

# ERAZINE

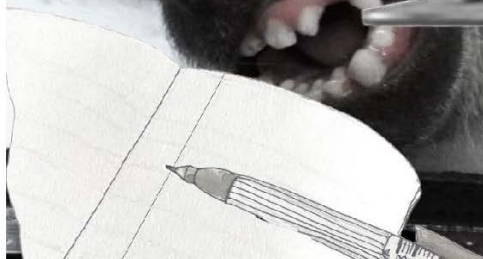
Issue 1

A collection of stories from a collection of storytellers

A Selection  
of Stories

Writing Prompts  
for YOU to try!

Wee  
Poems



You might wonder who the contributors to this ERAzine are. Are they long-time writers? How do they come up with ideas? I've never done any writing before, so how could I write something for the next ERAzine? I don't know these people, so would I fit in? Read on...

The zoom version of the ERA Creative Writing group started during lockdown. Some of the half-dozen or so writers have been with the group since then, but a few of us have joined along the way. We use the word "writers", which is true enough, but it's easier to think of us as storytellers. We make shit up. Sometimes the shit is shit, but other times the shit is quite... well, we'll let you make your own minds up.

Most of our stories are written as short stories, but some are written as dialogue between characters or even as poetry (often in the loosest of sense). We usually get a prompt (sometimes a picture, or a starting sentence), spend five minutes working on an idea, then fifteen minutes developing that into a very rough story. What you see here is the 'polished' output. It's what happens after the zoom when we take the rough story and make it readable. But some of the group don't go that far, they just choose to attend and get their pleasure from that. And that's just fine.

One thing that the group has in common is that we are all in recovery from alcoholism and drug addiction. The second thing we have in common with you; every one of us has used these words at the start of a sentence:

"Imagine if"

What follows can be fantastic, 'Imagine if Scotland won the World Cup', and some of them are a bit more realistic, 'Imagine if I got that job'. Regardless, we are imagining. That's what makes us ALL storytellers. If you are in recovery, imagine yourself coming along to Monday night's creative writing group. Every one of us would be really pleased to see you there, so give it a go, you might just like it!

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Edinburgh, January 2024

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NOTES

ERA

ZINE



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# **C O N T E N T S**

<b>WEE POEMS - DONNA H</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>BEATHAG &amp; BEATHAN - CHRISTIAN ROBB</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>WRITING PROMPTS:</b>	<b>8</b>
• <b>THE OLD RUG - RUBY TUESDAY</b>	
• <b>EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE - RUBY TUESDAY</b>	
• <b>THE LAST WE EVER HEARD - OSCAR WILDCARD</b>	
• <b>SHE ALWAYS WOULD - OSCAR WILDCARD</b>	
• <b>THE TON UP KID - TONY Z</b>	
• <b>NOTES OF FATE - CHRISTIAN ROBB</b>	
• <b>THE DEVIL &amp; THE BOTTLE - SM</b>	
• <b>TRY IT YOURSELF</b>	
<b>FITBA GENIUS &amp; SNOOKER LOVE - TONY Z</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>WEE SHORT STORIES - STEPHEN CHRISTOPHER</b>	<b>26</b>

# Wee Poems

## Spiritual Journey

Cautiously, she entered the day,  
The way she often would, some to,  
See, so much to do, a search to hide,  
From this land so blue.

To find a friend, just one, so true,  
Platonic for fun, so much to do,

So little done,  
She enters a new world,

A spiritual one,

A journey, she begun.

Through every day, such pain and fear,

Upon a star unseen,

She wished to disappear,

To a land where life seems so clear

There are so many distractions here...

Donna H.

## Back to the Basics

Every time when you feel,

Like you're gonna fall,

Remember simplicity,

Like the shape of a ball.

The moon, the stars and the sun,

Take your mind back to when,

You were young,

All around, all you see,

Destruction and poverty,

Why all this anger and anxiety?

Let's remember what we've got,

We may think it's a little,

But it's really a lot,

Let's enjoy this life,

We may only get one shot,

Don't give up now,

Give it all you've got,

Donna H.

Moonbeams & Moonbeer

As I walked through the moonlight,  
There were things I'd never seen before.  
A stairway to the moon itself,  
With a welcoming open door.

So when I enter,  
I stare and adore  
There is all sorts to choose from  
With moonbeams galore.

I think I'll be happy to stay in here,  
Please close the door and pass me a  
moonbeer,  
I have no intention of leaving here.  
Donna H.



Into a Strange Land

Into a strange land I must go,  
What season beholds us,  
In this wind and snow,  
Sun and rain,  
Nourishing grain  
The seeds we sow,  
Into a vast sea, of a golden glow,  
Sun and rain merge together,  
Creating a radiant rainbow,  
Cheerily, changing, weather,  
Unaware of circumstances,  
And who, you must be,  
Gaze into the rainbow,  
That shines over the sea,  
When all around, betrayal found,  
Drift off distantly,  
Into a horizon, so profound,  
Of mystical purity...  
Donna H.

## Beathag

SHE sat by the window, her skin up against the rough nylon of the net curtain, peering out at the cul-de-sac through a blackened eye. The metallic taste of blood in her nostrils. It was the first day of twenty twenty-one. She was grateful it had happened now rather than last week. Turning up at her father's for Christmas in this state would have been the end. Frank was still asleep. The room was a wreck. Everything lay about the floor in a violent random fashion: the mirror in shards; furniture broken; pictures off the walls; pieces of her favourite turquoise dress torn, all over the carpet. The neck from the glass giraffe snapped in two. The television on its side. The camera, Frank had bought her, in bits. It was morning and she was exhausted.

She would telephone John-Paul Retz, the Deacon, shortly, for guidance.

The pandemic had brought it all upon them. Before that Frank had been so attentive, taking her to the theatre for the first time, at least that part of the theatre to which she was unaccustomed: as she pulled the smoke from the cigarette all the way down to her boots she pondered on what part of the theatre she had found herself in now. He used to sing to her; call her Poppins. In the beginning she was fascinated with him, slowly getting to like him; moving in with him three months ago; and learning to love him, to this, where she was past hating him.

Her name meant life! What kind of life was this?

She sucked at the filter through a fattened lip.

She looked at her finger and wondered if it wasn't broken, it certainly felt broken. Everything is Broken, that was her favourite Bob Dylan song, from No Mercy. She hoped, in Heaven, Frank would find Mercy.

Her father had told her it would pan out this way, "Those sailor types!" He'd said. But she didn't believe he truly believed that, he simply didn't want to lose the income she brought to the household. Besides! The reason she left to move in with Frank, in the first instance, was due to him treating her like a skivvy since the death of her mother. She thought about what a brute he was. She wished her mother were here now.

Her mother had ended her days escaping the house, wandering the streets in her underwear and knocking on random doors. She was eventually admitted to a care facility, during the storms of March last year, but died within the month. It was written up as Covid, but Beathag believed her mother had willed herself to death looking at the white walls. She also believed the beatings her mother had endured over the years had contributed to the dementia. Were all men brutes? Her brothers weren't brutes. Ernest, her favourite, who had died back in twenty-seventeen from a heroin overdose, when she was just seventeen; he, was such a beautiful human being, and good to her, and good to everyone. Oh! She missed Ernest. Harry had gone to work on the rigs, and though she hardly heard from him these days, they did text, and he always sent something special for her birthday, and each Christmas. This year It had been the new Bob Dylan box set.

She said the last time that the next time would be it.

She was thinking of a line in another favourite of hers by Bob Dylan, Joey, from Desire: '... he ain't dead, he's just asleep'.

Frank was Joey's brother in the song.

Frank wasn't asleep. He was dead.

Picking up her phone she typed out a text to her brother: Harry, could you please find me a good criminal defence lawyer? I've killed Frank. Don't call the police. I've spoken to the Deacon, he's going to call them. Luv B xx



She looked out through the netting and saw the blue flashing lights. She calmly typed out a text to her father: There is nothing in the world that doesn't have a decisive moment. Luv B xx



Beathan

HE sat looking, out through the dust coated window, across the street at the schoolyard, listening to the menagerie of children playing in the afternoon. In one corner of the pane a long-abandoned cobweb hung like a strong delicate rag, in the other a fine hairline crack. It was early December, there was a frost on the ground, and the winter sun was calling out from behind an over cast sky. Ruby Tuesday, sang by Katey Sagal, played on the mpeg 3 player in the small Berlin room.

His childhood had been a sad affair. They had been poor and were always moving from town to town. His father was forever on the run from landlords or debt collectors. When he was ten years old his mother, Margaret Mary, had left his father; and with his two brothers they settled in Stornoway, The Western Isles, with the grandmother. She had been a kind woman. His mother was also always loving and supportive but, she had wanted a girl, and had not even believed the midwife until being shown his tadger. So, convinced had she been that she had not even considered any other name than Beatrice.

Throughout his life he had never truly bonded with people or made any real friendships. One of his brothers had ended up in a psychiatric hospital and the other in an Argentinean jail. His life, had been a calamity of dysfunctional relationships. A hedonistic hellion of high adventure, he'd say. But, over the decades, drip by drip, his dreams had slipped away.

He'd written a letter, though he knew there was no-one of any dearness to him that would read it. Whomever found him may read it, the police who first came

across his body would most likely, and the coroner most definitely. He looked at the thin skin of his fingers as he placed the note on the table.

Before now he could never do this, though in one way or another it had been on his mind the whole of his life. Suicide was a family affair. His uncle had hanged himself. And then his father, wanting to go out with a bigger bang than his brother, had disembowelled his self, while smoking three cigarettes, before driving a silver sacrificial knife into his neck, believing it would free him from his crimes, no doubt. His father had always told him, since returning to his life in his late teens, "You'll amount to nothing, you are a nonce." He couldn't recall, even two occasions where a kind word came from the man.

Through the window he watched the ache of afternoon turn to evening, the schoolyard quiet in the yellow of the streetlight. Marianne Faithfull sang *As Tears Go By*. That came out the year he was born. He stroked his chin and damned the decisive events of the past two years: a catastrophe in every sense of the word! A despotic dystopia had descended throughout the planet. Police patrolling the streets; shortages in the shops; forced isolation; denizens of paranoia; people pointing fingers all over the place: it was a plague of pandemonium. There had been a paradigm shift in the social fabric that had been brought about by whoever the forces were.

He was a busker in Alexander Platz! It was his livelihood, his job, his only form of income. That had all gone. There were few people commuting to work these days, no passing trade. Even if three people gathered in a park they could find themselves in breach of the new laws. Eventually he had no choice and was forced to claim benefits from the state. It was degrading-to be made to jump through all those ridiculous hoops by some hapless ingrate with spots on her face and looking no older than sixteen.

Before now he could never do this. His mother would never recover. And he couldn't be in death with that knowledge. But, last month she had been diagnosed with vascular dementia. It was a tragedy, and over the telephone the doctor had asked if he could not return to Stornoway to care for her-otherwise she would be

committed to a care facility, where she would surely catch Covid. He reasoned, if he killed himself now, she wouldn't realise. When they had spoken, over the recent months, she could no longer remember when they had last talked. On occasion, of late, she was even unsure of who he was when she picked up the phone.

-BAEy-un, Bea! He heard her cry, like an echo far away.

He looked out the window again, as a light drizzle fell and evening became night. The moon looked puzzled. A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square, by Rod Stewart-played on the digital music machine. It was his mother's favourite tune.

He was suddenly struck, recalling the doctor's requests. The restrictions around the world hadn't changed much since the pandemic but, like the return of children to schools, travel was once again also being allowed, under special circumstances. Right there, right then, balling up the paper from the table, he resolved to catch a plane as soon as he could book a flight.

Christian Robb



# WRITING PROMPTS

Prompts help inspire and fill a blank page. Here are a range of stories inspired by prompts used in the ERA Creative Writing group. Why not give it a try yourself?

**Use the following as an opening line to your story & write for 10 minutes.**

***The stale smell of the old rug...***

The Old Rug.

The stale smell of the old rug made me want to vomit. A mixture of smoke, old food and god knows what bodily fluids are ingrained in it. It resembled a worn door mat. It hadn't always been like that. It once had a pile so plush you could practically bounce on it, but now...

My Papa had brought it home from some far-off land when he was in the army, it had taken centre stage in my Grannies living room in front of the fireplace. It's difficult to define the marks from the hot coals from her fire or the ones from my joints now. It's dark in colour, deep wine and navy, to perfectly mask the stains.

Ah can barely move ma head... it's like my brains too big for ma skull. There's something gluing my face to the rug, it might be chilli sauce. Ah raise my eyebrow and it slightly pry's one eye apart. Through a blurry haze ah can see an over flowing Tenants ashtray, the branding long faded. Ah've no idea how long ah've had it. Ah chored it fae a pub, long before the smoking ban. Ah hink the ashtray's outlived the bar. Ah can see the silhouette eh two bottles beside the

ashtray, buckie & Grants vodka and a baw eh paper. It must be chilli sauce cos the paper looks like it once homed a kebab.

Ah move ma eyeball further down the couch, I see the bottom of a leg. Ah can tell by the cut of their jeans it must be a felly. Who the fuck does that belong tae? Ah clock their foot, nice trainers... Adidas Wiens... blue and gold, bet he's a Rangers supporter.

Ah wonder who it is? Did ah meet them in the pub, which one though? Ah canny mind anything after being in The Star. I vaguely remember leaving... The fresh air hitting ma face and lightin a fag, am pretty sure that's what goat me drunk.

Ah wonder if there's anyone else here? Am no getting up tae check, ah canny lift ma heed anyway. Ah canny hear anyone else... only his breathing. Ah clench the muscle in ma thigh a bit and can feel ma jeans and push ma belly out and can feel their button on ma stomach... Av no shagged him then.

Av got a drooth, ma mouth feels like the rug am lyin on, there's no way am movin though, I don't want him to wake up. I've no idea what time it is... Am just gonnæ shut ma eye again and he'll hopefully be away when ah wake back up.

Ruby Tuesday

***A new policy has come into place in airports, you now have to check-in your emotional baggage along with your luggage...***

Emotional Baggage

"Morning, ticket and passport." The check-in assistant asked barley giving me a glance. My mouths dry, yet every other part of my body is sweating. I tentatively hand them over before taking a drink out of my water bottle.

"Try and keep calm" I think to myself. "Breath, inhale 2, 3, 4..." I don't have a fear of flying, just the airport, especially check-in.

"Normal baggage to the right, emotional baggage to the left" the assistant orders as they hand me back my passport and boarding pass.

I take a breath and umph my cases onto the conveyer belts and try to remain unfaltering whilst awaiting my results of the baggage weigh-in.

"Your five kilograms over your emotional baggage allowance" I felt the sparse saliva in my mouth evaporate and ooze out my pores.

"What???" I queried. "That can't be."

They point to the numbers on the scales with their expressionless eyes.

Fffffuuuuuck, shit, breath. I detest airports. I cannot afford this. I've already spent a fortune on weekly therapy sessions for the past three months to ensure this wouldn't happen.

"Its... its just the stress of the airport" I plead. "It'll go down once I'm through security" I say hopefully licking my

lips and drying my hands on my thighs.

"You're still five kilograms over" they state with no emotion.

"You can either go to the counselling room or pay the £100 per kilo fine and head off to security" They say through a straight grin.

I take another gulp of water and give them a half smile to give me time to think.

Can I afford the £500? I do have my credit card. But what about the emotional baggage I'll come home with though? What if I fall in love and get dumped? I'm already worried about how I'm going to look in swimwear compared to others by the pool. I'll be depressed at the thought of my holiday ending and coming home and will most likely be hungover at the airport. Let's try and not think too much about all that just now, I do not want that weight going up another kilogram.

I'm going to have to save my credit card for my return.

"Where's the counselling room?"

"Down that way past WH Smiths" they gesture with their hand. "You'll see the queue."

Ruby Tuesday

**Write a story that begins: That was the last we ever heard of him/her/them.**

THAT WAS THE LAST WE EVER HEARD FROM HIM. HE SAID THEY WERE REAL AND THAT HE COULD PROVE IT.

NECKED THE END OF HIS PINT AND SWANNED OUT THROUGH THE OLD SALOON DOORS.

I CAN STILL FEEL THE WARM SUMMER AIR PRESSING IN CLOSE AND THEN PULLING BACK AGAIN AS THEY SWUNG BEHIND HIM. THERE WAS A TANG OF OZONE, IT SMELLED LIKE A STORM PASSING EVEN THOUGH IT HADN'T RAINED FOR WEEKS AT THAT POINT.

OF COURSE, THE POLICE SAID IT WAS AN ACCIDENT. THEY HAD HIM ON CCTV GETTING INTO HIS CAR AND AGAIN ON HIS WAY OUT OF TOWN.

DRUNK DRIVING.

THE MAN HAD A FEW CRAZY IDEAS, BUT I DON'T THINK THAT WAS ONE OF THEM.

THEY RECKON HE DROVE INTO THAT FIELD, CRASHED, THEN FELL INTO THE RIVER TRYING TO FLEE THE SCENE. THAT'S WHY THERE'S NO BODY - JUST WENT FOR A MIDNIGHT SWIM.

BUT TELL ME THIS - WHAT DID HE CRASH INTO IN THE MIDDLE OF AN EMPTY FIELD? HOW DID THE CAR GET THERE WITHOUT LEAVING ANY TRACKS?

OSCAR WILDCARD



*Use the following as the title of your story...*  
*"She Always Would"*

"MA, PLEASE. I NEED HELP. I'M SCARED TO GO ON MY OWN, WILL YOU COME WITH ME?"

A SHADOW OF A MAN STOOD ON HER DOORSTEP, WET EYES PLEADING FROM A SUNKEN FACE SHE'S KNOWN ALL ITS LIFE AND YET HARDLY RECOGNISED.

A FACE THAT HAD ASKED THAT SAME QUESTION, ON THAT SAME STEP, CRYING THE SAME TEARS 38 YEARS BEFORE ON HIS FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL.

HER LITTLE ANGEL. HER HEART AND SOUL. HER BABY BOY.

THIS WASN'T THE SAME MAN WHO'D STOLEN HER CHECKBOOK, PAWNED HER RINGS, RUINED HER MARRIAGE.

IT WAS THE BOY WHO'D LEFT WITH TEARS IN HIS EYES AND COME HOME WITH SCRAPES ON HIS KNEES.

SHE'D HELPED HIM THEN, SURELY, SHE COULD HELP HIM NOW?

KISS IT ALL BETTER? JUST HOLD HIS HAND FOR THAT FIRST BRAVE STEP?

SHE KNEW.

SHE ALWAYS WOULD.

OSCAR WILDCARD

***You find a £100 note on the street. A few blocks later, you find another. A few blocks later, another...***

The Ton-up Kid

It was the dog-shite that I had my eye on. Only the day before I'd stood on one when leaving the flat. As a result, I was like a marine on patrol in Basra, scanning for anything out of the ordinary; inturdgents, you might say. So, when I clocked it, I knew to steer well clear, and had begun to maximise my radius to avoid casualty. In doing this, the blind man heading in the opposite direction sensed my altered course, perhaps because of my pronounced cough, "Ahem!"

With an expression of disdain on his face, he adjusted his own course accordingly, such that the ping-pong ball on the end of his white stick swept straight into the smelly stuff. It was a sweep too far. I stepped on quickly, divorcing myself from the whole episode, hoping that my crimes had gone unnoticed by innocent passers-by.

Leaving the carnage behind, I continued my scan. My eye was instantly drawn to a strange note lying right in the middle of the pavement, which surely the old blind man must have trodden over, or perhaps he had dropped. At that moment I thought, though only briefly, about calling out to him. The thought disappeared almost as quickly as it had arrived. Wow. A one-hundred-pound note! I'd never even seen a hundred before, now I had one in my hands. I did feel sorry for the old fella, that on account of him being blind, instead of having the good fortune to see the note first, he now had the misfortune to sweep his ping-pong into the poo. I also felt guilty that it just might have been a note that he'd dropped. If that were the case, I might as well have picked it from his pocket.

Anyway, one blind man's loss is another able-bodied man's fortune, as they say. And if they don't, they should.

My dutiful remorse over, I took out my wallet, opened it, folded the note neatly and popped it right in. After tucking the wallet into my jacket pocket, I was safely on my way, The Ton-up Kid.

I crossed the road to the chippy. The shop hadn't changed since the nineteen-fifties, as evidenced by the photos that hung on the white-glazed tiled walls inside. The chippy sat under a railway bridge, and the space outside its door held onto a natural vortex that seemed to be omnipresent. I was sure that the photos on the wall showed the same chip-wrapper broadsheets swirling round as there are today. Having cut through the supernatural gateway, I joined the end of the queue.

I perused the greasy delicacies on offer behind the hot glass of the display cabinet. Smoked sausage? No, too smoky. Fish? No, looked like last Tuesday's. Haggis and white pudding both appeared to have been cremated. Loupin'-wi-grease spam fritters it was then, and I'd have a portion of mushrooms, even though they were as tough as champagne corks the last time.

Just then, the evil vortex blew something in, a gift from its swirling menace. Not a soul in the shop, not the customers nor the staff noticed, but me. I couldn't believe my eyes. It was another hundred.

Cool as a cucumber and swift as a hawk, that's what was needed. I executed my plan without detection. I instantly had a stay of hunger, and nonchalantly walked out of the shop, with a tiny curl of a smile and the note secreted in hand.

What were the odds? It was just my day! Red letter days are hard to come by. Crimson banknote days even harder!

I checked that there was no one around, then folded the note carefully and put it alongside the other one in my wallet.

I cut through Glasgow Green down towards the Walkway. I passed the Glasgow 2014 'monument' and looked beyond it to Nelson's Memorial and sighed. I'm no Grayson Perry but even I could tell that the two juxtaposed hideously with one another. A stupid grinning Clyde the Thistle-man

and an austere nod to the empire. Freak, unwanted twins in my mind, but I conceded, more palatable than statues of slavers.

But then I saw it, there, right where Clyde's meat and two veg would have been, had he been a 'real' man. It looked like Clyde had a dog's lipstick poking out from his nether regions. I took a closer look, then closer still. A jogger and cyclist flew by me, looking at me like some kind of horticultural deviant. As there was nobody else around, I climbed over the wee crowd barrier for an even closer look, then I gave the thing a good tug. It was! Another crimson note! I couldn't contain myself, and began jumping around laughing, like Clyde was my long-lost brother, him grinning all the while.

That's when the Old Bill first clocked me, "Hoy, you! Stop!"

As they sprinted down towards me, I hopped the barrier, and they gave chase. They didn't know what I'd done, and really, neither did I (other than tamper with Clyde), but they weren't giving up and so neither was I. All the time, I kept the note tight in my hand, a treasure worth running for!

Eventually, I juked off the walkway and gave them the slip. Still with a smile on my face, I admired the note in my hand. I'm a collector now, I thought. I completed my ceremony, first folding the note, then laying it inside my wallet so that it could be with its new friends. I put my wallet away.

Then I had an idea. My old watch was falling apart. Three roman numerals swirled around inside the watch face like a kid's kaleidoscope. I'd always wanted a really good watch. To mark this day (and so that I didn't just squander my new-found fortune), I decided to nip into H Samuel in St Enoch's and check out their offerings.

There, in the window, was the same watch that my Uncle Gerry owned, a Tissot Chrono Classic XL. Yup, that was the very thing! It had an RRP of £599 and a 'sale' price of £299. Perfect!

I went into the shop and asked to see the watch. The assistant brought it

From the shop window. It was stunning, and I decided right there and then, yes, I'd take it. The assistant packaged the watch up, putting it into its little presentation case, telling me to register... blah blah, yes, can I just please have it? I thought.

"How would you like to pay?"

"I'll pay cash," I said. This should impress them, I thought, then went into my wallet and pulled out the three hundred-pound notes and handed them over. The assistant went over to the till, closely followed by the manager. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but they both looked over nervously, which in turn made me feel nervous. I heard the door open behind me and had an urge to turn on my heels and run. Then I felt a hand at my elbow, gripping it tight, pinching a nerve. I turned to see the two policemen from before.

"I think you have your man, officer," The manager said, "He has handed over three of the forgeries, all with the same serial number, identical to the note we received earlier."

Before I could say "Spam Fritters", the policeman had slapped cuffs on me and read me my rights. I was dumfounded.

"The fact that he has more than one note," said one of the officers, gathering up the evidence, "points to him being part of the organised crime gang, if not the mastermind."

I can't remember much more than that, although I'm sure that as I was being hucked away, I saw the old blind man, minus his dark glasses and ping-pong stick, looking at the watches in the shop window, and smiling.

Tony Z

## Notes of Fate

It all began with the glint of a broad silver strip running through a crumpled piece of crimson-pink paper on the pavement. Stooping down, Alex discovered an abandoned £100 note. Gaping at it in surprise, he quickly looked around. The streets were deserted. An involuntary twitch crawled across his lips, and in a fevered moment, he placed the note into his pocket. Again, he scanned the streets; not a soul in sight. And then he saw another £100 note. Not ten paces further on, another. His heart raced, and his mind began to flood, plagued with possibilities. However, exhilaration began to turn to trepidation as the thrill mingled with unease and surprise descended into disbelief. Note after note appeared, like pieces of a puzzle, like breadcrumbs in an urban jungle. He leaned against the fence to catch his breath, and looking down, there was another. He looked around again, convinced the money came with some malignant and weighty intent, and someone was watching. Not a soul, not even the movement of a curtain in the windows. He considered turning for home, but as he turned, another note. Nightfall came, and overwhelmed with exhaustion, Alex lay down under a bush in the churchyard and slept. He was awakened by the early light and the cold, wet dew. Opening his eyes, he saw a £100 note sitting on a branch of the bush. The next days and weeks were spent walking the empty city, picking up £100 notes. Enchantment turned to obsession. He needed an answer to the enigma of the money; his pockets were bursting, and the burden was beginning to play havoc with his back. The nagging questions of consequence hung heavy like storm clouds. Sleepless nights were spent piecing together the puzzle, searching for meaning in what had become his routine. Then, one drizzle-draped afternoon, standing in the park by an ancient oak tree, Alex had an awakening. The money wasn't a whimsical gift; it was a message, a symbol of unexpected opportunities and the price of unbridled curiosity. In that moment, Alex made a choice. Carefully folding the note in his hand, he placed it on the ground, in a deliberate act of relinquishment.

*The money that had once held him bound was now free to weave its magic on someone else. As the last note left his fingers, Alex looked back, feeling a great weight lifted from his shoulders. He noticed a young woman removing her shoe in the distance. Leaving a trail of notes behind, he made his way home to his bedsit. In the end, the true treasure wasn't the money, but the journey it had inspired and the understanding that had come with recognising when the allure of the unknown is best set free.*

*Christian Robb*



**Inspired by a picture...**

**Picture prompts are a great way to inspire your writing. Set yourself 10 minutes & write whatever comes to mind...**

The devil & the Bottle

My world has been turned upside down. I am dreaming, and for all intents and purposes, my dreams have become my reality – a place where I can consider my dire predicament with a calm, precise clarity - and my waking hours a nightmare, where I am unable to distinguish between reality and hallucination.

This is what I know.

I am asleep under a salt encrusted sheet, close to death.

I am lost, adrift somewhere on the Atlantic Ocean, and have been for 93 days and nights.

I will probably die within ten days.

All I have left is hope.

Dreaming, my brain firing on all cylinders for survival, I know precisely what I must do when awake. I must drink what rainwater I have collected, catch fish and keep out of the burning sun, under my salty blanket. I must keep my eyes on the horizon and, most importantly, I must not lose hope.

I know now that what I've always needed is precisely what I need now, but my situation has forced the focus. I need food and water to last another day, and the irony of being imprisoned by millions of gallons of salty water and countless, unseen fish is not lost on my dreaming brain. But to survive beyond tomorrow, to live again, I need help. I need rescue. I need discovery. In short, I desperately need other people.

Yet whilst awake I'm losing my grip on reality, plagued by visions that my desperate, broken body will not recognise as hallucinations. Ships. Land. Aircraft. Voices. My simple list of must dos becomes lost in the horror of my situation.

My mother sits here with me, in my dream. She isn't real, of course. I understand that. I'm fully aware that I'm dreaming, and I'm aware that my mother is not alive at all. Yet here she is, watching over me. It is a comfort. She told me that she's here to keep me from temptation. Temptation from what I do not know, but I trust her. She also tells me not to lose hope. I'm about to wake up.

My lips are thin, cracked and dry. My tongue is swollen. The silence that envelopes me is crushing my bones. I feel like I'm cooking. My teeth are too long, and they move with my breath. I crawl to the water pot. A thin layer of water reflects my ghostly reflection. I drink it down and lick it off, as eager for the water as I am to rid myself of that face. Eyes burning, I



scan the horizon. I see a glint on the horizon. Flashing! Is it a ship?

I jump up, arms waving, crying out. It is a ship! I scream for help. They can see me, I'm sure of it! The ship is coming right at me, fast. It isn't slowing. I stumble back. I see the rigging. I see faces, laughing, mocking. People on fire, pointing at me, shouting. The ship is looming over me, about to carve straight through me. I fall back screaming.

Nothing. No ship. No faces. Tears burn down my face.

I hear a clinking noise. Glass? I scramble over and find a bottle, knocking against boat. I fish it out of the water. It looks like an old, very old, whiskey bottle.

Red eyes stare back at me through the slimy glass. It smiles, it's tiny face twisted toward my own. It Looks like a little devil.

"What do you want"? it asks.

"To survive. Rescue. I,..I need help", I reply hoarsely.

"Let me out, and you can have all that you want. Free me.

Open the bottle. Do it now."

"I need help. A ship. Other people."

"Trust me. Release me. I'll make your dreams come true. I can get you on your feet on dry land. You're hopeless without me.

You need me, and I need you."

"But hope is all I have."

"You're going insane, listening to advice from your dead mother. Let me be free, and I'll let you talk to your mother any time you want. Open the bottle, Peter."

I pulled the crusty blanket over my head, leaving me in semi darkness with this devil in a bottle.

"Tell me how you know my name."

8 months later.

I was rescued that very day. A Mexican fishing boat found me. A lucky, chance encounter they said, and one that saved my life.

I am sitting at my kitchen window, staring out over the sloping, green grass toward the tree. The sun is rising behind it, casting a shadow on the grass between us. The branches reach up while shadow reaches toward me like the roots of the tree itself stretching to pull me under. I shiver.

I made a choice that morning. I decided to sleep on it, so I could make a further decision regarding that bottle and the promises made. My mother told me again she was here to keep me from temptation, and I shouldn't let go of hope. Under those shadow roots, close to the tree, I buried that bottle ten feet deep, unopened and locked in a stainless-steel box.

I'm at peace and, God willing, that bottle shall remain buried and unopened.

SM

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## TRY IT YOURSELF

Set yourself 10 minutes, don't overthink it, just write!



Detective Inspector MacAslan leaned forward.

“So, you’re saying that you never placed a bet on the City – United game last Wednesday, is that right, Lee?”

“Naw,” said Lee nervously, “Ah wouldnae dae that, Ah mean, why would Ah? Ah got enough money fae playin’ the game.”

“But we have evidence that points to the contrary, Lee. Video evidence for one thing. Of you entering and placing a wager at Macbets on Main Street just half an hour before the game was due to start. How do you explain that Lee?”

“Ah dinnae see that that’s me in that video,” protested the ex-player, “Ah wouldnae dae that. Ah’m a professional fitba player...”

“No, you were a professional football player. Not anymore,” corrected the policeman.

Lee’s brief could see his client’s nerves were jangling. “You don’t need to answer these questions, Lee.”

Lee steadied himself.

“Awright, aye, ah wis a fitba player, but ah wouldnae dae it. Ah dinnae need the money.”

MacAslan continued with his line of questioning. “But we also have a statement from someone close to the City manager saying that he colluded with you to make sure that there were at least three cards in the first half.”

Lee jumped to his defence, “Whae ever said that’s lying. Why wid ah dae that? Ah dinnae need the money an’ Ah’ve my reputation as a professional fitba player – a Scotland International fitba player – tae think aboot. It’s just no’ worth the risk. That’s just no’ me.”

“We’ve also got statements from several bookmakers in both Edinburgh and Glasgow saying that you were a regular in their shops and that you regularly placed large bets on football.”

“Nut, no me,” said Lee as he crossed his arms tightly.

“But you were seen in these shops with known acquaintances of yours, Jimmy

Six-bellies and Marco Richardson. We know it was you, the evidence is overwhelming.”

“Nut, wasnae me,” Lee said, as he tucked his chin into his chest and leant back in his chair, crossing his legs.

“Well then Lee, can you account for these transactions from your account? There’s over £150,000 withdrawn in cash in the last six months; £30,000 right before last Wednesday’s match.”

His brief knew that the game was up. Lee was bang-to-rights. It was an open and shut case, and he duly advised his client that the best way forward was to accept the evidence presented and to co-operate with the police.

“Listen to your lawyer,” added Detective Inspector MacAslan, deciding to show his hand. “He has your best interests at heart. You’re not the one we’re really after. We’re not even after the manager, if truth be told. Yes, you’ll both be prosecuted, but your co-operation will be looked upon favourably by the judge. We’ll even put a word in for a non-custodial sentence. We know that there’s a well-known mob behind this and at least half a dozen other lucrative capers like it. We want them captured and put behind bars.”

Lee paused for thought.

“It wasnae me,” he said, defiantly, “Ah dinnae need the money, Ah’m a fitba player, Ah’ve a reputation.”

Tony Z



Snooker, Love. (A very short play formatted for radio)

*Fade up, car door closes, sound of front door opening then closing.*

MAN: Alright darlin'? That's me home. I'm just going to head in for a shower.

(pause) Did Max get home from school camp OK?

(pause)

WOMAN: (Shouts from upstairs) Are you home?

MAN: Yes. Did Maxie get home alright?

WOMAN: Yes.

MAN: You okay?

WOMAN: As good as I'll ever be.

MAN: You remembering I'm out tonight?

WOMAN: With Darren and the lads, right?

MAN: Yes, that's right.

WOMAN: Did you not say that Darren was away on holiday?

MAN: Oh, er, yeah, that's right. (pause) I meant with the other lads.

WOMAN: Where are you off to again?

MAN: Just going down the club to play snooker.

WOMAN: So why do you need a shower?

MAN: Oh... the office was warm today.

(pause)

WOMAN: And you were playing there last Tuesday night too, right?

MAN: Yeah, that's right. Why do you ask?

WOMAN: Oh, it's just that I noticed that you'd left your queue in the hall cupboard after you'd left.

MAN: Ahhh, yes - I had to borrow Johnny's.

WOMAN: Ah, that explains it. So Johnny must use pink chalk on his cue then?

MAN: Sorry? What?

WOMAN: It's just I found some of the pink chalk on your shirt collar when I went to wash it last week. (pause, then calmly and deliberately) Try to be a bit more careful in future darling.

MAN: Er, yeah... I will do. I'll just go get that shower...

Tony Z



## Blank Canvas.

I wake up in the toilet wearing someone else's clothes. The last thing I remember is kissing Dinah. I drain the half bottle of red that I kindly left myself. My stomach uncoils as the liquid starts to sing and I stumble out the tomb reborn.

Dinah is lying outstretched on the floor and she is sobbing. Not drunken tears, but proper wailing. It sounds like grief; it sounds like loss. Her friends surround her on their knees, sticking out comforting hands, but not wanting to get too close her pain. The music has stopped. Everyone is stood round the room in ones and twos and I think they are crying too. It's like a renaissance painting, all shadows and eyes. Dinah crumpled in the centre of the room in that velvet green dress.

When I was wee, my mum would take me to the galleries and she would point up at some gold-plated frame.

*Look how the eyes follow you round.*

I would swagger up and down that white marble flooring. Hands in pockets, swinging my legs like a soldier. If the paintings were going to watch me, I would make it a show.

I'm looking at Dinah but every single other person in the room is looking at me. They are looking at me like my flesh is on the turn.

Stephen Christopher

The blackout.

You wrote a show  
about that night  
and cast me as myself.  
I dissected my character  
with my head in my hands,  
struggling to breath.



Dear Joan

I was putting ma face on when he got the idea intae his head.

-Do we need a calligraphy set hen?

-Are you joking?

-How?

-That's the yin for curly writing.

-Ah like curly writing.

At first it lived next tae the hoose phone, but nobody rang. Then he puts it at the table by the door, tae sign for the big shop, but it's all gone electronic now. He starts inventing reasons just tae get it out.

-It sounds like a herd of Elephants up there, I'll just put a note through the door.

I bumped into Lawrie from next door who'd seen him using it at the bookies.

-Ink pot and everything Joan. Refused ma biro. Horse came in but...

Ma blood was boiling. I had no idea he had been doing the curly writing outside the house... and refusing poor Lawrie's pen!

I sat him down and told him that it was either me or the calligraphy.

-It's just a pen.

-Exactly.

He told me that he'd thrown it away but I still had ma suspicions. One day I even found an ink mark when I was taking his good jeans out the wash.

He left me in June for that Elsie down the road. Just packed his things and left.

You should have seen the note that he left me.

Stephen Christopher



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