WENSUM

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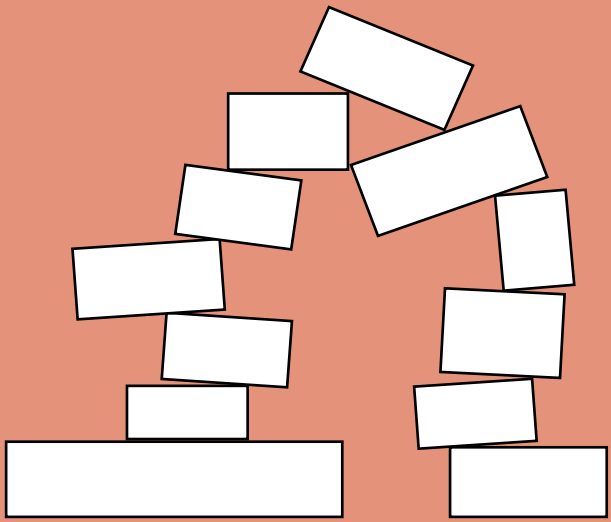

WELCOME

David Sexton | Editor

I'd first like to apologise for the delays as the eagle-eyed amongst you will notice that it isn't really Autumn anymore – sadly I had a family bereavement while putting together this issue which derailed the process somewhat.

The strangest thing happened while reading through submissions; I came across a story that was eerily similar to one I had written myself years ago. During my Masters course, we were all presented with a table of random objects and told to pick one to use as a writing prompt – I chose an old postcard written by someone called Helen. I thought it was apt to include both Anna Booraem's *It's Been Burning for A While* and my own *Midnight Sunset*. I hope you enjoy them both alongside the other selections.

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Swinney Lane, Insanely New

David Gladwin

Heated unseasonably, ground baking dry, every lawn shrinks a fingerwidth back. Track. Daily I walk town and country, find newly-mysterious things. Images, scratched into stone and dried earth, made from twigs. The same figure, I figure. The artist unknown. But I watch, for the pure joy of seeing. The being. Whomever, whenever. Awaited, awoke.

And bees, I see bees. Dead bees, everywhere, dead. Under lime trees on Chesterfield Road yesterday, along borders, the riverside path. Dead bees on the pavements, the road, Swinney Lane and the well in the wall, spring abandoned, bricked-over like Nature. Sealed off as though flow could be strained and detained, cold constrained. Grained. Stained and remained.

Why did I come here to live, why back here again, once everybody had gone? To take it all back. Lack. Trick track, unpack. Swinney, Piggy

swine line. Fed to Saint Winifred. Swinney Lane to Piggy Lane, stream trotting trickling back down through the stones of this place. Trace the birthplace. I live on Well Yard, where the view from my bedroom is over the roof of the East Mill and off up the valley, the Derwent, the river, the flow. Know. Life runs the land's veins and arteries. Charted, departed and martyred. Imparted. Divided amongst, against grain, against gradient. Radiant backward, the roots of the tree.

To walk the length of Swinney Lane, observing and reversing to reflect on miry flections, chips and splinters, broken-taken, how the stone was maken. All the masons' hammertaps, combtoothed across the faces of the walls' dry sections. Questions. Knowing where to strike, how little force, how hard, the mallet's transit, glance it, trace and shape the blocks' approximations, stationed. Set in rows and columns by the wallers, fallers. Gone before she bore me, tore me loosened from the gritgrain of the town. We are blinded by such tiny particles, articles. Them, thou and thee.

Tradition, inhibitional. Urgent indulgent. Frightened by specifics I dare not yet specify. The specifier and the specified. Lied. Led a stringer. Pearls, before Swinney Lane. Train. Tracked, signalled, signified. Indignified, defied astride. A bride, tried. Tied and fastened, tight, fitting. Unflitting, permitting. Written signed and stealed. Yield. Fields lain and slain but the names yet retained, Field Lane and Green Lane defielded, degreened.

Late Friday afternoon, delicious interval, the peace before the pissups. Sit up here with beer and gaze away down Mill Street, incomplete. The shrieking scream of peregrines above, unseen, away behind the trees, between the mills and churches. Perches. Cliffs of brick and stone, unknown aloft, unsoft and often stooping. Pigeon feathers left, bereft. I look again but see no bird. Unheard, unsignified. Unsignificient. Just like me, unvisioned and immissioned.

But the vision comes, it comes a-taunting. Haunting. Failure-flaunting in the summer of my days. Its ways are winding, hiding. Sparks

uprising, fire a second's thought away. Delay, decamp and damp the dread back under. Stand another. Life lies between energy and enjoyment. Employment, deployed in the business of burning the world. Busy hands make no mischief, the Chief misses nothing and we are too tired to see what he has sired.

An empty pint, with insides sudded foamy. Town below me, show me. Throw me out a catch to catch me out, unlatch the drought, act out inaction. Fractious factions, fractioned. Ration out the doubt. Devout and out. Devoted, vote demoted. Motivate your mate, Ms Nature! Missing, inaction in traction. Engines talled and stalled. Fall, chimneys, fall and pull the buildings down. The town. Around my sorry crown.

Even my dreams have confined and aligned, predesigned. Wednesday night I was driving a narrowing roadway through woodland, thin round moorland grasses and bracken alongside the sandygrained soil of the hollowed way, closing to pathwide and halfblocked ahead with stone, boulders, perched angled together to roll at the touch. I was pushing the car now, impos-

sibly upward the steepening way on the west of the valley, with nowhere to go. Slow.

Wakened and walked through the heat and dead bees again. Then last night drove in my dream up the opposite side, Toadmoor Lane there in Ambergate, steepening just like the woodway but here between stones of the houses and walls with the road angling back until, nothing but sky through the windscreen, I felt the front wheels lifting light from the tarmac, the car tipping back on itself in a fall back to bed, where I started from sleep and lay breathing, relieved. But believe me, I don't have a car.

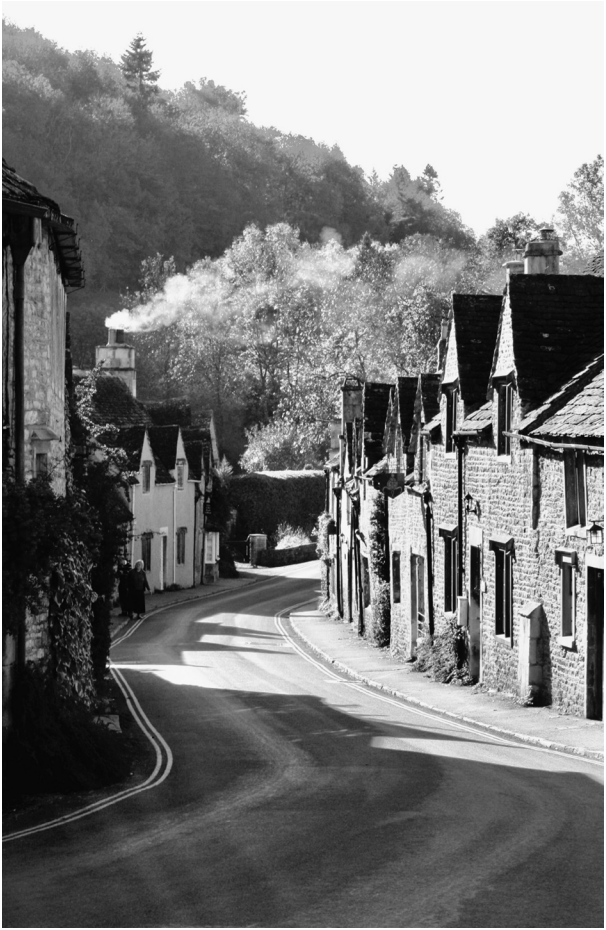
A fuller glass now, sipped to keep from spilling, willing time to slow as back I go to sit under the sun, before the others come. The people make me want to stay, and then they make me go away. Betrayed by what I sayed. Dismayed them, made them see short time and scant resources, mighty forces. Courses, action. Now and ever. Never. Ending of our tether. Tenure. Summer in its splendour. End you.

Quietly in crisis sit and think. Drink. Links us to the cycling water, Nature hates a vacuum,

nothing goes to waste. Haste, paced. Climbing to place. Ever higher, admired. Rewarded, retired, uninspired. Cyclical movement, in and on cycles. These are my people, not those who were driven away. Stay. Ours is the houses and streets of the town in the valley, the watercourse. Coursing inside us and through, me and you, interfected. Reflected. The water gave us our first image, our sense of ourselves. All of this taken back with the lack, dusty track. Dry lips crack.

Unless, yes! We redress, strip the flesh from the selfish, tear down all the grand. Let the land love the people who love back the land. Take it back, given back in a redistribution of health, feed the need, not the greedy. This locus our focus, folk history made in the making, re-taking and shaking. Shake tape to take shape, make the world in its image by city and village, uphill and downriver together. To gather, in pace and in mass, to trespass on their cosseted assets. The beast will be risen as bidden, by each and all, folk into focal, your local where I am the figure, a cell. Dwell.

Sit with me now, let us talk our way back and yet forward, on upward to topple the tomb at the top. Talk as we drink, but it's not the drink talking. The wayward are walking, our footsteps no march. We tread light and stealthy, sneak up on the wealthy and stick ourselves fast. Vast, we are massive in passive and active resistance, insistence on instant renewal, defueling the fossils to nurture the future. The struggle before and behind and forever. Endeavour. Our never and ever, our end.



Some Days

Jackie Carpenter

We're late. We've got to be at the hospital at 7.30am for Nigel's op to remove his cancer-ridden prostate and need to leave at 6.45am. It's gone six when I lift myself onto one elbow and check the time on my phone. Shit. Everything a rush. Nigel goes downstairs to feed the cats as he always does.

"Have you seen Reebie?" he asks. Reebie, the noisiest cat on the planet, usually wakes us at 5.30am, yowling for breakfast.

"No." I don't want to voice my fears. As soon as I woke, realised it was late, and didn't hear her, I knew something was wrong. We both rush around the house, not quite trusting the other not to miss her if she's asleep behind the sofa or under the radiator. Not sure whether to be glad Nigel got more sleep before his op or worried where she is, I run round the whole house a second time, looking under the beds

and behind my clothes horse, draped with cardigans and trousers not yet dirty enough to wash. We both look round outside – she's not in her toilet area, or her favourite places on the patio or the bench.

No time to look any more, we can't be late for the op. There's a last-minute kerfuffle – Nigel insisted on packing in the morning, and the bag isn't big enough, as I predicted. I bring the car around to save him from hiking up the twenty-two steep steps through the garden to the garage. He's exhausted pretty much all the time nowadays.

"I don't know where she can be," he says.

"No."

"I thought it was odd she didn't wake us."

"I know, it was so quiet."

"Where on earth can she be?"

"Maybe she's crawled away somewhere to die. She is twenty, sweetheart," I say.

"Don't be negative."

I shake my head. No point saying, again, that my thinking of possible explanations does not make a negative thing happen.

"She'll turn up," he goes on. "She's probably gone for a wander outside."

Which she never does. "Mmm," I say. "How do you feel, are you nervous?"

"Oddly, no." He sounds surprised. So am I. Emotion-driven and not wanting to know the details of what was going to happen, I expected him to be agitated – it seems unthinking optimism can be useful.

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The hospital is notorious for parking, but surely this early should be ok – although you never know how many people are coming in for surgery at the same time. There's a steep curve up a blind bend into the hospital car park, and I manage to bump over the kerb once again. We do our usual him-tut me-sigh routine. One of the two twenty-minute drop-off spaces is free, so I slide in. The instruction letter was stern: No one is allowed in the waiting room with you. A drop-off space is perfect.

Up the stairs through the echoey building. The

Urology Surgery door is shut, no entry until 7.30am. Half a dozen people are waiting and there are just two seats free. We sit down and wait the ten minutes. When the door opens, we all line up at the desk.

"Letter?" The receptionist asks.

It's still under the fridge magnet at home. To be honest, I rather thought it would be obvious, I assumed only people down for surgery came at 7.30 am. It takes her a while, but she locates Nigel's name and tells us to sit down in the waiting room. It turns out this is the waiting room before the waiting room, and all the wives are sitting with their husbands. We sit. And sit. I'm getting increasingly anxious.

"You go," Nigel says.

"I'll just move the car to the car park and come back."

"No, I'll be fine, we'll probably go through in a bit, you go, honestly."

"But I don't like to leave you on your own."

"I'm fine." He smiles. "Maybe Reebie will be there when you get back."

"Mmm," I say.

***

I get home to a silent house, as I feared. Pushkin, our other cat, has a tiny miaow that only comes out when she's desperate for breakfast. I go round every room, carefully, thoroughly, mournfully. Outside, I check the studio, which we open every day for Pushkin to sleep in. She sometimes gets trapped inside if she's hidden when we go to lock up. Little Reebie never goes in, but I have to check everywhere. I check the shed, the corners of the beds under dying peony fronds, under the long grass on what I tell everyone is our no-mow lawn. Up the nine deep steps to the pond-level patio, check all around there. No Reebie. Up the thirteen shallower steps to the garage. She isn't up there either. I've never seen her come up this high. Half-heartedly, I go a little way down the rough lane behind the garage then look through the wild land on the other side. She's completely deaf, so there's no point shouting her name – thank goodness, I'd feel so stupid shouting into unresponding air.

Back to the house. The silence, with no Nigel and no Reebie, looms at me. Cup of tea. Think. Facebook. I search for a good photo of Reebie and write a post for the local group.

***

The surgeon said he'd ring as soon as Nigel is out of theatre, but it's a three- to three-and-a-half-hour operation, and no knowing when it will start.

I don't talk to the cats like Nigel does. I imagine the house like this forever. No Reebie. No Nigel.

Best get on. The earliest I'd hear from the hospital is lunchtime, so I'd said I could come to the morning meeting of my local group. The other three ask after Nigel and are sympathetic when I tell them about Reebie. I've told work I'll come to online meetings today if I can – better than worrying. Still no phone call from the surgeon. I'll-keep-an-eye-out on replies to my Facebook post. I nibble three slices of salami and some sugar snap peas for lunch. Reach down the single-cup cafetiere from the top shelf.

The silence holds me down on the sofa.

***

At 1.15pm, finally a response on Facebook:

Im sorry to say, there is a deceased cat very similar to yours on the grass verge on your road, just above the side road. I would advise you take someone with you, if it was mine i wouldn't want to see it as it is. Sorry.

Surely Reebie wouldn't have gone that far. She never hardly goes out – and on the main road too, I've never seen her go out the front. But still. Grab my coat, put my boots on, and stride down the hill.

The deceased cat is a tabby like Reebie. I stand looking down at it. I don't know if it's her or not. There is a white chin like hers. I would recognise her by the ginger leopard spots on her belly, but there's just a trail of entrails, the cat looks as though it's been eviscerated, maybe by a fox. Its face is horribly disfigured, one eye on the end of what must be the optic nerve is two inches beyond its face, the other popped out of

the socket. Even I find it gruesome. Is it Reebie? The body does look quite large, maybe larger than her. Nigel would know straight away. But I'm just not sure – I don't see pictures in my head so I have no image of what Reebie looked like, even though I've had her twenty years, ever since she was a kitten.

I'm not achieving anything by staring. I go home for the next online work meeting. Helps take my mind off things.

***

The cat must be Reebie, no one else has seen any sign of her and I have – unenthusiastically and without much hope – looked around everywhere again. I'll have to bury her, next to our other cat who was killed on the road a few months ago. Nigel's buried half a dozen of our cats, attacking the soil with all the fury and agitation of loss. I've only ever watched. I'm not sure I'll be strong enough. Our soil is shallow, up here in the Peaks, and the lawn is claggy. I'll have to get the body back from down the road

– It's too far for me to carry it, it'll have to be the car. I look out a couple of old t-shirts for a shroud, for decency, a blanket to carry the body and gardening gloves so I don't have to touch the dead thing.

It's late afternoon, why hasn't the hospital rung?

It is going to be this silent forever.

***

"Nigel is fine. I had to take out a lot of tissue, but he's done really well," the surgeon says. "They're taking him down to the ward now, and they'll ring you when he's there."

Check on the website. Visiting hours are coming up soon, 5.00pm to 7.00pm. Watch the phone. It doesn't ring. At 5.45pm, I crack and ring the ward.

"He's on his way, but he's not here yet," they say.

"It'll take me half an hour to get there, so I'll leave now." I tell them. I grab the bucket of things and throw it in the car boot. Have to wait

till after seeing Nigel. At least I've got everything prepared.

***

I'm lucky to get a space in the car park which I'm fairly sure is nearest ward 204. Stride fast along the corridors, through the doors. Ask for Nigel.

"Oh?" the nurse says, looking down her list.

"He's on his way down," another tells her, and turning to me, says, "Can you just sit in the waiting area until we get him settled, please."

By the time he's in the four-bed bay, and I'm by his side, there's only half an hour left of visiting time. "Don't worry," the nurse says, "you can stay a bit longer, seeing as we kept you waiting."

Nigel is groggy, coming around, mumbling, repeating himself. Later he says he remembers nothing from the anaesthetist counting him down until he sees my face beside him.

"Is Reebie back?" is one of the first things he says.

I cannot lie. "No. I don't think it's going to be

a good outcome." My attempt at softening the blow does not work.

"Tell me," he demands. "I want to know."

So I explain about the Facebook post, sketch over the details of the mutilated body. "I'm going to sort it out when I get back this evening." I try to sound confident.

***

It's 9.00pm by the time I get back, stopping on the hill just down from our house. I couldn't remember exactly how far down it was so I have to get out to find the body and then drive the car another few yards uphill. I open the boot, put on my gloves, and take my bucket of bits to the verge. I'm glad I brought two T-shirts, unsure which would be best. I see I'll need both. I wave the flies off, and slide the hind legs and tail into one white t-shirt and the head and front legs – touchingly stretched out together – into the other. The body is stiff now, which helps get it on the flat plastic. Lay the body in the boot. Drive the few hundred yards back to

our house. Lift the boot tidy and body out, and lay it outside the back door. Thank goodness it's not raining.

Time to dig the grave. Nigel said the ground was hard, so I'm fearful as I drive the spade into the lawn but it's surprisingly easy, and I soon have a large enough hole. I lift the poor body and place it gently in the ground. Sprinkle some soil on the white cloth. Pile the soil back on, and tap it softly into place.

I'm proud of myself. Everyone – including me – always says how useless I am at anything practical, but I've done this well.

My best friend sends a WhatsApp with sad face, broken heart, rainbow and hug emojis: Across the Rainbow Bridge she is reunited with all her old friends and she will be waiting for you when It's time to join her.

Thank you, I reply. But I don't believe in the rainbow bridge, sadly.

It's been a long day.

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Next day, visiting time. I've WhatsApped, Nigel said he doesn't want anything else bringing. I know where the ward is now. As soon as I sit down, he wants to know all about Reebie, have I told everyone. I have. I've told his sister, my two kids, Emma over the road who feeds the puds when we're on holiday, the three friends in my local group, people at work, our friends in France who love cats, as well as my best friend.

"I won't miss all that incessant yowling all day."

"She's deaf, sweetheart, she can't hear how loud she is." Her strident miaows are just the right pitch to set his teeth on edge. Often he shouts at her; her tilted face still eager as she can't hear his fury.

"I so love that cat." She has been part of my life longer than Nigel, by a year. Working from home, I sit on the sofa, her often curled asleep on my thighs, my laptop on the right on a cushion as I twist over to the keyboard. If she's not on Nigel, that is.

"She never leaves me alone, as soon as I sit down she's there," he says. The cats queue up to sit on his lap, the one on the floor staring hard

at the other, currently in possession.

"She's old, sweetheart, likes the warmth of a lap." They look like lovers, him rubbing his beard against her affectionate head butts, gently fondling her ears.

"She does love to sit in the sun," he says, and I know he's also remembering last weekend when she hunkered down on the rug where the sunbeams fell.

"Such a gentle soul." I'm avoiding tenses. The present feels wrong, but the past too final.

"I'm going to miss her," we both say. I can't bear to swap any more stories.

We were told Nigel would probably come home the day after surgery. But his blood oxygen levels are low, so they're not sure if they'll let him go.

He tells me tales of his fellow patients. He's annoyed at the man who makes sure everyone knows he's a lawyer with high-profile clients. Nigel is outraged that he demands one of the ward staff fetches him a paper from the shop then is most displeased when he's told they aren't there for that.

End of visiting time. I've taken the day off work, anticipating I'd be bringing Nigel home, but now we're not sure even when the decision will be made.

***

I drive back to the hospital for 5pm, praying for a parking space. Just as I pull into the car park, my mobile rings.

"It's the vet," a female voice says. "This is a bit of a strange one, but did you report your cat missing yesterday?"

"Yes." My insides flip-flop.

"Well. Bear with me while I explain this. We've had a phone call from a young lady, who saw your post on Facebook. Her neighbour's got a cat which she thinks is yours, but they aren't very good with technology and don't do Facebook, so they asked the girl to try to get in touch with you. When she couldn't get hold of you on Facebook, she rang us. We had this number from when you brought your cat in."

"Oh! Blimey!" I can't think what to say, and

while I'm still trying to work it out, the voice goes on, "Anyway, if I give you her number, can you please ring the girl."

"Oh. Yes. Of course."

"You don't know me," the girl says, "but I saw your post on Facebook, and when my neighbour said she had a cat appear at her door, I thought it might be yours? A little tabby cat?"

"That could be Reebie… but I buried a cat I thought was her yesterday," I explain about the Facebook post and the mangled body.

"Oh? How strange. Anyway, can you please ring her? So you can talk to her yourself?"

She gives me the number and I tap out the eleven digits.

"Is this your cat?" a woman demands. I can hear yowling in the background. That's definitely Reebie, I'd know that voice anywhere. "Can you come and get her now, I'm allergic to cats and she's making a terrible row."

"Not right this minute, no, unfortunately." Tied in agonies of guilt, a bit annoyed at her peremptory tone, I lay it on thick. "I'm in Derby, about to go in to visit my partner who's got

prostate cancer and has had a major operation and visiting time is only just starting now. I can be home in an hour or so." It's a half-hour drive.

"Can't you come now? She just turned up at our back door. I can't have her in the house, I'm allergic to cats. And she won't stop that noise."

We work out they live five doors down from us. I have an idea.

"Maybe if I talk you through getting to ours, you could take her to the cat flap, she's got a microchip so the cat flap opens only for her and our other cat."

"That cat you buried, didn't you put its head through the cat flap to see if it was your cat?"

I pause. "I'm going to have to go, It's visiting time now."

"Here's my husband now, he'll carry her up to yours."

"Great! Is he able to carry her down the steps to the back door and show her the cat flap, please?"

"Why didn't you check that was your cat before you buried it, you could have pushed its head through the cat flap."

Not an animal person.

I talk them through where to go, up the lane, look for our garage, and down the two flights of steps. After a bit of – maybe not too gentle – encouragement, Reebie goes through the cat flap.

I pray she stays inside until I get back.

I've missed the first ten minutes of visiting time, too, what with one thing and another. Nigel is sitting up in bed. To explain why I'm late, guilty and embarrassed, I tell him about the phone calls.

"What? Couldn't you tell the cat you buried wasn't Reebie?" Nigel shakes his head and gives me that look. He is definitely better.

"The body wasn't in a good state," I say, not wanting to go into detail.

"What are you like," he says, shaking his head at me. I'm going to have to tell everybody that she's back. I sigh.

The next day a tasteful – plain – sympathy card from my best friend drops through the letterbox.

A Scotsman in Prague

John Szamosi

"I've been here ten years and love the place. Prague is a great city; sound economy, a unique culture, affordable housing and a decent selection of lager. Still there's one thing living among the Czechs that captivates us expats more than anything else: there's little or no crime here.

It's day and night difference between Prague and Glasgow, where I was born and raised. Even burglary and pickpocketing are rare, and violence is nonexistent. People don't raise their voices much less their hands against one another; it just ain't in them. Civilized folks, all of them, no exception.

Bar fights, for example, a regular workout in Scotland, seldom if ever occur in Prague. I try hard to search my memory and can only come up with two. Those were bad, though. Bottles and chairs thrown, broken noses, people losing front teeth, blood all over the place, horrendous

property damage, and at the end the earsplitting sirens of police and ambulance cars. But two bar fights over an entire decade ain't bad. Especially considering that I started them both."

A View for Mabel

Marianne Kennedy

Mabel Christopher lived in the same apartment in the same building on Hyde Street in San Francisco for fifty-eight years. When she and George took up occupancy in the '60s – young, newly married, and full of small dreams – the building was also young.

As the second tenants to sign a lease, the Christophers had their pick of units. They selected 10D, at the northwest corner of the tenth floor, above the street noise with a view of the neighbouring buildings. Apartment 10A, located on the front side of the building, boasted a spectacular panorama of the Bay Bridge. Costing a mere $10 more per month, it still wasn't what George Christopher called *a wise fiscal choice*, and as a new employee in the financial district, he was conscientiously aware of fiscal choices.

Mabel often wished they had chosen to live a little *above their means* by taking the apart-

ment with its breathtaking vista. The opportunity came up again over the years, but they were settled, and the move didn't seem worth the effort. To have started there – to have been able to enjoy the twinkling lights at night and the sun shimmering on the bridge during all those years – would have been a marvellous thing. To have started better might have helped things to turn out better. Not that she allowed herself any real complaints.

The Christophers socialized very little, but during the first year of their marriage, they played Parcheesi once a week with the couple in 9B, who later bought a house in Marin and were never heard from again.

George made a practice of taking Mabel to dinner every Friday night. He referred to the outing as Mabel's treat. Considering it a special occasion, she wore her black dress with a string of pearls – a wedding gift from her grandfather. George was attired in his only suit, a grey pinstripe.

They always went to The Bedford, the pleasant little hotel two blocks down Hyde and around

the corner on O'Farrell. The short excursion was highlighted by the pride Mabel experienced when her gentlemanly husband held open the door of the restaurant, a comfortably old-fashioned place with a wood-panelled bar and consistently good food.

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The Christophers hadn't planned to stay in the apartment very long, hesitating at signing a year's lease. They thought perhaps they would buy their own home. Mabel favoured one of the majestic row houses with steep steps, which led up to a painted front door that accessed spacious rooms spreading over three stories. She pictured those homes proudly growing taller in defiance of being shouldered on both sides by neighbouring houses. On the other hand, George envisioned a move to a larger apartment that could accommodate entertaining – a prerequisite for a successful banker and his wife.

They might have moved when the first year's lease ended if not for the discovery of Mabel's

condition. Mabel was delighted. George was concerned. A child meant they would need a larger place; it also meant they couldn't afford it. George, who was getting along satisfactorily at the bank, hadn't been there long enough to be promoted. So, they stayed – after all, it was *the wisest financial decision*.

"How can we possibly squeeze in a baby in addition to all the paraphernalia we'll need?" George would say.

The apartment was small – in actuality, only one high-ceilinged room and a bath.

The front door opened directly onto a tiny entranceway that displayed a Ming dynasty cloisonné vase, a gift from one of George's elderly aunts.

The black-and-white tiled bathroom was to the left. Mabel insisted that the door be kept closed so the commercial fixtures, designed for a hotel, weren't the first thing anyone saw upon entering the apartment. Her rule was intended to focus guests' eyes straight ahead into the single room that, on a sunny day, was brushed with the light from its small windows. She

needn't have worried since visitors were rare.

A closet, inordinately large in contrast to the size of the room, was on the right side. A Formica table with four large chairs upholstered in red vinyl dominated the kitchenette on the left.

Mabel had chosen small pieces of furniture to fit the space. A lamp sat on the chintz cloth covering the cabinet of her sewing machine. There was a television set on a movable metal cart and a floor lamp next to an upholstered reading chair.

A Murphy bed was located on one wall, concealed behind double doors. Every evening, George relied on its internal mechanism, *a marvel of engineering*, to free it from its hiding place.

"We will find a way," Mabel reassured George as she looked around the crowded room.

Then she waited patiently for a solution to appear. The answer to finding a place for the baby came in a moment of inspiration. She would convert the closet into a nursery. The space was tiny, six feet by six, but it was big

enough for a crib.

"Where will we keep our clothes?" George protested.

"We'll get an armoire with a shelf and a rod for hanging some things," Mabel said. "Then we'll purchase a large chest of drawers."

"That will crowd the place."

But as long as George's chair wasn't displaced, he'd be relatively happy.

In imitation of her childhood bedroom, Mabel decorated the nursery's walls with prints of rosy-cheeked children playing in flower gardens in front of thatched-roof cottages. She hung ruffled wall lamps to compensate for the absence of windows.

"Why is everything pink?" George asked, trying not to disclose his preference for a son. "What about brown? Or even blue would be better."

"We are going to have a girl." Mabel smiled knowingly.

George retreated, hiding his disappointment behind the evening paper, pondering what a man could do with a daughter.

Mabel, correct in her prediction, delighted in her new baby, who was beautiful – with pink tones to her creamy complexion – and blonde, although both her parents were brunettes.

"Where did the baby get her looks? She doesn't look like a Christopher – not with that light hair and blue eyes. Everyone in my family has a dark complexion," George reminded his wife before insisting, "I want her named Alice, after my grandmother."

She didn't particularly like the name but acquiesced regardless. She was content.

Mabel, who'd preferred to do simple things around the apartment, now enjoyed going to the park. The baby carriage stood in the entryway as if waiting for the daily outings. The children in Alice's life were brought to the park by their mothers or nannies, who grouped together, watching their charges play while commenting on their growth, bruises, and illnesses. The youngsters were known by their names. Adults remained nameless allowing Mabel to proudly announce, "I am Alice's mother."

On weekends, fathers accompanied their off-

spring where they played catch with their older sons or pushed their daughters on the swings. George, who didn't understand children, wasn't comfortable around Alice. Nevertheless, every Sunday, they set out hand-in-hand on their outing. Upon their arrival, Alice instantly became the centre of attention. George's chest expanded when he realized that a beautiful little girl wasn't such a bad thing.

Mabel wanted to give Alice a fourth birthday party, but not knowing any children other than those at the park, she took the party to where they gathered.

An accomplished seamstress, Mabel delighted in creating clothes to highlight Alice's beauty – pink to accentuate the blush of her cheeks or blue to bring out the colour of her eyes. In honour of the occasion, she made Alice a dress of blue moray silk. She found joy in the ebb and flow of colour running through the material like waves of seawater.

"Show Mama how beautiful you look," Mabel encouraged Alice, who squealed with delight as she preened – turning and swinging, swinging,

and turning – around the room, almost knocking over the floor lamp when she bumped into George's chair.

As the day was colder than usual for April, with a blustery wind blowing off the bay, Mabel insisted her daughter wear her heavy coat. When they reached the park, Alice immediately shed the detested wrap to show off her special dress.

The party was a success. The white cake with chocolate icing was adorned with Alice's name and surrounded by pink roses. Plates, napkins, and birthday candles completed the celebration. The children dug into the cake with eager fingers, forgoing forks, while smearing chocolate across their faces. Alice dropped a large piece, icing side down, onto her dress, leaving a mud brown stain on the salt-water blue material. The children were fidgety in the cold air, and earlier than usual, mothers and nannies herded them toward home.

That evening, Alice's pink face turned red with fever. The doctor came that night and the next day and the next. On each visit, his expression became more sombre. Her parents moved Alice

out of her closet bedroom to the couch. The space filled with the clutter of a sick room while she slowly died.

Over time, the reminders of Alice's existence were silently removed, returning the apartment to its childless state, while Mabel's grief, deeply buried, would not allow her the healing comfort of mourning.

George and Mabel said little. There didn't seem to be anything to talk about, and after Alice was gone, they never again mentioned moving. Mabel seldom went out except to buy groceries or to take their clothes to the Chinese laundry two doors up the street. George kept himself busy at the bank, becoming heavy-set and thick-necked – the person left behind in the teller's cage to impersonate a banker while the real bankers were making decisions affecting other people's lives and fortunes. When he returned after his long workday, muttering, "Whoever thought bankers put in short hours was sorely misinformed," he desired nothing more than to sit in his chair and read the newspaper after dinner.

"Perhaps you should go into politics," Mabel suggested, hoping to rekindle his ambition. "You would certainly win. Having the same name as the Mayor should guarantee votes."

"Maybe I could become Dog Catcher."

***

A sprinkling of thinning grey hair encircled the bald spot appearing on the top of George's head. Mabel could only see the saucer-shaped circle when he was sitting down. Occasionally, tempted to place a gentle kiss on the exposed skin but, afraid he would be offended, she instead silently moved away to clean up the dinner dishes.

No longer having a beautiful little girl to make clothes for, Mabel took up crocheting, leaving fuzzy balls of yarn, instructional pamphlets, and magazines strewn around the apartment. Finding the repetitive activity soothing, she made everything she could think of, including lap blankets and book jackets to hide the covers of the romance novels she allowed herself to

read despite her fear that George would disapprove, given his preference for the adventures of James Bond.

Around the same time, George once again started taking Mabel to dinner at The Bedford every Friday, resurrecting the old routine. She wore her black dress and for years he wore his grey work suit, then when the trousers became shiny, he replaced it with a new dark blue pinstripe. Perhaps afraid she would pick an expensive entrée – George usually ordered the mid-priced Chicken Dijon for both of them.

"A Grasshopper for the lady," he would inform the waiter and solemnly add, "and I will have a martini, dry – shaken, not stirred – with a thin slice of lemon."

When they went out, George protectively guided Mabel so she did not have to deal with the neighbourhood's changing cornucopia of sights and smells. At first, there were young couples like themselves, the sidewalks bustling with the competitive energy of husbands hurrying to work. In the '60s, there was an influx of hippie tourists from Haight-Ashburylook-

ing for mellow adventure. Then the foreigners moved in, Vietnamese and Chinese, tenacious immigrants who set up cottage industries employing their extended families in businesses designed to meet the neighbourhood's needs. The crossdressors and gays came next, each claiming a street corner on which to hold court. Tall, stately beings, wearing short skirts and massive jewellery, their inordinate amount of hair crowned their regally held heads.

The Bedford changed from an elegant small hotel to a boisterous family spot. The Christophers remained loyal until it no longer served meals, having slowly declined into a single-room occupancy hotel housing the homeless seeking refuge from the streets. George and Mabel found another restaurant, a little German place on Turk, but it wasn't the same.

***

At the beginning of the new century, everyone Mabel knew was long gone from the building.

George went suddenly. No cluttered, lingering death for him. He sat down one Sunday morning in his reading chair, newspaper in hand, and reaching up to turn on the floor lamp, suffered a heart attack and died instantly. His large body was carried out of the small apartment by a bevvy of paramedics, leaving the room with an unfillable hole. Once again, Mabel buried her grief without the salve of tears.

Displaying his typical fiscal planning, George left Mabel with a life insurance policy and by being frugal, she managed. She seldom went out, finding the streets unfamiliar and frightening. Having her groceries delivered weekly, she lived mainly on peanut butter, crackers, canned sardines, and tea.

Often Mabel didn't bother to unfold the Murphy bed, preferring to sleep on the short couch. She'd awaken in the early morning to the dancing images cast by the television. Cramped from being unable to stretch out, she contemplated opening the bed to finish the night in comfort but instead pulled her blue chenille robe closer, turned her half-curled body slight-

ly, and returned to a fitful sleep.

On Fridays, she put on her black dress that had acquired a green sheen over the years, black high heels, and black stockings. She made her way out of the building and down the two blocks to The Bedford, which had been purchased by a resourceful couple who repaired and repainted it until it was charming again.

Mabel felt comfortable there. The cosy bar was filled with arched eyebrows and soft, drawled words caught in the heavy air of cigarette smoke. The bartender knew her, was attentive, and the food was good. In honour of George, she always began with a martini, *dry – shaken, not stirred – with a thin slice of lemon*. She usually ordered the Chicken Dijon, although sometimes, she varied the menu by having the small top sirloin.

To reach the hotel, Mabel had to brave the sidewalk strewn with the homeless, their bodies and their possessions. She tried not to look – to walk with her eyes straight ahead and her breath held, the effort making her lips form a straight line on her tense face – yet she saw everything. She told herself that this new popula-

tion would either move on, disappear with time as the tourists and hippies, or find some way to fit in as the gays and foreigners did.

The corner of Hyde and Geary belonged to Crazy Stan, who accosted everyone with his angry gibberish. In the next block down from Mabel's apartment, a man had rigged up a house for himself and a little girl. Made from a large, discarded shipping carton with a door cut out of one side, it was like a child's playhouse. The inhabitants often stood in front of the doorway as though guarding their realm.

Mabel guessed the man was in his thirties, although his weathered face made him appear older. He was tall with straggly brown hair and a matching, unkempt beard. The ends of his fingers stuck out of the sleeves of his grease-stained navy windbreaker. The child, probably his daughter, was only three or four, a small-boned girl with dirty, light brown hair and pleading blue eyes. She leaned – lethargic – against the man, The little girl was all elbows and knees covered with bruises in varying states of healing, from bright red to crusty half-peeled

scabs.

Mabel began taking the long way to and from The Bedford to avoid passing the man and the child, but she still could see the cardboard box. When not guarding their home, sometimes the pair were huddled inside.

One evening, Mabel realized she wasn't hungry for the steak she'd ordered. The waiter provided a white Styrofoam container that, like a mischievous jack-in-the-box, had a faulty latch. Since it was raining, she chose the direct route back to her apartment, taking her past the makeshift house only partially protected by a covering of black plastic bags. Seeing no one home, she impulsively pushed the carton of uneaten food through the doorway.

The following morning Mabel felt compelled to visit the armoire that had replaced Alice's small bed in the closet. In a large box, she found a WWII army surplus blanket – olive-drab but roughly warm despite its several small moth holes – one of George's sensible purchases. Next was George's second-best pinstripe suit, the grey one – he'd been buried in the newer blue

one.

Then she unearthed Alice's blue gown. Her hand, moving as though disembodied, reached toward the garment. She gently picked it up, careful not to touch the two creases that – marching stiffly down the front of the skirt – intersected the chocolaty spot made over half a century earlier. Refolding the dress, she placed it under George's suit.

She threw her sweater over her shoulders and, picking up her purse and the blanket, left the apartment to head down the street. Furtively, she looked for the man and his daughter, but they were nowhere in sight.

Mabel moved resolutely toward the cardboard house. Then hesitating beside the open doorway, she bent down to peer inside. There was a large metal pan with a handle and crumpled newspapers. Nothing else. She pushed the blanket inside, tucking it into the corner so it couldn't be seen from the sidewalk, and quickly walked away, afraid that what she did could be construed as a crime. That evening on her way to dinner, she didn't look in the direction of the

dwelling.

The next week, Mabel took the umbrella that stood behind her front door for years and placed it in the box. It had a long handle and a broken spoke but was still usable. A week passed, and she didn't see the family but, nonetheless felt their presence in the neighborhood. The following week she left George's grey suit, and the week after, she deposited the blue dress, protected by a plastic grocery bag.

Two weeks later, before exiting the building, Mabel automatically checked the message board on the dimly lit lobby wall. Only one notice was posted:

CURRENTLY AVAILABLE – UNIT 10A

Once outside, Mabel's attention was drawn to a curious sight. She froze – it was George and Alice strolling hand-in-hand on their Sunday outing to the park. He'd rolled up the sleeves of the jacket and the cuffs of the pants and she was careful not to let the dress' hem drag on the rain-spattered sidewalk. Her father clutched the

blanket securely around both their shoulders while gallantly holding the broken umbrella above them to deflect the drizzle before rounding the corner and out of sight

Mabel returned to her building and slowly climbed the marble steps. She unlatched the iron gate, entered the lobby, and ascended in the rickety elevator until it came to a stop on the tenth floor. She made a sharp right turn and walked down the hallway towards her apartment, searching for the key that opened the heavy wooden door into the familiar semi-darkness of fifty-eight years. Before bringing it up to the lock, Mabel stood motionless, wondering what the view would be like these days from 10A.

It's Been Burning for a While

Anna Booraem

On the shore, Helen hiked up her pants. She shaded her eyes with a freckled hand.

There, way out there. A plume of smoke. What was it?

"It's a barge," Frank said, shaking out his newspaper and digging his feet further into the sand.

"What do you mean, a barge?" Helen felt herself spit at him, the words like bitter little tacks all over his face.

In reality, she said nothing.

She knelt in the sand and dug in her bag: Neutrogena sunscreen, a crinkled People magazine, her tweezers and mirror, a warm can of Pepsi Max, tissues, loose change, and sand. So much sand. She saw herself screeching and stomping her feet like Agnes when she was three years old, tossing her purse into the ocean.

Instead, she clenched her teeth and continued her search. A bottle of open ibuprofen rattled

past her scrambling hands before she finally found the binoculars.

Frank cleared his throat, shook out the paper, and dug his feet into the sand. All habits Helen detested, habits that frayed her very nerves to their very very frayed-est. She wanted to scream at him, tell him once again to stop.

"Do you need a drink, honey?" She said. "I have a Pepsi Max if you want one."

"Nah, I'm fine," he said, not looking up from his paper.

She pulled the binoculars out and walked to the water's edge, wiping the lenses on her shirt before bringing them up to her eyes.

The plume of smoke looked like a corkscrew. It was really quite lovely from this distance, like a design on a latte or a tattoo she might have gotten on her ankle in college, instead of this damn dolphin she'd been stuck with for twenty-five years.

No fire. And she still couldn't see the barge. Or whatever it was.

The waves lapped at her feet. She walked in further, oblivious to the water pushing past her

knees.

"It's been burning for a while," a voice said, silky, yet raspy, and carrying surprisingly well over the water between them.

Helen was waist-deep in the water now, the bottom of her white shirt floating around her, jeans plastered to her legs. The voice had come from a bright yellow inflatable lounger floating a few feet from her. A woman about Helen's age was lying on it, bobbing up and down on the waves, her face hidden under a large straw hat.

"Oh really?" Helen said as a wave lifted her feet off the ocean floor, and she found the water reaching her chest.

"Mind if I hang on to your raft?"

"It's yours," said the woman as she slid into the water, Leaving only her wide-brimmed straw hat floating on the surface.

Helen climbed awkwardly onto the float, her jeans heavy with water, her shirt stuck to her.

"Ahh…well… I see," she said quietly as she raised the binoculars to her eyes again. She scooped up the hat from the water and made herself comfortable.

"It's been out there for days," the voice said again. Helen turned to see the woman's head bobbing in the water next to her. The woman's face was wrinkled and whiskery. Helen felt the familiar critique she'd always had for other women, noticing their flaws and wondering how she herself compared.

Leathery skin, deep wrinkles around her eyes and chin, and shiny hair all around her mouth – the kind honestly Helen had been battling herself for the last six years, coming fast and furious every time she looked in the damn mirror.

"You really have to get a little closer," the woman said, turning her shiny dark eyes to Helen and winking. Her head disappeared under the water and popped up again a few feet further away. "To see what it is, you have to get closer."

"Oh, I'm not a very good swimmer," Helen protested. "I can't believe I'm out this far. I'm usually back on the beach. I don't know the last time I got into the water. Maybe that one summer when Henry was in the 11th grade, but

that's because he insisted on paddling me out in the sea kayak, which was a disaster because it flipped, and I was terrified…"

"I bet you're better than you think," the woman said.

Helen was surprised she could still hear the woman's voice since the distance between them had grown immensely in the short time they'd been talking. She twisted on the raft to look back at the shore. Frank was just a speck, sitting in his beach chair. There was the house behind him. The one they'd been coming to all these years, where her children had spent two weeks of summer for most of their lives. The new owners had painted it bright pink, and it made Helen sad to see a beach house that colour– it just wasn't right.

All the summers there; the babies, then toddlers, then that precious time of seven, eight, and nine, and then the awful teen years, and then they were gone. All gone. It was just her and Frank now.

And Frank. Who was this man she'd married all those years ago? Hadn't he been her best friend?

Like that was the main criteria for spending the rest of your adult life with someone? Hadn't they been close, biblically, but in other ways too? And all those years, she'd wanted to run, but she held tight. She stayed put. For him, for the kids, for her job, for the book club, for the family holidays.

"Hey," the other woman said. She was so far away now, heading toward the open sea, toward that plume of smoke, her head the size of a peach bobbing in the water, yet her voice was right in Helen's ear.

"Come on. It's time."

Helen took off the hat, laid the binoculars on the raft and slid down into the water. For the first time in an age, her body felt light, lithe, and smooth. It hadn't felt that way in fifteen years, since she stopped running and had started settling for walking the dog instead.

She held her breath and let go.

Midnight Sunset

D. G. Sexton

As soon as Helen had finished writing that there wasn't a Viking in sight, she saw the longboat. Postcard in hand, she sat up in bed and looked out her window at the unmistakable shape bobbing up and down on the horizon. There was no one else in the room to verify what she was seeing as her husband hadn't stumbled back from the bar yet. It wasn't exactly what she'd had in mind when suggesting the romantic getaway together, but what did she know?

She wandered over to the window and looked out towards the waves. All the oars were moving in unison, the rhythmic calls echoing in her ears. Row. Row. Row. Row. She paused, staring out to sea for a moment before taking off her nightgown and throwing on the warmest clothes she could find.

The sun sat just above the horizon; the brilliant red of the sky matched only by the warm orange

of the sea's reflection. Silhouetted trees dotted the landscape, their long shadows stretching away from the gentle glistening waves. Helen hadn't gotten used to the midnight sun; it was almost impossible to tell the time of night or day as the sun was always rising or setting. At night, the sun had a little paddle in the sea, barely getting its feet wet before rising up again, deciding that the water was too cold for anything but a brief dip.

When she was a child, Helen looked forward to the few seaside trips her family could afford more than anything in the world. The car boot would be filled with a mixture of colours, towels zigzagged with green and white, windbreakers striped, red, yellow, and blue. Her favourites were the plastic buckets and spades, a green bucket with a red spade for her and a blue bucket and yellow spade for her brother. Driving with the windows rolled down and fans on full blast until her or her brother could finally get a glimpse of the sea.

"I can see the sea! I can see the sea!" They would shout as it meant that ice cream, sand-

castles, and paddling were not too far away. At the beach, her brother would spend his time running in and out of the sea, splashing around and jumping over the waves as they broke. Helen would stand and watch the horizon, trying to pick out that first moment when a wave would begin to form and follow it all the way until the point it tickled her toes. Each one was the same, beginning with such promise but as time went on the weight would become too much to handle and the wave would collapse in on itself. All that strength and power reduced to nothing. Then came its cowardly retreat back into the ocean, like someone backing out of a room, head bowed in subservience.

Helen stared out at the sea once more, watching the silhouetted longboat slowly grow larger as it made its way towards the shore. The more she tried to focus, the more the wind caused her eyes to fill with water. The silhouette shimmered; edges blurred. Row. Row. Row. Row. The banging of a drum got louder and louder, beating in time with her own heartbeat. In her mind's eye, she could see them rowing,

their strong arms glistening with sweat as they worked. Arms that could lift her, throw her onto her bed and hold her tight.

Her husband would surely be back by now, but she doubted he would even notice that she wasn't there. He'd been strong once, kept in shape for the first few years, but she didn't mind the belly or the extra flab. It was the looks of disdain that she caught, the rolling eyes, and the endless scoffs.

"Huh, really? You think that's a good idea?"

"I don't know, we could try but I don't think it'll work."

"Are you deliberately trying to annoy me or what?"

She knew how he talked about her at work, or with friends, and he'd stopped calling her by name when they had company. It was always the wife, the old ball and chain, the other half, like she was somehow holding him back, or stopping him from achieving his dreams. Anything to avoid the reality that he'd turned into a useless, lazy sack of shit.

The pounding of the drums was getting faster

and faster, louder and louder. Row. Row. Row. Row. The longboat started to become clearer, its edges more defined. She could see the row of shields lining the sides, different colours and patterns symbolising each with its own meaning. Helen had learned this on her first day alone on the island, from the small museum of Viking history she'd wandered into.

"Hallo." The man had said as she entered, burly, bearded and balding. If it wasn't for the modern clothes he could have blended in perfectly with the handful of other exhibits.

"Hello." Helen nodded politely before slowly making her way around the relatively small room adorned with banners, old rusted swords, and brightly painted wooden shields. One caught her eye; it was split into quarters, alternating between green and white with a black border.

"Green is the colour of hope, white the colour of innocence, and black binds the living and the dead together." The man says, shuffling up beside her. "White can also mean surrender and peace, something for which the Vikings

may not be known for but they were far from the filthy savages you often see in the movies and television."

"That doesn't surprise me." Helen said, still staring at the shields. "What about the red?"

"Strength. The colour of the rich and powerful, but also danger, a warning."

"They're so... Vivid. Bold. They're not real, are they?"

"Oh, no." The man laughs. "They're replicas but are made in the same way that they used way back when."

"They're beautiful."

"Thank you."

"Wait, you make these?"

"Yes of course! There's no one else here!" The man said, reaching up to take the green and white shield from its hook. "Here, feel the weight."

"It's light." Helen said, pulling it up to her breast before stretching her arm outwards."

"Easy to wield, no?" The man said, gently taking her arm and moving it so the shield was parallel to her body. "Now you're a true

shield-maiden, a fearsome warrior."

Helen looked into those clear blue eyes, a calm and reassuring sea.

The crashing of the waves. The pounding of the drums. Row. Row. Row. Row. She could see the figures on the longboat now, all moving in unison. A single entity driving forward, battling the elements and changing tides. She could see the shields painted green, white, and black.

Helen took a step towards the water, towards those crashing waves tumbling to nothing in front of her. With each step she took, the waves retreated further and further back so she kept going daring the sea to challenge her. Eyes fixed on the longboat, arm across her breast, parallel to her body.

All at once, the water was up to her neck, the waves pulling her further and further from shore. The freezing cold. A sharp intake of breath. Then it was above her, shimmering alongside the midnight sun as she slowly drifted down. The brilliant red of the sky blurred by the teal sea. She let out one final sigh as the kaleidoscopic haze of colours around her faded to

black.

The pounding of drums, a crash of water. Helen felt a pair of strong arms around her, the warm feeling of another hugging her close as she rose higher and higher towards the surface, pulled upwards towards the green and red sky.

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