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Round 'Are Way:
An exploration of the representations of working-class characters and stereotypes
in twenty-first century fiction

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Abstract

Round 'Are Way is a creative and critical project consisting of three short stories entitled 'Joanna', 'Steven', and 'Caroline'. There is also an accompanying exegesis which engages with critical literature surrounding some of the concepts and issues discussed in the three stories. The three characters in the stories are all interlinked by the event of a funeral. The story titled 'Joanna' focuses on a young girl who is dealing with the death of her childhood best friend. She is also moving into adulthood and dealing with the loneliness and isolation she has felt since she first moved away for university. The story 'Steven' focuses on a middle-aged man who is experiencing issues in no longer feeling at home where he lives and disdain with the career he chose. Steven reflects on his life growing up in a working-class post-industrial town before moving to a big city and experiencing expressions of sexuality he has never experienced and meeting his best friend. The story titled 'Caroline' is an exploration of a mother's relationship with grief after the sudden, unexpected loss of her only child. Caroline is lonely in her empty house and pushing everybody away. The accompanying exegesis looks into the accessibility of publishing as a career for people from working-class backgrounds and the representation of working-class fiction in publishing. The paper will also explore the ways in which working-class characters are represented in twenty-first-century fiction and draw on pre-existing theories and ideas of how one's perceived class intersects with other experiences and aspects of identity. The representation of place will be focused on by comparing my own creative work with that of other authors, along with theories and analyses about evoking a sense of place. The paper will also focus on the different stereotypes the characters in my stories may have previously been subjected to and how I attempted to subvert them.

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Joanna

I finish another drink. I stare at the sky. It is so big that it makes me feel like a speck of dust, which most of the time is all I want to feel like. Sometimes I find it best to pretend that nothing really matters and reminding myself that I am just a speck of dust helps with this. I am very good at pretending to be happy. I've learnt that I prefer to be around people, because I have to pretend to be happy, and I am so good at it that I often convince even myself that I am.

I'm not a miserable bastard, I'm far from it actually. I don't think people would roll their eyes when I cross their mind. Not that I cross many people's minds. I miss her. The sky opens up and raindrops bounce off the wooden benches and empty glasses on the tables. There are more people here than I expected. It was like a school reunion outside the building. It was nice because I didn't keep in touch with that many after I left. Everybody is on their best behaviour at funerals. That's the one thing funerals are good for. You have to be nice to everybody. I look around and my brain aches at the sounds of laughter and crying and drinks clinking and hugging and singing.

For most of my life, I have never really felt lonely. I had friends all the way through school. We were a close group. Whilst we were all quite similar in personality, I was the funny one. I liked my role. I seemed to get on with everybody in school, and I was genuinely sad when the bell rang on the final day. I was excited at the prospect of all the new friends I was about to make.

Oh, sorry we didn't bother inviting you to the student Halloween thing, we were all already on campus together when we decided to go!! Tix for xmas event have sold out too, they told me they were running low when I went to pick up tix for me and others, I didn't realise you said you'd come along. Maybe if you call the uni they might have some spares?

Yeah, sure.

I hated university. Maybe I should've tried harder to mingle instead of locking myself away in my room most evenings. I thought I would've made loads of friends. When I came back home for Christmas, my old friends had all made new friends, and that's all there was to it. It is the harsh circle of life I suppose.

I felt like death was imminent when I woke up this morning, as I sat limp on the bathroom floor, resting against the toilet seat. I have woken up in that state almost every morning for a week. I don't get hangovers very often anymore, and after the fourth morning I convinced myself that it couldn't be a hangover, it must have been something catastrophic like a brain tumour the size of a house. I didn't drink that night, and so on the fifth morning, I woke up feeling okay, and accepted that my tolerance isn't quite so high. I miss her.

When I was at university and I came home to find all my mates had found new people to get pissed and dance in pubs with, she had gone too. I expected it, but it still hurt all the same. When we were together it was never quite the same as before anyway. She was slowly starting to fade into a person I didn't know. At least that's what I thought at the time. It turns out she was just fading away. Everybody ignores the rain.

--

PARK BENCHES

"What about Kill Bill, surely, you've seen Kill Bill?" She says, taking another drink from her can.

"Nope, never seen it. I've seen Pulp Fiction," I say.

"Doesn't count, even my Mum has seen Pulp Fiction," she says before laughing.

I look out over the field. It is nearing 7pm and the sun is beginning to drag itself down to the floor again. I take another chip from the polystyrene container in my lap and throw it to a seagull. Two lads in the year below are kicking a football at the top floor of the bingo hall,

trying to smash the windows that have yet to be destroyed. The skate park is full of kids throwing themselves down ramps on boards and bikes, and the swing sets are full of fifteen-year-olds. It's my last, last day at school. There is always a certain buzz in the air on the last day. There is a summer of endless possibility standing in front of us.

“Well, I tell you what,” I say. The cider is hitting me now. “When we're twenty-five and boring, you can sit me down and show me every god damn rubbish film I've ever seen. Deal?”

“Deal. If I make it to twenty-five that is.” I hate it when she talks like this.

“Well obviously you will,” I say. I don't want to ask any more questions, and I can tell from her face that she can't be bothered to argue with me, so we leave it there.

--

I stand at the bar swaying. God knows what I must look like, slumping around by myself and spending all my money on drinks. I order another vodka and Coke but I ask her to put it in a big glass and pay extra for her to put more Coke in, so it'll take me longer to drink it. I comfy myself on a bar stool and watch her walking around, pushing the glass up against the vodka spout and then pulling the little soft drink pistol out of its holster. I wonder if she knows how good she looks. I swear she keeps looking at me on purpose.

There is nothing high class about this place, with its wooden stools and beer mats pinned to the wall for decoration but this was Chelsea's favourite bar. I hand over the screwed-up fiver in exchange for the glass, and she smiles at me before moving on to the next person. I watch her make his drink too, just a pint of some beer that I hate the taste of, but she has never made it look better. She definitely wants me. It is clear as day. I made her laugh earlier. It was nice to make somebody laugh again. I read the label of the concentrated disinfectant. One part solution, one part water.

My life is now split in to two parts. Happy and miserable. Chelsea and no Chelsea. In

love and heartbroken. I stare at the picture of Chelsea up on the bar, with a little white rose beneath the brown frame. She must think I'm a selfish bastard, making this about me. Maybe I should've listened when she said she wouldn't make it. Mum told me not to think like that because there was nothing I could've done for her anyway. We had drifted a lot in the last two years. Maybe if I had listened and made her get help earlier then this could have been avoided.

I look over at her boyfriend. He's been sitting with his mates for most of the afternoon around a table. They've all been crying. He loved her for years before she finally agreed to love him back. I used to reassure him and tell him to hold on. I would tell him that I thought she was afraid of getting hurt, but I never really asked her. I didn't think he would wait around forever but he did. Sometime in the summer after college finished they entered the pub arm in arm greeted with cheering and clapping.

I am in love. That is one of the things that is making my life a complete tragedy, actually. She left me a couple of months ago. I didn't think she'd ever leave. She said she needed time away, to work on herself and find out what she wanted from life. I think that was her way of saying it's not me, it's you, and some other bullshit. The whole break up was a lot of bullshit to be honest. I had loved her before she loved me, just like Chelsea's boyfriend, and just like him, I love her now she doesn't love me back.

--

BRAKE LIGHTS

I lie beside her on the bed and close my eyes. I could cry. I could break down and cry. I won't, because I don't want her to get freaked out and leave, but I could. I have been so fucking lonely. I have been so alone. My body aches. She lays a lazy arm across my chest. She just told me that she loves me. She loves me back. I have been so lonely.

The sun pours in through the sky light in the middle of the room. A perfectly square patch of carpet, faded from the rays, begins to warm. I want to go and lie under the sun on that patch of carpet and fall asleep. I want to start fading from too much sunlight. I am not on the carpet though; I am in her arms. She is asleep, breathing softly in my ear. I close my eyes. I am floating. I relax into the mattress and feel myself drift away.

I am in love.

I thought I was in love when I was sixteen. Infatuation maybe. In love with the idea. It wasn't love. This is love. They said that when I feel it I'll know. I want her to wake up so I can make her laugh again. I want to make her laugh all day every day until the day that I die. I want to feel her skin under my hands every day until the day that I die. I want to see her in every face I ever see. I want to hear her voice in any person that ever speaks to me again.

She loves me back. She said it herself.

"You're thinking too much again. I can practically hear you," she mutters.

She can't hear me. She just knows because I am probably furrowing my eyebrows so much that they're trembling. It is an annoying habit I can't control. My teachers used to tell me I was overthinking too. It doesn't matter though, that she can't actually hear me, because she has watched me thinking and noticed my eyebrows moving and she knows me. She knows me. I have been so lonely.

"Come on," she says. "Get dressed, let's go and get some food."

It is nearing midnight. She probably wants to drive to the fast-food place. I think about sitting in my car, the music she chose playing quietly in the background. I think about me driving, the brake lights illuminating her eyes. I think about her watching the road markings and counting the number of people she sees, which I have recently found she does. I think about tomorrow when I will go back to my dingy little room at university. I think about going back without her. I think about being in a room that she is not in and how much I

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do not want to be in a room that she is not in. I think about how if she started walking I would literally follow her to the end of the continent. I am in love with her. She loves me back.

--

The funeral was horrible. I don't think she'd have liked it. She wasn't religious. You could've shown her Jesus walking in the flesh and she would've shrugged and said she didn't believe it. I'm not religious either. The hymns and the talk of God's plan and the talk of the afterlife and mortal remains have never really sat right with me. It surprised me actually because her mum never seemed that way out either. I didn't see much of her during the ceremony but when she stood with her family thanking everybody as they exited the church she looked numb, as if behind her eyes she was somewhere else entirely.

She is so, so missed. The service was so lovely.

Yeah

I'll talk to you at the pub, we can have a drink if you'd like.

Sure

I couldn't imagine the thought of my own mum having to do that, watching my coffin get carried away by a load of men I've never met. I am drunk.

Most of my friends – who I struggle to keep in touch with these days – have gone down to the old pit. I told them I'd meet them later. Chelsea's Mum wanted me to stay for the pizza having found out I hadn't eaten anything all day. The truth is though, I don't know if I can quite face them. I met them in a pub before a night out sometime during my second year. It was one I hadn't been to before. They told me to meet them in their usual booth. Jordan stood up to go to the bar. 'Usual?' He asked everyone. They all nodded. 'Sorry, Jo what is it you drink?' My friend Indya turned to me. 'Bet you're not used to one of our nights out, what's it like where you're living at uni?' I shrugged and told her I preferred coming out

here. 'We're meeting up with Phoebe and Connor and all that lot. Oh, you haven't met them? They're amazing, Phoebe is the funniest person you'll ever meet.' When we got to the first nightclub I found myself watching them having fun. They were still the same people, hanging around the same places, but they spoke about things *you wouldn't understand, it's a bit of an inside joke.*

--

WHITE LIGHTNING

"EIGHT SEVEN SIX FIVE FOUR THREE TWO--- AHHHHHH rubbish mate! Load of shit!" Jordan shouts.

"It's impossible it tastes like shit!" I protest, spluttering on the white lightning that I just failed to down in one go.

"Nope, no excuses, you know the punishment," Tom says.

I shake my head and decide not to protest any further, pouring myself a shot of vodka. It tastes like nail polish remover. It burns the back of my throat. My ability to take the shot wins back the respect of my friends, who move on to the next white lightning victim. I see Rachel step outside and decide to follow her, stopping at my bag in the kitchen to pull out my cigarettes and lighter. I psych myself up as best I can, ruffling my hair and readjusting my tee shirt and jacket. I even throw a mint from the bottom of my bag into my mouth for good measure. This part of the evening has become somewhat of a routine. Every time we get drunk, she will find an excuse to need to talk to me in private but talking actually means she wants to kiss me. This agreement comes with a silent condition. We have never once discussed our kissing.

At sixth form the next day, it is as if it never happened, we do not even share a look that says *I really enjoyed that and would like to do it again.* If it were up to me we would do it all the time. We would kiss behind the maths block at school and in the park on the way

home. We would share secret looks whilst everyone is distracted. We would address it even in the most minuscule way. She wouldn't have to get drunk to kiss me.

I step outside. She is stood with Xander. Xander is a tool. He treats girls like rubbish and thinks he is much better looking than he actually is. She wasn't coming outside hoping I'd notice and follow; she is following him. She is smoking a cigarette. It needs re-lighting. He leans in and she uses the red ember on his to light hers. They kiss. God. He is a tool. She is a tool for kissing him. They are both tools. I walk back inside, deciding that I will never kiss her again. I don't care how much she enjoys it despite never telling me, I will never kiss her again.

“MISERABLE FACE MEANS ANOTHER SHOT!” Jack says.

I don't argue. The music gets turned up. I forget about Xander and Rachel. I let the nail polish remover burn the hairs off of the back of my throat. I dance. We all dance. Chelsea and I perform the routine we made up to Madonna when we were barely teens. We perform it to perfection, or at least that's what it feels like. I find myself laughing. I find myself absolutely happy.

--

I stand up to leave. I find Chelsea's Mum and I hug her. She is drunk. She tells me how much Chelsea loved me and how much she missed me when I was away at uni and she tells me that she wants me to come round and see her every Friday afternoon for a cup of tea and she wants to get hold of her Facebook account if I know the password so she can get all of the photos off of it and I should come round every Saturday morning for a cuppa or maybe just next Saturday or the Saturday after that.

I put my hands inside my pockets and walk out of the pub, finding myself stood in the middle of town. The shops and pubs and cafés might be 'under new management' every now

and then, but nothing around here ever changes. The clouds have cleared, and the sun is shining again. It must only be 5pm, which means most of the shoppers have gone home, but the pubs are still busy. It makes me smile. When I came back from university and everything had changed, I couldn't wait to get out of here. I do miss it though. I shiver. I have already spent too much time missing what is no longer there..

I stagger a little as I walk through the infamous Gold Street, decorated with night clubs and kebab shops .The place isn't so electric in the middle of the day. There is a feeling in the pit of my stomach, it weakens my legs. I haven't been for a night out on this street since I was twenty. I am twenty-four now and I couldn't imagine even putting a pair of high heels on, never mind being so young and care-free and happy. The sun dips as dusk sets in, the way it always used to when I walked to my part-time job in the summer. I breathe.

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HISSING RADIATORS AND MISSING PEOPLE

I wake up. I am sure I heard a knock at my door. My brain plays so many tricks on me in the mornings though, so I don't open my eyes and try to fall back to sleep.

Another knock. Who on earth is knocking on my door? I rub my eyes. We don't get post directly to our doors. Did I leave the oven on? Is the kitchen on fire? I get out of bed and pull on the track suit bottoms I left on my desk. I open the door.

“Jo, thank god, we were gonna put out a missing person's report on you!”

It is my flat mate Rebekah. She is standing in her dressing gown. I have been at May's flat for the last week or so.

“Wha-?”

“I mean, we noticed on Wednesday that you hadn't moved your clean plates off the dish rack for a while and we thought oh maybe she's just got busy with her uni work but then

we realised that your curtains have been shut for like three days and we thought god she hasn't died in her room has she? I knocked yesterday morning too and nothing!"

"Yeah," I say. "I've been out, I didn't really think you'd notice, erm, sorry about the plates," I say.

"Oh it's fine we moved them back into the sink; don't worry. Anyway, look give me your number and then if it happens again I can text you, cos see none of us had your number and you're not on Facebook or anything so...". I think back to my impulsive social media purge a couple of weeks ago after seeing yet another couple I know get engaged.

"Yeah, yeah sure," I say.

I reel off my phone number and close the door. I lie on my bed on top of the sheets. I imagine them discussing my whereabouts in the kitchen, knocking on my door yesterday morning. I wonder if they were genuinely worried about my safety or the thought of one of their flatmates actually dying in the flat excited them to no end. I am in my final year of study and had considered trying to get a studio apartment close to the university, but after considering how much lonelier that would've felt than at least being able to hear other students, I decided to stay in halls again. My flat mates are well intentioned, they're just already all friends, and I am exhausted and defeated from two relentless years of trying to make friends and keep friends that I didn't even try with them.

I had a job interview two months ago. The position is for a content writer at a company that sells milkshakes and yogurts. They called me a few days ago to tell me that they want me. It would mean moving to Sheffield, but it doesn't matter so much. Aside from my family, there is very little left for me in my hometown. I told them in that same phone call that I'd take the job.

My radiator hisses. It has been broken since I came back after the Christmas break. I am submitting my final assignment of the year tomorrow. I have grown quite fond of the

sound. White noise has always calmed me down, and it fills the silence. I close my eyes and drift off back to sleep. I get to start again soon. I get to get out of here and start again.

--

I finally reach the bus station, which is a miracle given how drunk I realise that I am and stand at the 221 stand. This bus has a stop which is very close to the pit. I imagine going there, and laughing at the jokes I don't understand, and memories I wasn't involved in. I imagine not being able to sit off to the side with Chelsea and laugh about something ridiculous until our sides hurt. The bus pulls up and a couple of people get off. I let every person in the queue get on before me. I shake my head at the driver and watch it pull away. I head down to the 390 stand. The bus that stops outside my Mum's house. The humming of the engine under my seat comforts me. It reminds me of how hot the seats of the old school buses used to get.

“How was it love?” I have always hated crying in front of her.

“Oh, come here, love, I know,” she holds me. “Come on, let's get you in bed. I'll put the kettle on.”

I lie in bed. My bedroom is the same as when I moved out. I close my eyes. I think of Rachel, and I think of Xander, and I think of my old job and nights out in town, and I think of Paul and Tom and Jess. I think of school and my teachers. I breathe. I think of Chelsea and her mum and her boyfriend. I think of how horrible life is. I think about how sad and horrible it is that she's dead. I think about how angry I am.

I think of May, and how she isn't going to come back. I think of waking up tomorrow, and everything being the same, and I think of happiness. I think of myself being happy. I think about how happy I can be. I think about how Chelsea's pain didn't go away when she

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left, it just got moved from her to everyone that loves her. I think of how I want to be the only one that feels my pain. I think that I'll spend the day with mum tomorrow.

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STEVEN

The library looks closed today. It looks closed every day, to be honest. The ‘M’ in Marklow has fallen off almost all of its screws so it now reads *Warklow Library: owned by our council, run by you* in bright red letters across the front of the building. The red bricks and the flat roof stand against the heavy grey sky today. It smells fusty.. I browse the teenage fiction section, in search of a book about anything but teenage boys in rubbish schools surrounded by rubbish people. I walk up the staircase in the centre of the building holding a slightly worn copy of *Factotum*, which I heard one of the teachers talking about when I walked past the staffroom on the way to the toilet during my maths lesson. He was also smoking from a tobacco pipe, and I could smell brandy on his breath during the first period, so I’m not sure how much I trust him.

“Close in five minutes,” comes the stern voice of Mrs. Walters, the chief library volunteer.

She is who the ‘you’ refers to on the front of the building. She doesn’t like me coming in here because once I do, I don’t like to leave. It is usually quiet in here, and often warm, so when Mum and Dad are arguing or Dad tells me to go outside and hang around with my friends like a normal teenager, I slip in here for the evening.

“I said five minutes, son. Either check the book out or sling your hook,” Mrs. Walters says. I decide to slip the book into my bag and sling my hook at the same time, which is my way of giving her the finger.

The sky threatens rain, which is typical for springtime around here. I walk alongside the railway tracks until I reach the hole in the fence that leads to the football field. I sit down under the tree that provides the most rain cover and light a cigarette. I decide against the book

and opt to watch the football game unfolding in front of me instead.

My older brother Christopher and the lads from his school year are halfway through a game. Half of them in white tops make up 'shirts' and the other half are naked from the waist up, making up 'skins'. They meet here at six o'clock every Friday evening as soon as the clocks go forwards and I started coming here every Friday at six o'clock as soon as I found out that Mark Chapelhow always plays 'skins'.

I sit far enough away that they cannot see me watching them. Christopher publically humiliates me whenever I get within six feet of him when he's with his friends. I also don't want anybody to know that rather than reading a book or doodling in my notepad, I am watching Mark Chapelhow get progressively dirtier and sweatier.

The back of the net bulges and Mark runs towards the corner flag, sliding on his knees and pushing his hand through his long black hair. It was their last day at school today, which means that in exactly one year, it will be mine. Their faces are plastered with freedom. They sang 'bollocks to this place!' as they ran towards the buses. I watched them from the safety of the wooden bike shed, thinking that I could not imagine myself ever being so happy to leave here.

I quickly tire of the boys screaming and shrieking at each other and wish my best friend Craig had been able to come out tonight. I called him up earlier on the house phone and got his Mum instead. She didn't seem at all interested in speaking with me. "He's busy helping his dad, Steven you'll have to call him up tomorrow or see if any of your *other* friends are free." I thanked her and put the phone down.

Mrs. Jackson doesn't like me all that much, she thinks it's strange that Craig and I only have one friend each and I heard her telling Craig's Dad that she thinks I'm weird with my long curly hair and the comics I'm always carrying, she thinks Craig should have more friends. After she put the phone down on me this evening I retreated to my room and decided

I'd spend the rest of the evening in there, maybe sneaking some chocolate biscuits upstairs when I got the chance.

My plans quickly changed when Mum got home from her shift cleaning at the school and moaned at Dad for not walking the dog. Fridays are the worst because Mum and Dad realise they have to spend the whole weekend together, and that makes them both angry, which makes them both drink. I have tried my absolute hardest to make them be in love with each other. But they are, what my teacher would call them, hopeless cases. They do not want to love each other. Every day on my way home I check to see if they have put the 'reduced to clear' stamps on the flowers. I use my left-over dinner money to buy some and give them to Dad to give to Mum.

"Don't be chuffing soft," he says before making me put them in the garden.

I tell Mum that even though he never buys them, Dad's favourite cigarettes are the ones with the gold carton. They're just too expensive for him, I tell her. "Yeah well, Stevie if your dad wants to kill himself with fancy gold packaging he can pay for it himself."

Now I'm sitting here again staring at Mark Chapelhow, even though I promised myself that last week would be the last time, and the week before that.

--

It is the last day in school. I sit at my desk, the same one I have sat at every weekday for the last five years, and for the first time in five years, I pray for the clock to stop. I pray for somebody to jump up and say "Sir! The clock! It's wrong, it should say 8:30am, but it says it's 3:15pm!"

The careers lady that came in for the afternoon last week asked me what I wanted to do after I leave school, and I didn't have an answer for her. She handed me leaflets, mainly with the council logo in the corner, about schemes where I can train up for different trades such as plumbing, bricklaying, and plastering. She even asked me if I had considered joining

the army, or the royal air force. I said there was more chance of me giving birth to a child here on this floor, which made her laugh. I told her that I liked drawing and showed her some of my pictures which she liked. She asked me if I thought about applying to go to an art college, and I told her that no, I had not. She told me to go to the school office on Friday at 3:30pm where she would send over some brochures and other information about programmes for people like me. I didn't quite know what she meant by that.

I don't quite fancy going home and showing my dad the brochures for fancy colleges. He keeps telling me that the first Monday after school ends I'll be down the yard with him, learning how to plaster a wall to perfection. When Mum suggested I might not like that kind of thing, he finally compromised and said if it doesn't work out then I'll be in town working on the cars with Christopher.

The class explodes in laughter at the cartoon playing on the television. Mr. Baker and Mr. Chapmon wheeled it in, and luckily the cartoons were about to start. They joined our two classes together, Baker's lot sitting on the floor in front of our desks, and said it was our treat for finishing school. It is the same show that used to play every evening after Mum bathed me. We would sit on the sofa, wrapped in bed sheets, and covered in blankets, eating toast and watching the cartoons.

"You're my favourite little boy in this world, Steven," she would whisper to me.

"Including your brother, of course." I would laugh and let her kiss my head and squeeze me tight. When Dad got in from work, covered in muck and asking for his own bath, she would bundle me up to bed and read me a bedtime story.

I never did like the night times, when my door was shut, and I could never sleep. I stare at the wall behind the tv in the classroom. I imagine myself in a college. I imagine myself surrounded my paints and chalks. I imagine big white classrooms, with huge windows and high ceilings.

The bell rings. Notebooks and school ties are thrown into the air. Cheers and chants drown out the cartoons. Girls burst into tears, hugging each other and holding each other up. The boys can't get out of here fast enough. I walk slowly down to the office, my hands squeezed shut inside my pockets.

"The careers lady, um, Elizabeth, she said she had some stuff here for me," I mutter.

"Name?" The lady behind the glass says.

"Redbridge, um, Steven Martin Redbridge," I tell her.

"Oh yes, they're in the back, just a moment." I nod and watch her leave her cubicle.

I picture myself working in an office. Surrounded my stacks of paper, knowing exactly what it says on each of them. Knowing where they should all be.

"Here you go, lad," she says. I nod and shove them into my bag. "I think you should apply to those places, you know," she says. "It's about time some of the lads in this school tried something different, I'm sick of seeing them turn into their dads before they turn seventeen," she says.

I nod in agreement, as if I too am sick of seeing it, but I'm not confident I know what she is talking about.

--

"You know what I say, Stevie? Bollocks to Dad! Bollocks to him! I mean... one sec." He puts his hands on his knees and dry heaves. "Sorry... what was I saying?" He asks, before stumbling sideways and continuing his march home.

We missed the last bus after the pubs shut and so decided to walk home. Christopher and I have very little in common with each other, but one interest we do share lives inside a barrel. I had originally come to the pub with my mates after we went into Manchester to watch the football. Christopher was already in there with his mates from work, and by the time we made our way over he was drunk enough to talk to me.

We reach the top of the bridge, and the town comes into view. The orange street lights and the glow of the high-rise blocks sit twinkling against the black sky. I cycled past the high-rise blocks on my way to school every morning. The grey concrete and the damp tunnels connecting the doorways would scare me, so I began to take the longer route to school, avoiding the blocks completely.

Christopher has been talking about trying to get one now he is earning a full-time wage. He tells Mum that he wants some independence, but I heard him talking on the phone to his girlfriend Jeanette the other day and I'm sure I heard him saying something about when the baby comes. The thought of Christopher, the man who still sits at the table after work waiting for his Mum to do him some supper, raising a child is terrifying.

As we reach the top of the hill the lights of the town come into view. It actually looks ok at night. The lights of the high rises look like stars if you squint until your vision blurs, and since the smelt mill closed down the air seems clearer. I watch Chris staring at the girls clambering out of a taxicab at the bottom of the hill. They are drunk on lager, screaming and singing. I stare too.

“Seriously, Steve. If you wanna go to university, do one of them arty farty degrees, do it!” he says. “Cos I’ve been thinking, you won’t last a day plastering with Dad, you’ll hate it, and I think you have as much interest in cars as I do in painting, so honestly just go for it. Life is too short to have regrets mate,” he says.

I want to believe every word that stumbles out of his drunken brain. This is the most interest he has ever shown in me. I think about the lad behind the bar. I think about his big hands. I think about how he refused my money when I ordered myself a pint. I want to believe Christopher and turn up at the best university in the country in the morning. Instead, I will fulfil my promise to Dad and give working for the council a go. Me and Chris having babies at the same time. Mum is going to absolutely lose it.

--

I sit in the living room staring forwards. The smell of pork being boiled with cabbage and cauliflower wafts in from the kitchen. The smell of the onion gravy is the only thing giving me any pleasure. It reminds me of Sunday mornings at my grandma's, Chris down the garden helping grandad, and me at the dinner table completing jigsaw puzzles and playing snakes and ladders with my grandma as the gravy simmers on the stove. Caroline's father Edward is sitting in the armchair adjacent to me, sipping a can of bitter.

"Here, son," he passes me a carrier bag and I nod and take a can out.

"Thanks, Edward," I say.

"Come on, lad, none of that! You're family now, son. It's Eddie!" I nod and return my gaze to the television.

"This is what it's gonna be like now, son, boxing days are the best here, the girls getting the food done, me and you watching the football together. It's a right old laugh," he says.

I stare at him. I stare at the yellow wallpaper behind him. I stare at the brown coving around the ceiling. Caroline's mother suggested that once we are married I will move into their house until we save for our own. Caroline said she couldn't imagine anything worse than getting married to someone, but she will if I want to. Her Mum says that once the baby – which has not yet been conceived – comes, she will move in with us for the first eight weeks because Caroline will need the help when I go back to work. I imagine throwing myself through the living room window. I think Caroline would probably jump out after me, and we'd race to the end of the earth away from this whole thing.

We all sit in the living room, me and Caroline on the floor, her sister and her fiancé bundled on one armchair. Her Mum and Grandmother sit on the sofa and Edward, who hasn't moved all day, well I have forgotten where the chair ends and he begins. *Coronation Street*

plays on the TV. I am glad not to be at home. Chris will be with his girlfriend, meaning Mum and Dad will be sat on opposite ends of the sofa, taking their resentment for each other out on me. I busy myself with drawing or painting when I'm at home, so I don't have to pay attention to them. Dad will usually come in and call me a big Jessie, whatever that is supposed to mean. I never know what he means. Caroline is holding the newspaper and tapping the end of her pen against the crossword puzzle. She nudges me. 17 across:

COMEUPSTAIRS. 6 down: INFIVE 9 across: PLEASE

"If you could go anywhere Steven where would you go?" she asks, kneeling on the edge of her bed. I shrug.

"I don't know, why, what about you?"

"God, anywhere," she says. "A pub with music so loud that the floor vibrates beneath your feet, and loads of wine, boys, interesting people!" I have never seen her look so thrilled.

"Me too, I want that. A big city, so big that nobody even knows who you are, somewhere that I could get so lost in. A little flat, I'd have people coming round all the time, and not dickheads like Robbie Carlyle and Jason Duggan, no, proper interesting people. No miserable parents either," I say, surprised at everything I just said.

"And am I in that little flat, Steve?" she asks. She is smiling.

"If you want to be," I manage.

"Couldn't think of anything worse, I hate big cities," she tells me. I smile.

Caroline gives me the pleasure of slipping out of the house without any goodbyes. She's going to tell her family that I ran off and won't come back, then she's going to do something too. She doesn't know what yet, but she is sick of working at the cinema. I kiss her at the door and head towards the bus stop.

--

I look around at the miserable bastards having a lunch time pint or three. I wouldn't call them miserable bastards to their face, but they are. And they know it. They come in from their various offices and warehouses at 1pm every single weekday. Some of them must travel a fair distance to get here, just to slump over the tables nursing their pints. Joe owns a car garage four miles away, and Sammy works in the massive warehouse which is a good ten-minute drive. They must all pass one or two pubs on their way here, but this one differs in that it is very welcoming of the lunchtime miserable bastards and less welcoming of hipster beards, craft ales and listening to certain genres of music 'ironically'. I complained about that last one to David last night, and he just rolled his eyes and told me to get a grip.

I don't consider myself to be one of the miserable bastards. They do rub off on you though. This pub just happens to be the closest one to the office I work at. Data management and inputting.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. It is Rob Jones, senior executive and senior dickhead. I am supposed to have a meeting with him every Friday at 2pm. That means that I can't join the miserable bastards on Friday because if Rob Jones, smells beer on me then that's me getting the sack, just like he did with Billy Rosen last summer. I feel a bit sorry for Rob. Nobody likes him because he has to have a meeting with every head of department every week to make sure they are all doing their jobs properly. He is also a dickhead.

Last month, he finally wore me down and I agreed to go out drinking with him. He kept calling it a works night out in the office, which meant I got a lot of funny looks off my peers. We got to the first bar where he ordered a bottle of whisky to the table and drank almost the whole thing. I watched him loosen his tie, undo his shirt buttons at the top as the alcohol made him sweat. I cringed as he tried to chat up the waitress who almost had him thrown out until I calmed the situation down. I cringed as he threw his arm around me, as he threw a WOT THE FUCK ARE YOU LOOKIN AT? at some blokes who didn't even make

eye contact with him.

Anyway, like most weeks I don't want to have a meeting with Rob Jones, senior dickhead/executive, but this week I really don't want to have one with him. I don't want to stare at my computer screen and spend the train journey home cramped up in the doorway next to three suitcases and twelve other commuters.

My phone rings again. I let it ring off. I leave a fiver on the table and exit the pub. I don't think I'll ever go back there, actually.

It is a warm day. I remove my jacket and undo the first two buttons of my shirt and make my way towards the city centre, which is a long walk, but I've got a lot of adrenaline inside me. I walk along the canal, the same path I used to stumble down, the drugs blasting my brain out of my ears, as I made it home from a night out just five or six hours before I was needed at work.

I stand on the platform, long before the commuters and their suitcases are due to arrive, and wait for the train to pull in. I take my seat at a table, which is risky because there's room for three strangers to sit next to me. I pull the book I still haven't started out of my briefcase and wait for the servers to pull the drinks trolley down the aisle so I can order a coffee. I shoot David a quick text, knowing full well he'll shit his teeth when he reads it.

Going back to Marklow. Funeral isn't till Monday but want the weekend there.

Dnt worry I no u wont be able to join me. Lv you x

Also I've quit my job. This isn't a mental breakdown. I don't think so anyway. X

He will be angry with me for a bit, but I fell in love with David because he seemed to understand me like nobody ever has, so eventually he will understand.

--

"Dare me to jump," I say, standing on the wrong side of the railings next to the canal.

I grip on to the cold metal so hard my knuckles turn white. I stare into the black water,

imagining myself falling through it. There is no splash, no coughing and spluttering, no coming back up. I am just falling, and it is quiet, and I can hear myself think, and I'm falling and falling and falling."

"You're mental," Ryan says, grabbing me from behind and kissing me on the cheek.

My very best friend, who does his very best to get me wasted and off my face every night, and almost always succeeds. I pull myself back over the rails. The sun is beginning to rise. The light sky burns my eyes. Ryan walks in front of me, his black hair bouncing on top of his head. He is wearing my denim jacket and I'm sure those are my doc martens. The white tank top and tight blue jeans are all him though. He almost punched me when I accused him of copying Freddie Mercury.

"I thought your new friend would be joining us for the walk home, you couldn't get enough of him in the club," I say.

"Come on did you SEE how old he was? I've got limits," he says. "Plus, we haven't got room for any more gays in our flat since you started taking every Tom, Dick and Harry in off the street," he says, throwing his arm around me and squeezing me.

This isn't true. He brings home someone different at least three times a week. I could count on one hand the amount of times the same person has said 'aright mate' more than once whilst stood in the kitchen in their pants, drinking coffee out of my mug.

I met Ryan my first week in Manchester, which seems a lifetime ago now. He was sitting behind me in my first class in art college. We got talking and he invited me to the pub. He was still living with his Mum and asked me where my parents lived. I told them that I wasn't from the city and had saved up for two and a half years to get a small horrible flat in the basement of a building next to the train station. He couldn't believe I had my own place and offered to pay me a tenner a week to live there too.

When I'm not in college – which I'm in as often as I humanly can be – I work in the

café on the middle floor of the huge building filled with offices for different financing and accounting companies. Ryan works in night clubs, which at first I thought meant he was a DJ, but he just works behind the bars until they finally let him move to the other side and get as drunk as possible before it closes.

We finally make it home and he sits down in the living room and lights a cigarette. I accept a rollie from him and let the smoke fill my lungs.

The thought of going to work tomorrow fills me with dread. I got my graduation certificate from college in the post last week. My head pounds. I feel as though I am going one million miles per hour.

“I can’t keep doing this,” I tell Ryan.

“Don’t talk wet,” he says. I cringe as another can of beer cracks open. Why does he have to drink so much?

The door slams. I wake up. I must have fallen asleep in my clothes, and my shoes apparently. I’ve been in Manchester for almost three years. I’ve woken up – either still drunk or with a pounding hangover – in this bedroom for three years. When I first moved in the bedroom walls were painted a horrible yellow, so I went at them with purple stripes. It looks God awful. I was supposed to be at work fifteen minutes ago, I’ll have to tell them that the tram was delayed or I was mugged or I had an epiphany and am joining the circus.

--

The library looks closed today. **MARKLOW CONFERENCE ROOMS Book within!**

I had assumed that they would close it eventually, Mum even joined the Save the Library committee for something to do on a Tuesday, but it was no use. I wonder if they still run the after-school clubs in there, but conference rooms with vertical blinds and bars on the

windows don't look like the most child-friendly places. I consider crossing the road and waiting at the bus stop going the other way. I shouldn't have left so suddenly. I should probably ask for my job back.

“Steven Redbridge, how long's it bloody been, son?”

“Hiya, Johnny,” I say.

I'm standing in the chippy staring at what I can't believe isn't a ghost. I want to tell him that I can't believe he's still alive, but I manage to refrain. Not that eighty-odd is that old, but because I'm fairly certain he has eaten nothing but steak pies and drunk nothing but brandy every day for fifty years. I ask for a small portion of chips with salt and vinegar and promise to send my mum his best (best not to tell him). He ought to be living it up in retirement by now, but from what I last heard he doesn't trust anybody else to run the place.

“Always thought your mum was the bees knees in school, till your old man got himself in. Put a ring on it quick as! I don't blame her, good looking chap when he had a full head of hair.” I nod and exit the chippy before he says anything else about my mother.

The sun breaks through the clouds so I find a bench on the field behind the chippy and sit myself down. Craig Cathcart and I used to play football here on a Thursday night whilst our Mums were playing bingo. The chips taste much better from Johnny's Plaice than they do at any of the ones I've lived near in Manchester.

I watch some kids kicking a ball about, setting their phones up to film themselves doing trick shots. They're not sliding through the mud or belting the ball through the goal posts like we used to. The bingo hall on the opposite side of the field has been boarded up. Most of the windows in front of the boards have been smashed. Nettles and bushes climb the brick walls. I used to like sitting with my dad in the back room when Mum was bingo-ing and Craig didn't fancy a kick about. He used to buy me matchstick sweets and I would pretend I was smoking with him, back when you could smoke inside.

I finish my chips and head towards the housing estate. I yearn for a cigarette, the same way I did when I was seventeen. I should be on my way home from work now, sat on the train between a ginormous suitcase and an egg sandwich. I walk past the flower shop which is now 'Cutting Edge' and my old barbers which has been replaced by a charity shop. I have not walked these streets in years, since my mother died. As soon as I could I got back on the train with David and went home.

I don't like to think about Mum too often. I was her favourite when Chris and I were growing up. Every Sunday as soon as Dad and Chris left the house for his football games Mum would put a film in the video player and we'd lie under blankets giggling and eating crisps.

My old street comes into view. A white people carrier is parked outside a newly built garden wall. A family must live there now. A big family. A big family. I should be happy that the quiet house with unhappy parents and restless teens is likely now filled with love and toys and cooked dinners and birthday parties. Instead, I am jealous. I do not like feeling jealous, it reminds me of all the arguments I caused between David and I in the beginning. So insecure that he would leave me, and I'd be on my own again I couldn't stand the thought of a good-looking guy giving him the eyes.

I am jealous of this family and the house that they have made their home. I always thought it would be funny to go and live out my final days there to complete the circle. 'Hello, I'm here to die, don't mind me, no I don't want a brew thank you, just here to die'. I don't think the happy family would want me on their sofa though. Maybe I am one of the miserable bastards.

--

"What's wrong?" I ask. "You seem off."

"Nothing. Do you have anything else to say or can I get off?" she asks. My weekly

phone calls with Mum have been getting shorter and shorter recently.

“Not really.” I twiddle the phone wire around my finger. “I heard back from that illustration company, they said they’d keep my portfolio in their files, but I wasn’t a match for the position they were offering.” The end of my finger turns purple, and I release the wire.

“Well, that’s probably for the best,” she says. “You ought to be in a steady job that brings in a steady wage, not prating about painting pictures.”

“Aye, I suppose,” I respond, not bothering to tell her that that isn’t how it works. “You got anything on tonight?” I ask.

“Well, we’ll be going down the bingo if your dad gets his bloody act together, he’s pissing about down the bottom of the garden,” she hisses.

I want to ask her what’s wrong, what made her so bitter, but I know the answer. She is sick of my dad’s temper, she is disappointed in Chris for splitting with Jeanette and she is worried that I’m going to end up dead. When I called her in pieces to tell her that Ryan had gone, she didn’t seem to care. She just kept telling me that she couldn’t understand what the hell I was doing to myself, that I had to come home now and to stop being silly, that the same would happen to me. She wouldn’t listen when I said he’d been unwell for a while, that it was a genetic thing, his Grandad died from it. She just kept saying that she couldn’t understand me.

“I’d better not keep you then.”

“Aye, I better go and clart your dad round the head,” she says, earning a laugh from me.

We say our goodbyes and the humming of the phone line fills the silence. I watch David fiddling with the video player.

When Chris called and told me that Jeanette had left him I was on a train before the end of the phone call. I helped him get moved into a flat, and David and I painted the walls

and got all the furniture we could fit in his van from the charity shop. I haven't spoken to my brother in a while. His divorce brought us close for a short time, but there was always something pulling us apart. It was strange, seeing my big brother who spent most of our childhood beating me at everything so vulnerable. He couldn't cook for himself, couldn't get himself up and off to work. It was my turn to look after him. Eventually though, once he was back on his feet, we reverted back to the old awkwardness. To not knowing what to say. To feeling like we were living on opposite sides of the world.

David neatly packs the video player into a box along with his videos and his cassettes. I promised I'd make a start on my records and books tonight. We are moving in six days, closer to his family. Further from mine. I fiddle with the end of my belt. I watch him pack our home up for the second time in fourteen months.

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Cutting Edge is now Mandy's Nail Salon. I wonder who Mandy is. Marklow library is still Warklow library. I walk and walk and walk. I walk until my feet hurt so much that it feels as though my shoes have fallen off. Funerals are funny things. Going home is a funny thing. I have lived in five different houses, but I always called Marklow going home. David asked why once. I was born and raised there, I told him. He asked why again not so long ago. He started asking why all the time. Why on earth did you leave your job? I get why you left your job but why did you have to leave them on such bad terms? Why do you still refer to Marklow as home? We have been living here for twelve years now, you've been back there twice in that time. Is it me?

Funerals are funny things. All that talk about the afterlife and how life is short, and we should make the most of what precious time we have with the precious people in our lives. It reminded me of Ryan's funeral. The funeral celebrants had both described Ryan and Chelsea as 'complicated'. Who isn't complicated? I guess that is code for 'not everybody understood

them, they went against the grain.' I walk and walk and walk.

I live nine minutes from the pub. I set off sixty minutes early so I could go the long way. I breathe in the air. I take note of the green grass and the birds singing. I am trying to be more mindful. I am trying to appreciate everything more, the same way David does. It comes naturally to him though. I have to make myself be mindful. They can say all they want about not taking life for granted, but sometimes it is impossible not to. Especially once you've accepted that sometimes you really can be a bit of a miserable bastard. I think of the miserable bastards in the pub, they should all be pouring in off the street about now. Rob Jones will be gearing up for his meeting with whoever replaced me.

Funerals are funny things. They make you think in a way that nothing else can. Watching the final act of somebody's life, knowing that they will never be in the same room as anybody else again, that you have the privilege of still being here. The wake was rough too. The pub I drank in with Chris when we were teenagers and loved going out with each other. The last time we were properly friends.

The town centre looked like a different place all together. Every third shop or café had an 'Under New Management!!!' sign pinned to the doorway. The pub is the only place still stuck in the eighties , with wooden stools and beer mats for decoration and sticky lino flooring.

Funerals can be very funny things.

The path I've been walking on opens up into a field. I imagine Ryan walking towards me. His black hair bouncing. His cocky grin as he tells me about how he managed to pull the bar man the night before. I have started remembering him like that now. Not pale and skinny, getting sicker and sicker. I think about a lifetime spent dealing with Rob Jones and data entry and management strategies and quarterly reviews. I think about how much of a miserable bastard I was.

Funerals are funny things.

You regret all that stuff, then you go to a funeral, and you don't regret a thing. It all seems so pointless. So futile. I walk towards the pub's garden, surrounded by bright yellow fencing. Chris spots me and waves. He is beginning to look old now, which I have enjoyed teasing him about. He is pushing his granddaughter Evelyn, named after my mother, on the one swing that hasn't had the seat nicked. My niece Jodie is sitting on a bench fussing her Chihuahua Benny.

"Thinking of going home again," I had told David a while ago. "To see Chris."

"Ok," he answered.

"I know why I keep saying that," I finally decide to tell him.

"I know." Of course he does. "And I think it's time I stopped pretending that I don't, time I started listening to you," he said.

We're sat outside our local. Chris walks over with the pints. Evelyn is asleep in the pram. David is throwing a ball for Benny. His muscles flex with every throw. I think it's time we finally got married. Marklow library is still Warklow library. The Hair Rooms is now Mandy's Nail Salon. I wonder who Mandy is.

CAROLINE

now –

You wake up. What woke you up this time? Your phone vibrates. An email. *‘Another entry has been submitted to your online memorial book! Tap the link to view now!’* It reads like the ones you get from holiday companies, *‘The holiday you viewed three years ago is at an all-time low price!’* You lock your phone and stare at the black screen. Her friends meant well when they set that up in your name, they probably pictured you sitting by the fire with a glass of wine, tearing up at the heart-wrenching tributes written by those who knew her.

The emails haunt you now though. You are scared to read them, even the ones written by Joanna and Dion who you’ve known since they were all kids knocking on the door asking if Chelsea was coming to play out. You would put two pounds in her coat pocket and tell her to be home by 7pm, watching their little heads bob down the driveway. No, you do not want to start reading, and have to stare down the barrel, and finally admit to yourself that you did not know her at all. That the little girl who became a woman long before her time, who you branded lazy and a brat, who stayed in her room unless she used the bathroom or made herself food, was a stranger to you. A lodger who you sometimes saw, who you often argued with, who you did not know.

You get out of bed. You slept through the whole night. You stand in the darkness of the bathroom and take a deep breath before turning on the light. You brush your teeth. You turn on the shower and stare at yourself in the mirror. Unrecognisable. You used to worry so much about your belly sticking out and your skin flapping under your arms. You used to worry about your face being too oily or too dry and the same with your hair. You want to shake that person and wake her up, slap her silly. You hate her. You would give anything to be her again. It is laughable.

--

Melissa Radband
U1753788

Still can't believe that you are gone Chels! What a girl wish we had never fallen out it all seems so silly and petty now! Since I first met you down at The Pit and thought you were the coolest girl ever we have been friends! All those nights out round town, god! You were so mad! Every Friday on the piss with you till Monday morning! God The things we got up to haha! AM sure so many oyer people have similar stories, and pretty sure none of them could ever be repeated out loud!!!! You really showed me how to party and I thank you every day for that cos I propeeer came out my shell when we became friends!!!! Im doing my hairdressing quals now!!!! Couldn't stop cryig when I heard the news and your funeral was soooo sad but think youd have liked it!!!! Miss you so much girl hope you're having a good time up there partying and if you find a phone up there drop me a line hahahaha hopefully nobody gets that!!!!!!!!!!!! Jodie Thompson xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

now –

You sit in the garden, and sip on the warm mug you cradle in your hands. The birds sing, which is nice. You want it to feel nicer. The girls at work told you to take all the time you need, accepted your decision to put Desiree in charge and sent Debbie round with a flower bouquet and some chocolates. Sorry your life has been ruined, hope this box of Cadburys helps! They meant well, obviously. Debbie left the flowers on the doorstep, and you watched her jog back to her car before texting you saying she must have missed you, but everyone is thinking of you during this difficult time!<3

Difficult

time

You wonder whether you should go back early. The house is haunting you. You can't be in it. You cannot imagine leaving it either. You used to love going out and about. You had gotten quite confident at walking into the gym, trying to blend in with all the workies, as you call them, with their hair pinned up or gelled back, trainers turning to leather shoes after the spin class. You find it easier to think about workies in business suits than you do about other stuff.

You think that you'll go to the DIY shop later and buy some paint. The whole house could do with a touch up. You could do the fences in the back garden too. You could fill weeks with all the things that need painting. You should paint the walls white to make the rooms look bigger. It would stop them from closing in, stop the house from suffocating you. A song thrush sings from the neighbour's tree that hangs over your garden.

--

Not gonna write much, but av ad a few drinks n stumbled on this so thought I'd give it a go. Met C a few year ago, she msgd me on fb cos she was after something so I told her to meet me @ pit. Where I do most my business. I sell good times, that's all ill say.

Anyway, lovely lass, one of the only punters I could actually stick around n have a drink with. Fancied pants off her tbh, think she did me, always buying me drinks n always asking me 2 go out on piss w/her. I was busy workin tho, as I said. Plus she wa best mates wiv ma ex so apart from the odd once or twice when we ended up together it never went further. Had her back tho, she got herself hanging round with some right dodgy lads, n that's coming from me. Anyway, sad 2 see what happened. RIP

now –

You had a dream last night that you were back at the salon. It's nice to dream of other things. You want to be back, to be in charge. You want people to walk in and know that you're the

one running the place. That you're the one who makes sure it's spotless, that everything is by the book, that it's your name above the door you worked so hard to open. You were about to start your life and now it is paused. You wonder if it will stay paused forever. If your chest will feel ripped open forever.

You wonder about ringing Darren and seeing if he wants to come round but he has been weird around you since it happened, like if he touches you then you'll just fall apart, as if masking tape is holding you together. It pisses you off. You thought if anyone would help you feel normal it would be him, but in some ways he is the worst because he makes you feel like you are not the same and never will be again.

The television plays in the background and fights with the radio for your attention. You let them both cancel each other out. You collapse on the sofa next to a paint tray and roller. You close your eyes, your body, your brain.

Before—

“Can we wait for the fireworks?” she pleads. I smile at her, her blue eyes weakening my strong front once more. Mum says I need to be tougher with her. Mum must have never looked into her eyes and felt her heart turn to liquid. ‘Of course, darling’ I whisper, giving her another chip. She shivers, and I tighten her scarf around her neck and kiss her head. I managed to get the caravan for so cheap on account of it being the first week of November in an off-season seaside town. She has enjoyed it though, and that is all that matters. We have stayed tucked up in our tin house, eating toast and listening to the rain wash over the coast.

‘This has been the best time of my whole entire life,’ she said to her teddy last night whilst I was putting the lasagne in the oven.

“We should stay here forever,” she says to the black sky.

“I think we should,” I tell her. I think we should. We should stay in our tin house,

away from the bills and the birthday parties where presents are expected and my judgemental parents and my sister who is *doing ever so well for herself you know, it's such a shame that you aren't*. I look down at her, swinging her legs under the bench and laughing at the drunk men hauling themselves along the street in front of us. I put my arm around her. I want to squeeze her so tight that I forget where I end and she begins.

Now –

You wake up. 2am. You need to go back to work.

--

When Chelsea Kitchson first walked into my classroom seven years ago, she stuck out from many of the sixteen-year-olds I usually see. Of course, as kids find themselves at that age, and begin to express themselves as best they can within the limits of the school uniform rules, I have seen many a colourful character and personality. Chelsea really did stand out for me though. When I look back and wonder why, I imagine it is because she was so quiet, and so unassuming. Whilst saying very little, and contributing almost never, in the essays she turned in, it quickly became clear to me that she knew everything there was to know at that age, beyond her age. She struck me as somebody who may be carrying a little baggage, as most teenagers do, but her baggage seemed to weigh her down more than the rest. Rumours discussed in classrooms never included her name.

I began to mentor Chelsea. I knew of the potential she had, to be the first in her family to go to university, a top university at that. I wanted to see her succeed. She would turn in extra essays for me and looking back I wondered if I was really mentoring her or if I just selfishly wanted to read more of her work. When she left my class, I tried to keep up with her studies. I had hoped that she would move on to university, but wherever she

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ended up I knew she would succeed. It broke my heart to read the news. I know how loved she was. It was a pleasure to teach her, it was a pleasure to learn from her. May god be with her as she rests. Godspeed, Chelsea.

Now –

You get home and put your keys on the countertop. You sit on a stool at the breakfast bar and the cat jumps up on to the table before nestling in your lap. You hadn't told the girls at the salon that you would be coming back so soon. You stood around the corner, with every intention to go in, just to make sure everything was running smoothly in your absence. You imagined the looks they would give you. The heartless woman carrying on as normal during such a time. She must not have even loved her! You turned around and walked home, ran home, tears in your eyes. You must have looked a right lunatic, it is laughable.

You sit at the table now, staring at the closed laptop. Twenty-seven unread tributes! Click here to [view](#) is what the email said this morning. You wish you had not read the first few. It was like reading about somebody else, somebody you didn't know. Somebody who you're not sure you would have even liked. It is only 9.30am. The house is repainted. You do not want to read, or sit and think, or sit and think and read.

Your Mum has tried calling you seven times now. *I am grieving too, Caroline.* She said, as if you should've felt sorry for her, as if you should've said oh god yeah mum, sorry, how're you feeling? This must be so hard, let me get you a cup of tea and a blanket, you selfish bastard.

Your phone buzzes.

Can I come over. Need to see u & talk. Dazz x

Yes can come over now x except not talk, just fuck me, and don't speak to me, and make my eyes roll back and my brain fall out

before –

“Come on, get up,” I say, trying to think of an ultimatum. What kind of ultimatum do you give to a fourteen-year-old nightmare who doesn’t seem to give a shit about anything?

“Piss off,” says the lump under the duvet.

“Now. You’ll miss the bus. What time did you sleep last night? If this carries on I’ll have to take you to the doctor’s, there must be something wrong with you.”

The lump moves and groans and sits up to reveal a face. The lump gives a shit about the doctors.

“If you want a lift you need to be next to the door in half an hour or I’ll be late for work, I’ve got customers back-to-back today,” I say. I cannot be late again, or knob head silly prick Joanne will show me the door. That’s what she said last week when I was late.

“I rent five seats in this salon, the customers that walk through the door expect high quality and punctuality. They expect the best treatment. You are lucky to be working here, a place everybody recommends, building yourself a clientele.” I was hardly listening, but I did hear her call my work high quality, if not completely at the scheduled time.

I proudly told Chelsea that story whilst we ate Shepard’s Pie and watched Deal or No Deal last week, and whilst she sniggered at knob head silly prick, she didn’t seem all that interested.

“I don’t know why hairdressers even exist, people should just cut their own hair, it’s a right scam.” Arsehole, I wanted to call her.

I just shoved mashed potato into my mouth. It isn’t a scam when she wants a new colour every other week free of charge or brings her friends round for a short back and sides grade three on the top. She knows that if she ever cuts her own hair I’ll kick her out, which I won’t, but the threat makes her laugh.

She joins me at the table, dressed in her school uniform, and we eat Weetabix and drink orange juice in silence.

“Got good lessons today?” I ask.

“None of them are,” she says. “But I do have PE which means I need a note,” she says between mouthfuls.

“Already written one it’s pinned to the fridge,” I tell her.

I have been politely asking for her to be excused from PE since the bleep tests and netball were added to the curriculum.

“I’m gonna get the bus instead,” she says, before wrapping her arms around my waist and letting me, for the first time in longer than I can remember, kiss her on the head.

Now --

You stare at him. He rubs his face with his hands and smiles at you.

“Missed doing that,” he says.

He lights a cigarette and blows smoke towards your ceiling. His other hand rests on your naked thigh. You never used to let him smoke in the house when Chelsea was in, you were always trying to get her to quit. You suppose he thinks he can now. Chelsea never liked him. Once in an argument, she told you that ever since you had got with him she had lost all respect for you. You scolded her for daring to speak to you like that, for not giving Darren the time of day. She said she’d try harder with the next one.

“I was thinking, you should sell this place, downsize. We could use the leftover from the sale to do it up. We could move into it together, closer to my mum’s,” he says. He cared for you once. When you were finally flying high, and acting like it, your confidence, your arrogance, attracted his attention. He admitted that he wanted the chase, he wanted to make you like him. You thought it was romantic at the time, it added to the fire that he had

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reignited inside you.

“What do you think?” he asks. You stare at the tribal tattoo wrapped around his bicep.

“Just a two bedroomed place, use the spare as an office or something.”

“I think I’m going to have a shower and wash my hair, and by the time I’m done I want you and all of your stuff out of here, and I don’t want you to come back.”

You cannot hear his protests once you lock the bathroom door and turn on the speaker.

--

Chelsea I couldn’t believe it when I heard the news! Been friends all these years since Breakfast Club back in primary! Love to all your family. Hope you found peace beautiful girl xx

--

Would like to send my love to Chelsea’s family, especially her Mum xx

--

Rest in peace the biggest wreck head I know! I’m sure you’ve found a party to crash up there somewhere, in fact I bet you’re looking down on us now with a can in your hand! Easily the funniest drunk I’ve ever witnessed. Don’t think half the stuff (or people) we did bears repeating on the internet! Much love <3

--

Open verdict. Open verdict. Open. Inconclusive. Unable to answer. We don’t have a fucking clue. Your guess is as good as ours. You can barely remember what was just said in that room. You do not care to remember. You stare at the gin and lemonade sitting on the table in front of you. The noise coming from your family sitting around you sounds almost joyful. They are sad, of course, and they look at you with sadness in their eyes, afraid to say the wrong thing, so saying nothing.

There is Jackie, your kid sister. She has always tried to keep in touch, even during the times you didn't hold up your end of the stick. She married young and has spent the last eternity raising three children. The twins, Joe and Harry, are both off to university in September, studying chemistry and physics respectively. Her husband Michael is a bit of a prick but ultimately a good dad and he seems fairly loyal to Jackie which you were certain he wouldn't be. Then there is Jane, your cousin, whose daughter Clara got on really well with Chelsea whenever there was a family do. Your older brother Carl sits beside you, his arm slung across the bench behind your head. It comforts you. He never married, *married the motorbikes me*. You look at them, who came to support you today. You are grateful, even though you would never tell them.

Open verdict

something like that .

You lie in the darkness, staring up at the ceiling. The house is empty, and it eats you alive. You wish strangers would walk in and set up home around you. Your mum left three hours ago, in tears. She couldn't face the inquest. You thought it was selfish. You still do. It could've been an accident. Isn't that what you wanted? Your mother gave you a cup of tea and a stern talking to.

"You should've been there," you said.

"Don't, Caroline. I couldn't be there. It was too painful."

"Do you think I enjoyed it?" You were drunk and you were crying.

"I understood her, you know. She liked me," she said.

You didn't answer, afraid that whatever you might say could destroy your relationship. "She would come over after school sometimes, we would drink peppermint tea and talk," she told me. "She was very angry."

No shit.

“But she was more than that, she wanted to travel, she was always showing me pictures on her phone of all the places she wanted to visit, most of them on coastlines. And you know why that is don’t you? Because every year you took her to the beach and showed her the cliffs. You made her very happy you know,” she said.

You do not remember much else, on account of how many gins Carl bought you, but those words draw circles around your mind. You imagine her, sticky chocolate around her mouth, blonde hair sticking out the sides of her bobble hat, ice-cream cone crushed in her fist, walking two steps to your one along the promenade. You imagine her standing on the bottom railing and poking her head over the top one, watching the waves crash into each other below her. You imagine her laughing, tugging on your coat to lift her up.

You made her very happy,

you know

You imagine her walking one step behind you, old enough now to drive a car, staring at her phone screen. You want to take it from her hands and throw it in to the ocean and force her to enjoy herself, but you relent. You shouldn’t have forced her on this holiday, you should’ve let her stay at your Mum’s and come here by yourself. She stops you and turns your attention to the screen, to a post she has just made to her Facebook account. A picture of you, hanging over the railings of the pier. The photograph, already with four likes, is captioned ‘love spending time with this beautiful woman @CarolineKitchinson <3’. You remember tears in your eyes. The smile creeps across her face at the suggestion to buy two portions of fish and chips and go back to the caravan to colour in your new colouring books she insisted you bought from the market and watch the films you used to watch all those years ago.

--

Only just heard the news.... I hadn't spoken to Chelsea for a year I wish we hadn't drifted, life is too short people. Look out for those you care about.... Maybe she would have benefitted from that 2. Love you girl xxx

--

Chelseaaaa miss you so much! Been thinking a lot about life lately, yours was cut short far too early but I guess you were needed up there sooner than we wanted you to be. You were my favourite cousin and family do's aren't goin to be the same without you any more. They'll be practically unbearable! Us two always sneaking off and getting up to silly shit whilst the adults got pissed. Wish I took more photos of you. Love you soooo much <3 <3

--

You wake up. Next door's lawn mower rumbles on beneath your window. Part of you wishes he would take out a fence panel and hoist the thing over to give your front garden some love. You have never been much of a gardener, you let Chelsea do what she wanted with the flower beds on the front, and she opted for carnations in every colour she could find. Some of them have flowered again this summer, but they have not been cared for the way they should have been with plant feed and a knee mat, and a watering can painted with yellow flowers.

You close your eyes again. You think about calling Darren and asking him to come over to talk. You miss him. Or at least you miss waking up beside somebody. You miss noise in the house. You miss watching somebody's chest rise and fall in the bed beside you. Not being alone. You are going back to work in one week. You went into the salon yesterday to make sure the place hadn't burned to the ground in your absence. You also wanted to get the other hairdressers' awkwardness out of the way before your official return.

You accepted their sympathetic eyes and quiet voices. Once you were in the back,

cleaning and checking your tools, contacting clients, and sorting out the appointment books and ordering your stock, you felt alive. You were back in your element again. You were in charge, the ones for others to turn to. Desiree insisted that at times she was lost without you and had to refrain from calling for help. You didn't know if she was lying to boost your ego, but it made you feel good. It made you feel needed and important. Once through the doors of Cutting Edge you are the one that is needed.

--

before

“Caroline, what’s up?” she says down the phone. I can barely speak. I need my mum.

“Mum, I need you, it’s Chelsea. She’s, I need you to come over.”

“Is she hurt?” mum asks.

“No, I don’t think so, I’m sorry to call so late, I didn’t know who else to ring really, I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok love. Your dad is up now, I will get him to drive me down, ok?”

“Thanks mum, bye,” I say.

I stare at her. I don’t even recognise her. She is slumped over a chair after being carried up to the front door by the disgruntled police officer. I want to grab her by both arms and shake her. I want to shake the ever-loving fuck out of her. I want to squish her back down to a popcorn-eating child. I want to start over.

We received a call from two concerned girls who had found her whilst they were walking to the taxi rank. They stayed with her until we arrived. She became lucid enough to give us your contact details. Things could’ve been a lot worse.

How many times have things been a lot worse? She is asleep. I spent the first ten minutes shaking and obsessing over whether she was breathing. I want to get her out of the ridiculous heels and uncomfortable-looking outfit, run her a warm bath and wash her hair,

wash all the colour out of it. I want to take her make up off and pump her full of vegetables and water, then wrap her up in her quilts and let her sleep for a week.

There is a gentle knock at the door. I open it to find my mum standing there in front of the rising sun. I didn't realise it was so late. I follow mum into the front room.

"Oh, love, look at her," she places a hand on my back. I need her now more than I ever have.

"I don't know what to do, mum, I can't keep her safe anymore." I am crying, weeping. She puts her arm around me.

"Let's get her in bed and I'll put the kettle on," she says. I nod.

Now –

You look around her room. It seems the same as you always remember. Since the girls at work have become more comfortable around you, they have asked about it several times. Last week whilst she was on the phone to the wholesaler's, Gianna slipped over a leaflet about an organisation her mum works for that takes clothes donations for young girls in the care system. She couldn't make eye contact as you took it from her. You have always liked how straightforward Gianna is, but she has started dancing around you again. As soon as you saw the leaflet you shoved it into your bag and walked into your office. She meant well, but you wanted to knock her out.

You sit down on the edge of her bed. Posters line the walls, pictures of band members holding guitars and standing behind pianos. A pile of her CD's is almost the height of her stereo speakers. Her desk stands next to her wardrobe, slightly discoloured after you let her try her hand at wood staining.

The huge artificial plants that she would drag through the front door and up the stairs every other week (It was half price Mum!) cover the top of the desk. Beneath it, her books are

lined neatly. Always organised by the author's surname, and if she had two books by the same author, then by the book title. Most Sunday afternoons when the weather was miserable and work tomorrow would loom you would slope into her bedroom to find her lying under blankets, surrounded by lit candles, watching something on her laptop.

Before she got into going out at the weekends, Sundays were your favourite days with her. She would come and lie on your bed when she woke up, and finally tell you about her week at school or college, and the things that were bothering her, which at that time were mainly immature boys and petty arguments. Sometimes during an argument, she would tell you to piss off and shut herself in here for the rest of the night. You would leave her to calm down knowing that she had once she began playing one of her cd's and the door would creak open as she sneaked down the stairs for food.

She often made her own meals once she was old enough to realise just how bad your cooking is. She wasn't very good either, but it was nice to see her get so enthusiastic about a cottage pie or a spaghetti bolognese after coming home miserable after a bad day at school.

You lie down on her bed and stare up at the ceiling. It smells fusty in here, the room which hasn't been entered in nine months is in some desperate need of love and care. It is in need of a good Hoover, with some nice-smelling powder sprinkled on the carpet beforehand, and a good polish. The bed sheets need washing with fabric softener and fragranced dryer sheets. Maybe tomorrow, or maybe not.

You like it how she left it because she was never quite so tidy. You like the clothes falling out of the wardrobe, the laptop still open on the floor by the bed, the book opened at the last page she read, face down on the bedside table. Maybe that is where you will stay, beside the book, face down on the bed by the bedside table.

--

before

My Dad gets home from work, I hear him put his boots in the pantry and place his plastic snap box on the kitchen side ready for Mum to wash. I hear her huff in response. They don't ask each other about their days, they barely say two words to each other. When I was younger and still living here, my sister was always complaining that our parents were miserable old twats who would benefit from getting a divorce. It used to upset me when she'd speak like that. I told her that Mum and Dad couldn't split up because neither of them would be capable of looking after us on their own. They were both useless. Now I'm a little older, I understand what she was talking about.

I came over last night because I'm moving out of my flat with Sharlene and into my own house. I moved in with Sharlene after Rocky and I split up a few years ago. She had her own place in one of the high rises. It was great fun at first, she paid the rent and I bought all of the food. We spent most nights lying on the floor drinking wine and most of the weekends out in town meeting boys and bringing them back. Sharlene started to get quite serious with Mark who she met whilst we were on a night out. After years of abstaining from falling in love and declaring no man worthy enough of her time or her energy, she couldn't help herself when it came to Mark. I do really like Mark, he's a welder and works down at the factory near the school. He treats Sharlene like the queen. I just wish he didn't treat her so great that she had to kick me out so he could move in.

Anyway, when Sharlene asked me if I could move out, I didn't have much choice but to move back in with my parents. I was quite looking forward to it at first, I naively pictured film nights with Mum and Sunday mornings fishing down at the river with Dad. This morning I got the phone call I had been waiting for that the offer I had put in on the house had been accepted. Mum kindly gave me some of the money they got from selling my Nan's house to get myself set up. It isn't exactly a good look in the village to have a homeless daughter who also happens to be up the duff. I cannot stop thinking about the conversation

we had the other night when Dad had gone to bed.

“I just don’t think this is right, Caroline.”

“Why’s that?”

“Babies need their fathers; how will you work? You can’t raise a child on one wage.”

“Mum, we’ve been through this, I have told you in detail how I’m planning on affording everything.” I was beginning to tire of her worries and judgement.

“It just isn’t right, love. You should be walking down the aisle first, making a lovely home, you’re just getting your career on track. I mean they’re giving you a trial in a proper salon! You’re not just cutting all yours and my friends’ hair.”

“Mum, they will pay me the time off, I will have a job to go back to. The girls have offered to chip in with the childcare, I mean Sharlene and Mark are buying a cot, even Steven has said he’ll come home from Manchester once a month to spend a few days with her. He can’t wait for the baby to come, been picking out clothes and everything! Everyone’s made up for me! Why can’t you be?” I was angry with her.

“Caroline, what will I say at bingo? My unmarried thirty-year-old daughter spends her weekends bringing men home, sleeping with them without learning their names and getting herself knocked up? I worry about you, love. You’re unwell. Your sister was never ever like this, even when she was having all that trouble down at work.”

“Mum,” I groaned. “I’ve had enough of this. I was freaked out when I took the test, I’d never even thought about having children, you know me. But there is something missing in my life, and you know it isn’t a man. I want this. I want this baby, Mum.” I could tell her that I would sell my left arm to raise this baby and make things work, but she would still roll her eyes and mutter something under her breath. I am beginning to stop worrying all together what she thinks.

I came up to bed not long after that and buried myself under my sheets like I did as a

teenager. I lay there, imagining a little baby in my arms, relying on me to keep her safe. I never saw myself having children. I never saw myself like the Mums pushing their prams up to the primary school and dressing their children in pretty little outfits. I did not feel at all maternal until I learned that she was inside of me, and even then I wasn't sold. My friend Julie changed completely when she had a baby. She was a cook at a restaurant – a really posh restaurant – but when she got pregnant she packed it in to look after the baby so her husband could carry on working. Since then, she's had two more babies and never went back to work. I used to feel sorry for women who become mothers. Julie said she felt sorry for me, she told me that she wasn't complete until she had children, that her purpose and role on this earth was to be a mother. I couldn't believe her.

Last night, after another one of mum's 'talks', I stopped worrying about the birth and actually imagined what she might be like. I imagined myself kissing her head, her asleep on my chest. Our house will be small, but cosy. We will grow up together. When Mum is judging me, or my sister is pitying me, and the friends that have my back will all have moved on, it won't matter, because we will have each other. I will have a teammate. She will have her own personality that I will get to know, and she will have dreams and hopes and aspirations, hopefully ones much bigger than mine. She will fall in love and have her heart broken and she will have talents and friends and hobbies, and she will have everything she wants from life.

I will have a teammate, with big brown or blue or green eyes. She will have blonde or brown or maybe even black hair. She might have my chin or her father's nose. She'll learn to count to ten and recite the alphabet. I'll teach her to read and spell her name, which I still haven't decided on. I'll show Mum and Dad that I can do it, and that I don't need anyone else. I laid in the bed and closed my eyes, waiting for her to come.

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Submission box

Tell us about this person – share it with their family and friends!

I don't want to tell anybody about you, Chelsea. I want to keep you all to myself. I want to keep you in my handbag and in my pocket. I want you all to myself. I haven't spoken to others about you all that much, not even Grandma. She keeps trying to bring you up, but God I don't think she knew you like I did, Chels. She did that thing yesterday, you know with the teacups, that used to annoy us, and I couldn't help but laugh. Luckily I didn't have you there setting me off even more and winding her up. I wished you were there though, setting me off laughing with that look in your eye. I know that you loved her, and in her own ways she did love you, but I just can't speak to her about you yet, not the you I knew. I wish you were here all the time. I miss you being in the house. I miss sitting in the living room knowing that you're upstairs reading or playing on your Xbox or whatever else you did up there. The house seems so massive, it seems so empty. Even just to have you behind the closed door, ignoring me and requesting some peace, dead eyeing me every time I walked in with a pile of clothes or a cup of coffee for you. I wish I had that. I can't keep asking why you left me Chels. There are no answers anywhere. We were a team, it was just me and you, against annoying family members and our shitty teachers and our horrible bosses. It was me and you at weddings and christenings and everything else. Even when we drifted as you got older and wanted to see more of the world without me, I knew that somewhere inside of us both it was always me and you.

I never really wanted children. Even when I found out I was pregnant with you, it took me a while to come around. I couldn't imagine the responsibility of having to care for another human for the rest of your life. I couldn't imagine me with a baby. But when you were born, and I had to change you and feed you and clothe you, it was like I was born to. It was hard at first, but you were a perfect little baby, and you made things easy for me. I loved

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cuddling you and I didn't even mind getting up three times a night to feed you. You got quite stubborn the second you started walking. You didn't want fuss or cuddles or kisses. You wanted to play rough, throw your toys around and run away from me as much as you could. It didn't really stop after that. I could sit for hours and talk about what you were like at every point in your life. I could spend hours on your growth spurt when you were twelve, and all of your ridiculous hobbies. All the money you had me spending on your cd collection, and that ginormous stationary set you insisted on taking to your first day of high school. I even miss the phone contract money and that gym membership you begged for with a FIXED 48 MONTH CONTRACT coming out of my bank every month.

I haven't really felt like myself since you went. Nothing seems the same anymore. The garden is becoming overgrown, your carnations and lilies haven't flowered properly – mainly because I kept forgetting to water them. I painted the fence, but I don't think I did it right, I painted it grey but since we had all the rain last week it has started to fade a bit and the brown is showing through again. I went back to work, I was starting to go crazy in the house, and you would've thought I was acting ridiculous for not going back to work. I've still got it, by the way (my skills), you'd be impressed with a bad ice-blonde bleach job I managed to get back to a healthy warm brown the other day. The clients are driving me crazy, if one more of them walks through the door giving me a sympathetic smile and a bunch of sad-looking flowers I will sell the place! And what do they think leaving a ridiculous tip is going to do? Jeanette who always comes in for a perm paid forty quid more than she should've done the other day!!! I took it mind. She should've been paying me to listen to the stories about her husband's dysfunctions all these years anyway.

I miss you Chelsea. I miss my best friend. I don't know why you went. I don't know if you wanted to. But you did, and now I'm not going to get you back. I keep waiting for you to walk in through the door and throw your work bag on the kitchen side, but I know that you

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never will. I don't think I'll be the same, not until the day I'm finally back with you. I will start telling people about you eventually. I will tell them about how funny you were and how we used to sit laughing and joking in bed on Sunday mornings, and how terrible you were at cooking and washing your clothes without shrinking them. I want you to myself for a little bit longer though, if that's okay. I wish you were still here. I don't know if I'm supposed to move on or let you go or keep you with me or what. It was actually Dad who suggested I write to you, he said he did for his brother which surprised me because I thought he hated Uncle Pete.

I can't talk about you in past tense. I can't even think about you half the time. I just wish you would come back and I'm starting to think a piece of me thinks you will. I can't wait to see you again. I'll write again soon.

Mummers x

Are you sure you'd like to erase text?

YES

Delete online memorial? Are you sure?

YES

Would you like us to archive your tributes and send them to you? If yes, please select how you would like to receive them.

- Email**
- SMS**
- Post**
- None**

Are you sure you wouldn't like to receive the memories shared?

No thank you, I have plenty.

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Online Memorial Deleted.

An Exploration of Working-Class Fiction, Characters and Stereotypes

Introduction

This exegesis is an exploration of the representation of working-class characters in twenty-first-century British fiction. The exegesis is accompanied by a portfolio comprised of three short stories. The protagonists in each of the three stories are all from the same northern town, and whilst some class and personal experiences are shared, they have all lived different lives. The protagonists are all linked through the event of a funeral. This exegesis explores how these characters and characters like them have been represented in fiction throughout the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The characters in the short stories, Joanna, Steven and Caroline, have all had vastly different experiences throughout their lives. This exegesis aims to explore how particular class experiences and other issues have affected the course of their lives, for example, their habitus, their sexuality, and their relationships. In what follows I explore how I and others have considered the intersection between class and other aspects of life and identity, and consider the critical theories and ideas surrounding this. I will analyse how my work differs from that of others, along with what I have been inspired by in both the creative and critical context.

This essay will begin with an exploration of the critical and cultural debate surrounding the shape of publishing for working-class writers and working-class fiction in the twenty-first century. It is also important in this section to define 'working class'. Following this the essay will move focus to my own creative work compared with others. The representation of home and the class experience that impacts this, will be the main focus of research here. Class experience can also have an impact on the characters' relationships and their expression and understanding of their own sexuality. In the third section of this essay, an exploration of the mother-daughter relationship, particularly a single working-class mother, will be discussed. Steven and Joanna are both queer characters who are open about their sexuality. In their respective stories, I do not connect any trauma they experience with their sexuality. The third section will also include an analysis of how this is represented with regards to their class experiences.

This project aims to explore representations of different stereotypes and archetypes within fiction as well as representations of the home in a northern, post-industrial town. It

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will analyse how my creative and critical work fits in to the field and how what I have done differs from the work of other writers.

The Publishing Industry

Defining Class

One cannot begin a study of working-class writing and publishing, characters, and stereotypes without first defining what it is to be working class in 2022. In the present day, there is a difficulty in defining class as occupation, and access to education has changed in the twenty-first century. The definitions I refer to will shape my idea of class throughout the exegesis. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2021) states:

A class of society... consisting of people who are employed for wages in unskilled or semi-skilled manual or industrial working... considered the lowest class in terms of economic level and social status. (2021)

This idea about occupation being important in defining a person's class and or social status is also supported by several researchers such as O'Brien (2016) as he defines the working class as people with parents who are labourers. Evans and Tilley (2017: 3) note that they 'focus on occupation, and to a lesser extent education, as key measures of where people are positioned in the class structure.' These views are not supported in all studies of class, however.

Claire Ainsley (2018: 10) suggests that class distinctions have become blurred and collective identities appear to have given way to a more individualised form of expression. Dorling (2014: 3) also states that social class in Britain is no longer neatly defined by occupation. Other analysts suggest that class and the study of it are no longer important in analyses in Britain. Evans and Tilley (2017: 2) note that Savage (2000: 7) argues that class and the study of class are no longer central to British sociological analysis. Dorling (2014: 3) however does note that 'class matters because it often feels as if it is the modern-day truth of our identity, we can't escape it.'

Whilst researchers such as Savage may argue that class is no longer important in sociological analysis, the statement by Dorling suggests otherwise. The OED definition of working class is the most recent definition and states that people who are working class are considered the lowest class. Ainsley's idea that class distinctions have become blurred and collective identities are no longer prominent in British society and, at the same time, Dorling's idea that a person's class is an identity which can't be escaped from are ideas that will resonate throughout this project.

I grew up in a working-class household. My father worked in a copper cable factory

and my mother was a cook on school dinners. I grew up in an ex-mining town in Yorkshire which is still dealing with the effects of austerity and deindustrialisation. However, I am also university educated and I am currently completing a post-graduate degree. Most definitions of working-class people also include the level of education. This may suggest that whilst I experienced a working-class upbringing, I may no longer be defined as such. However, as Dorling notes, it is an identity that cannot be escaped from. In entering post-graduate studies, and acquiring a bachelor's degree, I have found that the class-status I experienced growing up is still a part of my own perceived identity, whether I want it to be or not. I undertook this research for this very reason. Discussions surrounding society appear to be moving away from class, but many people still feel that their perceived class intersects with other aspects of their lives and identity. This project will analyse this aspect of the fictional characters in my three stories.

The research in this exegesis will also assess the cultural debate surrounding the state of the publishing industry in regard to working-class fiction and working-class writers. Predominantly, in research surrounding working-class fiction, analysts and researchers such as Haywood (2018) and O'Brien (2020) are referring to the stories and the characters themselves, rather than the authors. This project will look to explore themes and representations of working-class writers, stories and characters, along with the state of the publishing industry both for those from working-class backgrounds looking to have a career in the industry, and for writers from working-class backgrounds.

The Working-Class and the Cultural Debate

A 2014 Labour Force Survey identified that 43% of people working in publishing – including those in influential roles – were from middle-class origins, with only 12% from working-class backgrounds. In an analysis of the Labour Force Survey, O'Brien (2016) also estimated that 47% of all authors, writers and translators are from professional, middle-class backgrounds, compared with just 10% of those with parents in routine or manual labour. According to research published in *The Bookseller* in 2019, 80% of people in the publishing industry who see themselves as working-class feel that their background has adversely affected their career. The data suggests that few working-class people do work in the publishing industry, and even when they do achieve success in the industry, staff still feel as though there may be hidden barriers as a result of their working-class background that has perhaps delayed or limited their success.

In a 2018 article written for *The Guardian* Kit De Waal notes that the statistics show publishing to be the least socially diverse of all the creative industries, stating that of the ‘big 5’ publishing houses (Simon & Schuster, Harper Collins, Hachette, and Penguin Random House), none had opened offices outside of London. This differs from other creative industries such as television, with channel 4 opening offices and production in Leeds in 2019 and ‘Media City’ being home to BBC and ITV offices and production studios as of 2010 and 2013 respectively. Whilst companies being based in the north or south does not denote class, the ‘big 5’ publishing houses being based in a metropolitan area may cause a homogeneous workforce that favours the middle classes. This then impacts access to the industry, from writers to editors to admin staff. This idea is supported by a report published for Arts Council England (2017: 36), where it is noted that ‘membership of the literary insider network, centred as it is amongst London-based, white and middle-class constituents, favours those already on the inside’ and also notes that “opening up the insider networks of writers, agents, publishers, reviewers and commentators [...] is one of the key challenges in opening it up generally.” These reports and statistics show how there is not only a lack of working-class people in the publishing industry, but perhaps a culture that favours those from middle, and upper-class backgrounds.

It must also be noted that since DeWaal’s article was published in 2018, HarperCollins established ‘HarperNorth in 2020, aiming to nurture and grow voices across the region, which could improve access to the publishing industry.

It is not just working-class people working in publishing who feel they have experienced hidden barriers as a result of their class-status in their career. There is also a lack of access to publishing for working-class writers writing working-class stories. In 2020 Douglas Stewart won the Booker Prize for fiction with his novel *Shuggie Bain* – a story about a young gay boy growing up in poverty in Glasgow with his alcoholic mother. When asked by *The Irish Times* (2020) why he was only the second Scot to win the prize, he responded, ‘I do think for the longest time regional voices and working-class narratives have been overlooked, and people don’t quite know how to amplify that towards an audience.’ Being from Scotland does not make Stewart working class. *Shuggie Bain* including regional voices does not make the novel working class. However, Stewart has noted that his working-class upbringing influenced *Shuggie Bain*. De Waal also makes reference to author Chris McCrudden in her article, quoting him saying that publishing is an upper-middle-class industry whose output caters to middle-class tastes. In a blog post about the cultural debate

around barriers in publishing, Matthew (2018) of *Creative Conversations* suggests a big problem facing writers from ‘lower class’ backgrounds is the balance between pursuing creative endeavours while having to maintain the necessity of working life.

It is clear from accounts from successful novelists and writers such as McCrudden, Stewart and Kit De Waal that there are barriers in publishing that may prevent working-class voices from being represented, or cause them to be overlooked. This contradicts the rise in popularity of novels about the working classes. As noted, Douglas Stewart was the recipient of the 2020 Booker Prize and in 2019 Bernadine Evaristo’s novel *Girl, Woman, Other* which features the stories of twelve different people, many of whom are from working-class families and backgrounds, also won the Booker Prize for fiction in 2019. This begs the question, why do so many writers who perceive themselves as working-class feel that their class affects their access to the industry?

Professor Katy Shaw is the author of the *Common People* report (2018). Her research suggests that UK publishing is ‘not currently acknowledging the full diversity of voices active in British society today’. Shaw calls on publishers to support new ventures outside of London and increase investment in regional writing development agencies. She also notes that ‘arguably there has never been a more vital point at which working-class stories and voices need to be heard in mainstream culture’. This supports the argument that whilst talented writers can emerge from working-class backgrounds, big publishers who are based primarily in a metropolitan area – particularly London - do not provide working-class writers with adequate opportunities.

These statistics and statements from other writers all support the idea and argument that working-class writers, and those aiming for a career in the publishing industry, are not only under-represented in the publishing world, but they are also often overlooked and arguably do not often have the same advantages or at least, the same opportunities as those from middle and upper-class backgrounds. This essay will now discuss the opportunities and experiences the characters in my story have faced and how their perceived class has affected this.

Home and Place

Ideas and meanings of home are a key part of working-class writing and the tendency to ignore their importance has dulled our understandings of the history of the British working class and culture. (Wilson, 2015: 1)

Although the characters face many trials and tribulations throughout each of my stories, there is one overriding theme that affects most of the characters, their home. This section will focus primarily on the techniques I used to represent the town itself, along with characters' own sense of home. I will look at critical theories of the representation of the working-class home in fiction along with research into working-class stereotypes in fiction, whilst comparing these ideas to my own work and intentions.

The town of Marklow is a post-industrial, working-class town in the North of England. The town is still struggling to recover from years of deindustrialisation and austerity. Forster et al (2018) state that the economic and social processes of deindustrialisation still resonate in the present and continue to shape behaviour. Despite Joanna growing up in the town decades after Steven and Caroline, she is still experiencing the same economic and social processes, emphasising the issues that many working-class people in post-industrial towns face in trying to rebuild a society and economy.

Krieken et al (2017) note that Cohen (2006) states that storytelling techniques such as the strategic employment of 'point of view' evoke character identification. In representing a town such as Marklow, it is important that a subjective experience of and representation of place is evoked through the protagonist. This statement from Cohen highlights the importance of a character's perspective and point of view in successfully evoking a sense of place. An example of the representation of a town much like Marklow through the use of point of view occurs in Helen Cross' *My Summer of Love* (2001):

Whitehorse, where I live, is a small Yorkshire market town where nothing happens and lads think a good night out is lying on a bale of straw in a barn injecting each other with pig tranquilisers. Viewed from this side our street was decent; messy glass-porched semis, a short terrace, caravans, bikes, kids, a postbox on a crescent of yellowing glass. (2001: 4)

This excerpt is written from the point of view of the protagonist Mona, which enables the

protagonist to evoke a sense of place. Mona notes that ‘nothing happens’ and ‘viewed from this side our street was decent’. These markers of personal perspective invite the reader to understand the type of experience the protagonist has had within the town. It is a working-class town and this is represented through the protagonist’s vision of her home. Through her description not only can the reader understand the type of town she lives in but also understand her position and personal experience within it.

In the story titled ‘Steven’, the employment of the point-of-view technique is also used to represent the town he is living in and as a result, evokes a sense of home and place:

The library looks closed today. It looks closed every day, to be honest. The ‘M’ in Marklow has fallen off almost all of its screws so it now reads *Warklow Library: owned by our council, run by you* in bright red letters across the front of the building. The red bricks and the flat roof stand against the heavy grey sky today. It smells fusty.

In this excerpt from ‘Steven’, the point of view Steven provides, of the run-down council-owned library which smells fusty inside, indicates that community-based areas in the town have been neglected. Steven is fifteen in this excerpt and one year away from leaving school. It can also be expected - through quotes such as ‘it looks closed every day to be honest’ - that throughout most of his childhood he has witnessed council-owned buildings that have been neglected. The use of point of view here enables representations of the town through each of the character’s perspective.

It is important to understand how Steven perceived his town as an adolescent and young adult compared with now, as a middle-aged man who moved away from his small hometown to live in a big city. The first-person narration is vital in representing Steven’s perception and experiences of place at different points throughout his life. An example of this can be seen in the following extract from ‘Steven’:

As we reach the top of the hill the lights of the town come into view. It actually looks ok at night. The lights of the high rises almost look like stars if you squint until your vision blurs, and since the smelt mill closed down the air seems clearer. I watch Chris staring at the girls clambering out of a taxicab at the bottom of the hill. They are drunk on lager, screaming and singing.

Steven says, 'it actually looks ok at night' and describes the air as being clearer since the smelt mill closed down. This shows not only Steven's feelings towards the town but also his class experience. The smelt mill which likely supplied hundreds of jobs has recently closed down, and many people are living in small flats in a high-rise building. Steven considers the possibility of himself living in one. Here, as a twenty-one-year-old, it can be seen through first-person narration that Steven is accustomed to the town. Despite economic issues and the prospect of living in a small flat, Steven likes his town and the view of it. The narration style provides access to Steven's life and mind which is able to evoke his own sense of place throughout different points in his life.

Representing the Home

In much fiction, the north of England has often been represented with undesirable qualities. Cockin (2012: 6) states that 'the north is often mapped as grim, polluted, industrialized and demonic'. She also notes that in literature, northern cities have previously been regarded as 'dehumanising places of production where the worker becomes degraded.' Lucas et al (2021) quote Russell (2004) arguing that there is a genealogy of ideas reaching back to the 12th century, which represents the North as inferior and marginal. I did not wish to adhere to these stereotypes in my own stories, and whilst I do not reject the necessity for realism and the recognition of economic and social difficulties, the stories are not limited to this.

The bleak themes in popular working-class novels are commented on by writers such as Haywood (1997: 142), who noted that the social development of the working-class in the 1980's and 1990's has resembled a return to the insecure 1930's. He notes that working-class fiction of this period (80's and 90's) has renewed tones of bleakness, futility, nostalgia, and defensiveness. Great emphasis has been put on the lives of the characters in my stories, and despite their circumstances they are still able to individually thrive. Although my story 'Steven' was not written during the period Haywood speaks of, parts of his childhood were and I still aimed to evoke some of the same tones Haywood talks about here in order to represent people's experiences during the period Steven is growing up in. The idea of bleakness can be seen in excerpts such as this from Steven's story:

The bingo hall on the opposite side of the field has been boarded up. Most of the windows in front of the boards have been smashed. Nettles and bushes climb the brick walls.

In this excerpt, the landscape is used to represent the home and the experience of growing up in this northern working-class town in the 1980's. In O'Brien's 2020 study of working-class fiction, he noted that in his 1937 book *The Road to Wigan Pier* George Orwell uses the coalfields of Wigan as the 'characteristic landscape on which to define a particular class experience' (2020: 33). In these extracts from *Steven*, the neglected, closed-down bingo hall with smashed windows and foliage climbing the building evokes a sense of bleakness and represents the class experience he is living through not only in the present day but as seen in previous excerpts, but during the 80's and 90's, decades which Haywood speaks of.

Despite this sense of bleakness and class experience, and the social and economic issues already mentioned, the characters living in this town are not bleak people. In an article written for *The Guardian* (2018) author Natasha Carthew writes

Protagonists don't have to be addicts or alcoholics or victims in some way, they could just be working-class and what that means to us all in its compassionate impulsive big-hearted ways. (2018)

This point by Carthew emphasises the importance of ensuring that the interesting lives of working-class people are highlighted in fiction, and this is what I intended to do in my stories.

Whilst bleakness and futility may be characteristics of Marklow, these themes are not all the town is. In this sense, it is also not the way the inhabitants of the town view it. According to Edgerton and Roberts (2014), habitus – a term originally coined by Pierre Bourdieu (2002) – shapes the parameters of people's sense of agency and possibility. In the following extract from 'Caroline' she and her daughter are on holiday on the English Coast during November. It is clear from the extract that they are accustomed to a rather bleak sense of habitus:

She shivers, and I tighten her scarf around her neck and kiss her head. I managed to get the caravan for so cheap on account of it being the first week of November in an off-season seaside town. She has enjoyed it though, and that is all that matters. We have stayed tucked up in our tin house, eating toast and listening to the rain wash over the coast.

Caroline is a single, working-class mother. This holiday articulates the parameters and possibility for a single working-class mother as despite Caroline working long hours around childcare availability, she can only afford to take her daughter on holiday during late autumn. This is further emphasised by the following extract from ‘Caroline’:

‘This has been the best time of my whole entire life.’ She said to her teddy last night whilst I was putting the lasagne in the oven.

“We should stay here forever,” she says to the black sky.

“I think we should.” I tell her. I think we should.

When discussing the concept of habitus, Bourdieu notes (2002: 27) that one ‘has been conditioned by one’s position in the social structure.’ It can be argued that their working-class position and the habitus they are accustomed to shapes their sense that this holiday is ‘as good as it gets’ for Caroline and Chelsea. Whilst it may appear bleak to others, and perhaps themselves, they are still able to enjoy themselves and think of it as the best time of their lives because they are interesting people who love each other and despite their circumstances are still able to experience pleasure.

Wilson (2015: 175), says ‘the scene in which a working-class character desires the fantastic domesticity of the affluent other occurs in many novels of working-class life.’ I subverted this stereotype both in this extract and throughout the story of ‘Caroline’. Whilst Caroline does want to make a better life for herself and her daughter, she does not desire an affluent, middle-class fantasy. She agrees with her young daughter that their off-season caravan holiday has been the best time of their lives and wants to stay there forever. The mother and daughter never wish for a bigger house or better holidays, they are simply happy with what they have, making comfortable routines such as sharing stories of their week in bed on a Sunday, and Chelsea cooking their meals after busy days. The ambition Caroline possesses is not to live a fantasy middle-class life, but simply to make a better life for herself and her daughter. Eventually, she will become a business owner, and so succeeds in her desires.

I intended for this holiday, and Caroline and Chelsea’s domestic lives to reject the tragic working-class narrative and bleakness which in the past has dominated literature such as themes of crime, poverty and suicide in Alan Sillitoe’s *The Loneliness of the Long-*

Distance Runner (1959), and themes of substance abuse, addiction, crime and poverty in Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting (1993)*.

The three stories in this portfolio aim to subvert stereotypes of a grim, working-class north. Whilst businesses may struggle and the town continues to recover from the effects of austerity, cuts and deindustrialisation, the towns and cities are still full of interesting people like Steven, Joanna, and Caroline. They have hopes, dreams and ambitions and are flawed and big-hearted. There is a sense of community and understanding, and whilst the characters' class experiences may shape them, they do not define them.

Representing the Pull of Home

Throughout each of the stories it becomes clear that each of the protagonists – particularly Steven - feels a pull towards their hometown. Steven and Joanna have both moved away, for both further education and job opportunities. Despite this, it is not apparent that they feel alienated from their hometown.

Wilson (2015: 145) speaks of the 'uprooted and anxious' characters in working-class novels. These are characters who are 'set apart' from their family as a result of their education – in Wilson's case 'scholarship boys' – and are emotionally uprooted from their class and 'forced to oppose the ethos of the hearth'. It could be argued that Steven is much like the scholarship boys, as his artistic talents and interests in further education and living in a big city sets him apart from his family's lifestyles and job prospects. His dreams and desires are bigger than his desire for the familiar, and the expectations to stay in his hometown, as seen when he is in his girlfriend's home when he says 'I want that. A big city, so big that nobody even knows who you are.'

When Steven does eventually return home after spending his adult life in Manchester, he does feel a pull home. He has a relationship with his hometown – although not idealised - and no matter the size or appearance of a town, home is memory, and for Steven, he learnt the importance of family during his brother's divorce, and Chelsea's funeral, and feels it is time to return, as seen in the quotation: 'Funerals are funny things... "Thinking of going home again. To see Chris." I had told David a while ago.'

Marklow is a northern, post-industrial town. It is struggling economically and much of the towns buildings and spaces have been neglected over the decades. Researchers have spoken extensively of the 'grim north' stereotype, and as observed, much working-class fiction often depicts unsafe homes, alienation after moving on, and limited parameters for

possibility. Despite this necessity for realism, this is not all I wanted the town to be. I wanted to represent a place that still allows for individuals to thrive, that still has room for people to build better lives for themselves and their families. In representing the home through techniques such as first-person narration, it was also important to effectively represent the pull the characters felt towards Marklow upon returning. I intended to achieve this by taking Steven back through the streets he grew up on and emphasise the sense of familiarity. Home is memory for Joanna, and for Steven it can also be a part of his future.

Challenging Stereotypes

The mother-daughter relationship

The stories I wrote and the characters in them aim to challenge the stereotypes of people in working-class, post-industrial towns living bleak lives. Whilst developing the characters, I also wanted to challenge other stereotypes that other aspects of the characters' lives may be subject to in fiction.

The representation of the relationship between Caroline and her daughter is fundamental to Caroline's journey throughout the short story 'Caroline'. Caroline has raised Chelsea alone. Chelsea was raised in a single-parent household on a single wage, meaning their lives would likely not have been without financial pressure. Caroline is self-employed and after spending many years renting chairs as a hairdresser in a salon, is able to buy her own salon. Their financial status means that many aspects of their lives may appear bleak from the outside. They holiday during late autumn at a partially closed caravan site and sit on the coast wearing winter coats watching the bonfire night displays. However, there is hope within their domestic life, as observed by Caroline when she lies on the bed in Chelsea's room. They have spent a lot of the time making the house a home. Wilson (2015: 180) says of the protagonist in *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* that she, like many other characters in working-class fiction is unable to make a home for herself and her daughter that feels safe. This is not the case for Chelsea and Caroline. Chelsea's room is her safe space, they tend to the garden together with Caroline giving Chelsea much of the responsibility, and perhaps most importantly, when Chelsea is brought home by the police after passing out alone in a drunken state, she is home and safe again, and Caroline expresses her desire to keep her at home and care for her where she will be safe. The relationship between Caroline and Chelsea is not unconventional but aims to break certain stereotype of what a mother-daughter relationship should look like.

According to research published by Shrier et al (2004), more adult women have mothers who have worked or had careers, and women's personal and professional experiences are often quite different than those of previous generations. They also note that as societal attitudes about the roles and options for females has changed, so have women's views of each other. Caroline is much like the adult women in the research Shrier produced, and this aspect of her motherhood with more options for career and home owning are the characteristics I intended to focus on.

Caroline has a career, and certainly her personal experiences both preceding and

during her motherhood are different from her own Mother's experiences. She became pregnant at thirty after a decade of living with friends and partying and had her baby out of wedlock after deciding to raise Chelsea as a single Mother. Caroline's mother expresses disappointment in Caroline's decision to raise her baby on her own and believes that it is not right, it is not the way things should be done. As noted, in the late twentieth and twenty-first century, options for women and mothers changed, and when developing Caroline's experience with motherhood and her relationship with her daughter, I made the deliberate choice to explore those other options.

The noted changes for the options of mothers meant that mothers could also enjoy professional lives alongside their motherhood. It has already been noted that Chelsea grew up in a working-class household as Caroline worked for a salon. In a study conducted into working-class mothers and going back to work, Braun et al (2008) found that mothers expressed considerable commitment and pride in their employment, regardless of the low status and low pay. Caroline takes great pride in her work as a hairdresser and makes this clear in a conversation with Chelsea. It is her commitment to her work that Caroline wants Chelsea to take interest in, possibly in the hope of inspiring her. This can be seen in the following excerpt:

“I rent five seats in this salon, the customers that walk through the door expect high quality and punctuality. They expect the best treatment. You are lucky to be working here, a place everybody recommends, building yourself a clientele.” I was hardly listening, but I did hear her call my work high quality, if not completely at the scheduled time. I proudly told Chelsea that story whilst we ate Shepherd's Pie and watched Deal or No Deal last week, and whilst she sniggered at knob head silly prick, she didn't seem all that interested.

In this excerpt, it is clear that the relationship between Caroline and Chelsea blurs the line between mother-daughter and friendship. It is also clear that Caroline is aspiring to give Chelsea a better life than she had. She is a hard-working, single mother, and whilst she is not aspiring to a fantasy middle-class life, she wants Chelsea's life to be conventional. Caroline clearly takes pride in her work, and she wants Chelsea to know that.

I also intended to subvert stereotypes about the realisation and representation of the 'mother' using Caroline's character. According to Ashraf (2017), American poet Adrienne

Rich propounds that the daughter's fear of becoming like the mother is due to the mother falling back to second-class status, turning herself into a victim and not exercising her power (2017: 84). It is also noted by Smurthwaite (1998) that in the texts of American culture in the late 1990's, the maternal 'voice' and subjectivity were absent, and the mothers were primarily represented through others. The character of Caroline subverts both of these ideas as she remarks on her position of authority in the workplace and despite feeling lonely, still ends her relationship with her boyfriend when he suggests that they sell the house she raised her daughter in. It is Caroline whose identity the reader becomes the most familiar with and knowledgeable of, and instead her daughter Chelsea is realised through the eyes of Caroline.

Whilst Caroline and Chelsea's relationships may not be entirely unconventional, I did aim to subvert particular stereotypes, such as the absence of the maternal voice, and the representation of the mother. I also intended to use Caroline and Chelsea's relationship to subvert the common trope that working-class people possess fantasies of affluent domesticity and a middle-class life, and in a working-class, mother-daughter household the home is an unsafe space.

Same-sex Relationships

Dickson (2018) notes that tragedy has dominated the gay literary narrative over the past one hundred years and that 'celebratory narratives' are in fact more subversive and are distinguished by the way they depict community, comradeship and affection between queer people. This statement by Dickson (2018) is one example of how stereotypes within fiction can be subverted and the impact that challenging stereotypes can have. It is the depiction of community and affection between queer people that I used to subvert the stereotypes of loneliness, tragedy and violence often seen in fictional texts about queer people – particularly in working class settings.

Whilst Joanna and Steven are living as openly gay characters, their sexuality is not central to their story or their personality. Joanna is dealing with the grief of losing a friend and isolation and loneliness. Steven is feeling lost later in life and wants to reconnect with his hometown and his family. The issues these characters face are not as a result of, or affected by their sexuality.

Sally Munt (2000) notes that most critical reflections by community activists and scholars concerned with homophobic violence have been silent on the significance of class. (2000: 211). Examples of homophobic violence can be seen within working class literature

such as *Shuggie Bain* by Douglas Stewart and *Maggie & Me* by Damian Barr. Both of these stories are set in Scotland during the 1980's. Both Shuggie and Damian are growing up in council housing schemes and living in poverty. Both characters choose to hide their sexuality whilst growing up and despite this are still victim to homophobic bullying both verbally and physically. It might be argued then that in much working-class literature, and in fact research that there is a stereotype that class status and homophobia and homophobic violence are intersected. I did not want to add to this stereotype in my own stories, hence my decision not to include any homophobia or violence towards both Steven and Joanna and so subverting the stereotype that working-class people are homophobic and violent towards those who are either openly or perceived to be homosexual.

The absence of violence and tragedy in Steven's story, and the emphasis on chosen family, community and friendship aims to subvert both the stereotypes regarding class and homophobic violence and tragedy in the queer literary narrative. An example of this occurs in a conversation between Steven and his best friend Ryan:

He is wearing my denim jacket and I'm sure those are my doc martens. The white tank top and tight blue jeans are all him though. He almost punched me when I accused him of copying Freddie Mercury.
"I thought your new friend would be joining us for the walk home, you couldn't get enough of him in the club." I say.
"Come on did you SEE how old he was? I've got limits," he says. "Plus, we haven't got room for any more gays in our flat since you started taking every Tom, Dick and Harry in," he says, throwing his arm around me and squeezing me. This isn't true. He brings home someone different at least three times a week.

In this excerpt from *Steven*, it is clear that Steven and Ryan are part of a community in Manchester. The home that the two gay friends share together is open to anybody who may be having a hard time. Steven and Ryan are also physically affectionate towards each other, characteristics which are not often represented in platonic relationships between two males. Dickinson states that this type of friendship subverts the heteronormative stereotype in fiction, and this is what the relationship between Ryan and Steven aims to do. Paul Johnson (2008: 78) notes that in certain instances, class is implicated with the social construction and representation of sexuality. Munt surmised that in activists' work on

homophobic violence, class is largely ignored, meaning there is the potential for class status to intersect with homophobic violence. This idea of class and homophobic violence is represented in novels such as *Shuggie Bain* and *Maggie & Me*. In *Maggie & Me*, - a semi-autobiographical novel – Barr does not note any experience of homophobic violence once he moved to Brighton and acquired a successful career. I did not want my characters' sexuality to have any negative consequences, and so dealt with the issue of homophobic violence and class by not including it at all. The character's sexuality does not involve tragedy or negative consequence, it is simply another aspect of their identity.

Joanna spends a lot of time thinking about her relationships with women. Despite this, her sexuality is not discussed. I used this strategy to normalise Joanna's sexuality; it is not a secret that she is homosexual, and there are no consequences to her homosexuality. The concept of homosexual tragedy is not exclusive to gay men in media and fiction. Millward et al (2017:P 2) note:

In 2014, Bendix identified the fact that in the opening episodes of several dramas writers were choosing to eliminate the lesbian character as a way to move the stories of the heterosexual characters forward. (2017: 2)

In Joanna's story, there is no heterosexual relationship, and the lesbian character of Joanna is always moving forward both in her relationships and her character development. I used this strategy to emphasise the normalcy of Joanna's sexuality and subvert any stereotypes regarding tragedy and a character's sexuality.

It was important that the characters in my three stories subverted the stereotypes that aspects of their lives and identity are often associated with. The characters are living in a perhaps bleak and struggling town, but they are not bleak people. They are open about their sexuality with no consequences, and they make decisions that best suit them. They are able to experience pleasure as well as pain and hold values such as community love and friendship in high regard.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this portfolio of short fiction and research has attempted to challenge the long-standing stereotypes that characters and places such as the ones in my stories have faced. Whilst my research and creative work in some ways agrees with much of the critical theory and ideas already published such as bleak working-class settings, and using landscape and environments to generate a depiction and perception of the home, I feel as though much of my work goes against the grain of common stereotypes often found within literature.

The research and supporting creative text attempts to subvert the idea that working-class people are living uninteresting lives in bleak towns. The protagonists in each of the stories are vibrant and colourful people, looking to push the boundaries they feel they are living within. They have hopes and desires and are experiencing life in different and colourful ways. Whilst each of the characters has experienced one tragedy or another, it is how they overcome these tragedies that is important. The idea of home is central to the characters and central to the research.

Caroline and Chelsea's relationship is built on friendship. In much critical research, it is stated that in literature mothers do not enjoy their own identity and the family life is often not seen through their perspective. Caroline subverts this entirely. The reader knows exactly who Caroline is and instead it is her daughter who we get to know mainly through Caroline's perspective

As Dickson noted, tragedy has dominated gay literature over the last one hundred years, including death, heartbreak, violence and family troubles. I made the decision to include some of these themes in my own stories, however they are not related to the sexuality of the characters. Whilst the character's sexual orientation is important to who they are, it is not central to their individual plots and any of the issues they face throughout the story is not as a direct result of them either hiding or expressing their sexuality.

I am a working-class writer, and I write fiction about working-class people. In the first section of this exegesis, the cultural debate and statistics surrounding the current state of publishing would suggest a bleak situation for working-class writers and fiction. However, with some of the 'big 5' publishers opening offices outside of London, books such as *Shuggie Bain* winning the latest Booker Prize, and the rise of northern-based 'challengers' to the bigger publishing companies, perhaps publishing and working-class access to the industry

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may be changing.

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