a surgeon about to conduct a dissection.

"It went, Saulie, much as I expected," said Aunt Mary simply.

Mystified, Saulie had no opportunity to think of any further probing questions, because Aunt Mary had handed him a tea-towel, and they soon fell into an efficient but soothing rhythm of quietly washing and drying cups and saucers.

10. After a geological age of slow drifting, the Earth, a well-known rock collector, has died.

While Saulie had been going around the apartment of many colours one afternoon with a cloth and was giving himself instructions out loud about where he should aim to dust next, it occurred to him that he had accidentally gone for several days without having a conversation with anybody but himself. He felt the need to talk to somebody, simply for the diversion of it. He had then tried to arrange something with Fern, but she must have been busy, because she didn't respond for another two days. Saulie decided to send her a message again in case the last one had got lost somehow in the air - perhaps due to seagulls, and this time, when Saulie proposed that they meet up the next day, Fern had responded with a curt "Fine."

It turned out that both Saulie and Fern were temporarily financially embarrassed and couldn't afford to go out to a café, so Saulie suggested that they meet up for a walk, which although not Fern's favourite thing in the world, was at least free.

There was a light drizzle that afternoon when they met.
"The word today, Fernie-" Saulie began, but Fern cut him off with an angry wave.
"Give it a miss just for the day, will ye, pal?" she said, irritated, "I know you havenae been battered about by late nights, but I'm knackered. Ahm completely done in. So leave me to just focus on this unpleasant walking you're so taken with."
"Whatever you say, Fernie," Saulie said apologetically, and they walked in silence for a while in the gentle rain. Saulie enjoyed the feeling of the grazing rainfall. It was like being given a spray of cooling mist about the cheeks, like he assumed probably happened in fancy beautician places or spas. He wondered if this rain would build up enough pressure to flatten out his ridiculous woolly white hair, but experience suggested that it was doubtful that a drizzle was strong enough. This sort of rain would need to keep up all day at this rate to make much of an impact on anything. By the time he had come to this conclusion, however, in typical Edinburgh style the weather had changed and the skies had cleared and let a little bit of sunlight in.

Saulie turned to give Fern a meaningless smile and noticed she was looking a little red in the face, and was puffing angrily. Coming up in the distance, Saulie spied the formal old pointy metal fence of Regent Road Park, a thin strip of green by the broad road where tourist buses chuntered up and down.
"Regent Park is just ahead there. Let's stop for a while and have a seat, shall we?" Saulie suggested. Fern grunted assent.
They entered through the iron gate and Saulie looked at it inquisitively as they went past, trying to remember if he had ever seen either of the park's gates closed. Did they even shut, or had they rusted open years ago?
The pair wandered down the line of park benches, looking for one that was not unmanageably damp from the rain shower. They had to walk very slowly because in front of them were four people with black umbrellas, laughing and talking amongst themselves two abreast.
"Would ye look at these pricks?" spat Fern, "It was hardly anything, and it stopped raining ages ago. What've they got their umbrellas out fer? The self-centred stupidity of them. Look at the amount of space they're taking up, like the rest of the fuckin world doesnae count. Students or tourists, or

student tourists, passersby, squealing and guffawing and trampling all about the city like nobody else even exists. Arseholes."

"Come on now, Fernie," Saulie said gently, "This seat looks pretty dry. Let's take a breather."

Fern collapsed onto one end of the park bench with a thud.

"Maybe we don't exist worth a damn," Fern said, "We're hardly really alive here in Embrah, are we? Just the wispy bloody ghosts of people, hardly here at all. Why should the tourists give a shit? Might as well let 'em trample on through."

"Did I tell you I saw Teddy Orr recently?" said Saulie, changing the subject.

"Aye? Well, how is the Golden Boy?" puffed Fern, "Doing well, I'd imagine. Popular and in demand for whatever pish he spins for his adoring public. Stupid gold-plated bastard wouldn't even know how to fail."

Saulie shrugged.

"I haven't seen him in so long. He seems mostly to be in London these days. I don't think he is in Edinburgh much any more. That Teddy Orr life wouldn't be for me, Fernie. I don't think I'd like to spend so much time there, rather than here. But I think he's doing well. He mentioned lots of names, but I don't remember them properly. I'm sure that they were impressive. I think his names were for a play he had put together. Possibly something on the radio. It's good to know people who are doing well, people from back in the day who are doing all sorts of interesting things, wherever they might end up."

Fern snorted.

"Naw, it isnae good, as far as I'm concerned. What good is it to me if someone else does well? That doesn't improve my shitty life by as much as the length of one curly golden pubic hair." Fern shook her head.

"The smartest thing Teddy bloody Orr did was to leave. There's nothing here in Edinburgh but graves and ghosts, which is why you like it so much, Saulie. Yer half a ghastie yerself. But there ain't much of life here for anyone else."

"That's not true, Fern," Saulie insisted, "There's life everywhere, life and death, and all of it worth paying attention to. Of course there's life here. It just doesn't maybe look the same as other places. Things happen here too, but in their own way, and there's-"

"Don't you dare bring up the bloody Festival," Fern insisted, cutting Saulie off, "That's not bringing life to the city. That's only more of those laughing stupid folk who are just passing through. They come and make a big song and fuckin dance and noise in our deid wee city and then they fuck off, leaving us just as dead and pointless as we ever were, but with the small upside that at least it's quiet for a bit after they've gone, at least until the hordes of the living pestilence come back for another season. Naw, there's nothing to Edinburgh. It's a place for the living to visit for a little while and then piss off. The Teddy Orrs, the people who do things, y'know, who are important, who are real - the golden fowk, they know you have to be in a big, fat, blood-filled, pumping, living city, a place that will make something of 'em."

Saulie brushed some of the water from the park bench and shook his head. He waved his hand at the landscape in front of them.

"Ah c'mon now. Of course there are fine things around us. I mean, look at this here. I've always liked this view. All these benches lined up just to look out at Salisbury Crags. We've got a wee mountain right inside the city! A bit of pure old glorious landscape to admire, right there in front of us, an outdoor exhibition of nature. How many other places can say that?"

Fern sniffed and slumped over.

"Feuch. Just another old pile of rocks. Yer heid is not much down here with the rest of us Saulie. Yer a fool and a cloud brain. You are too much caught up in your doolaly thoughts. There isnae anything beautiful out there. It's just rocks. You might think it's big and grand, but it's just more dead and featureless stone. There's nothing interesting about a stone hill. It isnae doing anything."

"That's where you are wrong," Saulie said firmly, "Those stones aren't dead. They're just slow and sleeping." He pointed to the left. "Over there, Arthur's Seat, that big fellow, he was a volcano once. The very earth through here was hot and liquid, exploding, flowing, and moving furiously. The memory of all that is still under that hill even now. You know that James Hutton was born here, and he must have seen those crags. And Hutton looked at those rocks, and studied them, and found others like them, and discovered something extraordinary. Just because we can't see it doesn't mean stones and mountains and earth are static. Our lives are just too short for us to notice, that's all, but the land is always moving and changing. Hutton could look at places like these very same cliffs we are looking at right now and realise that the Earth was an old, old thing, and that it had a life that you could dig up and study. He could see geological time when he looked at these crags, and he could realise that there are lifespans and cycles going on beyond our own perspectives. We don't notice the old world at all because we are used to it being there, and it usually moves so much more slowly than us that we think it has stopped dead. We mistake a moment for an eternity. But it is still moving. It has been for a long, long time. When you look out at those cliffs and rocks, you are looking out over wondrous spans of time, over a landscape of time. I think that's one of the most marvellous things to contemplate in the whole world, and we can sit here in front of a park and do that right here in the heart of Edinburgh."

They were both silent for a while. Saulie looked at the view. Fern did not.

There was an odd sort of sound. After a while Saulie realised Fern was grinding her teeth.

"Well, cheers, pal," she said, her voice low and hoarse, "Like I need another fuckin reason to feel cosmically insignificant next to the mighty uncaring ancient geology of Edinburgh. Y'know, I don't need to be reminded that I don't matter. Disinterest and Apathy are not hugely uplifting principles of place to my mind. Other places elsewhere have something about them. They have drive, they're about things, about certain ways of living. Naebody cares about oniething here. Just today, walking down one street I passed a pile of empty beer cans, a smashed telly screen bigger than me left leaning gently against a wall, a couch abandoned to stand in the rain, a bathroom basin cracked perfectly in two and left tucked just behind a low wall, and more dogturds ignored by people who own dogs than I could keep track of. That's the detritus of people who don't care. They're acting according to the dead, indifferent spirit of the place. Yer foolin yerself with anything else. That's what's real. That's what we live in. Edinburgh is the city that disnae give a shite about you."

Saulie pursed his lips and thought carefully before he spoke.

"I suppose I am a fool, Fernie, but I am afraid that I don't know how to be any other way. But maybe to think everything is always terrible forever is just as lopsided as thinking everything is fine. I think we need to look for what is joyful and interesting, not to assume, I mean, but to make the effort, especially when you feel like sinking into an easy sort of comfortable sadness. Why is it that to be properly part of a place you can't look around at things? You aren't supposed to stop and pay attention. We think that's just for visitors. People who stop and stare at things are tourists, we think, and we aren't that sort, we don't want to look like that sort, because we're from here. We don't want to be taken for gawping tourists, so we don't look about us. We rush through our home blindly, for fear of the shame of paying attention and appreciating it. And of course, even I know that no place is perfect, just like no person can ever be perfect. We're all mixed up of different thoughts and feelings, good and bad, and a city is a sort of multiplication of all those people. But we can't forget that they are still our people, Fernie, even when they do things we might not like. You can't cut off every single little thing you dislike, or you end up with nothing. Anyway, I suspect that in some ways there's something to like in the fact that Edinburgh doesn't really care about you."

Saulie waved his forefinger around as he explained.

"You see," he said, "I've met so may people who are desperately anxious to live up to their idea of the city where they live - they're trying to be fashionable, or tough, or sophisticated, or driven, or formal, or loose, or authentic. That sort of an idea of a city can be unbearably heavy. The pressure

all around them telling them they don't count in a city unless they try to act in a certain way, well, it looks exhausting, and often people don't even realise that it's weighing them down. Edina, the spirit of Edinburgh, doesn't mind what you do. She will go on being herself regardless. You are not required to act on her behalf. You do not have the responsibility to personify the city. You are left to your own devices. You can more or less do your own thing."

Fern sat silently. Saulie looked at her with concern, but sneakily, out of the corner of his eye. If Fern caught you worrying about her, she might take that for pity, and she responded to pity and attempts at comfort like a wounded wild animal, which is to say she would try to bite your hand off.

"Sorry to go on like that, Fern," Saulie said quietly, "You know how I lose track of things. Ehm, but, that is, if there's something you'd rather do, something that would make you feel better-"

Fern growled a warning.

"Right, of course," said Saulie hastily, casting around for another topic to which he could retreat and find a way of distracting Fern in her black gloom. "I can't remember if I told you already, but when I was doing the memorial for Aunt Mary's committee, afterwards people kept saying something about the internet and email. As it happened, I was a bit dazed at the time, well, a bit more dazed even than usual, but I couldn't at all follow what they were trying to tell me."

Fern made a choking sound that degenerated into a wracking cough, with the rattle of mucous. When she could breathe, she swallowed and screwed up her face at the disgusting taste of whatever she had brought up.

"For Christ's sake, you big, dumb bastard," Fern said slowly, staring red-eyed straight ahead, her jaw tight, "Why do you think? It's your Aunt Mary again, isn't it? Must be. Why do you think she was so keen to get you to talk to her pack of subordinates? She was doing what she always does - trying to make something of you. The old ice sculpture was advertising you, trying to get you some obituary work, wasn't she? And who better? She's got an endless supply of greyheads getting ready to die, doesn't she? Why not wheel out Saulie - he won't notice, after all, and offer him up. She may as well have printed out business cards with you stupid beardy face on them and handed them out."

Saulie's eyes widened thoughtfully. Was Fern right? Wouldn't Aunt Mary have mentioned it if she wanted Saulie at the committee meeting to see if anybody else might have some use for him? No, on second thought, she wouldn't. Aunt Mary didn't really explain why she did anything, and certainly not to Saulie. She thought he was too much of a fool for explanations, even if she did want to help him. It was a cold way of showing care, but it must be the only way Aunt Mary had available to her.

Fern cracked her neck violently and stood up from the park bench.

"I cannae fuckin take it. You bumble about and even the heartless old witch gets it into her head to help you, in her own frozen up way. Everything always works out for you, doesn't it Saulie? You can just wander around like you always have, nae fuckin idea what's going on, talking to the dead or whatever you think you're doing, and never getting anywhere, but everything still works out fine for you, doesn't it, no matter how stupid your life is. I'll bet Teddy Orr mentioned about the pair of us being ridiculous, didn't he? Everycunt thinks we're a joke, Saulie and Fern, still hanging around Edinburgh because they have no fuckin clue what else to do. I'm fuckin sorry, big man, but I'm tired of being part of this failed comedy double act. I'm sick of it."

"Come on, Fern-" Saulie began, and got to his feet, but she had already stomped off furiously out of the park and away. He took a few ineffective steps after her, but she wasn't going to stop. Fern didn't want to be anywhere near him, even Saulie could tell that. He walked back to his park bench and sank down onto it. His best pal was tearing herself up, and he didn't really understand why, because he had cloud scraps for brains, and what was worse, he hadn't done a single thing to help her. He felt like a useless idiot. No, he was a useless idiot.

He stared helplessly at the crags in the distance until it felt as if they were slipping away. Trying to clear his mind, Saulie looked around the thin strip of park. Nobody else was around. The noisy path-

sprawling people with the umbrellas had gone, the pedestrians had gone, the dogs out for their walks had gone.

Down in the bushes where the park dipped, Saulie caught sight of something, an animal of some kind, a sign of life. However, on closer inspection, this thing turned out to be unnaturally unmoving. Saulie squinted. It was a wooden sculpture tucked away behind the leaves, a carved image of an owl donated by some artist to the park. A hiss of rain started up again, and Saulie barely noticed. There was a good dense tree covering his bench, so hardly any water fell on him, but he wouldn't have noticed it if torrents were gushing down on his head. The haze of rainfall and the darkening sky made it harder to make out the landscape clearly. He stared at the wooden owl in the bushes and wished that it would move. Just a flicker of the wing or a turn of the head, any sign of life. It was fading and retreating and Saulie was left alone in the park.

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Again there was a stretch of silence between Saulie and Fern. He had tried sending several messages - sincere, clumsy messages that tried to offer friendliness coming in tactfully from an angle, but he didn't hear anything. Saulie worried about Fern and wished he understood how she was suffering and wished that he could do some small anything about it, but even he could see that he didn't seem to be able to get through to her.

It was no help that he had nothing much else on at the moment. No hordes of books had been left behind by the dead that week, so he had not heard from Aunt Mary. Auntie Varsh was on holiday somewhere in England to visit relatives, and Uncle Ali was apparently enthusiastically trying to turn their familial meeting into some sort of cycling trip. Even Aunty Cressida had been silent when Saulie would have welcomed a postcard from her with a brief thought on life in Provence and a list of things she needed sent from Scotland. Saulie tried reading several books, but found himself unable to keep any of the words in his head. He would walk aimlessly around the flat of many colours from room to room, unaware that he even had a book in his hand. At a loose end, Saulie filled his days with worrying about his friend.

Saulie also found something going wrong with his sleep. He would find himself up and out of bed when the night was wide and ominously crackling. Obviously, he imagined he must have been sleeping now and then, but he never had any real sense that he was ever anything more than poorly awake, stumbling around the flat and unable to remember why. Late one night, Saulie found himself standing in the blue living room before the big windows that looked over the road below. He had enough functioning mind despite his sleeplessness that he had switched on a dim little reading lamp next to the couch to stop himself from colliding in the dark with the edges of furniture. He caught sight of himself in the reflection in the cold window. In his reflection he looked like one of Spilliaert's sleepless self-portraits, a ghostly, wisp-haired and hollow-eyed painting of himself.

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The air felt as if it was getting heavier and damper as Saulie walked uphill without any particular destination in mind. He walked past the Old High School, but turned to one side and studiously ignored the building, in case it made him think too much about uncertainty. He hoped Fern was doing all right, whatever was wrong with her. He missed her company. His week turned out to be oddly shapeless when he didn't meet her for lunch or a coffee every other day. Of course, he knew his life was on the baggy and unformed side - Aunt Mary had conveyed that to Saulie many times over the years, but now it was even more unstructured. And since he hadn't seen Fern in days, he

found that he was now craving his fancy chinotto drinking session at the little Italian café. It would never even occur to him that he could go to that very place right now on his own and buy a can of the bitter orange juice. How could he go to any of the usual places without his pal Fern? They wouldn't even actually be the usual places without Fern. Just because something is regular and ordinary and looks unimportant doesn't mean that it isn't in fact one of the solid little bricks propping up lives. Just the opposite, in fact. Not meeting up throughout the week was turning out to be a much bigger loss than he would have thought, if Saulie had ever thought about it before. But why should he? He'd never expected that the small comfort of seeing his friend regularly would suddenly disappear, which he now realised was foolish of him. Of course, anything can disappear at any time, he knew that, but like almost everyone, it never really occurred to him to think about the fragile nature of the routines of his own life.

No chinotto. No arancini. No going to the little cake and coffee place with all the paintings run by two old ladies and their dog. No stopping off at the wine bar with the olives - Fern taking the wine and Saulie the olives in a fair and equitable split that left all parties content. How else would she be getting her complaints off her chest? And how could he ramble on about whatever rolled out of his head? There certainly wasn't anyone else he knew who would listen for more than a polite minute or two. Why, a minute or two of talking, that wasn't even enough to get going! Saulie couldn't even begin to work out what exactly he was thinking with only a minute or two of chat. The first minute of talking was nothing but a minor prelude, an unsatisfying stub of conversation. He sighed.

Past the building that Fern described as looking like a bank built by Fascists, Saulie's feet took him downwards. With concern he realised that he had accidentally walked himself over to Princes Street. Every city has a Princes Street - a broad tract to hold and funnel tourists and chain shops that sell things to tourists, a street set aside for visitors, a main street that does not really belong to people who live in the city, and a street that is not really for Saulies. Princes Street was where the Christmas market would be set up by some corporation every year, unsatisfying lights and stalls in the winter darkness that didn't quite give you the feeling of warmth and satisfaction that was essential to keeping your spirits up in the long end of the year. Saulie never felt comfortable on Princes Street, as if there was a roaring, sweeping tide there that was driving him on and out, back to parts of Edinburgh where he belonged.

Glancing up, he caught sight of Edinburgh Castle high up on the Rock, and he looked away quickly. He didn't like to look at the Castle, although he had never really thought out why. Perhaps it was some forgotten childhood habit or game, the sort of game his young downstairs neighbours Poppy and Eva would come up with, a little meaningless quirk of behaviour performed for so long and so unthinkingly that it became a solemn personal superstition. All Saulie did know was that when he looked at the Castle, it felt like it was looking back at him and looking down on him in a way that made him feel confused and somehow guilty, as if he had been caught out by the Castle doing something he shouldn't be. Whatever childish part of Saulie that had long ago put together this superstition had also decided that if you didn't look at the Castle, it wouldn't notice you, and you would be fine to go on walking. He shook his head. It was silly, the half-formed ideas and fears that stay with you long after you have forgotten the explanation for them. For no good reason, Saulie felt his heart begin to beat more quickly. He took deep breaths of Princes Street air, but couldn't say if they did him much good.

To calm his mind from the pressure of Princes Street, Saulie examined the intricate spires of the monument shaped like a fanciful stone Gothic rocket ship stained with soot. It was an extraordinary looking thing. It had been designed by a man who submitted his proposal for the monument under the name John Morvo, but whose real name had been George Meikle Kemp. Kemp was obsessed

with Gothic architecture, and he was also a walker, which endeared him to Saulie. Kemp had apparently walked absurd lengths to go and and study Gothic buildings, on foot for hours and hours to go and draw an abbey or a cathedral. And the most extraordinary thing about Kemp had been that he did not seem to have been a formally trained architect. He was simply so fascinated by architecture and had developed such skills of measuring and drawing and planning that he had ended up designing, and later even supervising the building of one of the most famous monuments in Edinburgh. And then in the midst of this triumph, before the stone rocketship reaching to pierce the sky had even been finished, while out walking one evening, Kemp drowned in the canal. Nobody knew how it had happened. He never got to see his greatest achievement finished, but how clear it must have been in his mind, and how clear it stood in the mind of anybody who saw the structure. Saulie liked to think of the stone rocket as a monument to Kemp himself.

He wasn't sure how much longer he walked around thinking about Kemp's stone rocket, but as he was crossing a road he suddenly found himself in someone's way.

"Ach, sorry," Saulie apologised. He looked up and realised that the obstructed pedestrian in question was Abe the ragged itinerant barman. Today Abe was hunched over to make himself small, and was wearing a Russian-style fur cap, a Hibs scarf, and had on a dark green overcoat that was several sizes two large for him and made of corduroy, flecked with white paint stains on the sleeves. Saulie had never seen an overcoat made of green corduroy, and was eyeing it up before catching himself and realised he was being rude. He smiled hopefully at Abe.

"Hullo, Abe. Haven't seen you in a while," Saulie said.

Various thoughts played over Abe's scowling face, but eventually he decided that the weight of social proprieties meant that he would probably have to stand there and answer Saulie.

"Yeah, Saulie. There's yerself." Abe shoved his hands into the pockets of his green coat and shivered, as if someone had walked over his grave. Apparently for Abe running into Saulie was a bad omen on par with meeting the ominous ghost of a black cat while walking under several ladders.

"And you're keeping well, then?"

Abe twisted his shoulders in a complex shrug.

"I'm pleased to have run into you," said Saulie, "Look, I was wondering if you could tell me. Seeing how you work in so many pubs, and get all around town, ehm..."

Abe silently offered no encouragement.

"Well, the thing is, ehm," Saulie pushed on, "I wonder if you had maybe seen Fern lately?"

From beneath his feral eyebrows Abe stared at Saulie like he was insane. He kept this up for so long that Saulie started to shuffle uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

"What are you asking me about Fern for?" Abe said finally, his tone mistrustful and uncomprehending. "Why would anyone know more about where she is and what she's up to you than yourself?"

Saulie tugged at his white hair and nodded.

"Yes, right you are. Of course." he said sadly.

"I'll be off, then," said Abe and poked an elbow in a vague direction.

"Of course. Good to see you," Saulie said and tried to summon up a vague smile of politeness, but Abe had pulled his Russian cap down and hurried off. Perhaps he was late for work at one of the pubs that employed him, thought Saulie. He felt cold.

11. Edina, patron goddess of Edinburgh, has died.

For the first time since he could remember Saulie felt sore and tired when he went out walking. He wasn't normally conscious of his legs at all, but now they felt heavier and weaker, and he had to concentrate to keep going when he was out travelling the streets of Edinburgh. Perhaps he was getting the flu? Walking ordinarily made him feel better. Still, regardless of how his legs were struggling, walking was all he could think of to do at the moment. He looped around Edinburgh again and again, and by the afternoon had pushed himself up against the dark grey stone walls of Old Calton Hill Burial Ground. Old Calton was a good landmark to remind Saulie that he was getting too close to the centre of the city again. Maybe a little turn or two around the grounds would do him good? His head felt especially fuzzy, and he had to walk back along the high stone walls of the Burial Ground because the entrance had somehow escaped his notice and vanished the first time. He found that he had to really pay attention to make sure he didn't miss the gateway into the Burial Ground a second time. He lifted himself slowly and carefully up the steep steps of the entrance, carefully avoiding any fallen leaves in case they were slippery. It was a long way to fall from Saulie's height, and if he was honest with himself, he wasn't sure that just at the moment he would have the energy to haul himself back up if he took a tumble.

Old Calton, naturally, was the home of some of the older graves of Edinburgh. Saulie stood for a moment to catch his breath by Hume's squat tower, thinking that it looked like an ornate oversized postbox. The statue of Lincoln was set nearby, and seeing Honest Abe here was always unexpected every single time Saulie came to Old Calton. It always seemed to Saulie as if Lincoln had been put here by mistake. It's not as if Lincoln was buried here, and when people in Scotland had decided to build a monument to an American president, wouldn't you have expected him to be somewhere more public and open, not in a confined and claustrophobic cemetery?

Unfortunately, being off the street and inside the Burial Ground wasn't calming or relaxing for Saulie like it would normally be. The old graveyard felt too lost, too ancient and oppressive, surrounding him with all that mouldering dark stone, stained with great blotches of black. The huge obelisk of the Martyr's Monument was too tall above him, and when he bent backwards to look up to the very top he felt dizzy. Saulie stood as still as possible until the feeling of being about to fall passed away. He trudged on through the Burial Ground. The air was damp and heavy. Old Calton felt like an abandoned village, where something had happened a thousand years ago that had driven all the people away and left nothing but ruins haunted by the terrible silence of absence. In fact, homeless people in Edinburgh used to sometimes camp in the crypts and the walled roofless family plots of the Burial Ground. Saulie couldn't remember if they had been banned from seeking shelter here these days, but in any case there were no signs of life here today.

Saulie wandered. One family mausoleum was a dark vaulted cavern. He stood in front of the doorway staring thoughtlessly into the blackness inside.

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Over the next few nights - Saulie was increasingly unsure about the passing of time, Saulie's sleep had become even more token and unsatisfactory. Since he still had no pressing calls on his schedule,

Saulie had tried to nap during the day to make up for the deficit, but that turned out not to work especially well either. He would put his head down, but no matter how bleary his eyes and exhausted his mind, he had a strong suspicion that it might still be daytime, and he was fairly sure that you weren't supposed to sleep during the day. He wasn't sure where he had heard that. Probably Aunt Mary had let him know. If he did drift for a little while somewhere between asleep and awake on his back, lying there on the bed with his arms held tight against his sides, he would soon find himself with his heavy eyes flickering open and roaming aimlessly about the lime green walls of the bedroom. He was neither convinced that he had slept, nor for that matter that he had properly woken up.

Saulie experimented with trying to doze in different positions. He buried himself under blankets and rugs right next to the bed, as if to sneakily steal the power of sleep when the bed wasn't paying attention, but ended up rolling back and forth and unravelling the pile of blankets and making a semi-conscious escape. He tried lying down in the corridor with a pillow under his head. This was uncomfortable and he developed an irrational nervousness that someone would walk on him, although there was nobody around. He sat in Uncle Arthur's chair in the blue living room and tried to doze like Uncle Arthur did when he was alive. This was more comfortable for a while, but eventually gave him a terrible crick in his neck. He got up, rubbing the lump of bone at the top of his spine. Wondering if he was hungry, he went into the red kitchen and looked in the cupboard. There was no big tub of peanut butter. Saulie didn't remember when he had finished his peanut butter, and when he checked the cupboards, he couldn't find any spares stored anywhere. He was in the middle of opening some more cupboards and staring blankly at the insides when he realised he had forgotten what he was in the kitchen for. Closing all the cupboard doors carefully, so that they didn't make even the slightest creaking sound, as if he was trying to make sure somebody didn't wake up, Saulie padded quietly back into the blue living room. He stretched towards the ceiling and tried to yawn experimentally, but found that no relief came from it one way or the other. It was night again, or still night, or always night. He had somehow carelessly lost track. Swaying slightly and feeling light-headed, he stood in front of the living room windows again and blinked his tired eyes.

There seemed to be something fluttering about on the other side of the glass of the window, moving in a jerky unreal fashion, like it had been animated in stop-motion and caught on old movie film. The object appeared to settle on top of the building opposite. Saulie felt that he had seen it somewhere before, and after some painfully slow thought, it occurred to him that the image was the wooden owl from the park. Even to his addled and exhausted brain, it was clear now to Saulie that he was not entirely awake and was either standing on his feet and imagining things, or even perhaps somewhere else entirely and fitfully dreaming that he was standing at the windows and seeing a flying wooden owl. If there was any doubt that he was not properly awake after seeing the wooden owl fly clumsily about, the floating image of the woman on the other side of the glass where reflections should be would have dispelled that lingering uncertainty.

The apparition Saulie's subconscious had dreamed up was a tall, elegant lady, with a large quantity of gravity defying hair the colour of the white of the underside of a thick cloud lit up by full moonlight. She was wearing the sort of flowing classical drapery generally found on statues in galleries and museums being studied and carefully drawn by earnest art students. Although the imaginary woman looked perfectly at ease in her ancient dress, the drapery was made of a light grey sandstone. She was also holding a long black shining cigarette holder. The figure took a puff and blew a thin mist which hung about improbably. Saulie noted that the woman in the window was not so much floating as standing on nothing. She nodded at him and Saulie suddenly decided that she must be Edina, the patron goddess and personification of Edinburgh.
"Hullo Saulie," she seemed to say, "Keeping well, my dear wee wean?"

"Oh yes, thank you, Edina, " Saulie mumbled to himself, "Well enough, I suppose. Actually, come to think of it, do you know I rather thought I was doing well, but it's entirely possible I just hadn't given the matter much thought one way or another for years and years. That's rather my way, I'm afraid, as you know."

He imagined Edina giving him a quick smile. He had given her a touch of the Aunt Marys about the face, but longer and finer, and with a hint of lazy bemusement.

"Should you have some other props as a personification, do you think?" Saulie mused to himself, "I wonder if I should have imagined a trident or a lance for you to hold, or something else less obviously martial. An umbrella, maybe? Should you have a crown? No. Some sort of headgear? A wreath? Something more practical, like a scarf?"

Edina laughed distantly.

"Don't fash yourself, wee Saulie, I'm perfectly content as I am."

"How rude of me. What do - what is it you are supposed to do when you have guests?" Saulie thought in confusion, "I'm ever so sorry but I have been awake so long I think I can't remember exactly. Oh! Yes! Can I offer you a drink?"

"Thank you," said Edina, and took a drag from her cigarette holder. She was now holding a glass in her left hand. The liquid inside glittered. Edina raised the glass and nodded at Saulie.

"Got to keep your blood clear," she said by way of a toast, "Keep your blood clear to keep your head clear."

This didn't mean much to Saulie, but you don't expect things in dreams to make much sense. Besides, there was a sort of familiarity to it, so he nodded back in agreement.

"I think I might want your advice, Edina," Saulie said.

Edina swirled her bright glass.

"Never been much one for advice, Saulie,"

"Yes, yes, but you have to talk to someone, don't you, or even no-one, if that's all there is around."

Edina looked fondly down on Saulie.

"You've always been a funny one, haven't you, my wee mannie? You don't discriminate, do you? It doesn't matter if someone is alive or dead, or real or a figment, you are entirely content with them, perfectly happy to have a good talk to them."

Saulie thought.

"I suppose..." he said slowly, "If someone was definitively in one of those alive and real categories, they might get resentful having to be put on the same level as the dead and gone."

"That's the other side of not making any distinctions."

"Is it a bad way to live, though? I've never thought about how I should live. Aunt Mary and Fern have had strong ideas about that, and I suppose Auntie Varsh and Aunty Cressida too."

"Saulie died today. He never thought of any better way to be alive."

"I know I exasperate them, I mean, all of them. But I also think they don't really expect me to be any different, do they, not really? And you know, I've never felt lonely, despite being me."

"You can be alone and not notice you are lonely, I suppose," Saulie imagined Edina saying, "Do you notice how cold it is when it is always cold? I find you just get used to it."

"That said," Saulie mused, "It could be that a silly fellow like me benefits from sometimes bumping up against people with firmer heads. I'm just now finding out that I'm rather used to that, especially to having Fern around."

Edina smiled.

"If you say so, my dear wee wean. Head of clouds or head of stone, if you can't have both, divide them amongst yourself, I suppose. That's presumably why clowns, like West Highland Terriers, are more content when they come in duos."

Saulie waited expectantly, but Edina seemed uninterested in explaining further. The wooden tawny owl came flying in its herky jerky way and landed near Edina, making a loud hooting noise.

"I need to feed the owl," said Edina, apologetically.

Saulie sighed. "I was hoping for more enlightenment, to be honest, but how much wisdom can you expect from talking to dreams when you are half asleep. It's awfully hard to find insight when talking to yourself, or at least, when talking to myself."

The wooden owl gave two more blasts, the sound of which trailed off in the distance. The owl jerked it head to look in the direction the noise had presumably gone. Edina whistled a tune sweetly and sadly. Saulie strained his ears, but didn't quite recognise the music.

"Ah well," said Saulie, "I don't know why I expected that you would have more advice for me, Edina. I suppose meaningful oracular visions went out with the toga." He squinted at the image of Edina in his dream.

"I just mean, well, should I have been somebody else? I could have done with some wisdom on that, Edina. Should I have been the sort of person who organises the world, or someone who travels all over? Have I gone wrong by not trying to be rich or trying to be famous? You know, I do believe that I'm more or less content as I am, foolish a Saulie as I am, but I do feel a wee bit bad for maybe letting everyone else down who expected me to be a more solid individual. Do you not have any wise words on that sort of thing?"

Edina waved her cigarette holder.

"How come mankind, whan lacking woe,
In Saulie's face their hearts to show,"
she sang to her wooden owl in a pure, high, sad voice.

Saulie sighed.

"Ah well. Unfair of me. I shouldn't exactly expect you to be an Athena of wisdom, after all," he said to himself, "For instance, your owl is wooden and lives in the bushes of the park nearby, which isn't exactly fancy. And if you are any sort of Athena, Edina, you are maybe more of an Athena of careless culture, rather than wisdom."

Edina shrugged understandingly. She tugged at the top of her hair. "If you say so, my wee mannie. But making everyone stand in line to receive one-size-fits-all wisdom seems rather, well, gauche, to me. Better to give everyone space to find what fits them, wisdom-wise. That's my philosophy."

"Huh!" snorted Saulie and crossed him arms sulkily.

"Now don't be cross, my Saulie, you know how confusing you find it, and you could never keep crossness up for long any way, could you? Come here and look at this, this should cheer you up."

Edina produced a small, dark, wooden jewel box from behind her back. She opened it and smiled, showing it to Saulie. As far as he could tell it was mostly empty. Despite this, Saulie felt he was being shown some great honour, and he put his hands behind his back and tried to think what it would look like if he struck an attitude of respectful dignity.

"Ooh." he said while looking at the box Edina was holding out, feeling it was expected of him, "That's very fine."

The wooden owl, who had run out of patience, hooted loudly and insistently.

The next thing he knew, Saulie found himself struggling to open his eyes. Pale grey light was coming through the big windows, which might have been a sign of an upcoming dawn. On inspection, he found that he was sprawled awkwardly in Uncle Arthur's armchair. Saulie was unsure how long he had been dozing there, but given how sore he felt, the cramped doze had not done him much good. He painfully unfolded himself and slowly stood up, while what sounded like every single bone in his lanky skeleton made a plaintive cracking sound as he stretched towards the roof. Saulie shook his head like he was trying to dislodge something and rubbed his eyes. Checking the windows of the blue room there was no sign of anything outside but the tops of the buildings that were supposed to be there, all present and correct. He suddenly knew one thing was for certain, in a sort of deep sub-thought way - he had got himself so exhausted over the last few days that he was sure that he could now finally lie down and sleep properly for a while. He padded into the kitchen,

drank some fine tap water from his big glass vase, then swaying with tired light-headedness, he went to the lime-green bedroom and collapsed into bed. He couldn't tell, but Saulie presumed he fell asleep without any further messing about, and this time, to the best of his knowledge, he didn't dream at all.

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When Saulie woke up, he had no idea what time of day it was or how long he had slept for. He did, however, realise that he was very, very hungry. It must have been hungry o'clock. He felt a touch guilty. Auntie Varsh would be extremely unimpressed with how he had been forgetting to look after himself even more than usual. He imagined her standing there, waggling a finger and being enthusiastically critical of his sporadic eating habits, telling him that he was already much too thin, almost bones in fact, and that he shouldn't be so careless, that he couldn't afford to get any thinner, because he would definitely get sick. Eat, eat, eat! Auntie Varsh would say.
"All right, all right," Saulie thought, "I'll eat, eat, eat."
In the kitchen he dug through the fridge and freezer and every cupboard, and without any conscious planning, started cooking up a sort of chicken laksa. When everything was simmering, he took a moment to go and put on a record in the blue living room. He thought the record might have been by an Ethiopian lady who played piano notes like perfect crystal droplets falling from the edge of a roof. Saulie hurried back to the kitchen once the music was playing, mindful of one of Auntie Varsh's unbreakable golden rules (besides that eating is the only cure for the constant threat of sickness) that you should never, ever, ever leave the kitchen when you are cooking. According to Auntie Varsh, a watched pot may or may not boil, but an unwatched pot will definitely burn down your house.

Saulie sat at the small table in the kitchen and ate soup slowly. The heat of each spoonful spread through him little by little and warmed him back to life. He managed to eat a good-sized bowl, but there was a lot left in the pot. Saulie had never been much good at estimating quantities. He had always admired people, who knew, for instance, exactly how much noodles or spaghetti to cook for the correct number of people. Despite the insistent voice of Auntie Varsh in his head, he was too full to eat any more. He shrugged apologetically for being such a disappointing eater, leaving what looked to be another two meals' worth of soup to cool on the stovetop. He'd pop the leftovers in the freezer to surprise future Saulie when he next remembered to feed himself.

Saulie was tidying up the kitchen when he suddenly heard a distant rumbling bang. He wondered what on earth it could be. Saulie slapped himself on the forehead when his slow muddled head finally worked out what the noise had been. The One O'clock Gun! Every day they fired a cannon from somewhere on Edinburgh Castle at one o'clock so that every one could be reminded that the Castle was still up there and on time. Well, the gun was fired every day except Sunday, when presumably the gun took the day off, but church bells elsewhere would substitute in. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have even twigged that the gun had fired for the day at all. Somehow, Saulie always seemed to miss the shot of the day, as if the gun had fired just when he had happened to not be paying attention. But today he had heard one o'clock loud and clear. Not only did Saulie now know that it was one o'clock in the afternoon, but that it also wasn't a Sunday. And because he knew the time, all of sudden, Saulie felt that he had a little bit of structure back in the day. That made things manageable. If you knew when it was one o'clock, you could plan to try and do the sorts of things people usually do at one o'clock. Have lunch? He had already eaten that soup, as a sort of accidental

brunch, and now he could go on forwards through the rest of the day with only an acceptable Saulie amount of meandering aimlessness.

His knowledge of the time gave Saulie a burst of industry. He dug through the purple spare room until he unearthed a pile of postcards. They were of a variety of standard photographs of Edinburgh, often cramming four or five separate views together on one card in order to save the viewer time and provide the most efficient way for a postcard recipient to skim through a city as quickly as possible. These must have been part of the supply Aunty Cressida bought to take to France with her, the kind of postcards she would send back to Saulie with her instructions on how he should be looking after the flat and whatever long-distance odd jobs she needed him to run for her. He neatened the pack of postcards by tapping them on a bookshelf. Shuffling through the views of Edinburgh, he managed to find one card that had a view of the half-finished giant columns of the folly on Calton Hill, which he felt was the best of the bunch. Originally, this structure high on the hill was supposed to be a national monument in honour of the Scottish people who had died fighting in the Napoleonic Wars, and to be some sort of inspiring structure for future Scots. Because at that time Edinburgh rather fancied itself as a new Athens, a successor to the glorious ancient past of the arts, philosophy, and architecture, it was decided that the monument was going to be a replica of the Parthenon, making Calton Hill into a Scottish version of the famous Athenian Acropolis. But Edinburgh turned out not to be Athens exactly. In more typical Edinburgh style, ambition only took construction so far, and when the will, and more importantly, the money ran out, the monument was left with just the front part done, its massive steps and monumental columns standing boldly in front of nothing much. Over the decades, people had often suggested finishing the monument in some way, but it had never happened, and Saulie was of the opinion that it was much better as a folly anyway - grand, classical, unfinished, and a little ridiculous. By failing to be the thing it was supposed to be, it had ended up becoming itself.

Searching in the spare room, Saulie eventually found a blue pen that looked like it had been stolen from a bank. On the back of the postcard, Saulie wrote in his smallest, neatest handwriting:

Dear Aunty Cressida,
I enclose a collection of your blank postcards, in case your supply is running low and you need to write to me. Everything is as usual here in your flat. Montrose Terrace ticks along the same as ever, with or without us. The only small drama in the building lately is that the little girls who live on the ground floor (Annie Young's girls, Poppy and Eva) have demanded that a fire-pole be installed in the building, but I don't think the other residents will go for it. Hibs have lost half their games this month, and won the other half, and while the losses in terms of goals were much bigger than the wins, as Uncle Arthur used to say about football, you've got to look on the hopeful side. Hope the weather is fine there in France as always,

Yours,

Saulie

Satisfied with the postcard, Saulie left it propped up near the front door along with a pile of spare blanks, so that he would remember to post it the next time he went out. This gave him an encouraging sense of minor achievement. If he could do this, he could do something about Fern. Just because she wasn't going to respond to phone messages, Saulie wasn't about to give up on her. He was made of something or other more than that, after all. It was all a matter of getting back into the habit of doing things, wasn't it? It occurred to Saulie that by searching and walking and talking

and ringing and researching he had managed to find out and piece together some small things about the life of Therese Lane, when not one single person knew her well at all. Not to mention that there had been the added difficulty that Therese Lane had been dead. Lots of people knew Fern, and she was still alive. Surely if Saulie applied himself, he would be able to find out what had happened to her and, by really concentrating, even come up with some plan to help her and cheer her up. Perhaps he could convince her to go to the seaside? A change of view, a holiday, that might be the thing she needed to feel better. Saulie shook his head. One thing at a time, he thought to himself. He had to be organised about this. No point in making plans before he had done his research, after all.

To show himself how serious he was about this business of tracking down Fern, Saulie put on the black suit, eventually found his phone in the cutlery drawer of the kitchen, and sat down in front of the roll-top desk. Shoving some of his important papers around to make space, he switched on the trusty ancient computer and waited until it wheezed into life. He opened a file and started making notes about all the important things he could think of about Fern's life.

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On his way back from posting the package of postcards to Aunty Cressida, Saulie had stopped by the supermarket to see if they had any giant tubs of crunchy peanut butter. Unfortunately, the sort that he liked no longer seemed to exist, at least for that week, and Saulie wandered the aisle and made a note to come back in case the good peanut butter had suddenly reappeared. In the meantime, he supposed he should buy some meat and vegetables to cook something close to regular meals. Before moving off, however, Saulie was distracted from this mission by a red and black jar near the peanut butter section that fascinated him enough that he picked it up and examined it carefully, like it was an artefact from an alien planet. The jar was an unapologetic mixture of chocolate biscuits and jam, but in spreadable form. This combination seemed too extraordinary not to try, so Saulie popped it in his basket. While he was considering whether pasted chocolate biscuits and jam could sit comfortably together happily combined in a jar, or whether they separated out into layers from mutual repulsion, he was struck by a tangential idea so obvious that he felt he had to slap himself in the head again. The noise of this slap must have been loud enough that a ginger-stubbled young man in a bright yellow hi-vis vest who was further down the supermarket aisle turned to look at Saulie with suspicion. Saulie nodded solemnly at the young man and made a gesture to show that all was well. The young man took this as a good sign to ignore Saulie and go back to his shopping.
The very obvious idea Saulie had was this: if he wanted to know what was happening with Fern at the moment, he should ask after her where she kept her things, which was to say, in the flat where she rented. Granted, he knew Fern spent as little time there as she could, but he was keen to see what he could find out. Saulie whizzed through his shopping as quickly as he could, and raced back to Montrose Terrace and up the stairs to the flat of many colours.

With the food he had bought shoved haphazardly into the fridge, Saulie filled up his big glass with water and put an experimental smear of jam and chocolate biscuit paste onto an oatcake. He sat himself in front of the ancient computer and began searching for Fern's housemate/landlady, using whatever he could remember Fern telling him about her in her periodic complaints. Eventually, Saulie managed to track her down and get some messages to her. He worked on his Fern file while he waited patiently for an answer to his inquiries, and ate two more oatcakes with choco-jam spread.
Eventually, he got a response. It turned out that Fern's housemate was called Helena, and although it was obviously hard to tell from messages, she didn't sound as bad as Fern had made out. From Helena, Saulie found out that Fern had not been back to the flat in some days.

This was because Fern was in hospital.

12. Fern, performer of bitterness, has died.

Saulie sat slightly hunched with his legs tucked up. He looked at Fern lying there with her eyes closed.

He shook his head sadly.

"You almost look peaceful," he said quietly.

Fern groggily opened her eyes.

"Tch," said Saulie, "That bed is much too big for you. It's a shame that they couldn't find one that fits you better. It might have been much more comfortable for you if they could pop you in a child-sized bed."

Fern stared at Saulie, trying to focus on him, then shut her eyes tightly with a stubborn expression.

"How are you feeling, Fernie?" asked Saulie.

She opened her eyes again, this time more cautiously, and looked disapproving.

"G'way, ghost of Christmas past," she mumbled.

Saulie yawned.

"Not just yet, Fern, I've just found a way to sit on this plastic chair that isn't entirely uncomfortable, and it would be a waste and disrespectful not to appreciate it for a moment or two."

Fern sighed.

"Here I was hoping you were some sort of hallucination," she groaned, "But if you are, you're a persistent one. You won't disappear no matter how hard I concentrate."

Saulie crossed his arms.

"That's probably because subconsciously you don't want me to disappear. You are too used to me being around. Besides, I'm happy to see you, and happy to hear that your poor wee heart hasn't given out entirely yet. I've missed you, you know, Fern auld pal."

Fern grunted.

Saulie pulled a worn green cloth bag onto his knees and rummaged around inside it.

"I have brought you some grapes," said Saulie, and placed them reverently by Fern's bed, like a holy offering.

"Grapes?" Fern said doubtfully, "I think you're supposed to smuggle in a wee bottle of whisky and a carton of cigarettes for the condemned in situations like this, aren't ye?"

Saulie shook his head.

"No, it's definitely grapes," he said, "I don't know why, but grapes are traditional for sick people in hospitals, and also for hedonistic rulers lounging on opulent golden couches. It probably has something to do with lying down, which might possibly make grapes the very best thing to eat when on your back."

"Sounds to me like a way to try to finish off patients and emperors by getting them to choke," said Fern suspiciously.

Saulie agreed that this could well be, and plucked and ate a dark grape to prove that it was not poisoned and that it need not result in sudden choking. Fern still did not look convinced

"It's always an exciting gamble with grapes," said Saulie, "You never know what they are going to be like. Sweet? Tart? A perfect bite? Plain horrible? So tasteless you hardly notice you are eating them?"

Fern glared.

"Well, what are these ones like then?"

Saulie looked dignified.

"You will have to decide for yourself, Fern. You are old enough now, I think, to eat grapes on your own."

Fern made a noise to show that she was disinclined.
"I could mash some of the grapes up if you are worried about the choking hazard," Saulie offered cheerfully.
"Naw, cheers, pal," Fern grunted.
Saulie rummaged some more through the green cloth bag, and brought out a bottle of Irn Bru.
"Got this for you, too."
Fern squinted at the plastic bottle.
"Ah, c'mon. Sugar-free Irn Bru? You're really rubbing salt in the wound there, big man."
"It's all they sell here!" Saulie protested, "And anyway, if you aren't too interested in worrying about your health, I thought I should be probably doing it instead. You are my pal, Fern, and you've been struggling and not looking after yourself, and left to your own devices, you collapsed on the floor and ended up unconscious and in hospital."
Fern made a disgusted noise.
"Ach, let's not get into that, Saulie. It's getting so a poor, wee, law-abiding woman can't just be good and unhealthy and self-destructive like she's supposed to. Y'know, these last few days I've had enough preaching from doctors to last me a lifetime. You should see the binder full of exercises for idiots they've given me. It's just embarrassing for everybody involved. Once upon a time it was traditional for there to be dour, pompous, priestie types all over, making a living by telling people what to do all the time. But nowdays, you are the only holy idiot I've seen about the place, Saulie, and I dinnae think you could even see your way to telling yerself what to do, much less the poor unrestricted masses of Scotland. Naw, what we have now instead of priesties is doctors. At least the old-school moralising blood and thunder lot used to get some sort of sick enjoyment about telling everyone they were terrible and wrong and were going to hell. Doctors don't even seem to care about telling you off. They stare dead-eyed somewhere behind you when they talk down at you, like they're sick of the sight of you and cannae wait for the day to end. The old priesties used to really put their all into despising you, it wasn't this tepid, bureaucratic, vague disappointment like you get nowadays. That was the pure stuff back in the day. Doctors just aren't in the same class of telling people off. They keep on in your ear about how your heart might give out, and how you need to lose weight, and stop smoking, and stop drinking so much, and need to eat your greens like a good wee lassie. Compared to eternal hellfire and inherent wicked rottenness, these modern lecturings don't have the same level of drama really, do they?"
Saulie stretched out his legs.
"Aye, well, could be you are right, Fernie. Maybe doctors need to learn a trick or two. They could tell you maybe that minor devils, imps, and boggarts will eat your guts and steal your bones if you don't look after your health and drink more water. People might appreciate that more. Certainly, that's why I drink so much water. It's a well known feature of folklore that many supernatural beasties are very nervous about and around water. I'm perfectly safe from them with the amount of water I drink. They couldn't get anywhere near my bones, for how much the evil spirits are afraid of all that water. Probably they are not very strong swimmers, your average supernatural beasties."
Fern snorted a half-laugh.
"Aye, sure, you'll live forever, Saulie, with all that watter in you. If you can call being a doddering cotton-heided grave-touring skeleton living."
Saulie waved a finger excitedly.
"As it happens, because you have been busy being sick, I have had time to reflect on that very topic, Fern," Saulie said brightly, "And it is my conclusion that I am actually perfectly happy being a doddering, cotton-heided skeleton and all the rest of what you said. In fact, as almost everyone agrees, it's the occupation for which I am best suited."
Saulie helped himself to another grape.
"Can I offer you a grape yourself there Fern in your trying infirmity?" he said cheerily.
"Naw."

Saulie pondered.
"You don't want to eat a grape, fair enough. But how about we see if I can throw a grape into your mouth from where I'm sitting?"
Fern thought about this for a while.
"Aye, well, I'm a sporting sort of woman. Here's betting you cannae."
With great concentration, Saulie furrowed his brow, weighed a grape in the palm of his hand, squinted one eye to examine its curvature. He then took a deep breath and threw the grape in a beautiful arc. It hit Fern directly in the right eyebrow.
"Christ, they're sure making grapes tough these days," she complained, rubbing at her forehead.
The next throw went wide and bounced off the back of the bed. The third ricocheted off the side of Fern's skull.
For the fourth grape, Saulie forgot his athletic preparations and was barely paying attention to what he was doing when he threw it into the air and vaguely in Fern's direction. It headed straight towards Fern's open mouth and landed with a perfect pop of a sound. Fern clacked her teeth in triumph and she and Saulie cheered.
Elated, Saulie got down on his hands and knees and crawled about the room until he had found and retrieved all the grapes that had missed. He dropped them into the little metal rubbish bin one by one, got up, and brushed down his trousers, and stood by Fern's bed.
"It's good to see you still here in the flesh anyway, Fernie," Saulie said after a while.
Fern gave him dark looks. Saulie tried to wave them away by flapping his hands.
"Come on now, Fernie. Don't evil-eye me to death. I don't know if ending up in hospital has helped with thinking about things for you or not, but I know you've not been doing so well lately. There you were worrying about purpose and pain and that sort of thing, and then your body lets you down at the worst possible time. And I suppose that it can be a terrible harsh thing to properly realise that we aren't actually immortal after all. I mean, not realising it in a rational brainy abstract way, but to feel it physically, in a way inside the marrow that is unavoidably true."
Fern sighed.
"I knew I could count on you to cheer me up, Saulie," she said sarcastically, "Look at the sight of you. Everybody who sees ye come in here dressed in your undertaker's gear is gaunae assume that Ah'm done for. I wouldn't be surprised if a whole lot of other sufferers hereabout are worried you've come to bring them grapes and last rites too."
Saulie took his seat and nodded.
"Always pleased to help, Fernie," Saulie said with all oblivious sincerity. He pulled out a receipt from a pocket and squinted at his writing on the back. "Just thought you should know, the word of the day is 'bleggage'. I read it in a book by a fellow called Daiches. There was apparently a brief period in the early nineteen hundreds when there was enough of a Yiddish speaking Jewish population in Edinburgh that there were examples of a hybrid Yiddish-Scots. 'Bleggage' was a Yiddish-Scots word that apparently meant 'a badly behaved young person'. As in, 'those young boys throwing a Christmas tree into the river are a band of bleggages.'"
Fern grunted and cracked her knuckles.
"I'm pleased you are keeping right up to date with what's happening and being said around town."
"Oh, I forgot," said Saulie, digging out a knitted lump from the green bag and handing it to Fern, "Auntie Varsh sends her regards, and also these. She made them and told me to give them to you."
"Jeezusfuck, socks, ey?" said Fern holding them in the air so they unrolled heavily. They were made of wool that was different shades of excitable green, all of which managed to clash with each other. "Thick bloody woollen socks. Cheers, I guess."
Saulie smiled. "You know, I'm always delighted to get some nice warm socks. They are one of my favourite gifts. Keeping your toes warm is an excellent small pleasure that can improve your life more than you would think. I feel that if I can keep my toes warm, then I'm one step ahead, as it were. And the only thing better than having some good warm solid socks to keep your feet warm, is

having someone out there like Auntie Varsh who thinks enough of you to knit some good warm socks with her own hands for you. It's a lovely warm thought."

Fern looked abashed.

"Aye, fine, but why do they have to look so fuckin awful? They look like a dog ate a small colourblind kiddie's paints and then boaked them up in sock form."

Saulie considered for a moment.

"I suspect Auntie Varsh thinks of you as colourful," he said, "And wanted your socks to match. She made sure that I was to tell you that if you wear these socks and keep your feet warm, your health will quickly improve. She has diagnosed your fundamental sickness as being a result of eating incorrectly and letting your feet get too cold. Even if she is wrong, you still get a good pair of socks out of the whole thing."

Fern glared at the bright greens of the sock dubiously.

In the meantime, Saulie reached into the inside pocket of his black suit jacket. He carefully brought out a piece of paper that he unfolded and smoothed out. Unusually, the paper looked thicker and more fancy than most of the things he usually wrote on. It wasn't even the back of something that had been repurposed for Saulie to write on. When he was satisfied that he had the piece of paper as neat as he could get it, he held it up.

"I have something else for you Fern," and he handed it over to her.

On it was written this:

/Verna 'Fern' Anne Ferguson, my pal, has died./

/Born in the deep outer west of Edinburgh, Fern was forced to leave her family at a cruelly young age, because there was something wrong with them, and they did not know how to love her as she was. This early injury to her life meant that Fern did most of her growing up alone and unsupported. She did the best she could, but when you grow up thinking that you don't deserve to be cared about, it is difficult to trust others and to share life with them. She had several relationships with women that alternated between affection and suspicion and never lasted longer than nine months, three weeks, and two days.

By far one of her longest lasting and most co-dependent love-hate relationships was with the Edinburgh Festival, which allowed her to perform for the approval of others. This too, she never quite trusted, even though her best pal and number one fan insisted that her acting out of a dialogue between two old Scottish ladies meeting at a supermarket checkout was up there with the best comedy of the ages. She never wanted to be called a comedian, because, even if people laughed, she didn't trust them. She was the sort of person you could call witty once a day and she would never believe it.

Fern had many other jobs in her life time, and was fired from almost all of them. According to her, this was because employers inevitably began to fear how brilliant she was, and had to get rid of her.

Fern is survived by her daft auld pal Saulie, whose life she once saved at a house party by coming up and talking to him, and letting him talk, and also by being his friend for years and years afterwards. Fern was a woman of great and cruel imagination, and she took advantage of Saulie's tendency towards intense listening and confusion, as in some of the many folkloric lies she told him. One such lie was about a mysterious silver squirrel native to Edinburgh, big as a wild cat, that would appear only in the dead of night, an omen of terrible doom. If some poor soul was unfortunate enough to come across this unearthly squirrel portent, it would stand terrifyingly tall on its hind legs, point an unwavering silver paw and make a chittering noise eerily like a lost and terrifying language. This story was so convincing that Saulie was apprehensive around squirrels ever since. Despite this and many other such stories making him confused and often nervous, Saulie was happy to have been Fern's audience.

Like many Scottish people, Fern thought that the only thing that meant anything about her was her suffering. This is not unusual in people who have suffered, because the mind wants all that pain to be worth something and to have some sort of point. Unfortunately, this easily slips into thinking that suffering is the only thing that is real and true. It is a shame that before she died nobody let Fern know that pain is important, but it is not the only thing that is real. Fern was other things too, silly things, curious things, ungraceful things, and glorious things. Fern was angry and sad and bitter about life, but she was also perceptive, and inventive, and fun. Even if she didn't always think much of life herself, she made other lives more interesting by being there.

In the end, because she didn't think anyone should care about her, Fern didn't care enough about herself. It is well known that this ultimately led to her dying from her heart exploding dramatically out of her chest, drenching horrified passersby in a shower of high-cholesterol blood. This death was inevitable, given her phobia of green vegetables, her belief that cigarettes would never go out of fashion, her refusal to exercise because she felt it would make her look like a class traitor, and most of all due to her controversial, relentless, and ill-advised quest to find out what wines paired best with what takeaway food, no matter what the cost to her health.
We will always remember Fern, a difficult person, but a person worth caring about, and we will salute her memory every time we have a Malbec and pakora dinner. /

Fern held the piece of paper in front of her a long time. She pretended she was scratching her eye so she could give it a surreptitious wipe of any escaping moisture. She cleared her throat.
"Yer not wanting a hug or anything, are ye?" she said gruffly.
Saulie smiled at her.
"No, that's all right, Fern. I just want you to rest and get better."
Fern closed her eyes.
"Well, fine then," she mumbled, "I suppose that's all right."
Saulie stretched out his legs.
"I was thinking, Fernie, when you get out of this place, you should come and stay with me in the flat of many colours for a bit. For a break."
Fern looked doubtful.
"What about the Aunt in charge of property? Will she want me in her place?"
Saulie waved aristocratically.
"Oh, you don't take up much space, Fern," he said, "I'll send a postcard to Aunty Cressida when I get a chance to let her know. I'm sure she won't mind."
"Ehh," mumbled Fern, but Saulie was too carried away with enthusiasm now to notice.
"Fern!" he declared, "I think it's just what you need! I will strengthen you up with good food, just like Auntie Varsh taught me, and we've already got the crucial foot-warming covered with your new socks! We will get you well-watered, and will have you up and about and mighty in no time! Just think of the stairs, Fernie, think of the stairs!"
Fern did not want to think of the stairs and how healthy they would make her, and instead lapsed into a tired silence, closing her eyes.
Happily eating some more of her grapes, Saulie watched her pretending to sleep. He even did a pretty good job, in his opinion, of acting like he hadn't noticed her opening her eyes a crack to check he was still there.

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It does not matter how much notice the city of Edinburgh gets about a sunny day, it always feels like an ambush. No doubt, this is because the city has grown cautious through disappointment, but once it is clear that a rare hot day has been sprung by surprise on the stone town, everybody goes a little bit bananas. Portobello Beach turns into a sort of Mad-Max of sunbathing, colossal overspilling heaps of rubbish overwhelming the poor defeated bins, clusters of people emerging bravely into daylight who are so pale that you can see the blue marble veining under the skin, people who look as if they live underground for the rest of the year digging their toes into the sand with childlike satisfaction and shouting at everybody and nobody in particular. Most bizarrely, right on the sand of the beach, volleyball nets are put up, despite volleyball being surely the least Scottish sport ever invented. Cafés sprout optimistic outdoor areas and people dig up summer wear from somewhere at the back of the wardrobe, and suddenly and inexplicably everybody starts thinking they are perhaps just a little Mediterranean. Balconies on flats, which for the vast majority of the year in Scotland have no real function except for somewhere for the last diehard smokers to stand and watch laundry not drying, those formerly sad grey balconies suddenly become the site of endless cramped late-night dinner parties, where people roar so loudly and delightedly over their wine-glasses that it feels like the people are having a guffawing warm night party right in your bedroom when you are trying to sleep.

Saulie and Fern had immediately succumbed to the frantic brief madness of the Scottish summer. They were no better than the rest. They were at Portobello Beach themselves, sitting on the low lip of the concrete wall above the sand. Fern had unearthed a white bucket hat to protect her from the temporary excess of sunshine, and had her shoes and socks off even though her legs dangled a good tantalising distance from the rare gift of warm sand. Saulie had prepared for their trip to the local beach by wearing sunglasses that he had found somewhere in the flat of many colours. They were white, gigantic, and shaped like hearts. As is compulsory when at the beach, they were both eating ice-creams.

"I think this might be one of my favourite beaches," Saulie said as he looked upon the excitable summer chaos.

Fern took a bite of her ice cream and scoffed.

"How many other beaches have you ever been to?" she said.

Saulie tugged at his hair.

"Ehm...Dunbar, Largs, North Berwick..."

Fern nodded knowingly.

"You like this beach because it's close to where you live," she said.

"Not only because it's close!" insisted Saulie.

"Just a short bus ride away," insisted Fern, "Ye know there are actual warm countries with beautiful golden sands and sparkling clear water that you can actually swim in without a wetsuit or the fear that the sewage level has gotten too high?"

"Oh, I'm sure those other beaches are very nice, too," Saulie said, "But I like Portobello Beach. And anyway, that's where I am right now, so it makes sense to like it."

Fern snorted.

"You are like a giant thin child," she declared.

"One of my downstairs neighbours," Saulie said, "The wee girl Eva, was walking with her mother Annie and her sister Poppy here in Portobello on a fine, clear day much like today. She stared out across the water with the intense concentration small children have and pointed towards the kingdom of Fife. 'It's so clear,' Eva said, 'You can see France.' "

A joyfully screaming mob of young teenagers raced straight past them, kicking sprays of sand up at them.

"Look, Fernie," Saulie said with delight, pointing at the running teenagers, "A pack of bleggages!"

"Here, hold this," Fern said, and handed Saulie her ice-cream cone. Saulie sat there holding two melting ice-creams. A passing Golden Retriever lingered and gave him a sulky envious look. Surely two ice-creams on a sunny Scottish day was too much of riches for any man or dog?

"Eva's right, you know," said Saulie happily, "France does look splendid today out across there."

"Fife, ye lang gowk," said Fern, "Ach, I can't expect you to know where anything is, or even what day it is."

"Friday?" guessed Saulie, "It feels like a Friday. Everyone looks different on a Friday afternoon. They look a little excited, and like a bothersome discomfort has come off their shoulders."

"Anyway, that reminds me," said Fern.

She dug around in a pocket and handed him something.

"I got you a present," she said.

Saulie examined the object she had passed him. It was an old pocketwatch. He tried to wind it, and then shook it experimentally. He eyed the hands, looking for signs of movement.

"Thank you," Saulie said, "But it doesn't seem to work?"

Fern nodded, pleased.

"Yes, I thought it'd be perfect for you."

Saulie examined the pocketwatch. It had a scuffed silver back and a small crescent moon on the face. The chain attached to the watch was silver too, but a brighter and newer silver. The hands of the watch were set to twelve and would presumably stay there, barring something unforeseen.

"We should test it," said Fern. She cleared her throat, "Ey, pardon me there pal, d'ye ken the time?"

Saulie nodded and held the watch by the chain in front of him, swinging ever so slightly.

"Why, yes, of course, let me just see here. " Saulie said, "Looks like it's exactly midnight."

"Or midday," Fern said, taking back her icecream and working away at it as she was talking. "Y'see, Saulie, you have to wind those things every day when they work, and let's be honest, you are never going to able to do that."

Saulie admitted this was so.

"And, as far as I understand it, the cogs or something run at slightly different rates, or change in the hot and cold, and the pocketwatch keeps slowly skewing out of time. Not only would you have to remember to wind this watch every day if it was working, but you would also have to regularly check the time against something else to try and work out if the thing was running fast or slow." Fern polished off the bottom point of her ice-cream cone with a victorious nibble. "This watch here is much better suited for a Saulie," she continued, "Because it won't require you to do any organising, and it will still be, as the saying goes, right twice a day, which is more than most can say."

"Thank you very much, Fern, it's excellent," said Saulie, delighted.

"Lemme just take that ice-cream off your hands, Saulie," insisted Fern, "You don't want to get that pocket watch all sticky. You might gum it up and accidentally get it going again."

He handed his ice-cream over. Fern immediately and unabashedly started eating it.

Saulie looked at his pocketwatch with great contentment. He watched the waves of Portobello Beach, and the crowds of people trying to absorb as much of the brief incongruous moment of sunshine as they could. As if standing just behind him, Saulie felt a comforting presence. The dead of Edinburgh were just there, just out of sight, each and every life important, every single one worth something. Saulie could sense them there, looking out to the sea, the ghostly children of Edina, all the dead mothers, and sons, and daughters, and fathers, all the aunties and cousins, the people who had been builders, and accountants, and kept houses, and raised families, the artists, the poets, the drunks, the believers, the wits, the bores, the selfless, the self-obsessed, the people who hated, who loved, those who measured out their days with indifference, the ones who had cooked, and cleaned, and sat in offices, and drove vans, and washed plates, all of them, and all that they did.

And Saulie? What did Saulie do, after all? Nothing much. Saulie sat there, smiling foolishly, and remembered.