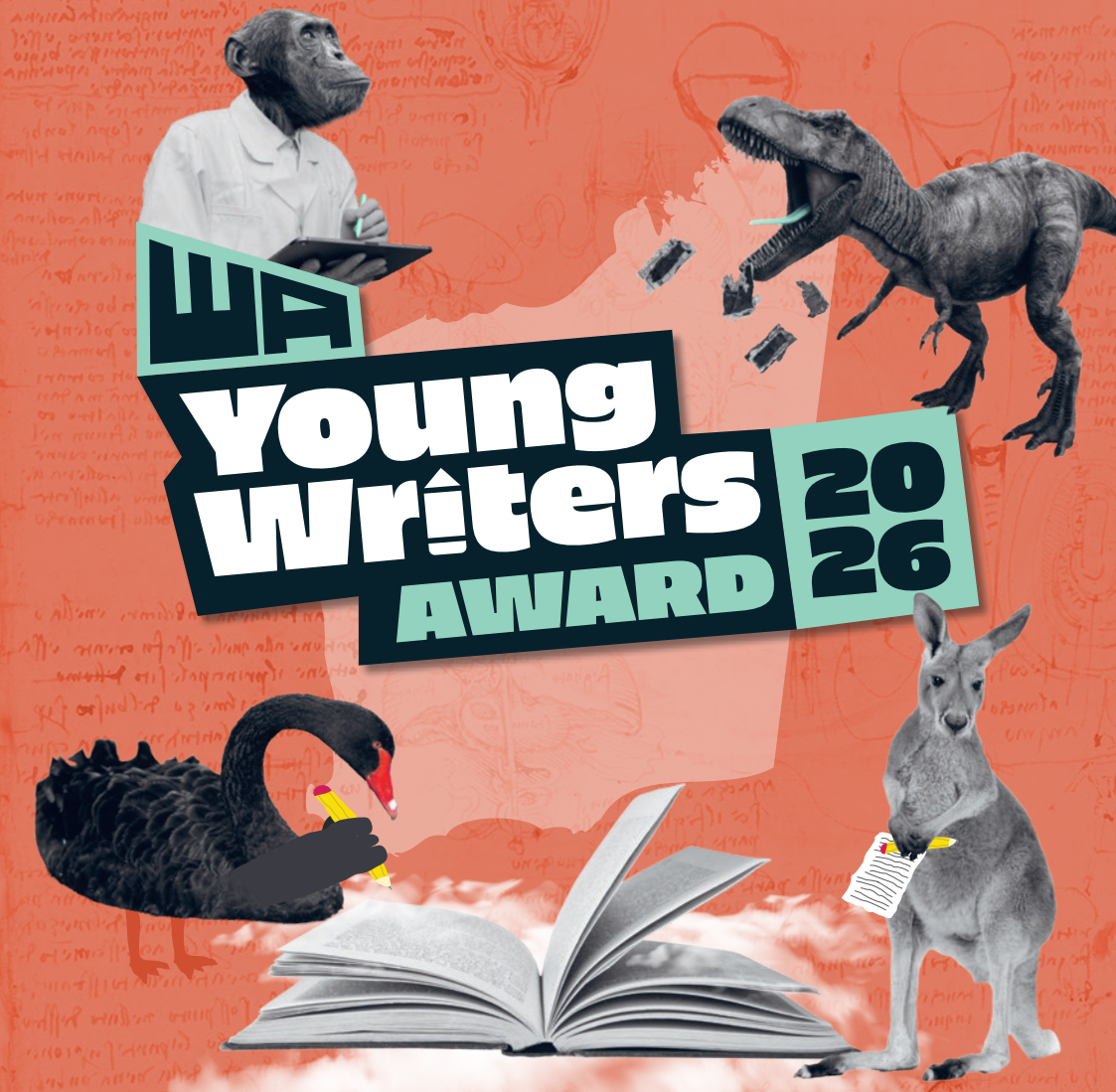
CITY OF SUBIACO

WA Young Writers AWARD 2026



LET YOUR IMAGINATION TAKE YOU SOMEWHERE UNEXPECTED

Anthology of winning stories

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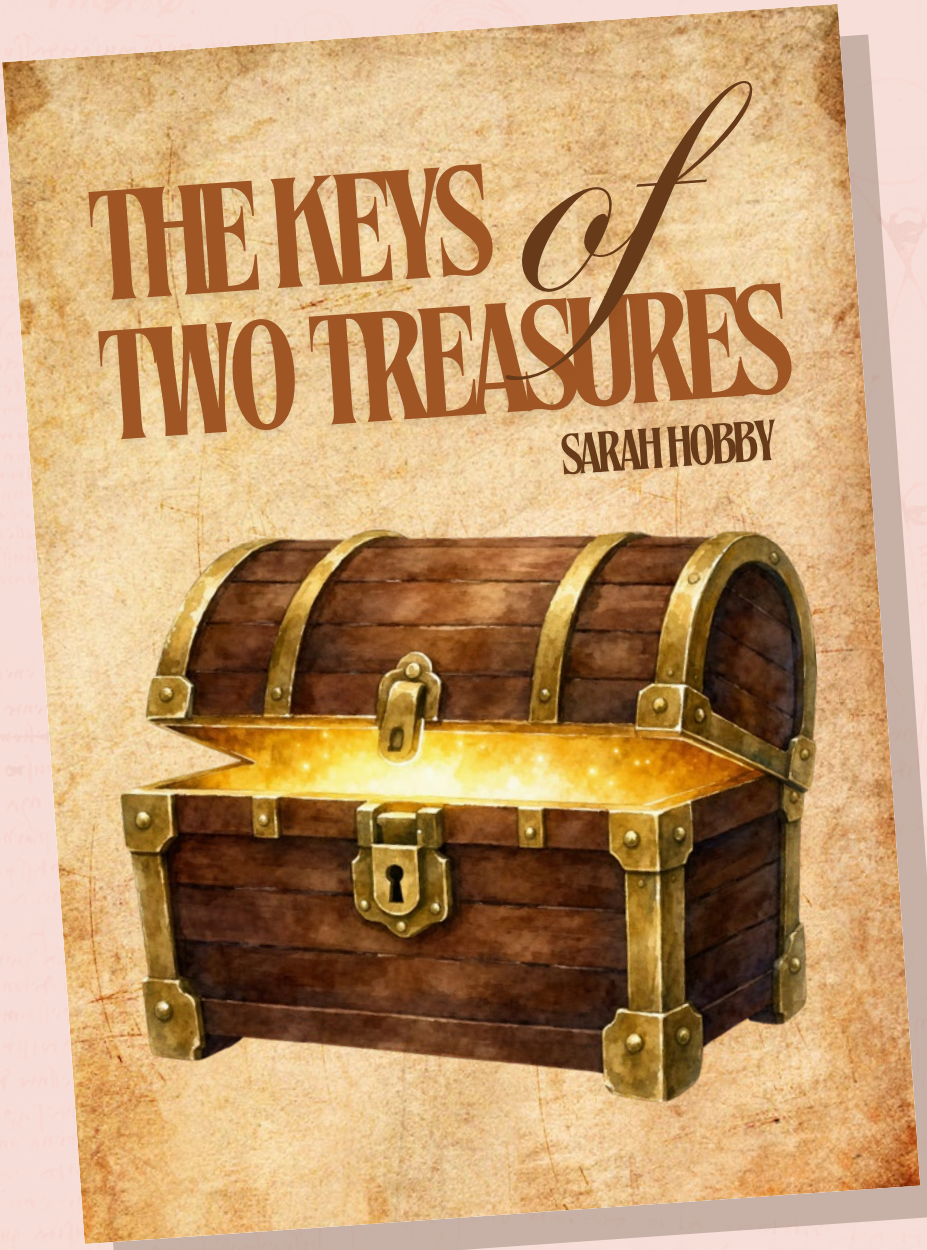


The City of Subiaco received over 700 entries for the 2026 WA Young Writers Award. From stories set-in far-off fantasy lands or relatable suburban streets, the settings of this year's stories came from near and far. A wonderful collection of diverse themes, characters and tales make up this anthology. These entries were selected out of hundreds as their creativity, passion, unique ideas, and technical skills shone through. Enjoy this collect of award-winning stories

WA Young Writers AWARD 2026

LOWER PRIMARY




THE KEYS of TWO TREASURES
SARAH HOBBY

Hi, I'm Tommy. I live in a rusty bamboo hut and I go to a school called Freshwater Bay Primary School. It's the school that my granny, Beryl, went to in World War 2. Yep, that's how old this school is, more than 80 years old! About my granny, she says that I will find something special if I look hard anoth inside my school but I can't see anything in the classrooms, corridoors, playgrounds and more! Anyway when I got home today and started getting ready for bed I heard a loud but faint sound coming from granny's bedroom. I rushed to see if granny was alright but it had seemed that she had left the room, so I started looking for the thing that had dropped onto the floor. I found a pair of underpants, a sock and a key. The key must have been what dropped onto the ground for there was nothing small but strong like this key in the room.

Soon, I heard Grandma Beryl's footsteps coming down the hallway into her bedroom so I quickly put the key in my pocket, thinking I would put it back as I went out of the room but granny pushed me out of her room so quickly and tightly that I couldn't move. 'Time for bed!' She cept on saying. Believe me she's never like this, she usurely let's me stau up late. It's only 8 o'clock. But because I am a good grandson I went under the covers, when I heard a muffled 'MEOW'. As I went closer into the covers it got louder and louder until I couldn't take it anymore and I pulled back the cover and there under the sheets was a cat. As I looked closely I saw she had a key the exat same key as mine. 'Thats strange' I thought, as I stroked the cat's fur I fell into a deep sleep. When I woke up granny was calling me, telling me to get dressed for school. As I woke up more clearly I remembered that it was PJ day at school today. 'Yay!' I said, while I was talking to myself the cat sneaked into my bag. Then, when I was ready, I grabbed my bag and went onto the school bus. As I got to a seat, I unzipped my bag to see if I got everything but I saw a cat's ear behind my lunch-box, astonished, I zipped my bag up again and put on a weak smile. The bus stopped at our school and I ran out of the bus just before the bell went. I just remembered that my science project is about cats! I went inside the science class and sat down, getting ready for my presentation when I noticed a keyhole in fact two keyholes on a tiny door which looked like it went with our keys. After everyone did their presentation and came over the shock of me bringing in a real live cat everyone left except for me and the cat.

I put both of our keys into the keyholes, then the door opened with a creak and sucked us in. the force of the sucking knocked me out but after I woke the cat licked me with delight as I saw a treasure chest and next to it was a small

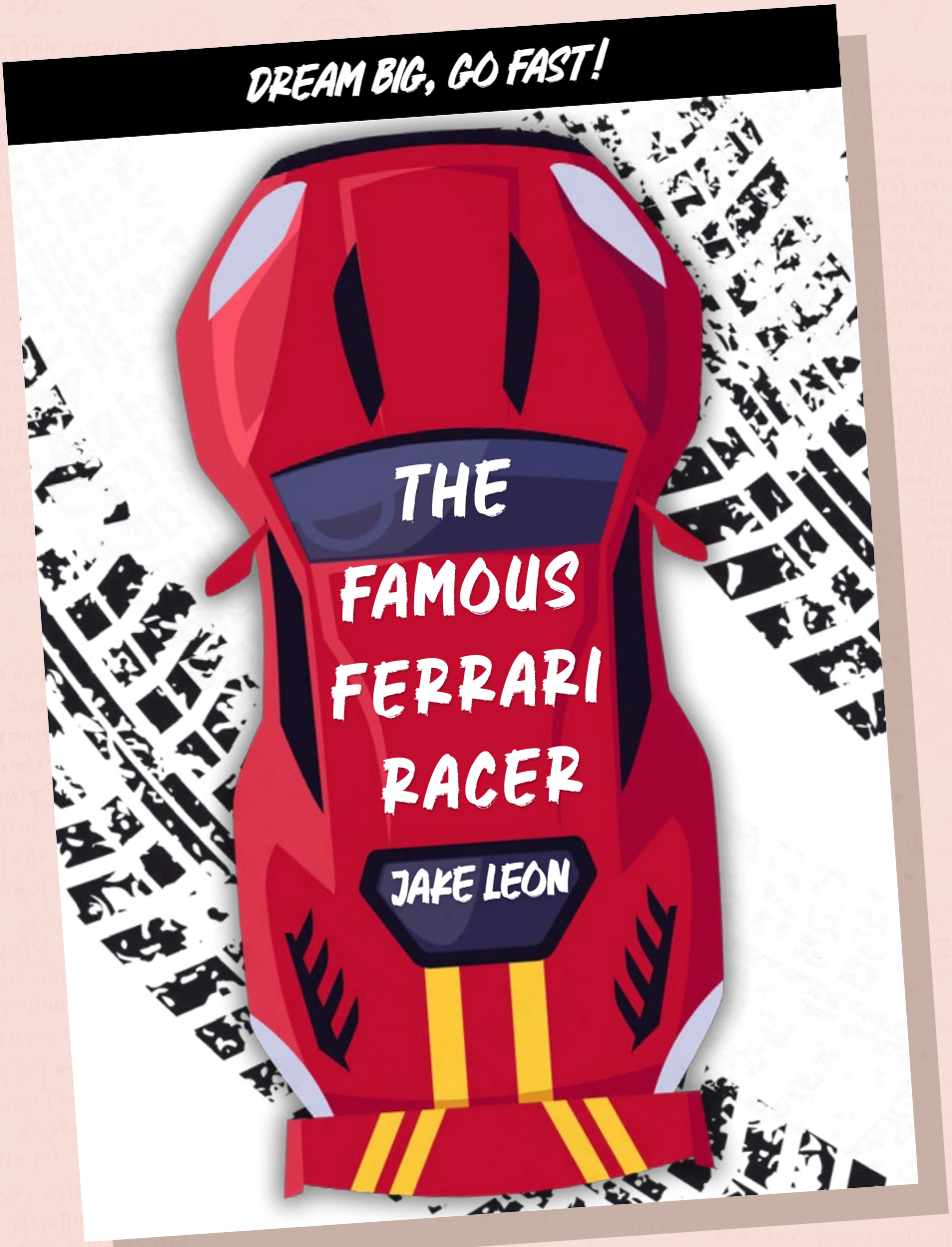
statue of a cat. I opened the chest and inside was a picture of a class in the olden days. As I looked I saw granny in the picture, then I noticed all of them were smiling in this fantastic, happy, and special picture. Before I could grab the statue of the cat, the cat beat me to it.

Then I noticed that this treasure hunt was to show me to work together and make sure to stay cheerful all the way. When I got back home that day I said thank you to granny and we danced around and sang songs together till we fell asleep.

Thank you awfaly my grandma Beryl.

– THE END –

DREAM BIG, GO FAST!



One day when James was 6 years old he was watching TV with his Uncle. He was watching the Formula 1 Grand Prix racing in Spain. His favourite team was Ferrari and his favourite racer was Leclerc.

His Uncle said "One day you could be just like Leclerc". James was happy that his Uncle had said this and decided that he wanted to be a Formula 1 racer when he was older.

James worked hard at school and he wrote heaps of stories about Formula 1 racing. He wanted to learn all about cars and driving. He kept watching formula 1 on the TV after school and at the weekends.

He started to learn to drive when he was 16 years old. He liked to drive super fast but his teacher told him to slow down! He passed his driving test when he was 18 years old.

One day when he finished High School he was walking to his house, which was not far away. On the power pole he saw a poster that said "One of our Formula 1 racers has retired, does anyone want to join our racing team?'. There was a QR code on the poster which you had to scan.

James was very excited! He scanned the code on his phone and filled out a form and sent it off. He rushed back home to tell his Uncle and his parents. When he got back home he took off his bag and rushed to his Uncle's bedroom. He told his Uncle about the poster and that he had filled in a form.

He was invited to meet the owner of the Ferrari team the next day. He was very nervous when he woke up. He put on his Ferrari T-shirt and his best pants. He drove to the race track to meet the owner. When he got there, he saw the team talking to the coach and the manager. The coach was pleased to see James. The owner came and shook his hand and showed him the car that he could test drive.

The car was an old Ferrari that had done many races before. He excitedly hopped into the driver's seat. He revved the engine to see if it was working then he put the gear stick on 'D' and pressed the accelerator. He went forward very fast and he drove around the track. He had to slow down for the corners and he went faster on the straight parts. He was very happy to drive his dream car! When he finished he got out of the car and went to join the coach. The rest of the team were all cheering for him! The coach was very pleased with James' driving. The owner invited him to join the team and they gave him a special team jacket to wear.

When he got home he rushed to his Uncle and told him the good news. His Uncle was super proud of James. He was extremely excited about the next day because he would race in the Grand Prix.

He woke up very early and went to the track in his new jacket. He saw the owner again and he told him that he would be doing some training laps first before the race. He got in the car and went out onto the race track. He saw that his speed was over 200km per hour!

When he had finished his training laps he got out of the car and his hero Leclerc was waiting at the gate! He rushed over to the gate and shook his hand. He told him "When I was younger, you were my favourite racer, and you were the reason that I wanted to be a Formula 1 driver!" Leclerc was very pleased to hear that he would be racing against one of his biggest fans.

They both hopped into their cars and they drove together around the track. They both went very fast, over 150 km per hour. When they finished they got out of their cars and shook each others hands with a smile on their faces.

It was 25 minutes until the race started. They got ready for the race with the other drivers and James was second on the grid. Leclerc was in pole position. All the cars were at the starting line. The starter waved the chequered flag and the race started! When all the racers took off James was in third position. They raced for 60 laps. James was in third position for 3 laps, then on the fourth lap he overtook one of the racers in front of him and he was second! He stayed in second position for 11 laps then on the fifteenth lap he skidded on the track and went down to sixth place. He was furious with himself. When he had a pit stop the mechanics put hard tires on his car and on the twenty fifth lap he climbed back up to third. He was very happy. The crowd cheered loudly. On the fiftieth lap he moved up to second.

He stayed in second until the last lap. He was very excited because he was close to Leclerc who was in first position. He zoomed up the track and nearly overtook Leclerc. He was only one metre away from Leclerc. On the final bend he was on the inside and he overtook Leclerc! James was very pleased with himself. He just needed to go fast enough to beat Leclerc for the last 50 metres. He crossed the finish line first! The crowd went wild. The loudest cheering was from his Uncle.

When James got out of his car Leclerc was pleased that James had beaten him. They shook hands after the race and they went up on to the podium together. James took a botte of champagne and sprayed it everywhere!

When he got home he got the trophy and put it on his table because he wanted to show everyone that he came first. He took his friends and his family to a fancy restaurant for dinner to celebrate. They had a big cake for dessert. He invited Leclerc for dinner too.

His Uncle said to him "James, this is what happens when you work hard and follow your dreams". James was very proud and felt very lucky to have such a supportive family. He kept racing all season and he won the championship! He had so many trophies that he had to buy a new table.

– THE END –



The Centipede

Nia Baguley

Chapter One

One day there was a little girl named Aria. She woke up one morning to find... she had hundred legs, she was no longer short she was long, and she had turned green. ' Why am I green' she thought. ' what bugs are green'. "UH" she gasped. " I'm a centipede!"

Chapter Two

"UH" she gasped. "Maybe it's that black berry juice" " let's go to my friends house to see if their a bug". And she did. All her friends had turned into bugs! Aria said " let's hold a meeting at my house." When everyone got to her house and everyone sat down Aria finally said " I think it was the juices we had yesterday." Everyone murmured in agreement. Suddenly Aria's mum steps into her room. " what a mess" she gasped " And were is Aria!"

Chapter Three

" Mum I am here" said Aria, but Aria's mum did not hear. All she heard was a tiny squeak. Aria's mum whirled around " ahhh" She screamed. "BUGS". She started to kick and punch the bugs and swat them out of the room. Once everyone was outside they were all badly injured. Aria stood up and started to speak. She told them they needed to find the magic jeanie.

Chapter Four

No one new were the magic jeanie was except Aria's best best friend who always new were the jeanie was. Her name was Evie. She was the smartest of them all. So after they had got the supplies they need they set off following Evie who was leading them.

Chapter Five

Soon it had fallen night and they set up camp using twigs and leaves. Soon fires were lit and bugs started to drift off to bed. Evie was the first to wake checking the supplies, and making breakfast. Around ten o'clock they finally set off up the mountains along the streams and through the forests. Finally

they arrived at a small cottage write next to the river. There was a little canno bobbing up and down on the surface of the water. Aria went up to the door and knocked.

Chapter Six

The door swung open to reveal a jeanie wearing jeans. " Hello down there little bugs" boomed the jeanie " do you want me to grant your three wishes." " yes please" squeaked Aria. " And what do you wish for? " asked the jeanie " To turn back to human and straight after I end up in my room and to fly". " your wishes are granted". Boomed the jeanie. Soon after wards Aria had turned into a human again and was back in her room.

Chapter Seven

A couple days later Aria woke up to a knock on her window. She pulled her curtains aside it was Evie. Aria ran outside and gasped. Evie was flying. " Hi Aria" said Evie " I just wanted to tell you that we are all back to normal and we all wished for the same wishes as you." "Oh" cried Aria "So how can you fly?" Asked Aria "Because you wished to fly to" said Evie "And you just haven't tried to fly yet" laughed Evie "try it" she said. Aria stood up tall strained her self and she lifted of the ground " I'm flying" she cried "yes you are" said Evie. And they lived happily ever after.

– THE END –

MIDDLE PRIMARY




The Night Underwater Orchestra
Sophie Colalillo

Something super odd was happening on the island at dawn. There was no soft pink line blending in the light yellow at the far point where the sky holds hands with the sun. Instead, the horizon looked both pale and misty as if a painter forgot to add colour to his pencil sketch. There were no clouds taking new funny, puffy shapes for the day because the cool morning wind wasn't blowing at all. Also, the waves were moving too slowly and sideways, sometimes even backwards.

"This is really strange..." thought Mr. Swaystiff, the oldest penguin on the island, waddling up and down the highest dune. Every morning at sunrise he would stand there to check on the coast as a good lighthouse keeper would do. But today the sand was not quite white and smooth, it was rather rough and grey. From behind the cliffs, that seemed like tired, wrinkly giants sleeping on their chunky bellies, his pelican helper Neksac flew at a shaky speed. "Have you seen?!", he yelled scared while landing goofily next to Mr. Swaystiff. "Something is really suspicious...", replied the penguin puzzled.

As Neksac started to flap his wide feathers without lifting his feet from the ground, his sharp beak made a nervous, croaking noise: "Let me tell you boss...I go to great heights...and the sky doesn't feel like sky today! The air smells of wet dirt and strong dust, I can sense electricity crossing my wings!". Since Mr. Swaystiff was the guardian of the island and he knew every single corner, animal, plant and species living on it, his heart began to beat faster and faster until it jumped in his throat from worry. He then stopped pacing, he blinked and stared at the sea. The murky water was rippling slower than usual, with no rhythm, sneezing out greenish foam. "The ocean is sick!", they cried out together.

Mr. Swaystiff went quiet in deep thinking mode while Neksac whipped his wings crazy quick in panic. "We MUST find the problem, the cause, the solution NOW!" shouted the penguin trying to come up with a mastermind plan. "Nek, (just his boss could use the short name) cruise the sky for a bird's eye view of the island and surroundings, then report to me immediately! I'll question the flocks on land about unusual changes and..." Before he could finish his instructions, Neksac chimed in "You should dive all the way down and explore the seabed. What better way to get to the bottom of it!" and he took off as rapid as a skyrocket launched to discover the mysteries of the universe.

Oh no! No, no. Nope. Mr. Swaystiff did NOT swim underwater into the open ocean anymore. The larger the number of candles on his birthday cake became, the further from the shore he stayed. Year by year, his body shrank, the blueish feathers faded into brown and shedding and regrowing new ones took a lot of energy out of him. Besides this, he didn't trust his cloudy eyes to spot danger nor his aging flippers and feet to steer him safely in the tricky sea currents. He felt dull and doomed. So, from then on, he decided to only have baths in rainwater puddles, natural lagoons or sometimes into shallow seawater holes trapped by a circle of rocks during low tides. In any case, he felt more comfortable whenever there was a barrier to separate him from the scary, wild ocean.

As he was marching back to talk to the other animals, Neksac returned in a hurry and stood in front of him, hovering at mid-air "You won't believe it Mr. Swaystiff, it's scorching hot up in the air! In some parts of the island the soil cracked and is seeping mud, your favourite tide pool dried because dozens of sea sponges piled between the rocks stopping the water from entering.

They made like a pillow wall!". Then the pelican puffed and panted for the worst news "And the natural lagoon turned into a rug of a thousand dead shells!". With no words coming out of his short beak, Mr.Swastiff seemed both shocked and confused. "I really think you should swim underwater!" said Necksac. But the penguin shook his head no. "You know I can't plunge-dive..." repeated the pelican "Also, as the guardian of the island, it's your job to protect all of us!". Necksac was totally right. They would never uncover what was hurting Nature, unless Mr.Swaystiff dived deep in the ocean. Again.

When they finally reached the shore, Mr. Swaystiff dipped his webbed toes into the water and shivered his flippers a bit afraid as well as a bit disgusted by the gluey green foam. "I'm here by your side, I'll keep an eye on you from the top. If you're in trouble I'll catch you, Sway". (Yes, now Necksac was allowed to shorten his boss's name because they had each others back in a hard situation. Just like best friends do!).
After taking the deepest breath, Mr. Swaystiff swam in the ocean, lower and lower until he touched the seafloor which looked too bare truly. A few pink coral reefs were swinging in the opposite direction of a small group of scattered Whiting fish. Some black and yellow stripped seahorses were moving horizontally, not the usual vertical, stuck into bottlenecks. They almost looked transparent without their usual bright colour. Tiny orange crabs were

cartwheeling on a mountain of mix coloured plastic trash. A family of silly, sticky octopuses were doing headstands in the sand without a shelter or hiding spots. The shells were all shut under lost fishing nets and the seaweed weak and melted. It was madness. Mr. Swaystiff saw enough!

He quickly cut through the grey waves up to the surface and informed his helper. “The ocean is not sick. The ocean is not IN SYNC!”, he shouted. Necksac gasped. They both knew that whenever the underwater world is out of tune, one of the Nature’s lungs doesn’t work well! Therefore, the ocean can’t produce enough oxygen for animals, plants and humans to breathe, nor get rid of gassy pollution that is sadly trapped in the warm air. In the end our planet will turn into a burning giant oven that bakes us all. “We must fix this right away!” said Mr.Swaystiff very upset, “Gather everybody and let’s bring the harmony back!”.

The entire afternoon went by with an army of stingrays vacuuming the dirty, messy sea floor, seals wiggling their tummies to slide pieces of broken clay jars and manatees carrying rusty, wooden boards from the old shipwreck to build a bowl-shaped underwater theatre. Until night when everything was set up and the marine animals joined for the unique concert of the year.

As soon as the moon kissed the sun goodnight, Mr. Swaystiff raised his fins high, ready to conduct. Click-clack, click-clack! A row of blue crabs bumped their shells together sounding like steady drum beats. POP! POP! Here came the quick, loud snap of the lobsters’ claws which made the same ringing crash as the cymbals.

Mr.Swaystiff swirled his stick around while slippery eels were peeking out from the cracks of the clay shards. They opened and closed their mouths to breathe, pushing out water like the windy notes of the trombones. TRRR-ING! At the bottom of the dark rocky reef wall, an octopus stretched out his long tentacles and strummed the soft sea fan like a delicate harp. TRRK, TRRK, TRRK! Three dolphins used their blowholes to make the scratchy sound of the guiro instrument. At the same time a school of fish blew bubbles through the hollow kelp tubes as if they were flutes, while lines of smooth Banjo sharks floated over the stage, looking just like violins. ZREE...ZREE! ZING-ZING-ZING! Instead, two curvy whales teamed up to create the deep vibrations of the cello. Finally, under the glowing light of jellyfish, Mr. Swaystiff took a joyful bow.

The day after, the penguin and his helper Neksac woke on top of the highest sand dune of the island. The soft pink sunrise was sinking in the bright blue horizon. The ocean was playing a music of turquoise crystal clear waves crashing

their crests on the happy cliffs. And the funny puffy clouds formed a cheeky winky eye in the sky. Every single animal could count on one another, cheered each other up as friends and did their part. Little by little, they saved the sea, because all Nature needs is a beautiful symphony.

– THE END –


BEST SELLING AUTHOR
HANS TEO
AN OLD TALE

Content warning: This story contains themes of grief, bereavement, loneliness, and suicidal ideation, including a young person contemplating suicide and an interrupted suicide attempt. Some readers may find these themes distressing.

"Don't leave me!" Tim cried out in his dream again! Tim was a lonely 15 year old orphanage boy. He had no parents or siblings. When he was just ten years old, his parents were killed in a tragic accident. Leaving him all alone in this world.
One quiet evening, Tim wandered through the woods thinking about the meaning of life.

Cling!
A sudden metallic sound snapped him out of his daydream. Looking down, Tim saw a set of coins on the ground. He bent down, picked them up and brushed off the dust that covered them.

A memory suddenly flashed in his mind. His mother had once told him an old tale "If you throw a coin into a river or fountain and make a wish, your wish will come true"! Without hesitation, he ran as fast as he could to a near by river. Standing at the riverbank, he held on to one coin tightly in his hand, closed his eyes, and whispered a wish. His wish was to have a family again, a loving home just like before. His hear ached as he missed his parents more than any words could express. Tim tossed the coin into the river and waited in silence. 10 minutes passed as he prayed for a miracle. But nothing happened He cried out loud, clenched his fists and feeling hopeless of his life, not knowing where to go next. He gave up in despair and believing he had nothing left to live for. He took a last breath, closed his eyes and prepared to jump.

Stop!
A calm, mature voice called to him. Tim turned around with tears-filled eyes he saw a kind-looking man standing behind him. Without saying another word, the man gave Tim a tight hug and told him everything will be alright. Tim felt so safe for the first time.

The man brought Tim home and prepared a simple, hearty home cooked meal for him to eat. Tim knew it was prepared with lots of love and efforts. As they ate together, the man shared his own story. His son passed away in an accident three years ago. He still misses him every single day. Tim looked at him with tears in his eyes. He understood the pain so well as he missed both

of his parents every day too. They embraced, both crying as they shared the grief they had for a long time. That night, the kind man made a life changing decision. He chose to adopt Tim as his own son.

As Tim laid in bed, he felt the warmth and love of a family once again. To ensure he wasn't dreaming, he pinched his cheek. "Ouch!" he cried. Tim knew his mothers old tale was true all along, and it was'nt just a myth...

– THE END –

The Tale of Leo and Vefir



Evin Anandagoda

It was a beautiful sunny morning in Dragon's peak. Above the gigantic cliffs, dragons soared through the clouds, and their wings were beating like thunder. Every day, the bravest children watched the Dragon Riders train, hoping that one day they would earn a dragon of their own.

Eight-year-old Leo also watched the dragon riders from the valley. His bright blue eyes sparkled with excitement as he dreamed of flying through the sky.

"I wish I could ride a dragon," he whispered.
His grandfather smiled kindly. "Dragon riders are chosen when they are twelve years old.

Leo sighed. Four years felt like forever.

Although he was younger than everyone else, Leo never stopped believing. Every afternoon he practised climbing rocky cliffs, running through forests, and learning everything he could about dragons.

He collected all sorts of dragon specimens and spent hours trying to understand how dragons are created. One dragon always caught his attention.

The Venom Dragon.

It was said to have shining purple spikes running from its neck to the tip of its tail. The spikes dripped magical venom that could melt almost anything. Most people believed venom dragons are monsters and could never be trusted.

But Leo wondered if the stories were true.

One summer afternoon, while collecting berries in the Forbidden Forest, Leo heard a strange sound.
"Rrrrr...rrr..." It sounded like someone crying.

Leo carefully pushed aside thick grass and followed the noise deeper into the forest. Suddenly, he stopped.

A baby blaack dragon was trapped beneath a pile of rocks. Its glowing green eyes were filled with fear.

Long purple spikes covered its back, and the dragon looked scared and lonely. His small wings were hurt from the fallen rocks.
"Oh no! A Venom Dragon" Leo gasped. "Don't be scared. I'm here to help." The dragon blinked.

Leo searched around until he found a strong tree branch. With all his strength, he pushed against the largest rock. It didn't move. He pushed harder. "Come on..." he puffed.

CRACK! The heavy rock rolled away.

One by one, Leo cleared the remaining stones until the dragon climbed free.

Instead of flying away, the little dragon looked straight into Leo's eyes. Its purple spikes glowed brighter and brighter.

The little dragon gently touched Leo with its nose.

"I think we're friends." Leo whispered with wide eyes.

The dragon made a happy squeak.

"I'll call you...Vefir – the fearsome one."

Vefir flapped his wings excitedly and wrapped his wings around Leo like a puppy.

"Let's get going. We need to get through the Dragon's Edge gates before they shut down for tonight.

When they entered the city, all riders and elders gathered around Leo and Vefir. Master Rowan, the oldest dragon rider, stared in disbelief. "This is impossible. How did he become friends with a dragon just like that?" he questioned.

One rider said "He's only eight!"

Another pointed at Vefir. "That's a venom dragon!" They're too dangerous! You shouldn't have bought it here" Leo stood in front of him. "He's not dangerous," Leo said firmly. "He didn't hurt me. He trusted me."

Some riders laughed. "He's just a child."

"Silent everyone" "The Dragon Bond chooses wisely," he said "It has never made a mistake." The crowd became quiet.

Master Rowan looked into Vefir's eyes and smiled. "This dragon has a gentle heart." From today, Leo and Vefir will begin training." he announced.

Everyone looked surprised. Leo couldn't believe his ears. His dream had finally come true.

The next morning, the training began before sunrise. Flying was much harder

than it looked. Vefir was playful and didn't know how to navigate through obstacles with Leo in its back. He didn't know how to control the fire or race the other dragons.

Day after day, they practised. They learned to glide between mountains. They raced across giant blue lakes.

They dodges giant boulders and flew as fast as they could.

Slowly, Leo and Vefir became faster, stronger, and more confident. Master Rowan wanted Vefir to know how to use his purple venom. "Many people believe a venom dragon's gift is only for hurting others," he said. "But true venom dragons use their power to break dark magic.

That evening, as everyone were having dinner, the ground suddenly began to shake.

Boom! Boom! Rocks rolled down the mountainside. The castle bells rang loudly.

Everyone gasped. Long ago, a giant called Gravelock had protected the kingdom. But an evil sorcerer had trapped a cursed crystal inside his chest, filling him with anger. Since then, the giant had slept beneath the mountains.

Now he was awake.

Far across the valley, a gigantic rocky figure climbed out of the earth.

Each step made the ground shake.

BOOM! BOOM!

Trees broke like tiny sticks.

Villagers ran for safety.

"We must stop him!" cried Master Rowan.

The dragon riders got onto their dragons and soared into the sky.

Leo climbed onto Vefir's back. "Ready?"

Vefir gave a loud roar. Together they flew after the others. The riders surrounded Gravelock and blasted him with streams of fire.

WHOOSH!

Bright flames covered the giant. But when the smoke cleared, Gravelock was

unharmed. His rocky skin was too strong.

Then using his giant arms, Gravelock started throwing boulders into the air. The dragon riders managed to just escape.

“This isn’t working!” shouted one rider. “We can’t break through!”

Leo watched carefully. Something caught his eye.

Leo could see the cursed crystal glowing inside the giant’s chest. The crystal was protect by purple vines which is dark magic.

Leo suddenly remembered Master Rowan’s words.

“True venom dragons use their power to break dark magic.”

“I have an idea!” Leo shouted. The other riders looked confused.

“There are cursed vines around the crystal! Vefir can melt them!”

“It’s too dangerous!” someone yelled.

But Leo was already guiding Vefir higher into the clouds. “Now!” Leo called.

Vefir folded his wing. Together they flew towards the giant faster and faster. Gravelock looked up and roared.

He was about to throw a giant boulder at them.

At the very last second, Vefir rolled through the air. His spikes were sparkling, bright purple.

Tiny drops of magical venom shot towards the giant’s chest. Ssssss!

The purple vines dried away. The dark crystal was now exposed.

“Go!” cried Master Rowan. Every dragon rider flew together and targeted the crystal.

CRACK! A bright beam of light burst across the Dragon’s peak. The crystal crushed into hundreds of sparkling pieces. Everything was suddenly became so silent.

Then Gravelock slowly blinked. His eyes were not red anymore and his face didn’t look scary anymore.

“I…am free,” the giant whispered.

He looked down at Leo and Vefir. “Thank you, little rider.”

“I was never your enemy,” he said sadly. “The dark magic controlled me.”

The giant lay peacefully beneath the mountain once more. He became part of the land. The valley was safe again.

Everyone started screaming with joy. The children started to dance.

All dragon riders gathered aroud Leo.

“We were wrong,” one said.

“We judged Vefir before we knew him,” said another. “We thought Leo is weak because he is small and young.”

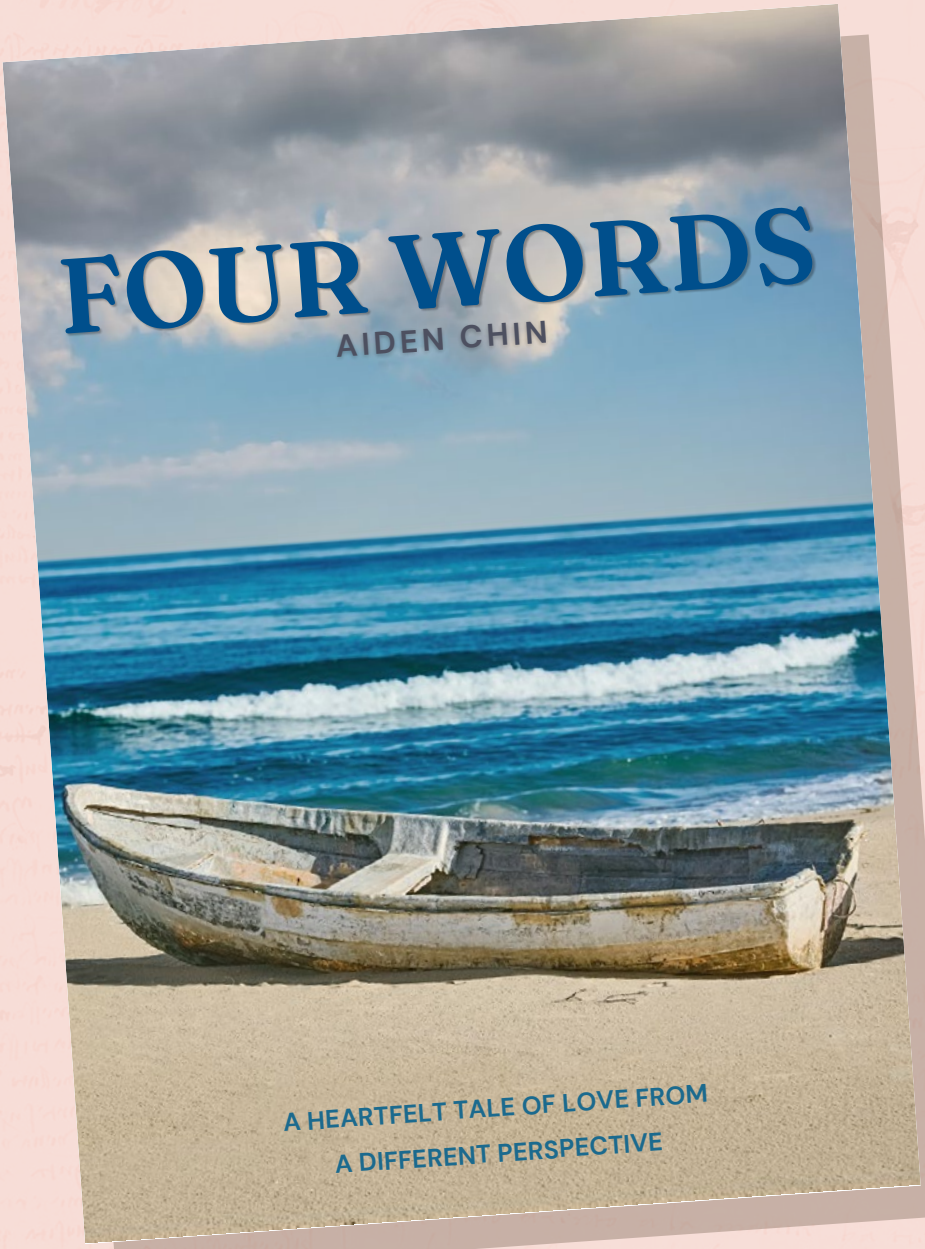
Master Rowan smiled proudly. “Today we have all learned an important lesson.”

He placed a hand on Leo’s shoulder. “Courage is not measured by age or size.”

– THE END –

UPPER PRIMARY




FOUR WORDS
AIDEN CHIN
A HEARTFELT TALE OF LOVE FROM
A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

For twenty-three years, I waited.

The waves had carved wrinkles into my once-fresh wood, while years of salt and rain slowly washed away my bright blue and white paint. Children would point at me from passing boats, calling me “the wreck,” thinking I was just another crashed boat left behind by the sea. They never wondered how I got here, or why I had spent every day and night on this lonely beach.

I remember the day I was first found.

In a garbage dump.

A small boy, around nine years old, and his dad slowly searched through piles of junk, looking for anything worth keeping. After a while, they found me.

“Can we keep him?” the boy asked, his eyes lighting up.

His father looked over my cracked sail and dirty timber before smiling.

“We’ll fix him together.”

Those were the four words that changed my life.

Day after day, they scrubbed years of dirt from my timber, hammered loose nails back into place and painted me brilliant shades of blue and white. It wasn’t easy. Some days they worked for hours under the gruelling sun, their patient hands slowly bringing me back to life. By the time they finished, I no longer looked like I belonged in a rubbish dump. I looked ready for the adventures waiting beyond the shore.

For years, I carried them across the beautiful, sparkling sea. Every trip brought a new adventure. Sometimes we would explore quiet beaches where nobody else had stepped, while other days we drifted far from the shore, watching dolphins leap through the calm waves beside us. We chased sunsets that painted the sky orange, and caught fish that were “this big,” as the boy would always say, stretching his arms out as far as he could. Even when they caught nothing at all, they always laughed on the way home.

Those were the happiest years of my life.

As the years passed, the boy grew taller. The life jacket that had once hung loosely from his shoulders became too small, his voice grew deeper, and before long he was too busy to come down to the beach. School became homework. Homework became friends. Friends became sport. The fishing trips became less frequent until, eventually, they stopped altogether.

The dad changed too. His hair grew grey, wrinkles formed across his skin, and each day he grew wearier. Every now and then the dad would still visit me. He'd brush the sand from my deck, check the sail, and quietly smile, hoping the boy would ask to come fishing again. But the question never came. Days turned into weeks. Weeks turned into months. And before long, I was forgotten, slowly gathering dust and rust by the beach.

Then, one morning, footsteps raced across the sand. The boy – now almost a man – held two fishing rods across his shoulders.

"One last trip?" he said with a smile, his voice almost completely different to before.

The dad smiled back. "Just like old times."

I had never been happier to have the sea beneath me again.

Then came the storm.

The wind howled like an angry beast. Waves towered above us and crashed onto me, each one sending a sharp pain through my mast, but I fought as hard as I could to keep them afloat.

The dad was too weak to do much, his fragile hands slipping from the steering wheel as a colossal wave slammed into my side. With a deafening crack, my mast snapped, and the freezing water pulled the father under, swallowing him into the dark abyss despite the boy's desperate screams. I used the very last of my strength to carry the weeping boy back to the safety of the shore, but the tide dragged my broken body away, washing me onto this forgotten beach.

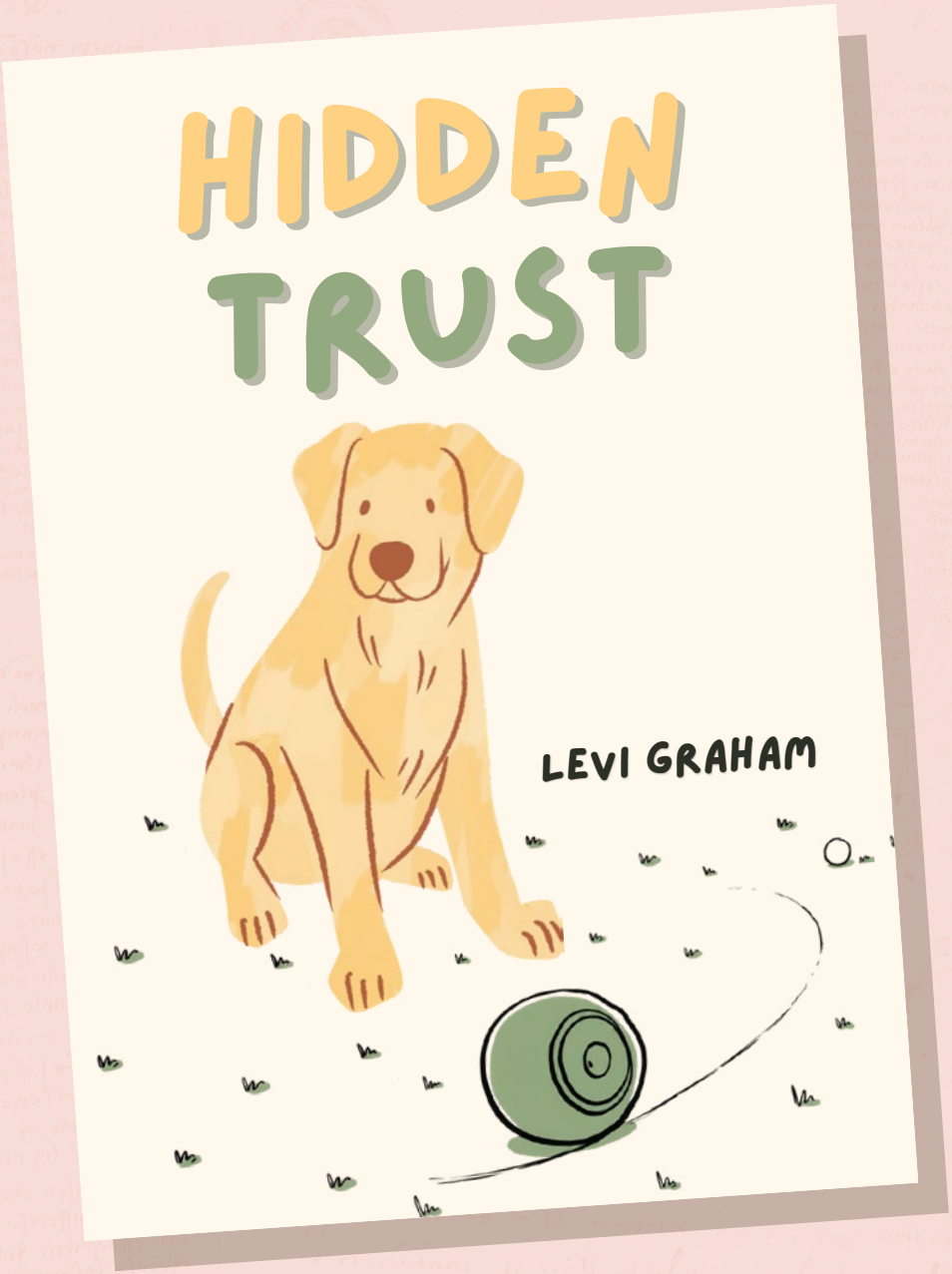
Yesterday, after twenty-three years, a man walked towards me. His face was lined with wrinkles, but his eyes were unmistakable. He knelt beside me, resting a trembling hand on my rotting timber, and tears filled his eyes.

Then, a little girl skipped over, clutching a paintbrush almost as tall as she was.

The man smiled through his tears, looked at her, and whispered the four words that had once saved me:

"We'll fix him together."

– THE END –


HIDDEN
TRUST
LEVI GRAHAM

George is my best friend. He needs me and I need him. We rely on each other. I love him even more than food. And that's saying something because I like that a lot! We go everywhere together.

We love to walk to the beach. That's my favourite place. I love the crashing sound of the rolling swell and the feel of the breeze pushing up against my face. I love the water. I always swim, but George doesn't. Every Dme I try to persuade him with a teasing tug at his woolen jumper, he just laughs and says he can't. I can't help feeling sorry for George. He misses out on so much fun.

Every now and then we walk to a huge Dn building. I don't like it there. There's a lot of deafening screeches, loud low hammerings and the never ending womp, womps of heavy machinery. There is nothing to do, so I always hang out in the corner. I sit down. I stand up, I turn around in circles. It's soooo boring.

I like going to the park around the corner. There's always lots of my friends to play with. There's Harry from three doors down and Charlie from the other side of the street. We like to play chasey together. George doesn't like to play. He just sits quietly on the rusty old park bench enjoying the fresh air. Occasionally he throws the ball to me. I am always beJer at catching than he is. SomeDmes I run around, weaving around trees and jumping over rocks. I asked George to do it with me, but he says no. He says he can't. I don't know why.

Every Saturday aLernoon George plays the bowling game. We walk together past the small yellow house with the peeling paint, under the big, tall trees, and past the corner store waLing with the delicious smell of bacon, round the corner, past the shop where we always get our food from. He's always so slow. I wish he would hurry up. But I can never go too fast. I can't leave George behind. He needs me. We arrive at the large iron gates at 3:00 PM sharp.
George calls it bowls, but I thought bowls were something I ate my dinner out of. I think 'hard grass' suits it more. George rolls lots of shiny silver balls onto the hard grass to hit a liJle white ball. I don't like the hard grass. It feels weird. It feels like plasDc. I think it's fake. I want to play with the balls, but George always says I can't. He says I'll break them. I obey him though I do want to play with them! They must be very precious. Maybe they're food! But aLer all George is always right.

But what I mostly love about George is how he always cares for me. He always gives me good scratch behind the ears before bed. He always has my dog bowl full of food. He always cleans my golden coat.

I feel sorry for George, how he doesn't have any eyes of his own. But I'm proud of being his guide dog. He needs me to be his eyes in the world. I need him to care for me. But mostly, we need each other just to have a friend.

– THE END –


Osprey's
Bad Temper
Dana Hislop

The first thing anyone noticed about Princess Osprey wasn't her brilliant orange scales or the gold streaks that shimmered across her wings.

It was her temper. She could ignite an argument faster than she could breathe fire.

Born to Queen Ember and King Talon of the Sky Kingdom, Osprey had spent her entire life hearing the same words.

"Control yourself."; "Think before you attack."; "One day you'll be queen." Those words only made her angrier.

"I don't need another lecture!" she would roar, sending servants scrambling for cover.

Unlike her older sister, Princess Kestrel, who was graceful, patient, and adored by the kingdom, Osprey was reckless. She challenged soldiers twice her size, raced through dangerous mountain storms, and had been banned from three training arenas after accidentally setting one of them on fire. She insisted they were all accidents. Nobody believed her.

One scorching afternoon, after losing another sparring match because she'd ignored her instructor's strategy, Osprey exploded.

"This is stupid!" She blasted flames across the training yard, melting half the targets.

The instructor sighed. "The targets were made of stone."

"They looked flammable."

"They were gray."

"So?"

By sunset, Queen Ember had finally had enough. "You will escort a supply caravan to the eastern cliffs."

Osprey blinked. "What?"

"It's a simple mission."

"I don't do simple." Osprey snapped back.

"Exactly why you're doing it."

She groaned dramatically. "This is punishment."

"It is." The queen spoke calmly.

Three guards accompanied her as they flew toward the eastern border. The journey was painfully boring.

No battles. No thieves. No excitement.

Osprey complained almost every five minutes. "How much farther?"

"We've been flying for ten minutes," one guard replied.

Then...

A deafening roar echoed through the canyon. The cavern shook. Rocks crashed from above.

"Rockslide!" shouted another guard.

Huge boulders rained down. The guards scattered. One dragon became trapped beneath a fallen stone pillar. Another wagon teetered dangerously over the edge of a cliff.

Osprey's heart pounded. Her first instinct was to charge straight into the collapsing canyon. But she hesitated. For the first time in her life... She stopped. She remembered every lecture she'd ignored. Think first. Act second.

She took a deep breath. "You!" she shouted to one guard. "Pull the trapped dragon free!"

"What about the wagon?"

"I've got it!"

She dove beneath the falling cart just as it tipped over the cliff. Her wings screamed under the weight. The ropes snapped. Boxes tumbled into the canyon.

With a roar, Osprey shoved upward. Every muscle burned. Slowly... The wagon slid back onto

solid ground. The trapped dragon was freed moments later. Everyone survived.

As the dust settled, the guards stared. One finally whispered, "You...planned that."

Osprey blinked. "I...did."

It felt strange. Planning had actually worked.

When she returned home, the guards told the queen everything.

Queen Ember smiled proudly. "You controlled your anger."

"I guess."

"You thought before acting."

"I hated every second of waiting."

The queen laughed. "You'll get used to it."

Osprey snorted. "I wouldn't count on that."

Months passed. She still argued. She still challenged every soldier she met. She still occasionally burned things she shouldn't.

But now... She listened. Sometimes.

One crisp autumn morning, a messenger burst into the palace. "Bandits are attacking the northern villages!"

Osprey was already in the air. Her guards struggled to keep up. This time, she didn't charge blindly into the fight. She circled high above the battlefield.

Counted the enemy. Spotted their leader. Then smiled."I've got an idea."

Moments later, she swooped through the clouds like a blazing comet. Instead of attacking the soldiers, she blasted the narrow bridge behind them.

The bandits found themselves trapped between the river and the arriving SkyWing guards. Not one villager was harmed. The kingdom celebrated for days.

At the feast, King Talon raised a goblet. "To Princess Osprey."

The dragons cheered.

Osprey shifted awkwardly. "I only did what anyone would've done."

Queen Ember grinned."No. You did what a queen would do."

The hall fell silent. For the first time in her life... Osprey had no fiery comeback. Only a small smile.

It wasn't because she'd lost her temper. It was because she'd finally learned that real strength wasn't about having the hottest fire. It was knowing exactly when to use it.

– THE END –

LOWER SECONDARY




A chilling tale of artistry and obsession from best seller
LIZETIENNE BURKE-HARDY
THE MEDIUM OF FLESH

Content warning: This story contains unsettling themes, body horror, graphic implications, and disturbing material involving childbirth and an infant. Reader discretion is advised.

His arm around my shoulders, our free hands clasped with fingers interlocked, we stare at the screaming baby in elation. It begins to writhe, twisting its blankets about itself and wailing so desperately I know he's suppressing a laugh. He turns to me, a look of pride plastered across his features.

"You did so well," he praises, gently kissing my forehead. He lets go of me – an action I knew would happen eventually, but the knowledge of which doesn't stop the drooping of my lips – to take hold of the infant.

He doesn't stare at it lovingly; that emotion of his is reserved for me. He examines it as the noisy lump of flesh and blood it truly is. He pokes its cheek with his finger, receiving a squeal in response. It reaches its hand up to grab him, tiny digits just barely wrapping around his. I know he detests such displays of "affection", as it's thought of by most, and would much rather it were to bat at him instead. He has no doubt infants can experience dislike, or hate, but love? No – for them, it is dependency dressed up as affection. Nevertheless, he doesn't want it to deafen us with any more unnecessary howling, and so extricates himself carefully, before holding its eyelids back to stare into bright eyes.

He resumes his inspection, pulling here, squeezing there. I can't read his expression, which creates in me a nervousness so profound I begin to feel slightly queasy. I can't stand to think he's unhappy, that it's any less than perfect; he deserves only the best. I steel myself to speak.

"Is it to your satisfaction?"

He turns towards me abruptly, the child forgotten. "My satisfaction?" he repeats, his voice filled with confusion.

After a pause, I continue. "Is it worthy, or useless?"

He is at my side in an instant, cupping my face with his hands and gazing into my eyes.

"Why would it be useless? It came from *you*, so how could it be any less than perfect?"

“I had no control over it. It might have turned out badly, and it would’ve been a waste.”

He smiles, his whole face illuminated with the warmth he shows me, and brushes his thumb over my cheek. “It would never have been a waste, darling. If I really couldn’t find a use for it, I would, say, make you a feast.” I laugh then, not because I think it’s a joke, but because I know it to be true. “Do you need anything?” The birth was relatively easy, aided by the number of times I’ve experienced it; most of the pain has already subsided. Besides, he’ll have to go to his studio soon, while the baby’s still awake.

“No,” I smile up at him. He’s bouncing on his heels slightly, eyes alight with anticipation – it’s glaringly obvious how excited he is. Even if I did need something, I couldn’t bring myself to delay him further.

“Do you *want* anything?”

“Nothing right now. I’m fine – you go.”

The feeling that invades my body as he walks away, the baby in his arms, remains unwelcome, yet all too familiar. It is a dull misery which renders me lethargic, pessimistic, and overwhelmingly hollow on a good day, let alone twenty minutes after giving birth. Thankfully, he’s already dealt with the bloodied sheets and drenched towels, so I don’t have to do anything other than lie here and allow the sensation to consume me.

This is nothing new; for a long time, the monotony of existence failed to rouse anything but boredom within me, with a dash of existentialism here and there. Then, I met him.

Every time I saw him, an inexplicable, quiet terror began to gnaw at me, mixed with a rush of adoration. I would watch him intently for hours, monitoring his reactions to everything, memorising his movements. For once I didn’t feel like the puppeteer of my own body; every part of me was simultaneously screaming to get away from and be close to him.

The presence of such strong feelings made the absence feel even worse, no longer something I had to live with but an emptiness I needed to fill. I must have seemed like a forlorn kitten around him, constantly hovering and trying to get his attention. Though, somehow, it worked; since then, he has always given me all of it, even when I haven’t deserved it.

Even when I haven’t deserved him, he is always there.

With thoughts of him filling my head, I drift peacefully asleep.

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I awake to the sight of him standing over me, leaning so our heads almost touch. As my eyelids, and the butterflies living in my stomach, flutter, his neutral expression brightens.

"I'm finished."

"This early?" While I reply, he's already taken my hand, and is pulling me into a sitting position. He ducks out of the room, returning with his arms behind his back. I close my eyes again and tentatively hold out my hands like last time. The scent of flesh fills my nostrils, with metallic undertones I can only assume is blood. A weight settles into my palms.

"Open your eyes."

I gasp at the sight before me.

Within a simple wooden frame sits a small rectangle of something resembling leather; carved into it is an intricate portrait of me. Despite its limited size, it is incredibly detailed, each hair at the perfect depth, beautifully-defined eyes staring out at the world. I'm unsure why, after all this time, I'm still shocked to see the extent of his talents. He waits patiently.

"What do you think?"

It takes me a second to compose myself. "It's beautiful."

He seems amused at my reaction, letting out a small chuckle as he says, "I'm glad you like it. I don't think I've made anything for you before, at least from *your* materials."

"*For* me?"

"Yes – I wanted to thank you." He takes my free hand in his – I can see drying blood under his fingernails – and raises it to his lips.

"For what?"

He grins, "Everything. I love you."

I wrap my arms around him tightly, earning a shocked grunt in response. "I love you, too," I whisper. "Thank you." We stay there for a few blissful moments before I suddenly jolt back. "Do you need to stop it rotting?"
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“Sorry?”

“I’m assuming you didn’t use all of it on my present, did you?”

“Just the lower back.”

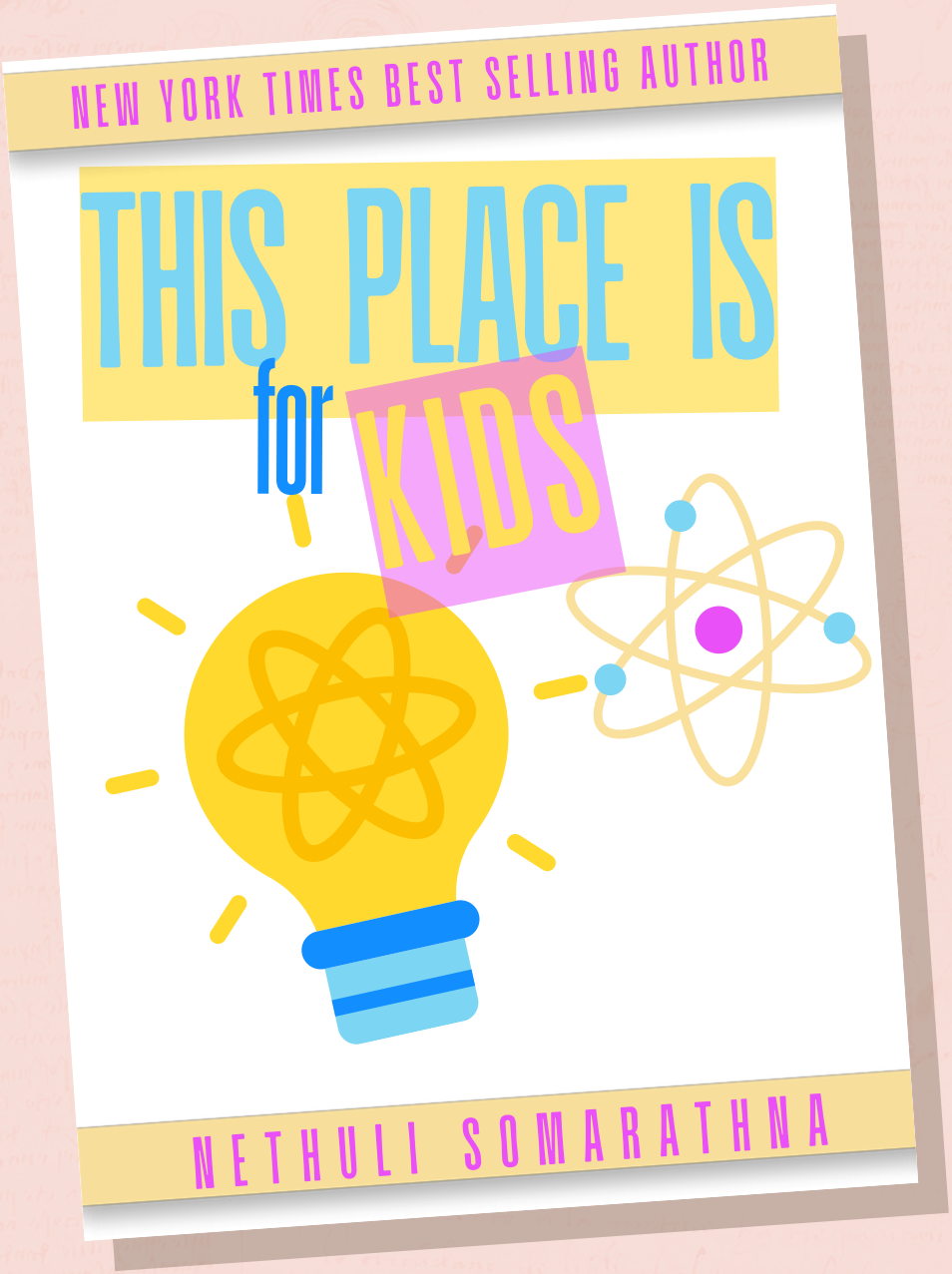
Though it pains me to tell him, I don’t want good materials to go to waste because he’s too busy talking to me. “You should go back to it before the rest starts decomposing.”

He smiles again, instantly lifting the weight from my chest. “Don’t worry about that; I put it all in the freezer. We have the night to ourselves.”

I let him kiss my hand once more, before he puts his arms beneath me and lifts me upwards.

“Aah! Careful!” He laughs; I manage to retrieve his gift before he carries me away. I’m unsure where he’s taking me, but as long as he’s there, I don’t care where we are.

– THE END –


NEW YORK TIMES BEST SELLING AUTHOR
THIS PLACE IS
for KIDS
NETHULI SOMARATHNA

This place is for kids, I think.

I mean, that's why we're here in the first place – my little sister, Tanvi, and her friend, Mireille. They've been begging for this for months, and Mum just so happens to be too busy today. I've landed with the job of supervising them in this science centre.

'It might be fun, Rovin,' Mum told me as I waited for Tanvi to lace her shoes this morning. 'Get out of your room for once.'

It's been a while since I've been here. The last time was when I was seven; eight years ago.

I lean on a rail, suppressing the urge to roll my eyes at Tanvi and Mireille squealing as Tanvi touches the plasma ball and electricity jumps to her hand.

'I'm Zeus!'

Wow, electricity. Electromagnetic fields. The bee-like buzzing of my seventh-grade science teacher's voice branding textbook definitions into my brain. How thrilling.

As I stare, however, the scene begins to fade into something else.

The big sparking globe is enormous. I reach out and the tip of my finger brushes the glass. A zap of lightning appears where I'm touching it. My eyes widening, I move forward and press my entire hand on the globe. The electricity spreads around it.

'I'm Zeus!' I yell, swirling my palm around. 'Almighty Zeus!'

I feel on top of the world.

I turn the slightest bit to the side and see a row of something shiny on a wall. I sprint over, the globe momentarily forgotten. When I stand before the shiny things, these big rectangles with frames, I see... myself? But it's not myself, I'm freakishly tall, I'm squashed almost flat, I'm wide as a car, I've got ripples through my body.

Giggling, I move from rectangle to rectangle, wiggling my arms in the air and watching Me 2.0 switch from form to form, squishing and stretching and everything. I'm like an alien! I make silly faces, my tongue large in one rectangle, thin and lizard-like in another.

Laughter bubbles in my chest at these strange caricatures.

In the back of one of these weird rectangles, I see a looming figure. I whip around and there's a humungous, towering T-Rex! It's all colossal white bones and a roaring jaw.

The T-Rex is surrounded by red museum barricades. I almost snap my neck looking up at it. The king of the dinosaur world.

There's a small square with words on it near the barricade. I try to read it, eager to learn about this creature, but the only word I recognise is T-Rex!

When I look up again, a small jolt of fear shoots through me. I suddenly imagine the dinosaur swinging its head down and clamping down on my neck with those sharp, sharp teeth...

No, you *will* be brave, *I think*. Be as brave as the mighty T-Rex, ruler of dinosaurs!

But it looks like it could move at any moment... I take a step back. To admire it better, of course. Not because I'm scared. That would be ridiculous. I imagine the T-Rex as it was in its time, towering over the weaker dinosaurs, stomping around, letting out an ear-splitting roar. All of a sudden I want a T-Rex in my room, too! I can ask the owners of this place if I can have it.

Imagining showing all my friends that I have the King of Dinosaurs in my house, my heart thumps with excitement. I wonder what it eats. I'm pretty sure dinosaurs are either herbivores, omnivores or carnivores. I know the T-Rex is a carnivore, but which animals fell victim to its jaws? I turn around and-

And I once more see today. It's as if someone reached out a hand and physically tugged me from a dream I was thoroughly enjoying.

Tanvi stands before the T-Rex display. Her eyes, wide, take in the rather underwhelming skeleton. My mind flashes through every dinosaur skeleton I've seen that looks precisely like this one, and I wonder if these bones are even real.

But once...

Behind the terrifying T-Rex I see an expansive machine. I skip over.

The machine begins at one side of the room and ends at the other. I spot an

orange ball slipping down a clear tube, disappearing for a second and going down a swirling slide. When it gets to the bottom it hits a bell and the little chime sounds in my ears. Eyes brightening, I run to follow the ball on its journey, tracking its twists, turns, and loops across the machine. When the ball falls into a cup at the end, my eyes follow to see a shiny plaque below it. Again, I can't read the tiny letters, but the big capitals say something like…

'R…ube… Gold… Goldberg ma…chine?'

I'm instantly fascinated.

My eyes catch on Tanvi and Mireille.

Running parallel to the ball in the Rube Goldberg machine, their faces alight with comic delight.

'Where'd it go?' Tanvi squeaks suddenly.

'I don't… oh!' Mireille sticks a finger out to point, and they start up their run again.

Something seems to move between Tanvi and Mireille. At first I think it's a trick of the lights, a trick of the machine's glass. But… over them forms a creature, one that hulks over their small forms and shines in all colours imaginable, with a smile that opens to glinting teeth like the T-Rex. It looks over the children with pure happiness, no menace. Purple electricity curls around it like wire. An orange ping-pong ball floats inside its translucent body.

It turns, and when its bright eyes fall on me, its grin drops.

For some reason, it's almost like I recognise it. I feel like I've seen it before.

All of its colour seeps from it like water from a cracked pipe, bleeding onto the carpeted floor until it's dark and empty. Its arm stretches toward me. I don't move. When its lightless limb touches my chest, I'm pulled under–

I make a mental note to get a book from the library about that machine. A plan forms in my head, a checklist with all the things I'll need (cup, cardboard pipe, ping-pong ball) writing itself.

There's a room that leads off from this one.

I walk into a small hall of darkness disrupted only by a screen on the wall in front of me. The screen is a collage of bright colours. I see a silhouette in the

middle, painted in greens, oranges, and reds. Around it is mostly black, with the occasional purple streak.

I shoot my hand up into the air.

The silhouette follows suit.

A laugh bubbles up in my throat and spills out, and maybe that laugh was so bright I could see it in rainbow on the screen, or maybe I imagined that.

'What is that?'

The words seem strangely echoey and faraway. I turn around, but there's nobody else in the room. Although I think I see something big and colourful and smiling leaving through the corridor. My vision goes cloudy.

'Rovin?'

'Rovin, what is that?'

I might have thought I was still in that strange doorway in time where I was seven. I was in the very room, standing before the very screen, save for the smaller figure I can see in red and orange tugging at my sleeve. Somehow, I've walked here in present time. The creature is gone. In fact, I'm not sure the creature existed in the first place.

'What's this?'

Tanvi points to the screen.

The answer shoots out of me almost against my will, almost as if a mechanical hand reached into my throat and tugged on it.

'A thermal imaging screen,' I tell her. 'Those colours show the heat of everything. You're a lot of red and orange, so you're pretty warm.'

'You're warm too,' she says.

'I know,' I reply. And it does feel like my body is filled with warmth. It feels like a reprieve from a long period of time floating mindlessly on a cold, barren wasteland. As if a sun has finally risen in that clouded sky.

'How does it work?'

'It... you wouldn't understand yet.'

Tanvi seems crestfallen, and I feel a little bad, but I know what I said is true.

'Have you been here before?' Tanvi takes out her water bottle and takes a swig. It's blue on the screen.

'When I was a little younger than you are,' I admit.

'Did you find it interesting?'

It's such a simple question, yet I feel it as a loaded one. Images flash through my head – a giant T-Rex skeleton, a set of mirrors, a Rube Goldberg machine – and with them I feel a hot rush in my chest. I recall the tug every exhibit seemed to have, demanding my attention. I recall drinking orange juice out of a silly straw from the café. I recall rushing home and, four hours later, calling for Mum to look at the complex contraption I'd created. I recall telling all my friends at school that I'd almost gotten to take a dinosaur home.

I remember coming here this morning, after having unsuccessfully argued with Mum to let someone else take Tanvi and Mireille, and the warmth rushes out of me like a broken dam.

'It was a bit boring.'

Tanvi hardly looks disappointed. She only really cared when she asked about the screen, and now that it's not the subject of my talk, she's given it her full focus.

'I saw that machine thingy.' She interrupts the silence.

'The Rube Goldberg machine?'

'That's what it's called?'

'Yeah.'

'I wanna make one.'

Quiet blankets us once more, and I can almost hear the shifts of her hair as she shakes her head around to see it move on the screen.

'I'm sure you do.' I finally make sound.

'When we get home, I'm gonna make a plan for a big one.'

'Okay.'

With that, Tanvi abruptly turns around and leaves the room. I laugh, but for

some reason it sounds like a choke in this room. As if the room's atmosphere refuses me the laugh, as if I've betrayed it once in the past. As if I've neglected it.

Feeling vaguely uncomfortable, I follow Tanvi's path back into the main area of the science centre. The light hits me like a truck, and I squint as I walk back to my patch of wall.

My path passes by the exhibits I remembered. The machine seems like a collection of tangled plastic now, and I know how every section, every function works. The T-Rex is no longer gigantic, it's a generic display that my eyes pass over. The carnival mirrors are just panes of glass that make waves in my reflection. The plasma ball is just electricity.

I reach my wall and lean on it. After a moment, I shove my hands in my pockets. I watch Tanvi and Mireille running around, trying every exhibit like it's the most unbelievable thing they've ever seen. Once I was like that.

I get out my phone and call Mum's number. She picks up on the third ring.

'How much longer do we have to stay here? This place is for kids.'

– THE END –

THE BIN RUN



~ Lifting the lid on daily suburban life ~

SCARLETT BROWN

Sunday: 5:00 PM

The streets are empty and bare. Not even a willy wagtail dares to whittles as the sun slowly sets behind the towering trees. Its Bin day. You stare from the safety of your picket gate, eyes creeping over the top of its sharp ends waiting... waiting for someone to make the first move. Yellow or green?

You had a few mates over on Saturday to watch the derby, the yellow bin is in desperate need of it being emptied. Boxes, snack wrappers and beer cans poking from its lid, the crows eyeing it greedily. Their cackling call seemed to be taunting you "What are you waiting for, huh? Don't you know what bin it is you idiot-?"

Suddenly, the neighbour, what's his name? Uh Mr Kelly? No Mr McCartney-Oh whatever the old blokes name was, had appeared. He too was waiting behind his gate. His sunglasses perched on his sunburnt, balding head waiting... waiting for someone to take out the bins. Waiting for someone to make the first move.

You had seen him over the weekend, he had been doing some yard work, blasting some croaky rock band sinning about annoying parents or some other silly little heartbreak. Out with his whipper snipper all day. Surely it was greens then? No idiot would do the garden unless it was greens week?

Sunday: 6:00 PM

The summer air is sticky, the cool breeze from the ocean making the grey singlet stick to your arms. Waiting. Every neighbour on the street peaking over the top of their gates and fences frozen in place. Some bare foot, others wearing flip flops, a handful wearing whatever was closest to the door. Waiting for the moment of the thunderous clatter of the wheelie bin being set at the curb.

A mirage disorients the bitumen road, kid's bikes and roller-skates left in their front yards waiting for some tried parent on the way to the morning commute to drag it to the front door. A trail of water flowing from some broken sprinkler creating a puddle at the drain. And a hum fills the air as the tall eucalyptus and invasive palm trees stir. The hum of busted up air conditioners, batterer by the magpies or winter hail. There was a blue glow coming from one of your neighbours' front windows. It's the 7 o'clock news update.

Sunday: 7:00 PM

The wind had picked up now, dark clouds go to cover the sky like a blanket as the sun dips lower and lower, tickling the horizon. It paints the sky as an explosion of orange and pink. Making it look like a reissuance painting fit for a god, ready to strike down the little people below, all of whom were still waiting.

Your gaze fixed. Fixed on the other eyes holding their red lidded wheelie bins behind them, hands ready to pounce on the "right" bin. But not a single person made a move. They didn't even seem to blink or breathe. Paralysed... Paralysed by what? Not fear, not pain, not by any sort of chain or drug, not by mental incapability, just paralysed. It was almost like an unspoken vowel. A vowel of incompetence sworn upon by all who live on the street. It was certainly an odd sight, but the standoff continued.

Sunday: 7:45 PM

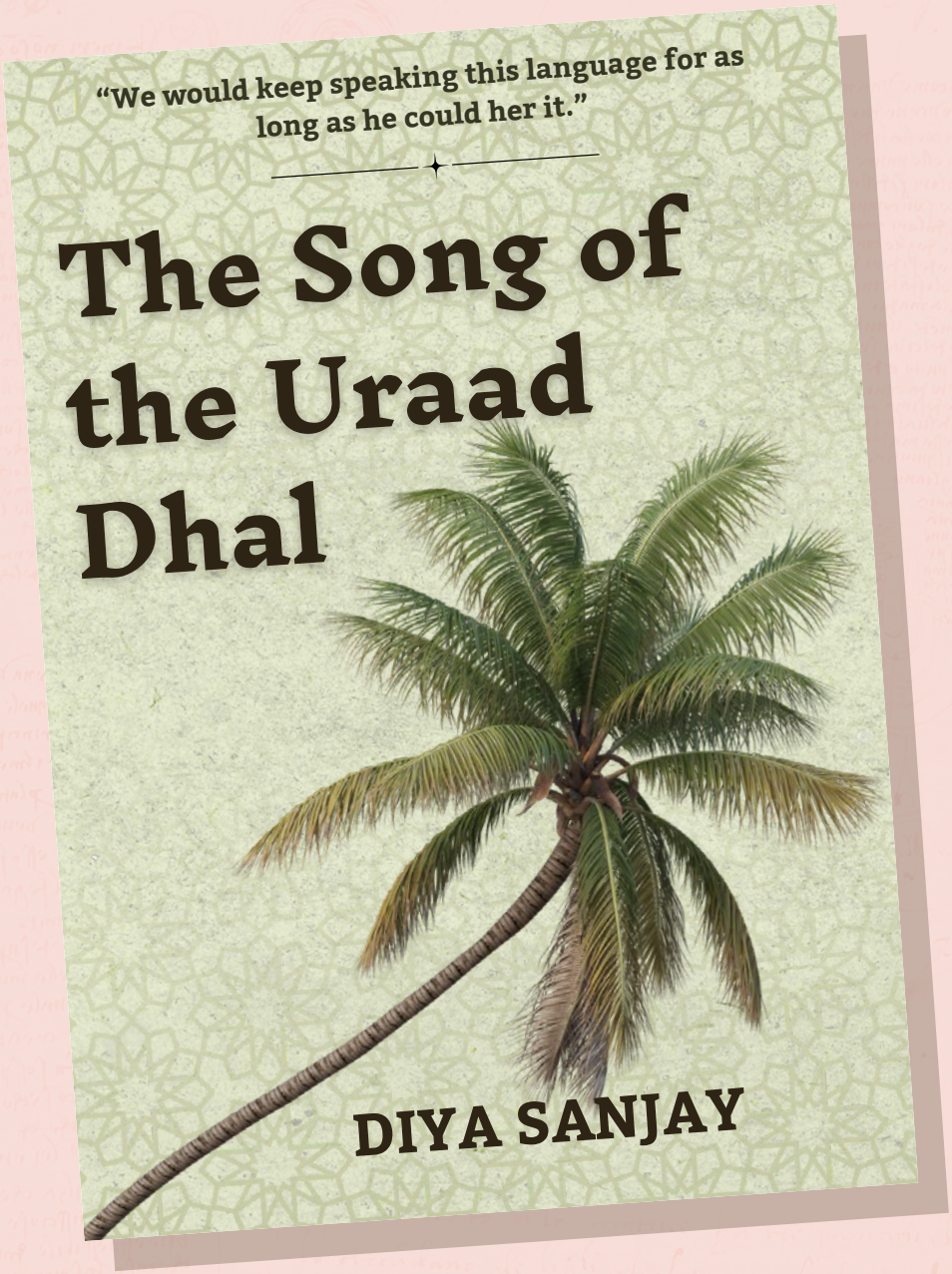
They had been frozen for hours now, even the trees seemed to have become stuck, the crows fixed mid cackle. The hum of the battered air conditioners had subsided. All that could be heard was the distant rumble of the freeway. Then suddenly, the only thing to disturb the landscape was the lonely jingle of a dog collar coming up from the alley way. As the dog walker and the pup reached the top, weaving around the yellow poles, they stopped. They just stood there and looked around.

"Huh how odd? No one has put their bins out today! I thought Sunday was the bin run?" The Dog walker and pup just stood there pondering their thought. As the rest of the street waited. Waited for someone to drag the bins up to the curb. But what bin was it? The yellow or the green bin?

– THE END –

UPPER SECONDARY




"We would keep speaking this language for as long as he could her it."
The Song of the Uraad Dhal
DIYA SANJAY

At the edge of the stone countertop, the mortar and pestle waited like old friends. My grandfather's hands hovered over the coarse idli batter, unsure at first, then finally steadying with a tremor that was almost imperceptible. Each circular motion pressing, twisting, dragging and seemed to summon a part of him long tucked away. The rhythm was patient. The stone rasped against the pestle in a voice only memory could translate.

I watched him, silently noting the way his knuckles faltered over familiar shapes, then found them again. In these repetitive yet infinitely new motions he told a story without words, of kitchens just like this one, of hands once confident over dough and spice, of laughter rolling around tiled rooms. They say laughter is created in the amygdala, that tiny almond-shaped thing buried deep in the brain, the part that shouldn't be forgotten, or at least I used to think. The scent of fermenting batter curled into the air, mingling with cardamom and cloves in the tall jars along the windowsill.

They say memory is a collection of scattered thoughts, but the hippocampus reminds me otherwise – filing the small, the mundane, the tactile. A scrape of stone on a wooden board, the cool wetness of batter on palms, the warmth of my grandfather's arms as I stand behind him. These are the anchors.

"The urad dal needs to sing a little longer, Thaatha," I said softly, my voice barely disturbing his rhythm. "Remember? You taught me. Until it's frothy and light as a cloud."

His hands stilled. For a moment, a curtain of confusion descended behind his eyes. He looked at the batter as if seeing it for the first time. Then, he blinked, and the curtain lifted just enough. "A cloud," he repeated, his voice a low rumble. "Yes. Your grandmother... She always said it should hold its shape like fresh-fallen snow." He resumed grinding, the motion more certain now. He was back with me, in our kitchen, but he had visited her too. His mind granted him a passport to a time his waking mind could no longer consistently reach.

Later, as the batter rested in its ceramic pot, swaddled in a thick cloth and rubber bands, the first true sign of the evening's fracture appeared. He stood before the stove, watching the steam begin to plume from the idli steamer. The familiar, anxious hum filled the room. He turned to me, his brow furrowed in a profound concern.

"We should set up another place," he said, his voice urgent. "Sanju will be home from the fields soon. He eats like a monsoon wind."

My breath caught. Sanjay, my father, his son, had not worked in the fields for forty years. He was an engineer in a city two hours away, and would be home

any minute, his clothes smelling of train air and long hours. But in Thaatha's mind, he was a boy again, with dirt under his nails and a bottomless stomach.

I didn't correct him. To do so would be to shatter his delicate, precarious world. Instead, I nodded, my throat tightening. "I'll get a plate for him." I took down an extra steel tumbler, the clatter of it against the counter sounding like a small, metallic yelp.

This is where the textbooks fail you. They talk of memory loss as a systemic deletion, a blank space ever growing. They don't tell you it's a tidal thing, sometimes receding, pulling away to leave barren shores of the present, other times rushing back in with such force that everything is drowned to the peripheries. My grandfather was not forgetting; he was time-travelling, and the journey was increasingly one-directional.

When my father arrived, shrugging off his suit jacket, the dissonance was a physical presence in the room. Thaatha looked at him, this middle-aged man, with a polite yet distant recognition. "Ah, you're here," he said, the urgency for Sanju from the fields now gone. The man he had been waiting for had vanished, replaced by a pleasant stranger.

We sat down to eat. The idlis were perfect, soft and spongy, little white towers on the waxy banana leaf. Thaatha's hands, now steadier, broke one apart and dipped it neatly into the reddened sambar. For a few blessed minutes, the rhythm returned. The shared act of eating, the flavours of tamarind and coconut chutney, the warmth of the food built a bridge we could all walk together.

Then, halfway through the meal, he paused, a broken idli dome suspended mid-air. He looked from my face to my father's, his eyes searching. The connection was fraying again.

"This... this chutney," he began, his voice hesitant. "It tastes like... the tree outside the old house. The one with the swing."

My father and I exchanged a glance. We knew the tree. We knew the swing. It was the central attraction from a story he'd told a hundred times, a story from his own childhood.

"Tell us, Thaatha," I prompted gently, leaning forward.
"Tell us about the tree."

And he did. The words came slowly at first, then in a gathering stream. He spoke of the rough bark, the way the coconuts fell with a heavy thud, the tyre swing his father had hung that could touch the sky if you kicked off hard

enough. He wasn't just telling us the story, but viscerally reliving it. The taste of the chutney, a specific blend of roasted spices and curry leaves made exactly as his mother had made it, was the key. It had unlocked a door and ushered him into a room his dementia had not yet claimed.

He finished his story, and content, finished his meal. The silence that followed was no longer fraught, but peaceful. He was tired; the journey had drained him.

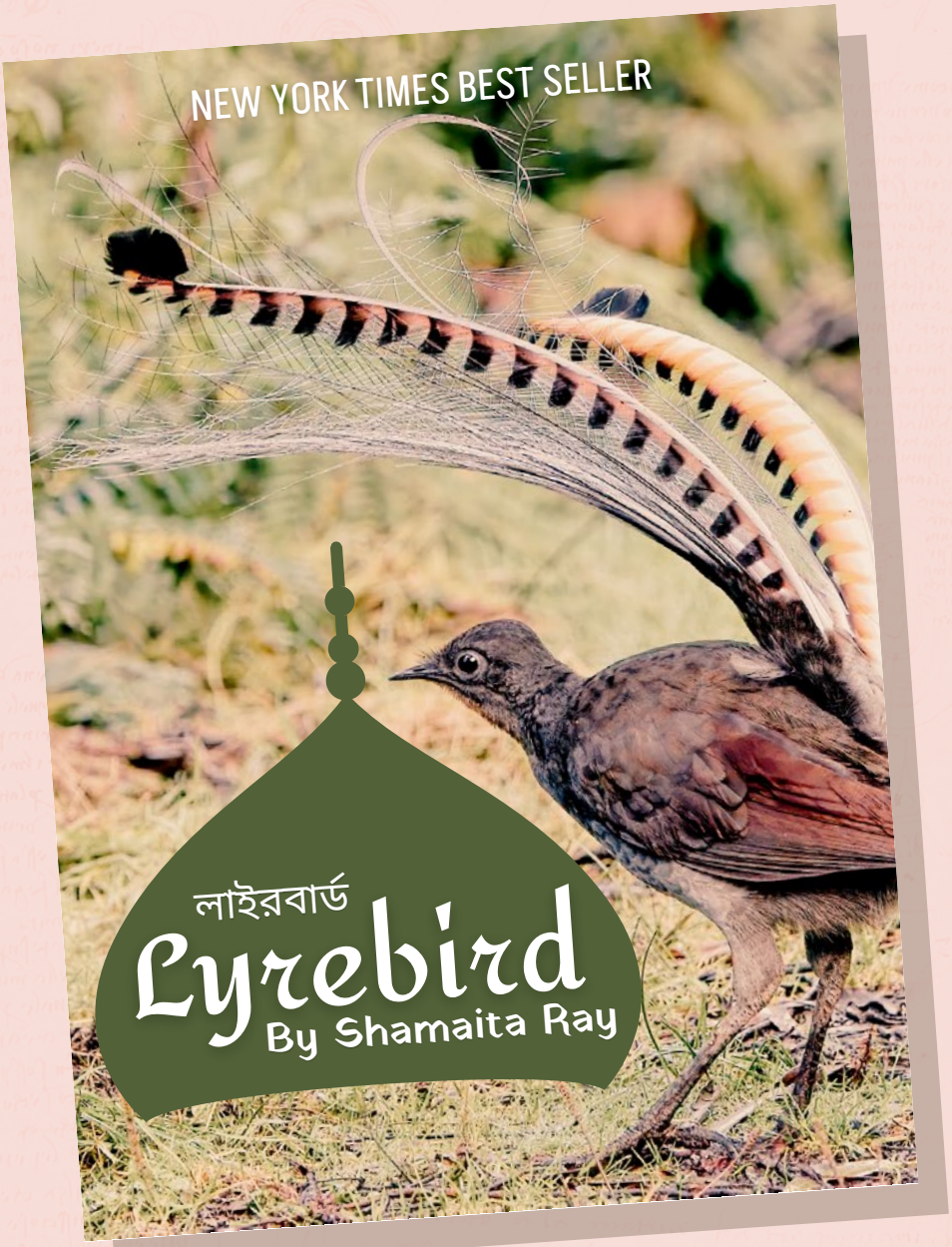
Later, as I washed the dishes, I understood. The connection wasn't broken. It was just being translated into a new language – one of taste and touch, of rhythmic motion and shared warmth. The man who taught me to listen out for the song of the urad dal was slowly forgetting the sequence to his own life, but the melody remained, etched into his hands, into the stone of the mortar, into the very air of our kitchen.

We would keep speaking this language for as long as he could hear it. We would grind the batter, steam the idlis and set the table. And in those moments, when a taste or a sound bridges the chasm of years, we could be whole again by the sustaining core of memory itself.

– THE END –

Glossary:

- Urad Dhal: Split black gram, a lentil commonly used in South Indian cooking, particularly for idli batter
- Thaatha: Tamil word for grandfather.
- Idli: Soft, steamed savoury rice and lentil cakes popular in South Indian cuisine.


NEW YORK TIMES BEST SELLER
লাইরবার্ড
Lyrebird
By Shamaita Ray

When you first moved to Australia, your parents took you to a zoo as some sort of unofficial inauguration. Back then, the world was just shapes and sounds and colours, things that flashed past you in a burst of coherence before fading into the warmth of your mother's embrace. The only thing you truly remember from that trip was the lyrebird show – the way your parents had grumbled about the extra fee under their breath in Bengali before switching to stilted English.

In the end, you thought the cost was worth it. The way the creature replicated the soft edges of your parents' words, as well as the clicks and churrs of the other foreign tongues crowding around the enclosure – it fascinated you to no end. You could barely speak, but you admired the bird and tried your best to garble out your own interpretations of its call, much to the amusement of those around you.

That memory felt so distant now, you thought, as you tied your shoelaces, wrapping one string around the loop of the other, the way your father taught you. It was your first day at school, and the thought was daunting. If your home was a raw ingredient, a haven of spice and prayer and song, everywhere beyond it was a fusion dish, a hotpot of cultures to which you didn't think you could be added. You tried to explain your dilemma to your mother, but she just laughed and told you it'd be alright. *"There will be lots of different people at school,"* she said in Bengali, the language familiar and warm. *"You'll fit right in."*

The sweet, lyrical flow of her words soothed you, and you made the mistake of believing her.

She had said a lot of things that morning, but she didn't tell you that everyone – regardless of what they looked like – spoke a broad version of English that massacred the delicacy of your language. You were only equipped with a textbook dialect of their caw, one that still clung to the lilt of your native tongue, and for the first time in your life you felt terribly embarrassed of it. Unbidden, that memory of the lyrebird resurfaced. An idea struck you, then: if a bird could so elegantly imitate the sounds around it, why couldn't you?

You listened carefully to their chatter, taking note of the stretching vowels and questioning inflection, as if they themselves were unsure of their speech. You cleared your throat and relaxed your tongue, chewing on the

words until finally you could replicate that same drawling call. You were elated. You spent the day playing it back to anyone who cared to listen, and soaked in the praise, 'fluent' becoming a word of great importance.

But when you showed off your newfound talent to your parents, they only looked at you in confusion. Your father asked you to repeat yourself, and your heart dropped to your shoes. That was where it began, you think. You remember how, from that moment, you paid close attention to how they carried themselves in public, foolishly using that same textbook English, proud of the shape of their words. The rolled r's and blurred consonants were discordant to your ears, and you cringed in shame when others would lean in closer to try and comprehend them. The accent was unbecoming, you thought, as you piped up from behind them as designated translator.

That was the moment you realised that they were not the same as you, could not mimic the way you had learnt to. More than anything, you remember pitying them for not having the lyrebird's skill. It was a survival mechanism, evolved on this isolated continent and unique to its species. You thought it a great tragedy that your parents, having been raised across the seas, would never truly grasp it.

Their stubborn sound drove you to be twice the mimic, to drown out their dissonance with your voice. You spend the next several years mimicking, a little lyrebird in a cage, changing your tune to fit the world around you – to entertain it. Your catalogue of songs grows, squawks and twitters and chirrups collected and reproduced at your discretion. Your relatives gush at your proficiency over video calls, calling you a "true Australian" in awed Bengali even as they struggle to understand you. Ignorant of their plight, the words make you swell with pride, while your parents share an unreadable glance across the room.

You've started tying your shoes differently – two bunny ears that constrict each other. You remember, suddenly, that rabbits are an invasive species, and you swallow. You pull the laces taut anyway.

The imitation is automatic by the time you notice it. Your voice sits lower to better bring out the accent, and threads of other calls weave into your speech seamlessly, no longer requiring conscious replication. You think it good, that it has become habit. You do not realise you sit perched in a cage with an open door, convincing yourself that resigning to captivity is just as good as freedom.

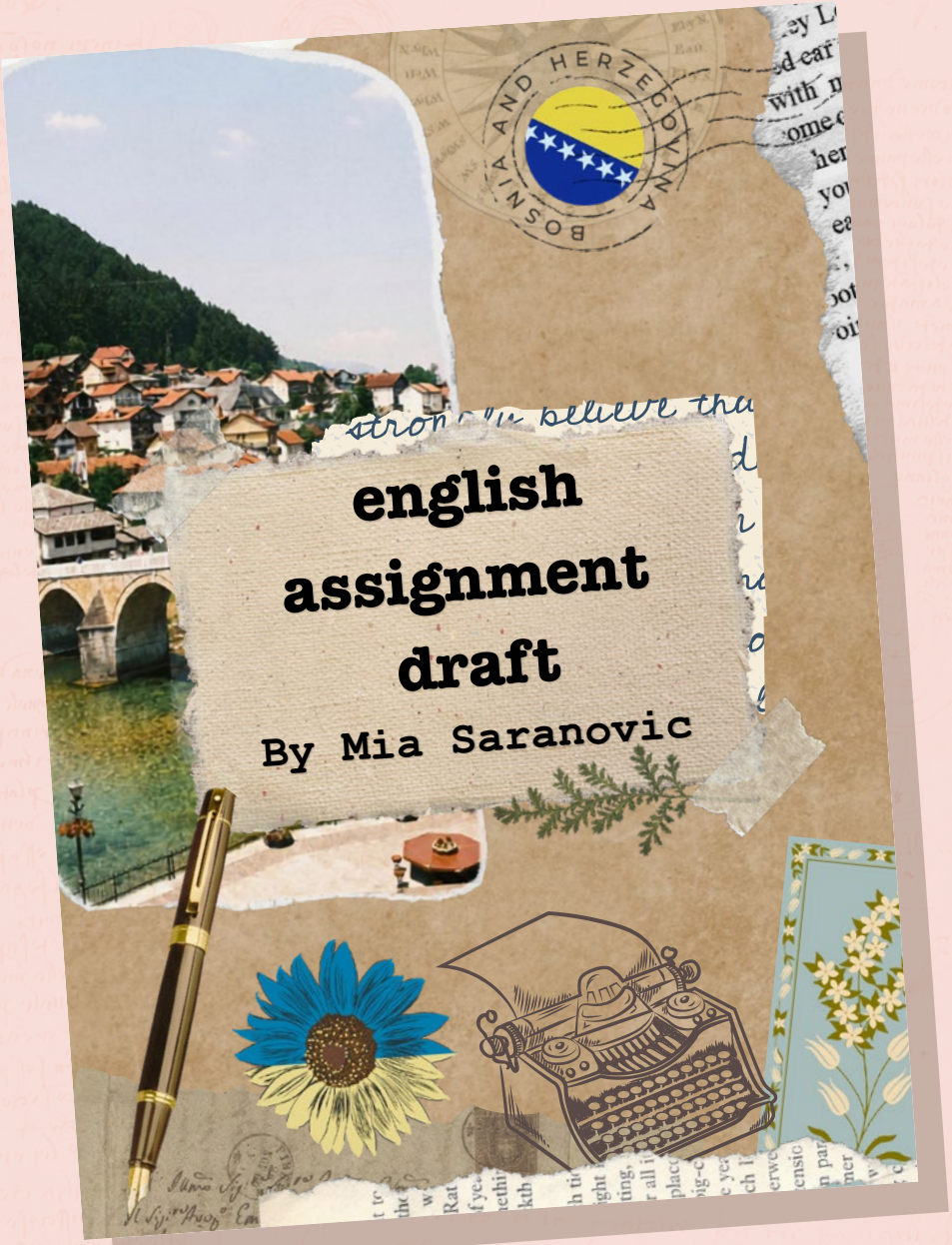
Your recapitulations are flawless now, but you're not a child anymore, and somehow that makes them unnerving rather than entertaining. People look at you strangely each time a foreign sound escapes your mouth, unable to equate your bronze skin to the bleached tone of your words. You've become the best of actors, yes, but nothing more than that – multiple masks that never meld to form a new face. You wonder if that lyrebird you saw all those years ago has been abandoned, too, if the once eager onlookers have grown tired of its mimicry.

Your parents barely recognise you now. They plead with you to speak in Bengali, to respond in what they call your native tongue, but you all know it has long ceased to hold that prestigious title. You filter through your repertoire, but the language slips from your grasp: long vowels ooze through the words, drowning the delicate syllables in an unseemly drawl. You panic, trying to remember the shape of the language – 'a' becomes 'o', consonants mellow to a hum – trying to untwist your tongue and push your jaw into relearned cadences, all to no avail.

You reset again and again and you can feel your throat shredding under the strain, yet the sound remains flawed and uncanny. Your parents see you struggle, and they sing to you, a mournful croon so familiar it may as well be transcribed in your heart, scripted words you can no longer utter.

Oh, lyrebird, have you forgotten your song?

– THE END –


BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA
english
assignment
draft
By Mia Saranovic

I pause my eating to posit the following to our mother: 'Did you know...'
- a pause for unresolved chewing - 'that Bosnia is like one of the tallest countries in the world?'
'I really doubt that.'
'Mhm, no it really is. I thought it was fake, but no. I kinda won the lottery in reverse then, don't you think? With you guys as my parents.'
'Don't say that.'
'No like - oh my gosh mum, just in terms of height.' I'm exasperatedly laughing and my tone is light-hearted, yet my diaphragm seems to have dropped onto my stomach.
'If I had been any taller, you wouldn't be here to complain about it.' I know the anecdote she's referring to. It was one of her family's rare stints in the apartment as opposed to the basement during the war.
'Oh, speaking of, I need your help with something.'
'Mhm?'
'I need to write, like, a story for English. It's diasporic fiction if you know what that is.'
She pulls her coffee mug away from her lips. 'About Bosnia?'
'Yeah, it can be. I think it would be cool to write about, y'know, something different?'
'Mm, different is good. And I know you'll make it great. The best.'
I smile. 'Cool. I just thought I could ask you some stuff, see if I can fish out anything interesting. Maybe take some inspiration when we visit this year.'
You interject, asking us to speak in English. I turn to see your ice cream finished, lean over to see a little tic-tac-toe board etched with your spoon into the bottom of your cup. There's an 'O' in the middle square. Rookie strategy - you should always start in the corner to make sure you can't lose. I've never told you that though, for all our games would've ended in draws, and if I slipped up and you finally won, you'd know it was still because of me. I draw an X beside your O.
'Hello? Are you even listening to me?'
I snap up to look at our mother. I had asked her once if she preferred the taste of weak coffee to strong. She told me no. She would order two half-shot cappuccinos back-to-back only because it took longer to drink.

The sign says 'no smoking,' but there's an ashtray on the plastic tablecloth: the quintessential Bosnian coffee house. Our mother and I sit upwind from family and their friends; she joins them in laughing. Our aunt takes a draw from her cigarette before moving to interrupt our father, gesticulating with her pearl-adorned wrist. She wears the bracelet constantly; I can't help but

wonder how many dings you could see up close, and where all the little scratched-off pearl pieces lie now.
'Yes, yes, I understand. But what's the point when your own children can't even see their family? When they can't even speak our language?'
I'm absentmindedly readjusting my necklace. I move to speak, but I don't - it's more useful if I listen.
I love our aunt. I think we used to talk all the time. I've started to pretend her messages can't come through to me unless it's someone's birthday or the new year. I Google-translate her well-wishes, always autodetected as Croatian, and ask our mother to proofread mine.
I've pulled my knees to my chest, conserving the limited warmth offered to me by the children's jumper I was gifted by a forty-something cousin of our father.
Mum is speaking now. 'You don't know how abnormal it is here until you leave, I mean...'
She's defending my education, the political climate, food regulation - I hear professions in favour of beach weather from a woman who hates the sand.

'Ok wait, I think it's better if I just read it out loud, you can keep cooking and just listen to me.' Mum nods, bobbing her head up and down in the direction of the broth she simmers. I begin to recite my essay aloud to her; my intonation is maybe a bit dramatic for the start of a school assignment I've pulled together in the notes app on my phone. You're trying to watch your show; I yell from the other room for you to turn it down. You do. After a little while, I assume because you can't really hear anything over the sound of my voice, you come and join us. You interject, ask me the meaning of diaspora when I mention the word.
'It's when a group of people are displaced from where they come from, but they sort of remain together when they move?' My inflection rises at the end and now it sounds like I'm asking you. I search up the word on my phone to give you a better definition, and you seem satisfied. Or maybe just indifferent, because you've already pulled up a stool next to our mother, and she hands you the spoon to continue stirring while she starts chopping the vegetables.
'Are you still listening mum?'
'Yes, just keep going.'
'Are you sure?'
'Yes.'
'Ok, just, like, pay attention. I need to know what you think.' I finish off my recitation.

‘Wow. Your vocabulary is really so strong, your sentences are beautiful,’ she laughs a bit, ‘but why did you make me the one defending the food regulation here? You know I think the complete opposite.’
‘Yeah sorry about that, I kinda spliced you and dad together, otherwise it was too many characters to properly develop within the word limit.’ Still, I look back down at my phone and re-read the line.
‘Ok, whatever will get you the good mark.’ She smiles; I nod, but she can probably only see the top of my head.
I eventually walk over to join the two of you, wedging my head between yours to watch the soup. The steam fogs up my glasses, so I reach up to wipe them with my sleeve. My elbow hits an empty bowl on the counter; I don’t turn quick enough to see it wobble before it shatters.
‘OUT. NOW.’ She yells it in Bosnian but we both understand.
We’re standing on the carpet now, watching Mum sweep the tiles. ‘You’re so clumsy,’ you tell me, harmonising with her parallel complaints. I twist my necklace around my fingers until they smell of iron. A few months ago you remarked that you were surprised at how pristine I kept it. That’s when I realised the white stone was plastic.
You lean your head on my shoulder; I cover you with my blanket, leaving my left arm in the cold. Fast asleep, your breath is warm against my collarbone, as though you're blowing the air-conditioned wind off my skin. Our mother is still completing her teary-eyed goodbyes and I’m scrolling through my camera roll.

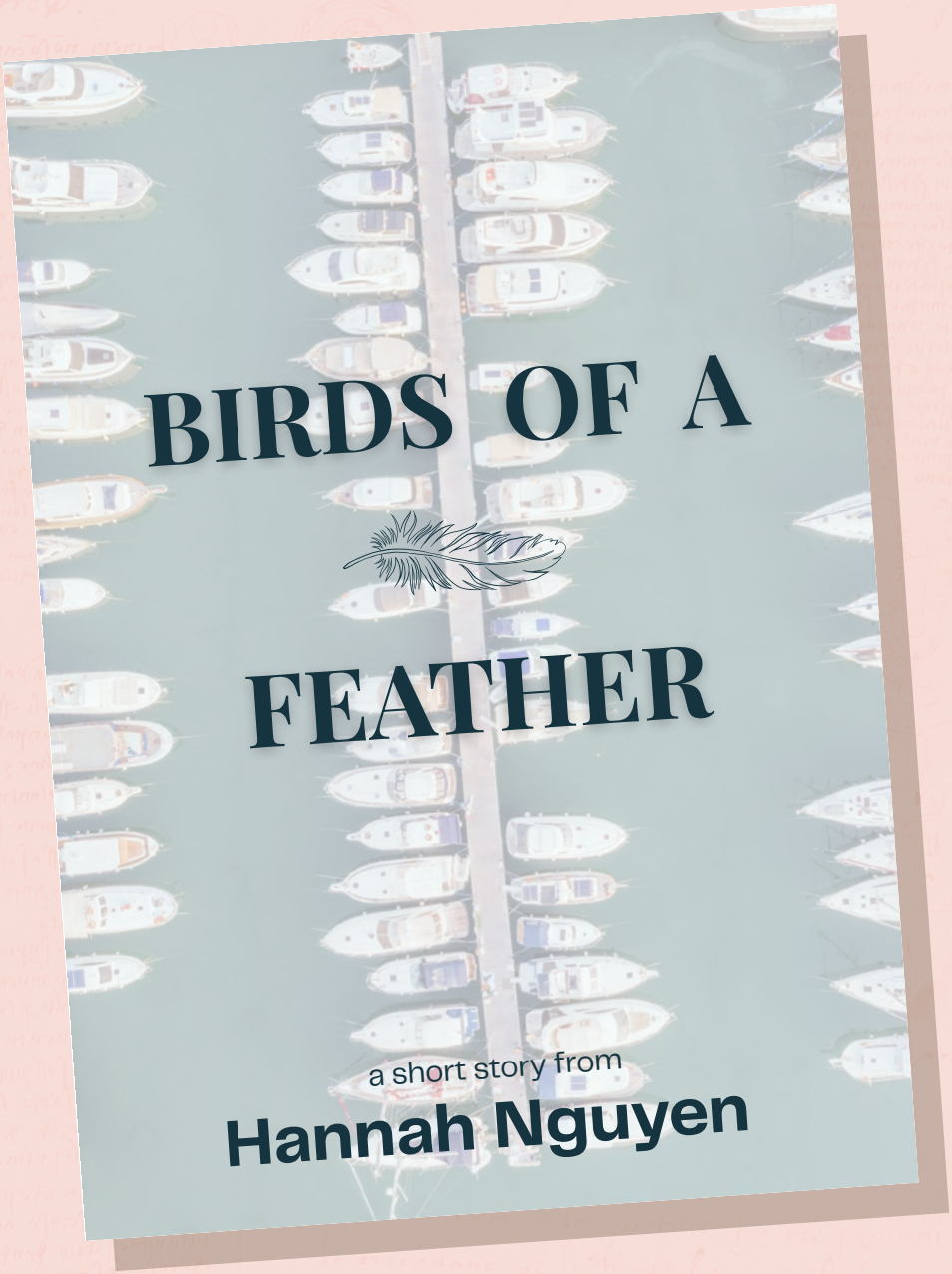
I wanted to hike. I wanted my lungs to burn from exertion on Bosnian peaks, not from cigarette smoke and factory fumes. In all the photos we would’ve taken, you would see the iron factory in our father’s hometown, and I the post from which they besieged it, and my arms would be outstretched perpendicular to my body in the picture perfect pose.
We depart in three hours. The flight is long; my legs will cramp as I sit and my wrist as I write; the essay is due soon. I open my notes app to look through it, but first spot my list of observations and inferences. Casual sight of buildings with bullet holes, link in some way to- I blink.
I close it.
I look up to see mum walking towards us and smile sadly at her. The corners of her eyes crinkle as she mirrors my expression, her sclera rimmed by purple and red below her eyes and on her lids. When she reaches us, I pull her down into a single-armed embrace. I can’t tell whose tears stain my cheeks as I tell her she has to sleep on the plane, and that I can’t understand how she’s even standing right now.

‘I will, don’t worry.’ She won’t. I’m not sure I will either; I wait for a bed inside four insulated walls.

Knees to chest, I’m slowly rocking in my chair and controlling my inhale. The deadline is tomorrow afternoon; I think I’m almost finished, but I’ve been ‘almost finished’ for the past few hours now. I don’t know if I would say it’s my best writing, but my teacher might - it’s not like she’s seen that much of it yet. Maybe you would say so too, but you don’t really like to read, so maybe you wouldn’t, I’m not really sure. I’m exhaling, my breathing a caffeine-induced burden. The sweat from my palms has been dyed by the ink from my handwritten draft, leaving black streaks as I wipe my hands on my thighs. Again I read it over. Again I feel sick. It’s beautiful. I think I hate it. I’ve pushed all of my desk paraphernalia into the drawers below. I saw our mother’s mother’s pearl necklace inside the first one. It’s like I can feel it pull on the back of my neck, drawing my head down to be cradled by my pruned fingers whose nails have embedded red crescents into my arms. I’ve polished her anecdotes until they shone with my reflection, yet I try not to face it as I shape the rounded vowels of our name at the bottom of the page with my sandpaper pen.
I don’t really want to know what you would think. I don’t want you to even read this anymore. My tongue feels heavy in my mouth. I don’t really know how to tell you what I feel. Can’t you just tell me what to do? Maybe all that I feel is that you know her better than I do. Or differently. But I don’t think that’s something you really need me to tell you, is it?
I don’t know, I really don’t; I’m sorry, I-

Three successive knocks in time with the rocking of my weeping body. You call out my name from the other side of the door. Our grandparents are on the phone. You’re asking me to translate, as though I’d stopped at some point.

– THE END –


BIRDS OF A
FEATHER
a short story from
Hannah Nguyen

The smell doesn't wash off.

I've tried. Soap, lemon, the rough side of the sponge until my knuckles go pink. But it stays, brine and diesel and the particular rot of all the sea creatures that cling to boat hulls too long. Mum says I should wear gloves. I say the gloves fill up with water and it's worse. She says I smell like a bait bucket. I say at least I'm earning money. We've had this conversation enough times that neither of us finishes it anymore.

I start at six, before Aquarama gets too busy. I take my bucket of tools and weave through the towering boat stacks towards the boat lift. The boats laze in metal structures like old shoes waiting to be polished. If they sit too long underwater, their undersides become adorned with rust, seaweed and shellfish. I can almost feel the smell settling into my skin before I've even picked up the scraper

Most mornings the ibis is already waiting. He started appearing sometime in November. Or maybe he was always there and I only just started noticing.

He's not a beautiful bird. He's the colour of old newspaper, with a beak like a scythe and a neck that shows pink where the feathers thin out. Just another bin chicken. He picks through the waste bins shamelessly, long claws clacking against the concrete.

Today, Steve is taking a long drag of his cigarette as I greet him. I face the first job, a small sailboat. Or the skeleton of one. The sails are gone and some planks of decking are broken. I scrape off the molluscs with my dulled blade, the wet algae peels off the boat in layers. I can never get all of it off. After I finish pressure spraying, Steve covers the hull with a dark coat of anti-foul paint. He pats me on the shoulder, hard enough to rock me forward, giving me a brief nod at my work before bringing the next boat. I catch my reflection in the wet paint as the boat is lifted away.

At lunch, I see Jess from school walking across the road, she works at the Yochi nearby. I bet she smells of mango and coconut. She’s laughing on the phone, probably to a friend, shining white shoes the exact same shade as her flowy cotton dress. She turns my way and I think she waves. I duck into the shed before she can see me properly. I watch her through the salt-crusted window until she disappears into the shop.

I take longer on the gaudy, luxury yachts. Their calcified hulls bulge like the belly of an overfed man. The algae takes the longest to scrub off, sometimes

there are mussels too. I don't think these boats have ever left their pens. Shellfish fall into my bucket in handfuls, clicking against each other like loose change.

As I work, a frenzied mob of seagulls fly down onto the jetty, with flashy white wings and bellies full of stolen fish and chips. Normally they only stop for a while, brazen and gossipy, critiquing my work in sharp squawks before getting bored and flying off.

But today, they see the dying mussels creaking open in my bucket, and inch closer.

And closer.

I kick at them with my gumboots, but they barely flinch, hopping closer towards me.

I throw my scraper at them, but as I do the seagulls come behind me. There's a dull thud as my bucket tips over, little morsels scatter across the concrete. The jetty erupts into white wings and screeching, seagulls shoving their beaks into the feast. I back away and watch the frenzy. The ibis stands from a careful distance too, watching. He doesn't bother with the mussels, he flies off to another jetty.

When the seagulls finish they take off again, cackling amongst each other as they leave the jetty littered with empty shells. They're probably laughing at me. After a while they blur into a cloud, just a cloud drifting off in the sky. I take my bucket back and move the other side of the hull.

By the time I finish with this yacht, the sun is tired, melting into the ocean for the night. My bin chicken returns, the hook of his beak curling over the top of the boat stacks. He watches me with one brown prehistoric eye. I must look so small to him, perched up so high. I drop any remaining mussels onto the jetty for the bin chicken, I know he'll fly down and get them when I leave.

I smell like old shellfish and my best friend this summer has been a bin chicken. Jess waved at me last week while she was getting onto her dad's yacht, her golden hair swishing behind her in the wind. I was scraping barnacles off a catamaran, pretending not to see. Maybe I've cleaned her dad's boat before, I wouldn't know.

Maybe one day I'd approach her at school, when I finally get rid of my smell.

Today, the ibis cracked open a mussel, found it empty. He kept moving along down the jetty, patient, ugly, but completely certain of himself, looking for the next morsel.

I rinse my hands in the bucket. The smell stays, the way it always does.

I'm starting to think it's alright.

– THE END –



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