

How Does the Space Create the Text?

**An Exploration of the Impact of Physical and
Geographical Space on Each Stage of the Writing Process.**

Jennifer Cavanagh

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Abstract

This thesis examines the effect of the writing environment on the writer, the subsequent impact on what is written and the reasons for this. It is formed of a collection of short stories, different stages of which were written in different spaces, and a reflective analysis exploring the ways in which the writer's fluctuating relationship with these various spaces has informed those stories.

Following the introduction, an initial chapter surveys the key characteristics of the short story form and sequence, and positions the present writer's collection in relation to the work of other contemporary short story writers. It examines different critical models of story collections, arguing that the present collection is best understood as a sequence. The next chapter, on methodology, outlines the key terms and approaches used in the thesis. Subsequent chapters analyse both the stories and the process of their creation, through a focus on the tropes of belonging and not belonging, familiarity and unfamiliarity, the uncanny, isolation, routine and memory.

In its exploration of the effects of writing spaces on the writer and what is written, the thesis draws on affect theory as a framework. Drawing also on work in humanistic geography, alongside the writing of Georges Perec and Gaston Bachelard, it explores the concept of space and the ways in which the writer attempts to build a relationship with a space (which is also the process through which a 'space' may become a 'place'). The thesis demonstrates that, rather than being static, such a relationship is subject to continued (and sometimes unexpected) change, and reflects analytically on how the present writer's changing relationships with a variety of spaces are reflected in the short stories in the present collection. Drawing again on Bachelard, the thesis argues that the writer's ultimate aim is always to make the space a 'home' (however temporary) for her writing.

Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

NO PLACE: A SHORT STORY SEQUENCE

TIME OUT

They had an hour. A bottle? Yeah, they could do that. Probably not food though. Just nibbles. Olives. It'd been a month since they'd seen each other, Joanne and Josie. This was when they still made promises to meet more often.

Wine punctuated words. With fifteen minutes until doors, they were only a third of the way through their updates and all of the way through the bottle. Doors time wasn't start time, but they wanted good seats. There was a bar at the arts centre. And they could take drinks in. Probably.

They sat in the front row. Just as well they'd decided against the bottle, the floor went straight onto the stage. Still, there was no need for the look the comedian gave their plastic cups as he walked on, sat down and adjusted his mic.

The introduction was ramshackle, as always. Something about a snowman. A reminder this was work-in-progress. Hence the ticket price. Hence the low key entrance. Hence, could someone time him?

Joanne got there first.

He wasn't grateful. 'Is that phone going to go off in the middle?'

It wouldn't.

'When I nod my head, start.'

He did, and she did.

'This is a story,' he said.

But it was more than one. First a romance, then a fantasy, then a murder mystery. He switched back and forth between the three, the heroes' paths almost touching, but never quite.

They jolted along: the comedian, the characters and the audience. Passed missed opportunities, awkward misunderstandings and wrong decisions, until they reached a cliff. They saw someone stand at the edge, curl her toes over, look down, feel her stomach swirl, and the air –

‘How long was that?’

Sixty eyes refocused. How long had that been?

‘Forty-three minutes and thirty-two seconds.’

The comedian thanked the audience and walked off stage leaving thirty hearts behind at the precipice, hands making impotent circles.

*

Joanne and Josie rescheduled three times before they met up again. People joke about the British summer, but on a June evening in London, in a beer garden that’s an actual garden, not a Soho pavement, late sunlight makes morning work a dystopian future. Whilst those around them began the annual tradition of drinking jugs of half liquid/half foliage, they crammed the last three weeks into a comparison chart: one job was better/the other, worse; this manager was clueless/that one needed ‘ending’; one knew a person who was lovely but.../and she mustn’t say anything/who would she even tell?

They were on glass number just-this-and-then-I’ll-have-to-go, when Joanne mentioned the stopwatch. ‘He said start. He didn’t say stop.’

‘How long is it now?’

Joanne’s finger swiped the screen. ‘Five hundred and five hours and twenty-four minutes.’

‘Are you going to keep it going?’

‘I may as well.’

‘Until when?’

‘Until he tells me to stop it. And it’s got to be him.’

They tripped over words and feet as they rush-hugged goodbyes and ran for different Tube lines. ‘Don’t fall asleep on the train!’

*

A fortnight later, they watched the show again. The spikey edges had been sanded off. They waited for a mention of timing, but it didn’t come, so they let the seconds tick by. In their post-show decompression, Joanne looked at the screen. ‘Eight hundred and forty-one hours and thirty-five minutes.’

‘Will it get to a point and then stop?’

Joanne put the phone back on the table, giving herself a splinter in the process. ‘I wouldn’t have thought so.’

They were at Bistro Ken, down the hill from the venue. Back when adults had first begun reading children’s books on public transport, this had been their favourite place to eat. They’d just got into hummus and had even had the odd sun-dried tomato, although they’d never met a sun-blushed one. The establishment’s name used to imply a certain misplaced self-confidence. Now, the furniture’s distress was no longer deliberate, but lacked the swagger to turn shabby into chic. They didn’t mind. It was a Saturday afternoon and what wasn’t sunbathed was rosé tinted. A fruit fly landed on the base of Josie’s glass. It had more faith in the description of ‘strawberry notes’ on the bottle than she did. Joanne sucked her finger.

‘Have I told you about Zoe?’ She had. Zoe was the intern in Joanne’s office, young and enthusiastically clueless. The fly crawled towards a droplet of condensation that was bigger than itself.

‘Sometimes, I look around the office and just feel like giving up.’ Josie had heard a lot about Joanne’s colleagues before, the children sucking coffee from Tommy Tippy cups. ‘I said something about Björk the other day and she asked me if that was a band.’

Josie wondered if flies could get drunk. It would explain mayflies. They always looked hammered. ‘Oh God.’

‘It’s like she’s culturally dead. Her boyfriend’s got a top knot.’

Josie shuddered and flicked the fly. The man with the top knot at the next table turned around. ‘Or maybe we’re old.’ She wiped the condensation off her glass with a serviette.

‘But we’re not. I mean. Are we?’

‘Well, there are a lot of people who were born in the 90s walking around like they’re adults and that’s normal.’ Josie balled up the tissue without looking to see if the fly had escaped and put it in the ashtray. ‘Ten. What d’you reckon?’

*

By the next time they met, any work worth seeing had progressed to Edinburgh, but the arts centre was halfway home for them both and they liked it. The building was a puzzle box; Kevin McCloud’s dream. Or nightmare. Laptops tapped at different points around the foyer. Amplified by the marble, they provided a backbeat to the singing which was coming from a rehearsal room somewhere. Josie didn’t know the song, but she knew that everything had changed. She almost knocked over Joanne’s sparkling water (the dead giveaway) as she reach-hugged her across the bench.

‘How long?’

‘Twelve weeks.’

‘Oh! So you couldn’t drink at Zoe’s leaving thing. Actually, isn’t it less than that since we were at Ken’s?’ The singing stopped. They let the applause pass and the laptop backing track resume.

‘I know. But, at the time, I didn’t know. I’ve been all over the place since I came off the pill. We were only half trying.’

‘It’ll be fine. If you didn’t know...’ Josie stirred the soft drink. She’d bought it begrudgingly, but now it was a solidarity lemonade. A new intro started up. ‘Do you know if it’s a boy or a girl? Do you want to?’

‘Not yet. I’m not sure. If I find that out then it’ll be actually happening.’

‘I think it already is.’

Joanne skewered a lemon with her straw. ‘Do you want to see a picture?’

‘Of the actual...? God, yeah.’ Josie studied the tiny photo. It was black and white. Even pre-birth this baby was making an artistic statement. And it really was a baby, not a half-hidden blob in the darkness. ‘I call godmother!’ She definitely knew this song, and she wasn’t even into musicals.

Joanne shrugged. ‘We’re not having a christening or whatever. That’s just an excuse to get people to buy the baby stuff.’

‘Well, yeah. That is the point.’ The song. Was it Disney?

Joanne was unconvinced. ‘There will be no christening. You can still be godmother though.’

‘Really?’ *Oliver!*

‘Yeah. We’ll just tell everyone you are.’ Joanne held Josie in a serious gaze. ‘You are the godmother, and I am the holder of the stopwatch.’

‘Is it still going?’

‘He hasn’t told me to stop.’ Joanne picked the phone up. ‘Two thousand, five hundred and eighty-five hours and forty-seven minutes.’

‘How does Nick feel?’ It was Nancy’s solo now.

‘Great. He wants to move though.’

Contrasted with Nancy’s hardships, Josie didn’t think this was so bad. ‘Where to?’

Joanne sighed. ‘Near his parents. More space. A shed. I’ve said I’m not going further than Zone 4, though.’

‘God no. You may as well move back to Cardiff.’ Nancy got a round of applause from the foyer, but it hardly made up for everything.

*

Josie’s non-drinking solidarity didn’t last long. ‘I don’t mind,’ said Joanne. ‘As soon as this baby’s born, it’s on the bottle and so am I.’ Months had passed. On top of all the things that had got in the way before, there were now ante-natal classes, doctor’s appointments, and the incorrectly named morning sickness. They were standing on their friend Tim’s balcony. Developers were dragging the area into gentrification, knocking through to the next postcode and pricing locals out of the view. From here, the half-hearted street lights that made the walk from the station feel so perilous, were fairy lights twinkling to the river. Through the French

doors, Josie could see Tim and Nick standing with a woman, gesturing towards a row of craft beer bottles as if they were guides at the Louvre.

It was Joanne and Josie's last chance to meet up with each other, with everyone really, before the baby was born, but it wasn't a shower. Joanne hadn't said anything about wanting one, but Josie wondered if she still should have thrown one. She didn't know the protocol. Should she bring it up now?

Joanne folded her arms. 'The next stranger who puts their hands on my stomach, I'm going to break their fingers. And that's not hormones, that's a fact.'

Josie chose not to suggest a shower. Besides, she was busy herself. She didn't mention that though. It might seem unsympathetic. But might it take Joanne's mind off the elephant in the room? Not that she'd use the word elephant. It was only when Joanne stood up that she reminded her of when Mr. Thin got his belly.

'Do people really do that?'

'Oh yeah. It's completely acceptable for a total stranger to touch me and smile meaningfully. Nick just smiles back.'

Tim had wandered off to mingle, leaving Nick and the woman in earnest conversation. 'Who's that?' Josie pointed her glass a little too vigorously in their direction and some wine slopped onto her hand.

'Oh, didn't I tell you? That's Zoe.'

'*The* Zoe?' Josie licked her hand.

'Yeah. She's working for Nick now. There's no escape.'

They turned back to the view, and the conversation turned back to the usual subject.

Josie made sympathetic noises and nodded as appropriate.

Joanne was looking at her.

‘Sorry?’

‘Four thousand, six hundred and four hours and fifteen minutes.’

‘It’s still going?’

‘Checked before we came out.’

*

Josie was staring out of her kitchen window at the office block opposite, gold plated by the sunset, when Joanne unexpectedly answered her phone. ‘So, what’s she called?’ Josie asked.

‘Tahlulah.’

‘Really?’

‘No. Nick was pushing for it though. I said that in that case her middle name was Fat Sam.’

Did quinoa go soggy if you left it? Josie hovered with the sieve. ‘I don’t know why you didn’t go with that.’

‘I’m sure we’ll regret it in years to come, but we’ve gone for Charlotte.’

Sod the quinoa. Josie put down the sieve and opened the fridge door. ‘Oh. That’s actually really nice.’ Joanne had done it again. Managed to be original without being pretentious. Old fashioned, without going biblical or dinner lady.

‘Well, we did give it a bit of thought. Especially with her having three names.’

‘How does that work?’ Josie opened a bottle. ‘I mean, in a library, which one would she be under?’

‘I’m not really sure.’

‘Maybe when she’s older she could swap them around.’ She poured the wine quietly. There was no need to rub it in. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Like I’ve had four hours sleep and a lot of drugs.’

‘What were they like?’

‘Well, Nick enjoyed the gas and air.’

Despite Josie’s efforts, the bottle clinked as she put it back in the fridge. ‘Can anyone have a go?’

‘I just needed something to distract him. He was moaning about using his phone to time the contractions, but I told him ages ago we weren’t using mine. And, by the way, I can’t remember the minutes, but when we got back from the hospital it was on six thousand, six hundred and eighty-nine hours.’

*

It was a beautiful garden. Beautiful gardens were why people moved further out. They convinced them the sacrifice was worth it. The guests, too many holding babies, were spread over mismatched chairs: deck chairs, kitchen chairs and, in Josie’s case, a paint-scattered school chair. The radio in the kitchen had been pointed towards the window, providing music without responsibility.

Meeting anywhere other than someone’s home was a no-no these days. Always big gatherings and always weekends. That was fine. Joanne and Josie hadn’t drifted apart as

such. When they met, it was still good. More people, and their mini people, and that was fine too.

‘We don’t know whether to keep cutting these back or pull them out completely.’ As he spoke, Nick casually snipped away at the offending shrubs with some secateurs. ‘There’s still a lot to do. We need to prioritise, and Charlotte’s room and the veggie garden are number one.’ Josie could guess which of the two was Nick’s real priority. There had been a lot of courgette chat that afternoon, entralling Zoe and the other born-again vegans. Maybe it was the farming instinct too, that had driven them out past the end of the ‘Ginger Line’ to a place Josie had always thought fictional. Of course, it was closer to Nick’s clients and Nick’s parents and Nick’s old school friends. Joanne’s commute, whenever she returned to work, hadn’t seemed to enter into the discussion. As far as Josie could see, there was no urgent need to refurbish the house, but this was what people did. Maybe she’d been renting for too long.

Joanne hadn’t stuck to her word about the breastfeeding. She probably hadn’t meant it, but Josie imagined her being worn down by the local ante-natal army and their weapons of knitted breasts that Josie was still convinced were a wind-up.

‘Honestly, they give them out for the demonstrations.’

‘Where do they get them from?’

‘I don’t know. There’s probably some little old lady somewhere knitting away with a big basket of woolly boobs next to her!’

Joanne was now inside somewhere with her breast pump, so she could have ‘just one glass of wine’, and Nick could have ‘yet another thing to moan about.’ Josie was facing the trees lining the right hand side of the garden. Here and there, a lemon coloured leaf poked through the branches that crossed like Mediterranean vines. Charlotte was playing underneath them on a blanket Josie remembered from the back of a student sofa. Sitting next to the child,

and enjoying a reprieve from interrogation, was Tim's current girlfriend. She was nice enough. Was it Stacey or Tracey? Tim was watching her admiringly, oblivious to her awkwardness, as was Nick.

Whilst relieved not to have been put on baby minding duty, Josie did like the child. She was all plump cheeks, dark hair and that combination of both parents that was both satisfying and unsettling. Apart from the nose. That was Nick's. But Josie could see the point in having her now.

She turned to the group nearest to her. Sitting back, a bearded man said, 'Not necessarily a knife. They just said, "a sharp implement".' He spread his legs even further apart. 'Of course. It's nearly always a partner.' Noticing Josie, the vaguely familiar woman next to him leant towards her. 'Have you heard about the body they found?'

Josie hadn't.

'It was on the allotments down the road.' There was a chorus of tutting.

'And we almost applied for one of those,' another woman said. 'As a mother, I find it very upsetting.' The rest of the group nodded. Josie was wondering if not being a mother meant she didn't have to care, when there was an unpleasant noise.

The smiley Charlotte had gone. The lateness of the afternoon and the strangeness of the people had finally got to her. Tracey or Stacey or whatever her name was swapped toys around and even began to sing, but the crying grew louder. She looked over at Tim, who'd taken a sudden interest in the courgettes, and then, to Nick. 'Look! Who's that? Is that Daddy?' Nick did one of those hand folding waves that people only ever did to children. The child cried louder. He didn't rush over, which, while no expert, Josie thought might be the normal, parental thing to do. Instead, he called out, 'I know how to cheer you up!' and disappeared into the house.

None of the baby bouncing people seemed too worried, although there were a few sing-song oh dears. How had she come to know these people? She tried to make supportive eye contact, but Stacey/Tracey was busy making a monkey dance with a car. Josie was about to stand up, when Nick re-emerged, brandishing a phone playing a tinny tune. Everyone seemed to recognise it bar her.

‘Look what Daddy’s got!’ The returning hero turned to the crowd, ‘She bloody loves this cartoon.’ He passed the phone to Tracey/Stacey, who held it for the child. Charlotte’s wail became a sob, a sniffle, then a smile as her hands reached towards the phone. Satisfied his work was done, Nick made his way over to Zoe who was examining the potato patch.

‘What’s up with you?’ Joanne pulled up a deckchair next to Josie.

‘Nothing. Charlotte was getting a bit grumbly, but she’s watching something on the phone now with... Tim’s girlfriend.’

‘Was she? Oh, what’s the matter, Charlie?’ She went over and stroked Charlotte’s cheeks. ‘I know what you’re watching! Ooh, and on Mummy’s phone. We never use Daddy’s, do we?’ Nick was showing Zoe where the aubergines might go. Joanne gave him a look that said she knew exactly where the aubergines could go, kissed her daughter and walked back to her seat.

Nick picked up a glass. ‘Are you alright for a drink, Tracey?’

‘Fruit juice would be lovely, thank you.’

‘Of course.’ He looked at Joanne and walked to the table. ‘You’ve got to be careful with alcohol and kids, haven’t you?’

Joanne smiled and reached behind her for the wine bottle. ‘Best make that your last can then.’

The couple glared at each other over Josie's head; one standing, one sitting. Some guests became interested in various plants, others the children. Josie took the bottle from Joanne and began to pour. 'Is the stopwatch still going, Jo?'

Nick walked back to Tracey and handed her a drink.

*

Josie didn't know what she'd expected before she entered the soft play centre, but it wasn't to be stared at like a townie entering a country pub. Even the ball pool smack of plastic on child deadened to a thud as she walked past. She stepped over a puddle, refusing to consider what it might be a puddle of. As she scanned the room for Joanne, she kept her head at adult height to reassure the locals. When Josie finally spotted her, she was sitting between two other women, the three of them lopsidedly framed by a couple of prams and various 'bags for life' that had had good innings. She could always leave now. Text Joanne from outside, say that it was a nice idea, but she hadn't been able to get away after all. Would that be so bad? It had been so long. Maybe too long. Joanne stood up and waved. She looked relieved. Brief introductions were made, names that Josie instantly forgot and she and Joanne sat down away from the mums, next to a different pram.

'Where's Charlotte?'

'Over by the slide.'

Josie looked but couldn't distinguish Charlotte's little head from the others. 'Won't she wonder where you are?'

'She knows I'm here. Do you want a coffee?'

'I'll go. Where do you get them?'

Joanne rummaged in her own, huge bag. ‘No. The stuff here’s vile.’ She took out a green flask covered in blue and yellow flowers. ‘Can you get the cups from under the pram?’

Josie tentatively inserted her hand into the hammock/shelf thing. She found an apple, a copy of *True Crime* magazine, four Tupperware tubs, a bag of plastic bags and finally three stacked plastic beakers. She placed them on the table. ‘That’s organised!’

Joanne gave her one back. ‘You’ve no idea. Just the yellow and the blue. Charlotte’s got a thing for green at the moment.’

‘That’s sweet.’

Joanne unscrewed the top of the flask. ‘It’s great when it comes to eating fruit and veg. It’s a pain in the arse with everything else.’

The coffee smelt genuinely nice and Josie felt guilty. ‘So, how is everything? How’s Nick?’

‘Fine. I think. He’s away on business.’

‘I didn’t know he travelled.’

‘He’s always had to, well, every now and again. More so now. This is the fifth time in three months. And when he isn’t working away, he’s working late, and when he isn’t working late, he’s either in the vegetable patch or the shed.’ She produced two packets of fruit. ‘Apple or grape?’

Josie chose a grape. ‘Thanks. What’s he doing?’

Joanne took out a slice of apple but didn’t eat it. ‘They’ve got some new client who’s giving them lots of business, which is fantastic.’ She began to smudge a fruity pattern on the

table. ‘He says she’s really demanding, which, she has every right to be.’ She looked up. ‘But explain to me how they can’t get back from Brighton on a Friday night.’

‘Who’s they?’

Joanne stopped scribbling and looked up. ‘Him and Zoe.’

Josie wasn’t ready to do out and out criticism. She’d fallen into that trap before.

‘Aren’t the Brighton trains dodgy at the moment?’

Joanne swirled apple across the table. ‘He could’ve taken the car.’

‘But don’t you need it for Charlotte?’

‘Maybe. By the way, seventeen thousand, four hundred and sixty-eight hours, last time I looked. Nick keeps giving it to Charlotte to play with. I’ve told him not to.’

‘Why don’t you just give her his?’

Josie heard the satisfying crunch of a full-stop. ‘I don’t know his passcode. Yet.’ A wipe appeared from somewhere. ‘Mind your hands.’

*

Two months later, it still wasn’t warm enough to sit out, but the sun pouring through the café window promised summer. Joanne stabbed an olive. ‘Did I tell you he’s gone vegan?’

They were back on Nick, and this time Joanne had made it clear that any criticism would be welcome. ‘Really? Wasn’t he a really shit vegetarian?’

‘Terrible. He’d have a sneaky bolognaise at work, then break down and tell me. He was only doing it for me. In the end, I told him it wasn’t worth it. That I absolved him on behalf of the vegetarian community.’

‘So why do this now?’

Joanne released a derisive puff of air. ‘He says it’s about sustainability and the environment and stuff, but he’s still driving – ’

‘Apart from to Brighton.’

‘Well, obviously not to Brighton. I mean, who would?’

Josie shared the last of the wine between their glasses. ‘I mean, where were all these vegans when we had to explain about fish?’

Joanne tipped her glass towards Josie. ‘And then about tuna?’

They clinked glasses. Josie took a sip and the sun caught the bottom of Joanne’s glass as she downed hers. Josie reached over the table. ‘Are you ok? What are Nick and Charlotte up to tonight?’

‘Nick’s away in Leeds; Charlotte’s at his mum’s. One more?’

Josie picked up her glass. ‘No thanks. I think I’ve had enough.’

Joanne peered at her disdainfully through her empty glass. ‘Don’t you start.’

*

A few months had passed and they were sitting on the new terrace at Bistro Ken. It had been a carpark, but the addition of four picnic benches and two yuccas had changed all that. True, some things could not be polished, but the sunshine bouncing off the graffiti above Joanne’s head promoted it to street art.

‘Are you sure that’s not sore?’ Josie squinted sympathetically at the plasters covering one side of Joanne’s hand.

‘It’s fine now. I’ve got something to show you.’ Joanne pulled out tissues, a pencil case, a pair of secateurs, a set of keys and her old mobile phone. Each item was a mess of

green crayon and red and brown splotches, but the phone was particularly mangled. When Joanne placed it reverently on the table, Josie could see the screen had shattered into a delicate web.

‘I charged it at work.’

Josie picked it up, then quickly put it down again. It was tacky. ‘Ugh! I’m guessing Charlotte won’t be playing with it anymore.’

‘Nick let her do that. Not me.’

Josie reached across the table for a wipe. ‘Where is everyone tonight?’

‘Charlotte’s with my mum and dad. They’ve come down to help with things.’

‘That’s good. What about him?’ Some of the brownny red smeared across the white, but the rest remained on her fingers.

‘With Zoe.’ Joanne picked the phone up.

‘Doing what? You might want a wipe first.’ She offered her one.

Joanne didn’t take it. ‘Not much. Do you want to check or shall I?’

‘I’m not touching it. How do you even...?’

Joanne picked up the phone and pressed the on button. Nothing. The screen was black in the sun. She tapped it. Sunlight turned the cracks white and amber. The rest remained dark.

‘I think it might be over,’ said Josie.

‘He didn’t tell me to stop.’ Joanne’s finger was white as it pressed down hard on the screen. There was a cracking sound as she released it. Her fingertip was dotted with blood.

‘Watch yourself!’ Josie shoved the packet of wipes towards her. There was the sound of a siren in the distance.

Joanne ignored both the packet and the splinters of glass as she dragged her finger across the screen. Blue light shone on her face. ‘Right then, how long has it been?’

FIRST SNOW

The muffled darkness disturbed Amal early while the rest of the house still slept. Something had dampened the night sounds she'd learnt to trust. She opened the curtains to amber sky, glowing behind polka dots. She watched them land uncertainly on the shed roof; cling to the drainpipe. She willed them on as they formed a film across the paving stones, drowning the weeds in thick white. Everything was brighter now, but dawn was still distant. She wrapped the blanket around herself and waited.

As Amal walked out of the door, the morning traffic buzz was flat. Cars were sluggish. Voices spread across the gaps left by engines, passing strangers turned nods to comments. Children moved faster than adults, laughing as they skidded and tumbled. She watched in awe, wishing she was brave enough to take those risks.

When Laila had read those British stories to her, huddled together under sheets while their mother complained loudly below, she'd imagined that walking through snow would be the same as through mud; that her wellingtons would slip and squelch. Or maybe, it would be like the happy sink into sand. It was not. There was a softness, but it compacted beneath each step, like cotton wool squeezed tight. If she tried to step in someone else's footprint, it was already hard and joyless, so she made her own way. She drove one boot deep into the snow, then stared down at the prematurely ended limb, wondering what it would be like to never see her foot again. She pulled it out and watched the snow crumble it back into existence.

The park was a mass of white, speckled with children. She sat on a snow-cushioned bench, while missiles and screams overlapped. There was a cold explosion on her knee and she saw small faces giggling. Their 'Sorry!' was shouted as they ran, looking back in the hope of retaliation. She smiled and kept her seat.

On any other Saturday, the playground would be overrun – concerned mothers swooping on determined toddlers, the monkey bars living up to their name, the slide, a jostling conveyor belt that reminded her of Laila’s seventh birthday party. The twins’ family had brought a slide, carried it across from one side of the road to the other. Amal had never liked the twins. Muna and Zainab were a year older than Laila. Whenever they were around Laila was different and Amal had to beg to be allowed to play. But Laila thought bringing the slide was kind. Her mother disagreed. ‘They just want to show us how much they have.’

Amal watched. She had never been on a slide before. She studied Laila, the twins and the other big girls to see how they did it. Until she decided she could do it too. She climbed up the ladder, just as her sister had done. Holding carefully on to the sides, she sat down at the top and froze. Only seconds passed, but this was a lifetime to the impatient children below, and Amal found herself the reluctant head of an angry snake. Muna threatened to push her down and Amal gripped the sides of the slide even tighter. But instead of Muna’s bony hand on her back she felt Laila’s on her shoulder. She had pushed her way past the ice-cream sticky mob, climbed up the ladder and now sat behind Amal, legs around her.

‘We’ll go together.’

Amal could see the soft, thickened shape of the park’s slide, hidden and forgotten today. The playground was a no man’s land. While the brave plunged down distant slopes, projectiles flew across marble battlefields dotted with monuments to the weather. There were two boys in the far left corner. Their matching hats were on heads three years apart; a distance Amal knew well. The taller boy was squashing together a snowball. His blue anorak was the colour of the dress Laila had worn the last time Amal had seen her. He called the shorter boy to hold the ball, while he scooped more snow around it. This boy’s anorak was

also blue, with a green dinosaur covering the back. Only when his arms could stretch no further and his chin pointed skywards was he allowed to lay the ball back on the ground.

They rolled it together then, the older boy steering it wherever the snow lay untouched, changing direction whenever it became heavier on one side. He could have done this alone, and quicker, but he let his dinosaur shadow help him, slowing down whenever things were about to run away from them. When the ball was as high as the dinosaur's horns, he sent the younger boy off to forage while he started the process again. It was a smaller ball this time, a quicker, one-man job. The gatherer returned, little blue sleeves supporting a mound of sticks and stones.

'Look, Charlie!' He let them fall to the floor.

Charlie turned. 'Well done, Alfie. Now come and help me.' Together, they lifted the smaller snowball onto the larger. Alfie held it in place, while Charlie packed a neck around it. Then Charlie took a step back, nodded at their progress and pulled his hat down over his ears. Alfie repeated each movement; a keen student. They both examined the collected items on the ground, or rather, Charlie did. Alfie split his study between the pile and the master. A hand was placed on his shoulder, and Amal knew exactly how that hand felt. She put a hand up to her own shoulder and brought it back empty. Charlie picked up the three largest stones in the collection and put one in Alfie's waiting hands. He pressed his own two stones, one above the other, into the larger, supporting snowball, making a show of being firm, but careful, then stood back so that Alfie could place the last button. Alfie took a big breath, his face frozen with concentration. When he wiped his gloved hands on his trousers, one glove fell off his hand and dangled by a woolly thread from his cuff. Charlie replaced it for him.

They turned to the pile, both crouching down to sift through it. When they stood up again, each had a handful of small stones. They hovered around the head; artists around an

easel. They stood back. Charlie put his hands on his hips and looked seriously at their work, more a builder surveying a job than a grand master. Alfie copied him. Charlie pointed to one side, then to the other. The boys separated but were never more than a shout apart. Another distance Amal knew well.

Alfie stood up and waved a twig in the air.

‘I’ve got one!’

‘Too small.’

Alfie threw it back down again. Charlie held aloft a stick so long and thick it was almost a branch. ‘We need another one like this!’ He walked over, stick in hand, to help the younger boy search. Alfie picked up, then threw away three inferior sticks, before running behind a tree. He appeared seconds later, brandishing a long stick in triumph. Amal clapped her hands together without thinking, but her woollen gloves muffled her embarrassment. Alfie ran up behind Charlie and poked him in the back with the stick. Charlie turned and smacked it away. It fell to the ground and the little boy’s arms fell to his sides, his gloved hands two tight balls of wool.

Their mother had made Laila take Amal with her that day. She would not hear any complaints, and who did these twins think they were anyway? So, they started off together across the fields. They said they were going on a picnic. Why did they have to go so far?

‘Can we stop now?’ Amal asked. She hadn’t asked that many times. The three girls ahead ignored her and quickened their pace.

She asked again, heard sighing, but none of the three looked in her direction.

‘Please!’

They stopped and turned. Laila walked back towards her. She didn't shout, but she was firm. 'Go home.'

'You have to let me –'

'Why do you always have to hang around me? You're too young to come. Go home!' she shouted, turned and walked back to the others.

Amal did not want to go home. If she was going to be treated like a baby, then she would act like one. She balled her hands into fists and dropped to the ground, punching it and screaming. When she looked up again, the girls were skipping away.

In the snowy playground, Alfie was about to scream too, but there was still time and Charlie was not leaving. Instead, he clasped his hands together, fell to his knees theatrically, wrapped his arms around his brother's legs and begged for forgiveness. The younger boy laughed and held out his hands. A moment later, the older boy was on his feet, and then, they were hugging. Suddenly, Charlie was dashing back towards the snowman and Alfie was chasing after him, trying to catch up.

Amal had tried to catch up to Laila, but she and the twins were already small bouncing figures in the distance. They must have heard her shouting, because she could hear their singing. The explosion silenced it. For days after, Amal heard nothing.

For a minute or so, the boys circled their snowman, surveying their morning's work. Then, they patted his head and ran off. Amal waited until they were as small as the three girls had been before the black cloud had hidden them. She approached the snowman. He was bigger than she'd thought. His smile was crooked and, despite the boys' efforts, one side was fatter than the other. She took her gloves off to feel the top of his head. The snowman was smiling, but he was cold. Was Laila cold? Amal took off her hat and gave it to him. It wasn't enough. She picked up a handful of snow and began to roll.

WEDNESDAY

It's a Wednesday morning. Neither you nor I have work today, we are in the same city at the same time, but it's she who's making us do this. I am walking a tightrope between looking good for me and not making an effort for you. So, there is mascara and there is eyeliner – it moves smoothly across swollen eyelids, like biro on a slipper's rubber sole – but no eyeshadow. Because you're not worth it. I put the lipstick to my mouth, then stop. Everything moves in cycles, and I wore this shade then. It will look like I haven't moved on and that will not do.

How has this face changed? No real lines yet, just crêpe creases when I smile. Not a problem today. 'Fat people don't get wrinkles,' you told me once. It was probably to make me feel better. You probably shouldn't have used the word fat. I've lost and gained a lot since then, that moves in cycles too. I hope you've aged badly. A picture proves nothing these days.

I look at the reflection of the bedroom. Strange to be getting ready here again before meeting you. This has changed too. Long gone is the white MDF desk with its skyline of cassettes, joss sticks and icons of dubious origin. Less is more these days, and I'm here less and less often. No trace of poster pockmarks, just a print my parents found in an antique warehouse, and this mirror bought online.

Your room was in a pocket of the city I'd forgotten about, exotic because it belonged to someone else's childhood, your childhood. Your room was long and narrow. The ceiling was high and the window stretched all the way up to it, with a low windowsill. That was your place. You told us about your sister's Rick Astley days and your brother's temper. It's always summer in my memory. She is sitting on the bed next to you and I am sitting on a reversible yellow sun/blue moon rug at your feet, letting sunlight and stories spill over me.

Maybe I forgot my place.

I go downstairs and make a cup of tea. I'll eat later. Everyone else is asleep. I don't want to think about you or about today either, so I turn on the TV. Breakfast news blares, 'Tensions are rising in...', I turn down the volume and switch the channel. The news will dig its fingernails into me throughout the day, so there's no need to give it an early start.

When we watched TV, we watched MTV. You were the first person we knew to have it. We watched it downstairs in the living room, and when we did, it consumed us. I can barely remember that room, just guitar strings in the desert; bleach blonds with dark roots. We didn't realise those American summers were heroin sunny. 'We could do that,' she said. 'Just drive around painting in the Mid-West.' We never managed that nor a *Goonie* adventure. We didn't even have bikes. We did the little things we could do. Dyed our hair, bought makeup, stuck our thumbs through the ends of our jumper sleeves and wrapped ourselves up.

Spring sunshine bathes my face. I'm walking in today, because there are other things I need reminding of too, like how good my life has been without you; like having the time and energy to walk in; like the fact I can stop at a café on the way and have breakfast out. This is my Wednesday and you will not spoil it. It's not summer yet, but the sun is warm through the café window as I eat eggs and drink coffee and watch the people who are in a hurry. They carry on with their lives, and soon, we will carry on with ours.

A song comes on in the background and I'm back in that summer that didn't rush away from us, September jolting us back. We put down our pens in the exam hall and knew school would no longer bookend our time. No more being cramped by polished shoes and routine. There were no rainy housebound days that July, just the park, the beach, the club and a festival that didn't live up to our expectations. Then, our first time away as adults. Six of us,

on a holiday paid for with money earned half-asleep on Saturday mornings in newsagents, cafés and cinemas.

‘I can’t believe they’re playing this!’ We shouted and jumped, so innocently amazed that we made that first bar, on our first night, our holiday local. I spent the second night outside it listening to you, saying ‘I know,’ ‘the cheek of it’ and ‘you look great’ on a loop, while everyone else was inside dancing. For the record, that girl wasn’t a bitch and did look better in that dress. Why did it bother you so much anyway? Then again, you are the girl who tried to make a funeral all about herself. There was a time I couldn’t listen to those songs. I can now. Just not today. Because of her, not because of you. ‘It was lovely, thanks,’ I say to the owner as I pay. ‘I just hadn’t realised the time.’

*

Fifteen years ago, the mid-morning faces on this road would have been very different: the out of work, the harassed mothers, truanting children. If I’d seen someone like me sitting in a café, I’d have wondered, ‘I know why I’m here, but why are you?’ Now, each café has a laptop user in the window. Working from home means working from Costa. The self-employed pay the wages of the media creative baristas, smashing avocados instead of the system. My thoughts already sound like you. As I pass charity shops, independent cafés and the organic supermarket, people walk in and out with as much ease as they pass from weekend to weekday.

Marble and granite tempt me into the cemetery. Even death is beautiful in the sun. I don’t read the names engraved, there’s no time, just trace my hand over the tops of the gravestones, let granite and lichen rub away my skin. It’s quieter here, though it shouldn’t be. The low wall, rusty railings and occasional tree are not enough to shield me from the traffic. I bang my foot on a hidden stone border. Grass has grown across the graves, uniting the dead. I

am accidentally walking over people, buried decades deep, but they are all part of the cycle. The grass, the trees, the flowers. She could be in this air now, or one day splash over my foot, trailing over the side of a boat in the Mediterranean.

I'd never been in her church before the funeral. I'd been in yours, bleary-eyed on a Sunday morning, or over-dressed on a Saturday evening, ready to rush for the bus. In hers, there were yellow glass windows with white hexagonal frames. They rose up behind the altar; a honeycomb daisy chain cross, bathing the mourners with a callous warmth as they swarmed up for communion. She smiled at them from the top of the coffin, from her final school photograph. Smart and sensible. Not herself. I couldn't walk past it, but I saw you touch the lid.

The gate and the graves are behind me now. On this side of the cemetery it's still fifteen years ago. I pass two off licenses, a betting shop and then a sea of graffiti and shutters. The hipsters will never make it this far. Anything they tried to pop up would be slapped down. Two women in pyjamas stand outside open front doors. One tells the other, 'Seriously, I was fuming with her!' The other, holding a baby in the crook of her right arm, a pink padded star, nods her head in agreement, then shrugs. 'Yeah, but she's your best mate.'

The road inclines steeply upwards. This area is hard to escape. When I look back, the empty shops run into cemetery green and the sun hits a pond beyond it, but when I turn, the city skyline appears as if from nowhere. Beautiful. Yet, none of these places ever felt like they belonged to us. So we left. Not her, but you made up the distance for her. What did you find? There is a lifetime of questions between us. If we could go back and change one thing, would she be here now? Would we two staying friends have made a difference? When our three divided into two twos, it wasn't just the maths that was wrong. If we'd still been a three, then she wouldn't have been there, hanging on a street corner like a stereotype. They weren't

our sort of people, but she'd started to branch out. Sick of us, maybe. Sick of juggling of us, or just putting up with us.

The ridiculousness of the afternoon ahead hits me. This farcical meeting. If we forget about the argument, about who was right and wrong, if we forget about the past, we are left with the fact that we are two strangers. I cannot be annoyed at the child you were, being the adult I am. If I meet a stranger in anger, I will lose the higher ground. I will be as ridiculous as you always made me feel. She'd find all of this hilarious. My discomfort, possibly yours.

*

Beyond the city is the river. The sun bounces off brown water. Industrial chic. I imagine stretching myself across it, linking two worlds. Above it, the sky is the colour of your wallpaper. It was the sort that squashes down when you press on the pattern, then pops back up. It must have been fashionable once. When it was scuffed and torn with too many unfaded squares, your dad painted over it. You got to choose the colour. Then choose again and again until you chose an acceptable one. It was unfair, a violation of rights, a – and I stop this train of thought. It's giving the illusion of solidarity.

I'm opposite the steps where we used to meet before a night out. Walking distance to our pub. Everything was walking distance in this city we thought was so big. We sometimes waited half an hour for you to arrive. There was no apology, just, 'I couldn't get my hair straight', 'Does my makeup look okay?' or 'I've walked out. They started having a go at me for no reason.'

A group of teenagers is standing on our steps today. They look as though they've been picked up from our era and dropped into this. I didn't think long hair on boys was even a thing anymore. I want to tell them how wonderful and terrible their futures will be, to infuse them with confidence and self-respect. I don't. Instead, I think about how things sometimes

change less than we think. That was the first landmark, and everything is fine. I'm still here. The me I am now, not the me from then. You haven't taken hold of me yet. I know there will be others. Not the school, that's gone now, rebuilt with more glass and less asbestos.

It would be easy to miss the next landmark, but I know it's there. I don't leave the main road, but I look down the side street. I see a sign jutting out from halfway up the side of a building, the only hint of an occasional club. Wednesday daylight shames it into seediness. The colour scheme doesn't help. No windows. Graffiti covered shutters. An attempted maroon and black makeover. From here there's no sign of the late-night roof garden. Not a garden. Metal stairs, moonlight, security lights, and you talking again about your mother: her sarcasm, her cruelty, her selfishness, her not understanding you for comic effect – all the things that made you, you. You had your blind spots and I had mine.

We set the bar low for bars. The carpet was sticky before the night had begun. It had diagonal stripes geometrics. *Saved by the Bell*. There was the black hallway where we sat for privacy and the lounge where we sat on New Year's Eve. Not on the seats, but on top of the sofa backs. Young and oblivious. Spilling drinks bought with Saturday job wages didn't matter because happy hour was never ending, escalating and terminating relationships. We bought drinks that don't exist now, and shouldn't have then: Castaway; Blastaway. Why? We weren't there for that. We were there for the music, and dancing, and love, and dancing, and singing, and dancing. 'You're like an Ever Ready Teddy!' she shouted in my ear. If you kept your drink in your hand, there was no need to stop dancing, a thumb in the top of the bottle. Eyes closed, we climbed guitar strings. Smoke filled the air and our lungs but we thought we would be long gone before it had time to kill us. There were no consequences. Just elastic bands to hold our hair back later. This right mind, right time, right place feeling would last forever. These were the friends that would see us through. Tie-dyed into our bone structure,

the music thumped through us. We didn't know heartbreak yet, but in the morning we'd know whiplash.

All that is behind me. I reach the river and turn. I see through new wraparound windows that you aren't here. Good. I'm early and know you'll be late. I won't wait this time, but I will be ready. I choose a seat looking out. I don't want to be ambushed.

This could be anywhere. I could be anywhere. No-one is looking at me, judging me, and that calms me. They are not you, but there are memories here too, neutralised behind the living wall and softened by scatter cushions, but still there. We saw our first concert here. We saw a lot of bands here. Always standing though. Why would you sit? We were late booking once and ended up in the seats. We tried to sneak down, but they caught us and we had to go back. Then you disappeared to the bar with someone else who looked older.

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Out of the window, I see girls with hair dyed more professionally than we ever managed, holding bags from our Saturday afternoon shop. Repeating our lives. I had the sort of hair that girls in club toilets touched and asked if it was natural. Not like yours. Long, dark and, I now realise boring. Maybe you haven't gone grey, but I'll still have the better hair. You'll have the stretch marks, the worries about your children's school, the revelation that it's not the school that's the problem.

During the funeral service, there was constant movement. I stood, sat, knelt and shook hands in sequence and on automatic pilot, but the cemetery was still and green. Most of the bees had gone, and my memory of it comes in short flashes – sharp black edges against the grass, men grunting under the weight of straps, a hug from her mum, not being sure what to do next, and then noises in the fog. 'She was my best friend!' It was your voice, shouting at me. We had just seen the same thing, been through the same thing, and yet, you were

shouting at me. As if I hadn't known, as if I wasn't crying too, as if, even on this occasion, your feelings meant more than mine. And I didn't say anything. Not because I was ignoring you, or because I wanted to hurt you, but because I really didn't know what to say to someone who would do that.

I might not recognise you. Will you know me? And what do I do when we are both sure it's us, anyway? Shaking hands would be weird. I can't hug you. Air kisses? We never did that. I've never done that. Even you won't have become someone who does that.

You open the door.

INSTACISING

Steph didn't know how long the *Peanuts*-style voice had been droning on. Some cruel joker had put the clock on the wall behind her, and her phone, in on the conspiracy, had given up the ghost shortly after she'd stifled the first yawn. She'd made the decision not to follow early on. Add to that the soporific effects of a free lunch instead of her usual anaemic canteen-bought sandwiches, and she couldn't have tuned back in if she'd wanted to.

She sat up in her chair and shuffled from side to side, a pre-emptive strike against a numb bum. The speaker had a plan to give them ownership. Not of anything worthwhile, like a car or a house, but of some ephemeral work-related *joie de vivre*. *Joie de travailler*? Whatever it was would not, in Steph's opinion, beat the idea that Leigh had come up with one particularly slow Tuesday afternoon.

Steph had stared at her across the top of their monitors. 'And you don't think they'd just give us some old banger with moss around the windows? The leg's been falling off my desk for the last two months and they haven't done anything about it.'

'I'm not saying they should give us a car.' Leigh pointed a mock-stern finger at her. 'Are you going to listen or what?'

Steph looked at the files on either side of her. 'I've got nothing better to do.'

Leigh flapped her hands, as though playing air piano, 'A house that drives you to work.'

'A campervan.'

Leigh shook her head. 'That's a car that you can sleep in. And you have to do the driving. I mean an actual house, but it drives you to work.'

Steph raised her eyebrows. ‘A driverless campervan. Like driverless cars. That already exist.’

‘No, not a car, not a caravan. An actual house. But it takes you to work on kind of autopilot.’ Leigh continued with Shopping Channel confidence, ‘So, you can get ready for work, while you’re on your way to work.’

‘I do that anyway. So do you.’ They were queens of red light mascara application. ‘I’ve seen you get cereal out. And what about the other traffic? What about crashes?’

‘They’ll run on special lines,’ Leigh countered.

‘So, a cross between the DLR and a campervan?’ Steph asked. ‘Camper-DLR?’

‘Well, I think they’d be brilliant,’ said Leigh. ‘And I find your lack of support hurtful.’

‘I’m sure you’ll get over it,’ Steph said, picking up a file.

‘I might. Or, maybe, when you see my house cruising by, with me still in the shower, while you’re freezing at the bus stop, you’ll regret this incredulity.’

‘If your invention is such a blinding success, why are you still coming into the office?’

Now, Steph’s eyelids were heavy and persistent shutters. She dug her nails into her thighs and then her bare arms. Perhaps self-preservation was stopping her from pressing too hard. It was no good. Even her ears were flitting in and out of reception like the office wifi, a necessary evil. Spending her days staring at numbers on one screen, she needed the chance to daydream on another. Leigh called it *Instacising*. Dreaming yourself onto beaches, toasting your audience with a cocktail glass, watching the night sky across the waves, slowly approaching...

How long had she been out? That was definitely a new slide. She checked the rest of the team. Shaun saw her look in his direction and winked. Paula was playing with her overcrowded charm bracelet. Gary hadn't noticed a thing, enthralled by whatever was going on. Or rather, was wearing a calculated, *I hope my line managers can see how enthralled I am by this face*. Maybe the little disco nap had done the trick. Steph felt refreshed. Clear headed. Perhaps even ready to listen. What harm would it do? There might be questions after, and she could shine for once. No. She'd had a doze, not a lobotomy. Besides, there was never any follow up to these things. There was the calendar, a quota and now another box could be ticked. It would be frustrating if she could be bothered to care. If she had the energy. If she could...

She was going to have to get up. Go to the toilet or something. Shaun was nearest to the door, but she'd rather go the long way around.

'Gary, can I get out please?' she whispered. Gary tutted, scowled and scraped his chair in. Cath, who'd bagged a corner table with the other team leaders, turned at the sound. Steph pretended not to notice.

'Thanks,' Steph beamed at Gary with exaggerated cheer, her smile slipping as she turned away.

Leigh had escaped today's, and all future days' boredom. It was her world that Steph now *Instacised* about.

*

Steph stuck her foot out behind her, catching the door before it slammed. She'd walk up to the third floor, get the oxygen circulating. How long was left, anyway? The clock at the end of the corridor had stopped. She peered into a meeting room window. The clock on that wall said the same time. How could it only be two fifteen?

In the stairwell, the sound of swinging doors and office murmurs in the breaths between were silenced. She walked through a carbon copy of the second floor. The building's exterior was ornate and imposing, but at some point an executive decision had been made to refurbish the interior by removing any semblance of the unique and interesting. Now, it was no more than an office space: dropped ceilings, open plan, aggressively neutral blues and greys. The whole building was in training today and the calm left behind was unsettling. Work stations huddled in conspiratorial fours, health and safety posters threatened her from the walls and the company motto, 'Compelling Experiences Creatively Empower Us', loomed above it all.

It took two hands to push the door open. Her footsteps echoed down the long, high-ceilinged room. The toilets had somehow escaped the great refurb, and were almost luxurious. Mahogany cubicles, marble floors, gleaming white tiles and lavishly golden taps. Not actual gold, she knew that, but if one day she were to find an attendant in the corner, doling out towels and perfume, she wouldn't be surprised.

She didn't need to go, but she was here now. She rubbed her hands over her stomach, bloated for the last couple of days. There was a little bump, just above her belly button. She must have dropped something down her top at lunch. Attractive. She pulled the top forward, shook it, then rubbed her stomach again. The lump was still there. She picked at it. 'Ow!' She needed a proper look, but the art deco uplighters didn't help. She leant right over the sink, as close as possible to the mirror, and found a very small, flesh-coloured, hard lump. She gave it a squeeze. Nothing. It didn't hurt. It didn't look great. But she wouldn't be wearing a bikini anytime soon.

There was a sudden sigh above her and she jumped. It was just the old air vents. Formidable, bronze affairs, each was a two-foot square, in the centre of which, three dragons

snaked in place of a grille. Steph had once thought they were fish. It would have made sense; most of the buildings around there had originally belonged to some shipping merchant or other. But they were dragon snouts, not fish heads. Each central dragon was stretched out straight, the tip of its tail wrapped around the top of the grille, while it bit down hard at the bottom. The other two wormed their way in front and behind it. On either side of each vent stood a wingless cherub, their role unclear. They might have been guarding the dragons or controlling them. To Steph, with their backs so firmly pressed against the frame, they were hiding. Wrapped only in tiny togas, they needed the dragons' warmth, but were scared to be seen. The picture rail running below them all could easily have depicted ferns sprouting from the top of urns, but Steph saw insects, poised to attack.

She'd have taken the long way back, had it not been for that look from Cath. The fresh air, or change of air, had sorted her out, but the rest of the session would still be tough. If she survived, would it be worth a celebratory drink? Paula had been angling to go for one since Leigh had gone... No. She wouldn't last half a glass opposite those vapid eyes. She knew from past experience how hard it was to distract Paula from the gossip of her close, personal friends on 'The Square' and 'The Street'. Worse still, what if she did last? What if it became their regular Wednesday night drink?

For the rest of the afternoon, she let the words wash over her, 'alignment... circling back ... transfer...' Occasionally, her mind drifted to the lump, but she managed to stay awake, and even nodded a few times when others did so. These achievements deserved a greater reward than a joyless wine spritzer with Paula at The Queen's. She called into the deli on the way home. Just for some things to pick at while she watched TV, but when everything was laid out on her coffee table, she realised she might have got carried away. It wasn't long before she was flagging. As she surveyed the collection of cartons, her phone vibrated. A new post from Leigh.

Leigh had gone big on sunrises and sunsets since she'd been away. She'd never seemed that interested in them before. Now, the number she shared each week seemed to outweigh the number she could realistically have watched.

Today's sunrise: a row of palm trees foretold the heat exhaustion of the day, drooping black. In the middle, the sun glowed a halo behind one. Baptism of fire. Dangerous. Not for her. There were screens between them. Oceans.

The next picture: half sky; half Leigh. The sky had faded, Leigh was looking darker, more vivid. She held a glass of brown liquid, twigs sprouting out the top, towards the camera. Underneath: 'Breakfast in Koh Phangan #healthystart #travel #sunrise #palmtrees #lifeinthailand.' Leigh was big into hashtags now too.

Pictures three, four and five were from later in the day. The same day? She was ahead. Already living tomorrow. Flip-flopped feet in front of the sea, a high angle of fish swimming close to the surface, vibrant *Insta-Leigh* smiling amidst a group of shiny strangers, beaded necks and braceleted wrists. Steph felt a tingle on her stomach. Remembering the lump, she put a hand over it. The tingling stopped.

Later, in bed, she swished back and forth again through Leigh's post. Fish; smiles; sunrise; flip-flops, until she closed her eyes and dropped her phone on her face.

*

'Any other business?' asked Scott at the morning meeting. Steph's stomach sank as Cath got to her feet. 'He's tried to keep it a secret, but as some of you already know, today is Gary's special day.' The staff smiled and nodded towards him. 'So, I'm sure you'd all like to join with me wishing him a very happy birthday.' Steph knew what was coming next.

The office tradition of singing ‘Happy Birthday To You’ had begun as a way to boost staff morale. Unfortunately, like Crocs and playsuits, it left Steph cold. And she wasn’t alone. Struggling in to work was effort enough, without having to sing publicly, for the benefit of a barely known colleague. The song came out as a dirge, made even more unsettling by the ghoulish enthusiasm of middle management. As for the birthday boy, who would enjoy watching others forced to suffer for them? Who would want a reminder they had spent another year in this tepid world? Gary beamed.

Leigh had been right. ‘We need to get away,’ she said, as she had a hundred times before, huddled over a mug or a glass. This time, they were sitting beneath chiringuito umbrellas. They had needed to get away for almost as long as they’d known each other. At times, they were even ‘definitely getting away’. They never did, or, at least, not in the way they suggested in the Friday evening buzz of possibility, or the Saturday morning buzz of the phone as they sent each other their dreams. The reality of what they could afford cut them short. Like all dreams, they were slippery. So, they met them halfway, took cheap and cheerful trips – a week here, a weekend there – but this made Leigh’s feet even itchier than before. The pinks and blues of Gran Canaria were a reminder that she’d never seen New Orleans, the beaches of Greece left her yearning for The Bahamas.

‘We are away,’ Steph had told her, taking her baseball cap off to gesture towards the pink sky and silver sea, that Leigh had somehow missed.

‘I mean properly.’

Through the sun and sangria, Steph knew what she meant. ‘You always want more.’

‘Isn’t that the point? I’m sick of putting my life on hold. This time, I’m doing it.’

For once, Steph believed her, and for once, she’d been right to. Three months, so far. Leigh had asked her along, of course, but she couldn’t. Not now. She couldn’t just give up

her flat. It was so hard to book time off these days too, and money seemed to drip through her fingers. She'd go out and join her later. Then again, would the new *Insta-Leigh* still want her to? Three months. Steph knew how she'd managed the first two. What was she living on now?

On Steph's way back to her desk, Cath caught up with her. 'Morning, lovely, could we have a little chat? It's nothing, really.' Cath liked to have little chats every now and again. And it was never nothing. Leigh reckoned Cath felt threatened by her. There was no need. Steph had no plans to have the life sucked out of her ascending the ranks. Cath tilted her head towards the break room; she didn't have the pay grade for her own office.

'How is everything?' Cath pulled her daytime phone-in face.

'Fine,' said Steph. The lump began to itch. 'You?'

'Great! Kitchen's all sorted now. Phew!' Cath wiped invisible sweat from her brow. 'Just to give you a heads up, your name cropped up at the managers' meeting.' She paused. There it was. Steph said nothing. 'I know things must be difficult for you, you know, since Leigh... And I understand the workload's a bit more now. But then, after what they said yesterday...'

'Right.' The itch became stronger. Steph tried to ignore it.

'I'm sure people are doing their best, but I need to *know* everyone is doing their best.' She put a hand on Steph's arm. 'You understand, don't you?'

'Of course.' Steph rubbed her hand over her stomach, easing the itch without making it seem obvious.

'Thanks.' She squeezed Steph's arm. 'Best to catch things early.'

When they'd first had to pick up the slack left by Leigh's departure, Shaun had gone on a rant, throwing his arms around in a way that made his aftershave even more invasive than usual, Paula seemed not so much to take it in her stride as not take it in and Gary had grumbled, but accepted it quickly. Now, Shaun was busy with a pot of hair wax, using his phone as a mirror, Paula was looking blankly at a file and Gary was absorbed in something on his monitor. He seemed more smug than usual. Had he seen the little chat? Steph wondered what Cath had meant by, 'what they said yesterday', but not enough to ask. Then, she remembered.

'Happy birthday. Did you get anything nice?'

'Comic con tickets. Angie and I always buy them for each other.'

Angie was Gary's inexplicable girlfriend. When her name was first dropped, Steph had assumed she was imaginary. As Leigh had said, 'I mean, who actually would?' But then, at the end of the Christmas party, Steph had suddenly gripped Leigh's arm like a vice and hissed, 'She's real!' And there she was. Sitting in the car. Too full of management-bought shots to control themselves, they burst out laughing. Gary turned sharply, but they could've been laughing at anything as they waved the happy couple off.

'I mean,' Leigh caught her breath, 'I've heard about dogs looking like their owners!'

'So, which one's the owner?'

'Hang on,' it was Leigh's turn to grab Steph's arm, 'did she have the bald patch too?'

'Dunno. I reckon she could grow a beard. Seriously though,' Steph looked at Leigh with exaggerated sincerity, 'it's great they've found each other.'

'Did they bollocks, he cloned her.'

Steph didn't ask where the convention was, but Gary told her anyway, along with the names of the characters they would be dressed as that she'd never heard of, from a show she'd never watch.

'What sort of cake did you bring?' asked Paula. Steph caught Shaun's eye across the desk. Languid and see-through Paula may have been, but when there was free cake, she came to life. At ten o'clock, her watery eyes would start flicking to the bottom right hand corner of her screen. At ten twenty, she would stop accepting requests to action. By ten twenty-five, her desk was neatly rearranged – stapler on top of post-it notes on top of mouse mat. At exactly ten thirty, her computer would be locked and she'd be on her feet.

They made a game of putting obstacles in her way. Sent her emails marked urgent, asked advice on erroneous issues. Even Gary had been known to join in, but Paula was a bakery Terminator. She was so tiny, so transparent, that Steph wondered if it was the only time she ate.

'Coffee and walnut,' said Gary, 'I can't have it at home. Angie's allergic.'

'My dad's allergic to horses,' said Paula.

'That's a shame,' said Steph.

'Yeah. We couldn't go to see *War Horse*. That's when he got me this one.' Paula thrust a wrist in Steph's direction, so she could see the silver horse's head hanging ominously from it.

'Nice.'

On her break, Steph took the stairs up to the third floor again. It was full today, and she got a few smiles, heys and winks as she walked through. As she stepped into the toilets, she shivered. The dragon-filled vents were working overtime. The toilets were empty, but she

went into a cubicle (it would be just her luck that one of Cath's cronies would walk in). She put the toilet lid down and crouched on top.

She took her phone out and started swiping. Where was Leigh today? A shy sun edged out from behind a pastel tower block, lightening the bushes below to a brooding green. The building looked an art deco affair. Almost. Too tacky. A Miami mock-up.

Following this, a huge, colourful salad served as a foreground to mountains that became green hills that swooped down to the sea. A bell sat silently in a church tower. A white movie flat. The setting for the catastrophe that would spur the hero on the path to revenge.

A sudden growl pushed Steph off balance. Putting her legs down, she managed to save herself, but in doing so she felt the top of her trousers catch something on her stomach. She rubbed her hand across it. It was wet. Had she torn the lump off? 'This is your fault.' She glared at the smirking dragons, then ran a paper towel under the tap and dabbed at the bump which was still there, after all. Red and bloody. But painless. Sturdy. She tore a blue corner of paper off and stuck it against it.

She walked back via the kitchen. It wasn't hypocritical. Birthday boy antipathy and cake hound teasing was one thing; good cake was another. She took another peek while she was in there, peeling carefully. The lump looked angry, but stopped bleeding. Even so, it couldn't be trusted.

At lunchtime, she went to the corner shop in search of a box of big plasters, like the ones they'd had to buy in Greece when it had become clear why their new plastic sandals had been such a bargain. The lump hadn't started bleeding again, but she didn't want to take a chance. When she got back to the office Paula was still at lunch, and Shaun and Gary were laughing. They didn't stop as she sat down.

‘What are we laughing at?’

‘Nothing,’ said Gary, pleased to cast himself in the role of naughty schoolboy for once.

She logged back on. The boys continued to smirk and she was almost relieved when Paula trickled back in.

‘How’s everything at home, Paula?’, she asked.

‘Good.’ Steph wouldn’t have guessed from her monotone. ‘We’re all really excited about what’s happening with Dev.’

None of the rest of the team watched soaps. They had each, on various occasions, informed Paula of this, but she always took it as an opportunity to be the benevolent filler-in of every gap in their knowledge of plot, character and backstory.

‘What a coincidence!’ Steph smiled at her and turned to Shaun, ‘And you were just asking about him.’ She would have to suffer too, but it was worth it.

That night, she re-examined today’s posts. The same smile on every person in every photo. On strangers. On Leigh. The lump tingled and she re-examined that too. Healing but swollen.

*

Steph was anything but a regular at the monthly quiz. As a rule, she avoided the sticky darkness of the basement bar completely. At least at the Christmas do, the Hallowe’en party and that Easter thing that she’d still not quite got her head around there was a free buffet and a couple of drinks thrown in by management, who Leigh always managed to persuade to throw in a couple more. Not so the quiz. Yet, when Cath invited Steph that Thursday afternoon, all her excuses slipped away from her and, on Friday night, she found herself

sitting at a table in a room with all the appeal of a provincial student bar. She looked around at the faces alternating between grey and red. How had it come to this?

Shaun too, hair immaculately coiffured, was looking around at the mottled sea. 'Are Purchasing not coming down?' There was a note of panic in his voice. 'Rosie said they were coming down.' Rosie was new enough both to have grabbed Shaun's attention and to be unaware of the benefits of avoiding him.

'I wouldn't have thought so,' said Cath. 'It's Terri's shower tomorrow.'

Shaun's face reminded Steph of Bob Hoskins' at the end of some film she'd seen. He stood up and announced, 'I'm getting a drink.' Behind Gary's head, she saw him down a shot at the bar, before taking his pint out to the courtyard and lighting a cigarette.

Gary had already claimed the pen and answer sheet. 'Round One General Knowledge,' he read.

'Ooh, well that could be anything,' said Cath.

'We didn't do General Knowledge at our school,' Paula apologised.

There was an electronic squeal for which the quizmaster (aka Pete from Accounts) apologised. 'Okay folks, hello and welcome. Nice to see some new faces amongst the regulars. Same rules as every month. No mobile phones, confer only with your own team or face disqualification. Tonight, we're playing for a whopping fifty-two pounds!'

A quiz show 'Ooh!' sounded across the room. Gary was poised, Paula looked worried, Cath sat forward and Shaun returned with half a pint.

'Which politician famously tried to feed his daughter a hamburger on camera?', asked Pete.

Gary turned to Shaun. 'Was that the BSE thing?'

Shaun looked into his glass. 'Dunno, mate, that was before I was born.'

'Same here,' said Gary.

They both looked at Steph. She ignored them and scratched the lump. It had been itching since she'd arrived. 'Ooh, I can see his face,' Cath said. 'He looked like that other one with the glasses and the floppy face.'

'I don't know this one,' Paula offered needlessly.

'Tory. What's his name? He's really annoying.' Cath squinted to help her see back into the recesses of time.

Shaun downed the last of his pint. 'Gove?'

'That's it!' Cath hit the desk.

'Is that the answer then?' Gary had pen to paper.

'Oh no,' Cath shook her head. 'But he looks like him.'

And so it continued. It appeared that the general in General Knowledge referred to the questions being generally relevant about thirty years ago. Steph suspected Pete had simply dusted off an old box of *Trivial Pursuit* he'd found underneath his bed.

Before the end of round scores, Steph took herself off to the toilets. There was no point waiting to hear them, it was obvious they were coming last. At least if Leigh had been there, they could've laughed at Gary and fed him deliberately wrong answers. Partly because of the queue and partly because she needed ten minutes on her own, Steph took the lift up to the third floor. The darkness unsettled her for a moment, before the office lights flicked on automatically. From outside the toilet door, she heard the vents. As she opened the door to

the pitch blackness the sound rose to a clamour. She put a hand up to the wall and clicked the switch. The flash of the lights brought about a sudden hush. It was an uneasy calm, as though she'd interrupted an argument. She peered cautiously into each cubicle, but she was alone. The lump had stopped itching, but now tingled. Steph put a hand over it and the cherubs and dragons looking down at her felt less severe.

By the time round three started, Gary was ready to either cry or explode, Shaun was on his fourth pint, and had sunk four, increasingly less secretive shots, Paula had declined a second lemonade and had become engrossed in her charm bracelet, and Cath was basking in the glory that (unlike some team leaders she could mention) all of her team members were there. The full, unhappy complement.

'Always a favourite, this one,' Pete announced, 'Sport.'

Steph sat back.

'Who won gold in the women's javelin event at the 1984 Olympics?'

They all looked at Cath, not very hopefully. 'Nice looking girl, not too muscly like some of them.'

'Aren't muscles quite handy?' asked Steph. 'You know, for athletes.'

'Oh, you're just like my Lorraine!' She slapped Steph's arm with a force only just on the right side of playful. 'What's that you're saying Shaun?'

Shaun had been mumbling to himself for a few minutes now and shaking his head. He now looked up at them all. 'This is bollocks,' he murmured, 'all of it.' Cath took a sharp breath in. 'Language Shaun! I know it's Friday night and we've all had a drink, but there are ladies present.' The stare she gave him belied her chuckle.

Shaun didn't hear her. 'I mean, seriously, is this the thanks we get?'

‘What’s that, love?’ Cath shrugged and pulled a face at Steph.

‘I mean, it’s never been brilliant working here, but at least you could have a bit of a laugh, now we haven’t got any time.’ Shaun had found his voice again. ‘And they’re talking about transfers? What’s going to happen then?’ He jerked his head towards Steph. ‘They can’t even be bothered to replace her mate.’

‘Don’t bring that up, Shaun.’ Cath put a hand on Steph’s shoulder. ‘You know that wasn’t my decision.’

‘Well, whose was it?’ Shaun’s voice rose. ‘And what have you done? What do you ever do?’

His words spread across Cath’s face.

‘That’s enough,’ said Steph.

‘I think you should apologise,’ said Gary.

Paula stared at the floor.

‘Do you now?’ Shaun stood up, slammed his empty pint glass down on the table, and stumbled off.

They lost, of course, though not as spectacularly as Steph would have liked. Gary was collected by his doppelganger, Paula’s dad picked her up, and Steph left Cath in the comforting arms of middle management while she got a taxi.

*

The next morning, in search of TV that would not require thinking, Steph found a crime drama that fitted the bill. It was set in Latin America, but not made by Latin Americans judging by the dubious stereotypes. It was awful, and just what she was after.

She watched three episodes, then stroking the lump, which was tingling once again, looked up Leigh's latest post. It was a split screen of two swimming pools: one full of water, but empty of people; the other, empty of water, but full of those orange and freckled people of whom Leigh was now one. Sun-bleached scruffy topknots, cornrows, dreadlocks.

The same group were in the next photo. Or were they? She swiped back and forth to check. They were sitting outside a restaurant around a heavy, black pan of seafood, a waiter standing behind them. Steph recognised the smile. In a bid to save pennies, or whatever the local currency was, they had found themselves on the tourist trail where the staff knew the phrases that worked in the languages that counted. Their friendliness was forgetful, having only space for so many tourists, each season pushing the old ones out.

She awoke on Sunday morning determined to be more proactive. She ticked off a few household jobs she'd been putting off, had a healthy lunch, looking out over downstairs' garden, and then did an even healthier, sensible, online shop. She rewarded herself with a quick look at what Leigh was up to. Only one group shot. The biggest yet. Faces she definitely recognised now. There was a white boy with dreadlocks beneath a red bandana, a girl with turquoise beads, and another one with a large nose ring through her septum, something that made Steph shiver.

After she'd scrolled back and forth through the latest batch, Steph hitched up her top and carefully peeled back the plaster. No scab. Was it swollen? A little darker too. She'd had a reaction to the plaster in Greece. She could call the surgery in the morning. Just in case.

Putting on her shoes the next day, Steph turned towards the bedside table where the phone lay. 'Sorry. It needs to be after five.'

The person on the other end sighed. 'I've got five fifteen on the twenty-eighth with Dr Cain. Can I ask what it's regarding?'

Steph put a hand over the lump. It was definitely bigger. 'A skin complaint.'

When she arrived at the office Gary and Paula were already at their desks but Shaun was not. Could he possibly be feeling sheepish? They all nodded at each other, but as Steph sat down to log on and ignore them, she could feel Gary still looking her way.

'Is something wrong?'

'Did you get home alright on Friday?' he asked.

'What?' The question came out as if of its own accord. She forced herself to dial it down to a more polite level. 'Yes. Thank you. Why?'

'Angie said I should've offered you a lift. I didn't think, you know, because usually —'

'It's fine.' She nipped the well-intentioned weirdness in the bud.

'Was Cath okay?' asked Paula. Steph was thrown again. Since when had Paula become interested in, or even aware of, real world events?

'Yeah. She was almost as drunk as Shaun. She might not even remember. Has anyone heard from him?' No-one had.

At ten o'clock, Cath appeared, with a smile and a cardboard box. 'Good morning, my lovely team!' she sing-songed. 'How are we today?'

They looked at each other and then the two empty desks. 'Fewer,' said Steph.

'Ooh dear!' The agony aunt was back. 'I'm afraid there's some bad news on that score. Shaun won't be joining us.' Cath picked up his Manchester City headphones and put them in the box, then the Sports Direct mug.

'Has he been sacked?' asked Steph. She'd always suspected a ruthless face lurked beneath that maternal veil.

Cath laughed. ‘Oh my gosh no! You mean, because of Friday? Not at all! No, we decided, with everything being the way it is, that it would be best if he moved on.’

‘Where to?’ asked Gary.

‘The Guildford branch, I think. He’s been talking about it for a while. Didn’t he mention it?’ All the while, Cath continued to collect pencil toppers, post-its, a signed photo of some footballer or other and put them into the box, until all that remained on the desk was a computer and tray, out of which she took three files. ‘Sorry, my loves,’ she said, passing one to each of them, ‘they’ll advertise for a replacement soon.’ And, with that, she wandered off towards the break room.

‘That,’ said Gary, ‘is completely out of order.’

‘Do you reckon he has been sacked then?’ asked Steph, marvelling that they were on the same page for once. ‘But why lie about it?’

‘No. He’s kicked up a fuss, and they’ve promoted him to keep him quiet.’

‘How do you work that one out?’ Steph would have despaired, but it was comforting to know that at least he was back to his normal self.

‘Happens all the time here. I don’t know, you toe the line and you get nothing.’

‘Paula, what do you think?’ Not that Steph expected much help, but maybe some sort of common sense.

‘I don’t know,’ said Paula. Steph wondered if a truer phrase had ever been spoken.

‘Are we doing Shaun’s files?’

Steph slipped the new file underneath her own and tried to lose herself in her work, but she just didn’t feel right. The lump was itching again, but that didn’t bother her so much.

The morning just felt unsettling. At half past ten, she logged off and announced to no-one in particular that she was going on a break.

As she opened the door onto the third floor office, she nearly collided with Rosie, but managed to swerve out of the way just in time.

‘Nearly! Sorry Steph!’ laughed Rosie. ‘Hey, isn’t it great news about Shaun?’ But she didn’t wait for a response, and Steph found herself standing in the doorway alone, holding her stomach protectively.

In the toilet, she lifted her top up to check the lump in the mirror. It wasn’t bruised, it wasn’t damaged, but it was darker. Raised and mole-like. She prodded it. There was no pain, but her finger left a dent that slowly disappeared, as if she were growing a mini memory foam pillow.

When she got back to her desk, Gary announced, ‘I’m going to check the union guidelines on this.’ Nobody asked for an explanation, but that wasn’t going to stop him. ‘The workload. They expect us to do Shaun’s work for the foreseeable. If we’re doing more work, we should be getting more pay.’ It was hardly the first time this has happened, but he did have a point.

Their unified front had crumbled by the following afternoon. However unfair it was, Shaun had been a link in the chain, and if his work wasn’t done, their own would grind to a halt. So, they each began to absorb small parts of his work, not mentioning they were doing so, until it became so obvious they stopped trying to hide it. Occasionally, for a couple of days afterwards, one of them would forget and direct a comment towards Shaun’s desk. Then that stopped. The extra work was absorbed and their conversations contracted. Topics such as *Love Island* and the Premier League disappeared.

At two o'clock on the following Friday, Gary had spent an hour giving Steph and Paula a detailed run-down of his itinerary for Comic con, which was that weekend. 'So you're excited then?' asked Steph, when he had finally finished.

'Does Luke Skywalker hate Father's Day?', asked Gary.

She stared back at him.

He sighed and shook his head. 'What about you two? Any plans?'

'Not much,' they answered together.

There was a look in Gary's eye that Steph didn't trust. 'Why don't you two meet up?' he asked. 'I mean, if neither of you are doing anything...'

'Well, I've actually got some stuff I need to do around the house,' Steph stuttered. But it was too late. 'Do you want to go for a coffee tomorrow?' Paula asked.

Steph wracked her brains. 'I'll have to see what I get done. Can I let you know?' Gary was undeniably smirking. Steph would not forget this, but if she was lucky, Paula would.

Paula did not forget. Worse still, Steph had forgotten that she had, in fact, given her her phone number halfway through her fourth frozen mojito at the Easter do. That evening, after three texts, each asking the same question, at a low ebb after losing a battle of willpower with the last slice of pizza, Steph caved. She sent Paula a thumbs up, which she regretted instantly. Paula immediately sent back a smiley face and '*Where do u want 2 go?*' At least Steph could take control of that. If she left it up to Paula, who knew where they'd end up! Probably in some sort of Christian café or something. Not that Paula had ever expressed any interest in religion at all. She just looked the type.

Where should she say though? Not Claude's, or any of her top tier cafés. She couldn't risk Paula turning up one Sunday afternoon in the future. Besides, that would be disrespectful to Leigh.

'*Pic 'n' Mix at 11?*' she typed and got an instant thumbs up back. That was it then. She was locked in. She rubbed the lump for reassurance. It was as long as her little finger now, but didn't hurt.

Standing in the doorway at ten past eleven the next day, Steph scanned the worn seats and tarnished tables. The place had been quite cool when it had first opened, with a little gallery in an annexe at the back. As it had become more popular, however, they'd begun to move the larger pieces out, and tables in, until the gallery became just an extension of the rest of it, and the café became just like any other with art for sale on off-white walls above artisan picnic benches. It looked like there were a couple of tables free in the annexe. She was making her way towards them when she felt a limp fish on her hand. She shuddered and looked down. 'Hi Steph.' Paula was smiling up at her.

'Sorry, I didn't see you there.' This was true. Paula's pallid complexion had camouflaged her against the wall.

'My mum's got Jade this morning,' Paula said, as Steph took off her jacket and pulled the peak of her baseball cap further down. She was about to ask who Jade was, it not being a name she recognised from any of Paula's soaps, when she remembered that she did, in fact, have a rarely mentioned child. Steph had forgotten she was a bullet to be dodged.

Paula offered Steph some tea from the pot in front of her, but Steph went to order a coffee instead. When she got back to the table, Paula was holding a magazine, on the front cover of which a woman smiled inanely, surrounded by promises of stories inside such as

'We Met Online. I Didn't Know He Was Doing Time!' and *'My Mosquito Bite Was a Sack of Spider Eggs!'*

'What's happening in the world?' asked Steph.

'This woman gave birth to triplets, but she didn't know she was pregnant, so she gave two away and kept one, but then they all found each other after she'd died.'

'How do you not notice you're carrying triplets?'

'I've heard about that before. And it looks like there's going to be a fire at the factory too.'

'Right.' Steph guessed this was something soap related, rather than Paula having developed a penchant for arson. She feigned interest in some of the straplines. Like a sponge, Paula sucked up the conversation, but it was hard to squeeze anything engaging back out of her. Steph couldn't bear the thought of more unwanted soap storylines, but TV seemed to be the language Paula understood best. 'Have you watched *Margaritaville*?' Steph asked her.

'No, what's that?'

Steph gave her a run-down of the mind-numbing series she'd come across, bigging up the parts that seemed most far-fetched and soapy.

'That sounds good,' said Paula, taking a sip of tea. 'What's that on?'

'Netflix.'

'Oh, we haven't got that.'

Steph took a moment to digest this information. Paula blinked at her, either comfortable with or unaware of the silence. Finally, Steph asked, 'Do you want to use my account?' This was normally against her principles, but if she could wean her onto something

decent, at least they'd have something to talk about. Paula's face did something Steph had never seen before. It lit up.

Afterwards, with nothing to rush home for, she wandered around the holiday displays that were just coming out of hibernation. Window shopping. For now. A palm tree tankini caught her eye. Holiday on a hanger.

It looked ridiculous, of course. She looked ridiculous. She'd never been able to pull off this kind of holiday fun wear, but, on top of that, there was the lump. There was no way of hiding it in something like that, she could barely cover it with her hand now. Not that there was anything wrong with it as such. People would look though.

That evening, she lay on her back, head on the arm of the sofa, phone held above her face. It was mainly landscapes tonight. A sunrise and a sunset in the usual colours, black palms dripping in front. A seascape. The sky above it cloudy for once. The sea, a line drawn beneath them. One shaft of light, falling precisely onto one boat – a tractor beam, ready to return the passengers. Another sea, golden, with houses rising behind, yellow, orange, throwback rose gold. Mountains rising sleepily. Purple to blue.

Steph lifted her top and looked down. She pressed the side of the lump, to see the memory foam effect again, but this time it sloped across, as if there was a ball inside. The same happened on the other side. Her appointment wasn't for over a week. Nothing was likely to happen between now and then. Unpleasant looking as it was, an emergency it was not. What if they laughed at her?

On Sunday morning there were two red notification dots on her phone: one was another post from Leigh, the other was a message.

'I like Mville. Think the man with the car's J's dad. Thanks.' Smiley face.

'*Me too,*' Steph sent back, with a thumbs up, then put the phone down. She'd look at Leigh's post after her shower.

Three days later, the red notification dot remained, and the number inside it had become oppressively large. The last time she'd ignored her phone this long was when she'd dropped it down the toilet at Claude's and had to leave it in a tub of basmati, and that was hardly by choice. There just wasn't the time in work, and in the evenings, she needed to make sure she kept up with *Margaritaville*. She couldn't have Paula overtaking her. Also, something about that blood red spot filled her with dread. She couldn't put her finger on it, but she couldn't bring herself to put her finger on it. That night, fortified by two episodes and a text from Paula which revealed she was only two episodes behind her, Steph went for it.

She recognised the landscape instantly, not that it was somewhere she'd ever been. Distant mountains like sleeping wolves, their bony shoulder blades jutting upwards. Coarse hair sloping down their backs, hackles ready to raise at the slightest provocation. Beneath their dark bellies, a bridge stretched red and strong across a bay. Leigh stood at the water's edge. On a beach once more, but the fine, white sand she'd been flip-flopping across for months had been replaced by yellow grit underneath her trainers. The sarong she had been living in had become jeans and a tee-shirt. Not alone, of course. Huddled in the centre of a large group. A few new faces, but others Steph remembered: the girl with the blond corn rows, the one with the bull-style nose ring, the boy with the impeccably styled hair. Behind them, the water was calm enough to ripple bridge tentacles towards them, almost touching their feet.

Steph felt a stirring in her stomach. She closed her eyes, put one hand over the lump and, with the other, scrolled once across the screen. When she opened her eyes, Leigh was smiling back. Alone now, red girders towered above her. No trace of apology on her face. No

guilt in her expression. If there was an acknowledgement that this was somewhere they'd talked of going together, it was in the smile. It was not the conspiratorial one she gave Steph when they'd convinced Paula that the *Coronation Street* cat was in the Natural History Museum. It was the other one. The one that she gave to Paula. Steph recognised the cruelty in it. Cruelty now directed at her.

She closed the app and put the phone face down on the table. She put both hands around the lump, so that her thumbs and index fingers were touching. Like making a heart into the sunset. The lump took the shape well, then spread out with purpose.

*

Two weeks later, to the background keyboard clicking, she tentatively asked Paula, 'What episode are you on?'

'Luisa's just found out about Jorge,' said Paula.

That was fine. That was still season one.

'And she's taking over the company,' Paula continued.

It was a relief, but still slightly annoying. Paula should have been less specific. Had she never heard of spoiler alerts? Absolute liability. Not that Steph said that. Instead, she said, 'She needed to step up. She was too weak before. That's a turning point.'

'Yeah.' Paula dragged the word out breathily, then added, 'I'd like to do something like that.'

Both Steph and Gary stopped typing. It was Gary who spoke first, 'You'd like to work for the Mexican mafia?'

Paula gave the matter unnecessarily serious thought. ‘Not the mafia bit. I think I’d like to have my own business.’

Steph thought it more probable she’d be used by an organised crime ring, but still asked, ‘In Mexico though?’

‘I don’t know. It seems nice there. Our neighbours have been there on holiday twice.’

‘Do you speak Spanish?’

‘No, but they don’t in the programme either.’

‘No, I suppose not. What would you even, I mean, what would the company do?’ For the first time, Steph saw a hint of pink begin to develop in Paula’s cheeks, and felt a pang of guilt. ‘It’s good to be ambitious though. It’s not like we all want to stay here, is it?’

*

That Friday afternoon she remembered the doctor’s appointment that she’d now missed, and took herself upstairs for privacy. As she waded through the automated phone options, the vents began to get restless. She stared at the one directly above her as she gave her staccato answers. There was something she hadn’t noticed before. The central dragon stretched out, its tail wrapping around the top of the grate as she’d always known it had. Its mouth, however, was not biting down on the opposite side after all. Instead of holding the frame in its jaws, it held an egg.

‘Webber Medical Centre, how can I help?’

Without taking her eyes off the vent she said, ‘Sorry, but I’ve missed my appointment and need to make another one.’ There was a long sigh. As Steph gave all the necessary details, the sighing continued, becoming gradually louder. Just when Steph had had enough of the rudeness, she realised it was not coming from the receptionist, but the vents.

‘Six thirty on the twenty-seventh would be fine.’ A loud shriek from the vents made both her and the lump jump. ‘Sorry. Could you repeat that? I couldn’t quite hear with all the noise.’

‘I can’t hear anything. It must just be your end.’ The shriek became a clanking that vibrated through her and made the lump squirm.

Back at her desk, Paula asked, ‘Are you okay? You look a bit pale.’ If she thought that, Steph was definitely in trouble. She sat back and stroked the lump. ‘Funny tummy.’

She made it through the day, but was thankful to curl up in bed by the end of it. Maybe she was too tired to forget her old habits or maybe she was looking for comfort, but she found herself scrolling once more through Leigh’s posts.

She was with the ubiquitous group: dreadlocks, bull ring, hair wax, beads. They were each holding aloft a glass in a neon-shamrocked bar, wearing hoodies emblazoned with the names of universities from which she was not convinced they had graduated. Leigh certainly hadn’t. Steph’s stomach sank and the lump fluttered.

Leigh had never wanted to go there. Ever. ‘Too many people, with too much money, buying too many things.’

Steph had tried to persuade her. ‘What about the theatre? Art galleries? Museums?’

‘No.’

‘Okay. Fine.’ Steph didn’t want to argue about a hypothetical. It was just an idea.

She scrolled along. There was no mistaking where Leigh was grinning at her from. The huge green woman behind her may as well have been holding up a finger instead of a torch.

*

At half past nine on Monday morning, Paula's space was even more vacant than usual.

'Paula's late,' Steph spoke into the air. Gary shrugged between skyscrapers of files.

'Good morning, my lovely team!' Cath had suddenly appeared at Steph's shoulder. 'How are we today?' She smiled at Steph, then at Gary, then noticed the empty chair. She raised her eyebrows. 'No Paula yet?' Steph shook her head at Cath. Gary shook his at the monitor. 'Have you not seen her, Steph?' Cath asked. Steph was about to protest on the grounds of why-would-she-have-it-wasn't-like-they-were-best-friends-or-anything, but that was both petty and not really the point. 'No,' she said, reaching for her bag. 'I'll text her.'

'No, better not,' Cath jumped in. 'Best to be careful. Go through the proper channels, just in case. Anyway, I'm sure she'll turn up soon,' said Cath.

Half an hour later, there was still no sign of her. Cath was deep in discussion with two other team leaders in the break room doorway. The three nodded intermittently towards the empty desk until Cath walked off. She returned ten minutes later carrying a familiar box, said something clearly shocking to the two still standing in the doorway then stomped (as much as it was possible to do so in sandals) her way to Gary and Steph's half empty cluster. She began scooping up Paula's multi-coloured paperclips.

'What's happened?' asked Steph.

Cath picked up the Queen Vic mouse mat. 'Apparently, Paula has a new job.' She slung the mat into the box.

'Didn't she have to work out her notice?' asked Gary.

'She did, so I'm told.' Cath grabbed the Roy's Rolls mug. 'Just no-one thought to tell me she'd given it in.' Steph flinched as the mug was hurled into the box, but instead of a

smash, there was a dull, plastic thud. She took the folders from Paula's tray and divided them between Steph and Gary. They made to protest, but Cath put her hand up. 'It's not down to me.' She turned and walked back to the break room.

Gary stared fixedly at his monitor and hammered his keyboard.

Steph reached into her bag for her phone. '*Hi. Are you ok?*' she typed. '*Have you got a new job?*' She pressed send.

Nothing.

She gave it a couple of minutes, then sent an emoji of a woman shrugging.

Still nothing.

If it were anyone else, Steph would've found it strange they hadn't mentioned a new job. But this was Paula. When she didn't reply by lunchtime, Steph decided to call her. As she entered the toilets, the vents were quiet, but the door sent an echo bouncing off the tiles. She pressed Paula's number and breathed a sigh of relief when she heard it ring.

By the tenth ring, it was clear that Paula wasn't going to pick up, but Steph now felt obliged to wait until the answerphone kicked in. It didn't. The line went dead.

Back downstairs, she told Gary what had happened.

'Right.' He didn't turn away from his monitor.

'Should we be worried? Don't you think that's weird.'

With a sigh, Gary slowly turned his head towards her with robotic smoothness. 'If you're that bothered, speak to Cath. I'm more concerned with how we're meant to get through the work of five people. And, quite frankly, I think it's weird that you're suddenly

interested in the welfare of someone you've been taking the piss out of for years.' He took a slurp of tea from his *Game of Thrones* mug and turned back to his screen.

In bed that night, Steph rubbed her stomach to console the squirming lump as she scrolled through Leigh's posts. Another group shot: bull ring, hair wax, charm bracelet.

*

Steph worked late again the following night, then the one after, and then the one after that, until, muted by monotony and exhaustion, she no longer called it working late.

'A word?' Cath tilted her head towards the break room. 'I know it's been a difficult time for you. I mean, it has been for all of us.'

'I'm fine,' said Steph.

'I was talking to Marion in HR yesterday.' And there it was. More money, same hours, but somewhere else.

She lay on the sofa that night, her eyes flicking between the last ever *Margaritaville* and a week's worth of photos she'd yet to catch up on, her mind resting on neither. It wasn't about the money. It was about being appreciated, so Cath had said. Leigh was all sarongs and sunsets again, back wearing the smile from bus rides in, from sharing giggles and plans. How long had it been now? She scrolled with one hand and patted her stomach with the other. There they all were again in front of a sunset: corn rows, dreads, beads. She stroked the lump like a cat's head and closed her eyes. Hair wax, charm bracelet, baseball cap. The lump moved.

SEASALTER

She opened her eyes to white. The sofa was made of driftwood and she had no idea how long she'd lain there, but knew that she wasn't the first. As she sat up, knots and bumps dug into her through thin cushions. Painted wood cladding covered three of the walls, whitewashed like an American beach house. Here and there were finishing touches of false sentimental value. Shells bought wholesale. Factory faded wood cut into cute shapes by industrial lathes. A welcome sign.

The fourth wall was glass. No latches. No handle. But she was in no hurry. Outside was end-of-year grey. A coarse hedge marked out a gravelled garden. A path threaded through it to a rain-spattered sea view. On one side of it, black lavender danced in the mist; on the other, the wind pulled a tree back and forth, making sharp brush strokes against the sky. The soft-focus horizon was empty. She strained her ears. Nothing. How long would she remember this?

And then, there was a dot. Small and distant. It moved rhythmically up and down. It grew larger, stretching itself into a figure coming closer and closer, head bouncing and hair swinging behind, as if it were a happy dog. Almost life-size. She saw the face she'd seen before and, forgetting everything, she waved. But the eyes stared ahead and the mouth was set. It was soon a dot again. Then gone.

A doorway now. Wooden and whitewashed again. She faced the darkness at its centre, but wasn't ready to look into it. She spread her arms and traced her fingers up the rough edges on both sides at once. Each join and dent of wood on the one side, each imperfection of the grain, was mirrored perfectly on the other. Her feet were bare, and standing on her toes, she could only reach the underneath of the cross-section, but she let her hands follow the

wood across this until they met in the middle. It was only then, still stretched out from toes to fingertips, that she looked directly at it.

She slowly lowered her heels to the floor and let her hands drop, gliding gently across the smooth, black surface in front of her. When they were at chest height, she pressed gently and the door gave. Just a crack, but enough to know it was possible. She pulled her hands away. It could wait.

She turned back to the window and walked the ten steps to it. The world was brightening and the line between sky and sea becoming more defined, but it was still grey on grey. She leant her palms and then her forehead against the cool glass and closed her eyes.

The darkness turned blood red through her eyelids. The sun had broken free from the grip of the clouds and a soft warmth pinned her there. She opened her eyes to it. The sea was clearer, nearer now. She could see now that beyond and below the garden a series of jagged rocks staggered down to the sea behind and beneath, crashing in white, jumping excitement against them. She saw the top of a bird as it flew close to the surface, then swooped upwards and away. A buoy leant forwards in the water, a runner on the starting line, and then she saw a new figure. The arms and legs were long and thin, each broken up half way by the knot of an elbow or a knee. Blue, baggy trunks sat on pink, saggy flesh. The figure was moving steadily further into the sea. The waves bounded around him. They had been waiting for him. The man began to swing his arms backwards and forwards, through the waves, splashing in front and behind him. With each step, his body sank deeper into the waves; with each sweep of the arm, the spray made what was left harder to see. When the water had reached past his waist, he changed the movement of his arms to a circuit on either side skimming the surface all around him. He moved them faster and faster, and the spray began to merge into a wall, higher and higher around him. The higher it rose, the more it attracted the sun, which was

shining with full force now, hiding him within a dazzling tube of light. She closed her eyes and stepped back.

She opened her eyes to darkness. She felt the wood through the cushions once more, and then the breeze blow across her back, tacky with salt. She sat up and, even before her feet touched the gravel, knew that she was in the garden. The stones beneath her feet, still bare, were warm and sharp and the night air was heavy with the smell of lavender. Everything behind, and stretching out to the left and right of her, was solid black, but she knew that the rocks were there. She could hear them standing up to the repetitive onslaught of the waves. In front, the moon hung huge and low. She stood up and walked towards it until she felt the prickles of the hedge against her legs. Where the moonlight hit the sea, it became a sheet of grey silk that undulated towards her. To either side, it darkened into molten leather, then merged into the sky.

She turned right and walked slowly, maintaining contact between her leg and the hedge, letting the branches scratch her skin. When they stopped, she stopped and turned to face the sea once more. She stepped forward. Everything directly in front of her was black, the reflection of the moonlight on the sea was far in the distance and there was no hedge to guide her now, but none of that mattered. She moved forward.

OFFICE SPACE

Amanda caught the Tube into work early every morning. It was hard getting up in the dark and not seeing sunlight until lunchtime, but the alternative was unthinkable. There was only ever a handful of other people on the platform. The regular five. A nightshift-dishevelled man, resigned to missing the day again, a tracksuited woman with scraped-back hair, and an office-smart couple, who arrived separately, then sat together. Occasionally, a lone student would be on the walk of shame, or a small group would shamelessly be continuing the night before. But not today. Each passenger recognised each face, and not one acknowledged another. Each stood in the same place, to use the same door, to board the same carriage as they did every weekday.

No matter how early she arrived, Amanda was never alone in the building; the security desk was staffed twenty-four hours a day. If Ted was on duty, he would tell her he was glad that one of them was feeling bright-eyed and bushy tailed, then offer her a sweet she would politely refuse. If it was Laurent, he would say how bitterly cold it was, but at least she was 'bringing the sunshine,' and she'd smile. Bob was behind the desk today.

'You made it in then, mate?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Let's hope those trains are sorted out by this evening, hey, but I won't be holding my breath!'

'Right.' She nodded, not that she'd noticed anything wrong.

Amanda was the first to swipe her way into Pergo's eighth floor office, waking the lights as she entered. She made the first pot of coffee, which was always the best. Someone

would make a passable second pot, but after ten o'clock she avoided the percolator completely. People couldn't be trusted.

It was official Pergo policy that all employees (other than Scott and Karen) should hot-desk. Amanda always chose the same corner desk. There was no through access behind. No-one could casually look over her shoulder as they passed, and, unlike the other desks, it was not paired with another. Instead, it was surrounded by a reassuring moat of personal space, small enough to avoid accusations of non-team playing. Facing Scott's office, it ensured that when he arrived, he would see her already hard at work.

There was a lemon post-it pad next to the computer keyboard. This happened sometimes. Someone would leave something, if not a pad, then a file or a stapler, on the desk the night before, as if to claim the space for the following day. When her colleagues arrived, they would blame an unaware and unseen temp, but Amanda suspected she was the butt of a joke. It made no difference. She removed the contravention of company guidelines and placed it on the supply station.

The hour or so of calm productivity between her arrival and that of her colleagues always went too fast. When they began to trickle in, in twos and threes, her day was far ahead of theirs. There was never a rush to take the desks nearest to her, but they were always filled. It was Catherine and James who ended up her neighbours that day. James arrived flustered, with complaints about traffic; Catherine a little beforehand, more calm, but almost as loud, with tales of the school run. Amanda had her break at ten, while they typed away, and went to lunch at precisely twelve o'clock, leaving stomachs rumbling behind her. The refurbished canteen had been renamed The Comfy Café and was anything but. She'd eaten there only once, on her first day. It had filled easily with mess and echoes. Last night, as every night,

she had made today's lunch and, at the designated time, she left Catherine and James and took the lift down.

She was not a believer in luck, but something along those lines had befallen her on her second day on the job. Unable to face the chaos of the canteen, she had been making her way outside. It was not until she had stepped out of the lift and the doors closed behind her that she realised she was in the basement. The strip lights flickered, a half-hearted acknowledgement of her presence. She pressed the call button, but the light above the lift door had already passed the G and was on its way to 1. It carried on, passed 2, and then rested on 3. A crackle. Darkness threatened. On the wall opposite was a red sign for 'Solitaire Ltd', above an equally red arrow. Amanda looked in the direction it was pointing, but at that end of the corridor, the lights had given up completely. A lot of firms were struggling. The lights in the other direction were not enthusiastic either, but there was a corner about halfway down, through which some brightness leaked.

It led to a large, open space, at the centre of which was an amphitheatre with a mustard carpet. There had been something like it at school. The students called it the well; the teachers called it the break-out space. It was somewhere for those too young for the common room and too old for the playground. Whatever the original purpose of this well, it was now a dumping ground. The carpeted section was clear, but to the side of it stood a Stonehenge of hard drives and a row of desks stacked upside down on top of each other in a terrible stutter of Hs, punctuated at the end by a knot of three-legged chairs. The room itself was formed of three wooden panelled walls, rising to a surprisingly high ceiling, and one huge floor to ceiling window, with French doors in the middle. These opened onto a small courtyard and picnic bench. That first day, and on other warm days, it was there that Amanda ate her sandwiches, gazing up at rising grey and the criss-crossed glass of store cupboard windows.

When the weather was against her, she sat on the mustard steps-cum-seats and stared at the unwanted items.

Amanda didn't mention the place to anyone upstairs. She sometimes wondered if she should, but they wouldn't be interested in her mealtime habits. Besides, she didn't want a chatty invasion of workers. She used to fear a sudden telling off from a caretaker, but it wasn't breaking the rules if you didn't know the rules. In three years, no-one had told her what the rules were, and she had spent all but four of her lunch breaks here, the world oblivious to her.

Today, she stood by the French doors and looked up at the square of clouds, ripening to a dark grey. She walked back towards the steps. Reaching into her bag, she located her sandwiches and sat down.

A man was standing in the centre of the well.

He was not much older than Amanda, with dark, slicked back hair, and was wearing a blue, pinstriped suit. He was not from Pergo. Not that she knew her colleagues' faces, but the wrong colour lanyard hung around his neck. Red.

'Good afternoon.' He sounded as though he was beginning a meeting or presenting a quiz show.

'Hello.' The thought of discovery had always been stomach-churning. It wasn't just the loss of privacy, it was the fear of being branded a trespasser in her own territory. Over the years, she'd conjured up an arsenal of excuses, but now that the worst had happened, she was trapped between attack and retreat.

‘I’ve come down for my lunch.’ She could justify her presence. Could he? Then again, he hadn’t asked her to explain it, and now he knew this was not her floor. ‘Do you work here?’ she asked. Let him be the one to feel he didn’t belong.

‘Solitaire. You’re aware of us?’

That was a pointed question but she would not allow it to prod. ‘The company on the other side of the lift?’ He had no authority here. ‘I hadn’t realised you were still going.’ Take that, intruder.

‘You work for Pergo.’

How did he know? Her cheeks began to warm.

He extended a long finger towards her chest.

Amanda looked down at her ID card. She flushed pink. ‘Are you here to look around?’ She tried to sound benevolent, as though she could forgive his presence. For now. This would have been more effective had her voice not quivered.

‘In a manner of speaking. Reconnaissance. We are each searching for something.’ He smiled, but his eyes did not join in. He gestured towards her with the magnanimity she’d wanted to project and took a step forward. ‘Please forgive my interruption.’

For the first time, Amanda became aware of the drawbacks of her location. She could excuse herself, and make her way back upstairs, but how long had he been there? Had he seen her come in? Wouldn’t it look odd, if she walked straight out again? He might take it as an admission of guilt, or notice her unease and take offence. Besides, even if she tried to leave, how long would the lift take to arrive?

Though he was standing and she was sitting, she had the higher ground. She began to unwrap the foil.

He ran a hand over his hair. ‘Do you eat here every day?’ This was not casual, but rhetorical. ‘Pleasant.’ He looked over to the courtyard, taking another step towards both it and her. ‘Secluded.’ He nodded towards Amanda’s sandwich. ‘Please, do not mind me.’

She did mind him. She minded not knowing whether to be annoyed, or scared, or intrigued. ‘What is it that you do?’ She took a bite.

He held out his hands, palms up, politician style. ‘We afford people the opportunity to reach their full potential.’

This was vaguely familiar. Something that had been chatted about over her head. ‘Life coaching?’ She took another bite.

‘There are similarities. We assist with the realisation of aspirations.’

‘I see.’ She didn’t. She could, however, see how such an ambiguous sounding business might fail. ‘And what, specifically, do you do?’

‘Everything.’ He sighed, then shrugged; mock humility following mock weariness.

‘So, you’re the managing director?’ Of course. The hair and suit reeked of the ignorance of fashion that came with privilege. His skin was wrinkle-free, yet somewhat leathery. He could have been a hard-living thirty-something or a well-preserved over-fifty. He had the confidence of both. The triumph or failure of a company would have little impact on him.

‘I find titles unhelpful. They’re so often barriers to success. For how long have you worked at Pergo?’ He checked his already scrupulously clean nails.

‘Three years.’

‘Are you quite content?’ He raised one eyebrow.

‘Yes.’ Happiness was relative. She had systems in place.

‘How would you describe your relationship with others?’ He was at the foot of the steps now. The eyebrow was still raised and the smile was back. His teeth were rather long and very white. She felt as though she was being interviewed by a shark.

‘Sorry?’

‘You choose to eat here. Alone.’

‘I like to have my own space.’ It was her turn to be pointed.

‘And that is precisely the kind of need that we endeavour to address.’ Taking a step up, he held out a hand. ‘It was a pleasure to meet you, Amanda.’

It wasn’t clammy, nor was it cold, but the hand held hers for too long and her spine tingled. In one, fluid movement, he released her, put his hand in his waistcoat pocket and produced a card.

‘Should you be interested.’

The card was red, with ‘Solitaire’ written across it in a raised font. Below that was what she at first mistook for the symbol for Pi, then realised it was a rudimentary picture of a desk. Above it, an empty thought bubble emanated from a circle. When she looked up, the man had gone. She walked to the corner. The lights begrudgingly flickered in the empty corridor. She turned the card over and saw there was an email address. No name. No phone number. She tucked it into the inside pocket of her bag.

There was a patter behind her and she turned. The patter became a march and then a stampede. The heavens had opened. Pools were already forming on the uneven and darkening courtyard. Paving stones became walls, became sky. Light began to shine through the lower,

taciturn windows, trying to turn the puddles golden. The room had changed. He lingered in the air.

Something moved. A bird? The rain was falling in heavy sheets. She squinted. Across the courtyard, within the frame of a reluctantly glowing window, was a distorted silhouette. She watched it move back and forth across the window, for five minutes, maybe more, unaware of her presence. When the rain began to tire itself out, so did the head. It stopped, turned, and then grew steadily larger as it approached the glass. It became a face. A pale face with dark eyes that peered through the glass. Amanda took a step back, then held up a hand. The face was pressed hard against the glass now, its pallid nose squashed to one side. Two shapes appeared on either side of the head. Two fists hit the glass. Amanda jumped. They thumped again and again. Sunlight flashed and the noise stopped. The rain had finished. The window was empty.

At the end of the corridor, Solitaire's lights were on. Had they always been? Shadows without owners stretched towards her. It hadn't been him, the face in the window, she felt sure of that. But then, who? She pressed the call button. Caretaker? The lights began to dim. A bored intern? She pressed again. There was the sound of chains grinding. Was someone down there? The lights went out. The doors opened. She rushed in, hit the button and pinned herself against the back of the lift, heart racing, banging against her chest like a fist on a windowpane. The doors closed.

On the eighth floor, the harsh lights and half full desks of Pergo were a comfort. By the time she made it back to her desk, her pulse had calmed to an energetic jog, but her cheeks burned at the thought of her foolish behaviour. She quickly wiped her eyes, before anyone noticed the tears that pricked at their corners. But there was no-one there to notice. That was something, at least.

She logged on to the computer and opened a document. At the end of the first page, she realised she had no idea what she'd read. This would not do. She tried again, but her mind wandered down to the basement. She would not give in to this. The third time she had more success, and was soon lost once more in her work, so much so that she was startled by the return of James and Catherine.

Catherine was mid-flow as she sat down. 'Of course, Tobias is devastated not to have passed the entrance exam, especially when Melodie did. He's so much brighter than she is.' She had never let a one-way conversation faze her, and so, over time, Amanda had learnt she was married to Clem and had three children, Francine, Tobias and Melodie. Catherine now threw her hands up. 'We didn't think she'd pass at all! I must show you this fantastic set of after dinner games I found. They're exactly your sort of thing.'

There was a long pause. Amanda looked up to find Catherine peering over her glasses, this comment having been inexplicably directed towards her. 'Thank you.'

The afternoon fell into a hum of typing, Catherine's energetic chatter and James's occasional grunt. At half past two, Catherine rose in uncharacteristic annoyance. 'Oh rats! Have you seen this?' She didn't wait for an answer. 'There's a whole staff meeting at three thirty.'

Amanda clicked on the mail icon.

'What is it now?' James asked.

Catherine began to energetically expound theories. 'Expansion...merger...surprise party...' As Amanda read through the message, she could see no suggestion of any of these, but nothing to rule any of them out.

‘I will be livid if I’m late,’ Catherine continued, ‘we’re going to the theatre tonight and I need to give Francine inhalation before we go.’

‘What are you going to see?’ asked James.

‘The name escapes me, *The Life of* somebody or other. It’s an am dram, but one of the actors is a very good friend of ours. He’s marvellous. He could be professional. We saw him in something last year, and he’s incredibly tall but was playing a much shorter character, and, do you know, he spent the whole performance on his knees! It rivalled anything on the West End.’

James nodded sagely at his monitor.

Amanda considered standing at the back of the conference room. She’d be both in the management’s eye line and not have to walk past anyone. She didn’t want to give the appearance of having been a late arrival. Sitting in the front would be far too much. She walked quickly, halfway down the room, keeping her eyes on the floor, and sat at the end of a row.

Scott entered the room at precisely half past three, Karen hot on his heels. As soon as they were both through the door, Karen took a couple of double quick steps and was level with Scott by the time they passed Amanda. Scott took his jacket off, put it on the back of a chair and rolled up his sleeves. Karen stood beside him, ever hopeful he might require backup. She had the misplaced confidence of the unaware.

Scott smiled. ‘Hi everyone, and thanks. Firstly, for coming at short notice, and, secondly, for getting here on time.’

Karen’s supercilious face reminded them that neither had been optional.

‘Thirdly. Well done! The last three months have seen a real increase in productivity and you need to give yourselves a round of applause!’ He spread his arms wide, as if to give his hands a run up to the clapping that followed. Karen followed suit and Amanda felt as though she was in a room of sea lions. Scott began to flap his hands up and down and the applause subsided.

‘I met with the finance guys today.’ He paused, and gave a thumbs up to the front row. ‘They’re really positive about the outlook going forward, but, you know, that doesn’t mean we can’t want more. We’re the best at what we do, because we know we can always make ourselves even better. So, I’d like to share with you a new initiative we’ll be rolling out tomorrow.’

He looked to Karen, who handed him a sheet of paper.

‘They’ve – ’, he looked down at the paper, then up, ‘sorry, *we*’ve been working with an outside agency on a way of interrogating the factors that are preventing each and every one of us from reaching our full potential, and of subsequently optimising each employee’s success.’

He paused. Amanda did not participate in the low murmur that followed. Karen glared at those who did.

‘It’s called “Whole Office”. We’re getting rid of the hot-desking.’ Another pause. Another murmur. Scott glanced down again. ‘Desks will be reassigned weekly. Every Friday, Karen and I,’ Karen beamed like a bride at the groom’s speech, ‘will collate each employee’s productivity data for the week and, the following Monday, you’ll be given new desks. At the end of the month, Karen and myself,’ (she was about to explode) ‘along with some hand selected elves,’ (the room laughed) ‘will use the data to decide the optimum work station and team for each employee.’

Another pause. This time there was no murmuring, just the silence of anticipation as Scott consulted the sheet of paper once more. ‘You may wonder, and I certainly hope an inquisitive Pergo mind would wonder, what the point of this is. Our ultimate goal, as always, is to increase productivity at every level of the company.’

Amanda closed her eyes. If she’d believed in anything, spiritual or magical, this would have been the moment to turn to it. Why start tomorrow? Why not next week? At least then there would be time to prepare herself.

‘We could have waited until Monday to roll this out. But, hey, who am I kidding? We just couldn’t wait to get stuck in!’ A few people put their hands up to ask questions, a few others to make sycophantic comments, and then they were dismissed.

As the staff made their way out of the room (after Scott and Karen, of course) the murmur became louder and annoyingly positive. A dull ache rose in Amanda’s stomach.

She tried to focus on her work for the short time that was left, but the white noise of the office was not enough to drown out the noise in her head. Her work was exemplary. She did not need anything optimised. When it was time to leave, the rota was yet to be announced. Should she stay longer? But why make today any worse? There was too much upheaval as it was. She said a perfunctory goodbye to James and Catherine. James quickly put his mobile phone face-down on his desk. Catherine looked disconcertingly on the point of hugging her.

‘It’s not that I mind change, but I do think it’s a case of better the devil you know!’ Catherine chirped. ‘Cheerio! I must remember to bring those games in for you! Honestly, James, these melatonin tablets have done wonders for me.’

‘Thanks.’ Amanda made her second swift exit of the day.

The faces on the journey home were always different and always too many. She got on the right carriage, but could not secure the right seat. It would not be long until she could shut her front door on the disorder of the day. She held on to that.

The next morning, Amanda and the rest of the regular five stood in their usual places, boarded through their usual doors and sat in their usual seats in their usual carriages. Laurent was on duty and Amanda smiled as he paid her his usual compliment. On the eighth floor, the reception lights were already glaring. She swiped in and, as she opened the door, Karen trotted past, holding an A3 poster, red bordered and laminated.

‘Good morning, Amanda!’ Karen looked directly into Amanda’s eyes, pinning her to the spot as she pinned the poster to the wall. ‘It’s all there!’ Karen’s smile elongated her chin, and Amanda was reminded of how a snake could dislocate its jaws around its prey. ‘You’re the first!’ Karen said, tapping the poster. Amanda nodded. Karen raised her eyebrows and shrugged her shoulders, and Amanda was reminded of what happened to the snake’s prey.

The poster was an office plan. Inside each rectangular desk the name of an employee was written in dry wipe marker. Amanda’s eyes went straight to her corner. She did not hope to find her own name there, but whose would be? Empty. Was that better or worse? She scanned the rest of the plan, but could not find herself. She scrutinised it more carefully. Had she been forgotten about? Had there been a complaint about yesterday? Just when the tears were about to come, she found herself.

She had been thrust into a nest of four in the centre of the office, equidistant between a water cooler and the photocopier. A thoroughfare. The names around her generated a faint memory, nothing as vivid as recognition. There was probably still an hour before they arrived. She took off her bag and coat, made a pot of coffee, then sat down to work. There

must be a semblance of normality. After all, a quiet office was a quiet office. But Karen strode self-importantly in and out of her peripheral vision and, by the time the others giggled in, Amanda had barely started.

Her first neighbour arrived at nine o'clock. His blonde hair was styled too young for his ham-coloured face. 'Can you believe this?' He grinned.

Amanda wondered if, not knowing anything about her, he might expect her to grin back. She shrank behind her monitor.

'I'm John. Who are you?'

'Amanda.'

His eyes widened in recognition. 'Was I talking to you at Jess's do?'

She shrank even more at the thought of it. 'I don't know her. Sorry.'

'Oh my God! You don't know Jess? You're going to love her. Everyone loves her. Well, not everyone, she can be awful, but that just makes me love her more. Wait 'til she gets here.'

Amanda nodded.

'I think we're going to have a right laugh this week!'

It would be hell. Amanda became further convinced of this when John leapt to his feet. 'Can you believe this?'

A life-sized and well-loved Barbie ran and hugged him. 'I know!'

John gestured between the two women. 'Jess – Amanda – Amanda – Jess.'

‘John!’ shouted Jess, pointing at him. Apparently, this was hilarious. ‘We are going to have such a laugh!’ They both turned towards Amanda. For the second time that week, she thought of sharks.

Jess and John had all of Catherine’s energy, but whereas Catherine was happy to take full responsibility for a conversation, ‘The Two Js’ as they called themselves, were persistently inclusive. They were convinced there must be an event or a person they had in common with Amanda, despite all indications to the contrary. Finally, when she felt too exhausted to deny one more acquaintance, the last member of their team arrived, dishevelled and heavy lidded.

‘Hi!’ shouted Jess and John in unison. Heads turned at neighbouring desks.

‘Alright.’ He squinted at them and slumped down in his seat.

John introduced the rest of the group.

‘Graham.’ He nodded, in agreement with himself. Amanda found it inspiring how he was able to field questions from The Two Js, while starting his work station and without properly waking up. He leant back, bouncing gently against the back of his chair as he answered. His responses were a careful balance of non-committal mumble and vague recollection.

‘Nah mate. Couldn’t make it. Had something on. Heard good things though.’

Amanda squirmed her way through the morning by counting down the minutes until lunchtime. At ten forty, twelve o’clock was a distant glimmer of hope. Thirty minutes later, it became a possibility, and in another half an hour she could almost touch it.

At eleven fifty-eight, she steeled herself. She couldn’t see Jess’s screen from where she was sitting, but she was either working hard or composing a drum solo on her keyboard.

Moving slowly and quietly, as though not to wake a sleeping predator, Amanda locked her computer, picked her bag off the floor and stood up.

The drums fell silent.

‘What are you up to?’ asked Jess.

‘Ooh! She’s making a run for it!’ grinned John.

Amanda froze, caught in the act. What was wrong about this act she really couldn’t say, but she knew she’d done wrong. ‘I’m just going to lunch.’

‘Oh no, Mands!’ John put two hands up for emphasis, ‘hang on for a bit and we’ll all go together.’

‘Yeah, Mands,’ Jess wiped a finger under each eye, then checked the tips for mascara, ‘we were saying we’d try Buttylicious.’

This was clearly news to Graham, but a De Niro-esque shrug suggested he might be amenable.

Amanda felt her lunchtime escape begin to slip away. How could she pull it back? ‘I’ve already brought something with me.’ That wouldn’t be enough.

The Two Js looked at each other and Amanda now understood what ‘the side eye’ was.

‘I thought you might have to get back for a client,’ said Jess.

Why hadn’t she thought of that? It wasn’t as though any of them had a clue what the others actually did. ‘Well, I should really be at my desk by one. Because of the time difference.’

‘No prob, Mands!’ John waved her away.

Jess winked, her false eyelashes an army of spiders dancing a menacing can-can.

‘Okay, babe. See you later!’

Five minutes later, and Amanda felt able to breathe once more, as the lift doors opened onto the basement. The strip lights barely acknowledged her. Sanctuary. She paused before turning the corner.

The well was empty. She was alone and it was good. She chose a step facing the window and took out her lunch. So good to be alone. The discarded computers sat monitorless and blind as ever. The sun poured deceptively through the glass, making the world seem warm. There was a noise behind her. She turned. No-one. He wasn’t there. It was just air rattling through the vents. Another noise. She stood up.

‘Hello?’

She walked to the hallway and called again. The lights flickered in annoyance. Solitaire was in darkness. ‘It’s an old building,’ she told herself. ‘It makes sounds.’

She sat back down on the opposite side of the well. She wanted to feel the sun on her back. That was why she had sat there. The clear view of the exit was coincidental.

She stared at the space where he had last appeared. Where he – what was his name? She found the card. No name. Just ‘Solitaire’ and an email address. But he knew hers. Why had he not told her his when she told him hers? She replayed the conversation in her head. That was rude. Another reason to be glad of his absence. To enjoy her own space.

He didn’t come that day, or the next, and by the end of the week she’d stopped worrying that he would. She ignored the questions that struggled to the surface each lunchtime. She would not allow them to block her escape from the turmoil of the office. The

Two Js' determination to include her was constant and aggressive. Graham was no defence, oblivious as he was to the fact he was under attack himself.

Three weeks into the 'Whole Office' programme, and it was clear to Amanda that it was everything she had feared. There was too much change, too much energy, too much enthusiasm. It was distracting. The day always began as it should. The regular five; the early Tube. But she kept finding that someone else had arrived in the office before her. She was fading. At least the basement was still hers.

Although the world beyond the building had not quite shed the winter, the courtyard could make extremes of any kind of weather. It trapped breezes into a wind tunnel. A shower would threaten a flash flood. Today, the sky was a cold but clear blue, and the concrete was dusted with diamonds. Brisk air greeted her when she opened the door, warming when she stepped into the light. The plant pots that had lain barren all winter were dotted with green.

Amanda closed her eyes and put her legs up on the bench. There was no noise of traffic or air conditioning or even birds, just the slow tap, tap, tap of the blinds against the window. She opened her eyes. The blind-free windows stared blankly back. The lights were off. The windows were empty. She resumed her pose and closed her eyes once more.

'Some sunshine at last.'

Using her hand as a visor, she squinted towards the voice.

'A pleasure to see you once more,' it continued.

It seemed as though she were staring into a lava lamp.

'I have startled you. I apologise.'

He hadn't. She knew the voice and had known it would return.

'Not at all.'

His shape began to solidify.

'Nice to see you too.' It wasn't, but his arrival had put her on the back foot once more.

'There have been changes since last we met.'

Amanda looked towards the plant pots and nodded.

He smiled at them and then at the sunshine, but stayed in the shadows. 'And how is your work?'

How could she explain the turmoil? The invasion? 'Fine.' Why should she try? 'Yours?'

'Wonderful.'

She felt a pang of jealousy.

'We are currently in a period of great anticipation.'

'What are you anticipating?'

'We have been given assurances that one of our most coveted regions will soon be receiving an influx of innovation.'

'I see.' She could see him now, but as to what he was talking about, she was at a loss.

He smiled, mouth alone. 'A position has become available, and we believe that we have finally found the perfect fit.'

'Sorry?'

‘You did not contact me. You remain content?’

‘I’m sorry, I hadn’t realised I was meant to. Yes.’

‘It was not required, but it was, somewhat, expected. And work is proceeding well?’

She felt both that she should not answer and that he already knew what she would say.

‘There’s a new initiative.’

‘I believe so,’ he nodded.

She added, ‘It’s a fantastic challenge. How did you – ’

He interrupted, ‘You are surely not one who would embrace disruption.’

She wanted to leave, but his presence in the doorway had a permanence she did not want to challenge. She looked at her watch, but the sun reflected off the face and the time was unreadable.

‘You will be late?’ He produced a pocket watch. ‘I am also in that danger. Until next time, Amanda.’ He was gone before she could say goodbye, or ask who it was she was saying goodbye to.

She looked towards the window where the face had appeared last time they met. But today, it was empty, as it had been every other day since.

The next day, when Amanda was apprehensively pouring the coffee that someone else had made, Catherine nudged her. ‘Have you heard?’ As usual, she didn’t wait. ‘They’ve brought forward the reviews.’

‘Why?’

‘Who knows? Maybe it was Karen’s idea, or those Solihull people or what have you, but the list’s already up. You’re this afternoon!’ She grinned and squeezed Amanda’s shoulder.

Amanda would have liked time to prepare, naturally, but she had nothing to fear. She’d like to walk in with something though. Was there anything she could print off in time? She’d have to miss lunch. That would be the fifth time.

She looked through the glass of the office door. Scott was gesticulating towards something on his desk and looking up at Karen who was standing over him, shaking her head. Amanda knocked on the door. Scott jumped and Karen glared, then both quickly composed themselves. Scott smiled as he beckoned Amanda inside.

‘Hi Amanda,’ he said, thrusting his hand in her direction. Amanda shook it, then Karen’s, before all three sat down. He turned to Karen. ‘Would you mind?’ Her stony façade crumbled and she passed him a file. He turned back to Amanda. ‘So, how have you been enjoying our new initiative?’

‘It’s been an enjoyable challenge.’ It sounded as convincing as she’d imagined it would.

‘How have you found working with different departments?’

‘It’s been interesting seeing how others work.’

‘In what way?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Could you give me an example?’

She cast her mind back to the conversation she'd had earlier in her mind. Nothing.
'Just, generally.'

He kept eye contact with her.

Her head was full of echoes.

Karen leaned forward and smiled becoming more gargoyle-esque in the process.

Something finally bounced back to Amanda. 'I suppose, the way that certain departments are already integrated to a certain degree and the job management and multi-tasking that that entails.'

Scott's smile wiped off the one on Karen's face. 'Great. Karen, make a note of that.'

Karen glowered and did so.

'Could you elaborate?'

'I have a greater understanding of my position within the company.' Amanda's confidence was returning. 'Learning about other roles has had a positive impact on my own.'

'Really?' Scott looked towards the corner again, and the gargoyle was on it straight away. 'So, how long have you been with us?'

'Just over three years.'

He looked down at the cardboard file on the desk. 'Thirty-nine months at the end of this month, in fact.' Looking up, he seemed, somehow, apologetic. 'Almost cause for celebration.'

Almost?

He continued, 'I also see from this that your productivity has increased, year on year.'

She nodded. This was not news.

‘Unfortunately,’ he was now making direct eye contact, ‘whilst the rolling out of the “Whole Office” approach has really motivated people to take ownership of their work, your personal output has decreased. Would you care to expand on why that might be the case?’

Amanda stuttered.

‘Or do you disagree with the data?’

She would never disagree with the data.

Karen was making absolutely no effort to hide the grin on her face.

‘Perhaps,’ she paused. How could she agree without accepting blame? ‘Perhaps in coming to understand the intricacies of the company, my work has become more considered and, therefore, this had led to a temporary reduction in my output. Now that the initiative is coming to an end, my work can return to its former level...’ What else? ‘Enriched by the experience.’

‘Well, that would certainly be one explanation. However, they’ve –’, Karen coughed. ‘We’ve,’ he corrected himself, ‘decided, after consulting with our advisors, to stick with the programme.’

Amanda nodded. Speaking was not an option.

‘What has become apparent, is that whilst your work has fallen below the expected standard, it doesn’t seem to have been affected by a particular department or group.’

He paused.

Karen leant forward once more. ‘It’s been really quite a consistent decline.’

Scott turned sharply. ‘Thank you, Karen.’

‘In fact, you’re the only member of the Pergo family on whom “Whole Office” has had a negative impact, so the natural assumption would be that it is not the initiative which is at fault. And, as you know we’re all about moving forward to the next stage, not trying to catch up to where we’ve been.’

‘Of course.’ Amanda felt the ground beneath her open up.

‘But, they, that is, *we*, feel that perhaps it would be better if you didn’t come with us.’

And she was falling.

Scott was still talking. ‘That being said, you have, until very recently, had an exemplary record.’ But she could barely hear him. His voice was somewhere far away. ‘Fortunately, our advisors have a position available which might be more suitable for you. He passed a red file to Karen, who immediately stood up and walked towards the door. Two things happened as she opened it, both of which made Amanda shudder: Karen turned to smile at her, and Amanda caught a glimpse of a blue pinstriped suit.

Every day, Amanda sat at the same corner desk. There was no access behind. No-one to look over her shoulder. The desk was not paired with another. It was surrounded by space, not another desk, not another person, in sight. Even the corridor lights didn’t venture down this far. They flickered somewhere in the distance. It was hard getting up in the dark, not seeing sunlight, but there was no alternative. She thought there had been a window when she’d first arrived. Had she seen someone through it? She remembered the feeling of cold glass against her hand. She stared towards the empty wall.

She heard a tapping sound and turned to see he was back again, drumming his long fingers against an ID card that was the same red colour as hers. 'It would be better not to try to remember,' he said. 'It is a distraction from your work.'

'Sorry, you're right,' she said quickly.

He smiled the smile with which his eyes never joined in, but which showed all of his long teeth. 'It is not terrible, but there is much to do and,' he took out his stop watch, 'we have our schedule to keep.'

'Of course.' Amanda had already picked up a file from her desk before he had finished speaking. She didn't look up again, but could hear the slow buzz of the lights as he walked down the corridor.

Far beyond the reluctant strip lights, as the Tube arrived, there was a handful of other people on the platform. A nightshift-dishevelled man, resigned to miss the day again, a tracksuited woman with scraped-back hair, and an office-smart couple, who arrived separately, then sat together. The regular four.

THE DAUGHTER

She hadn't missed the ship; the ship had missed her. Now it would be at least a week before it would return. Why had they not just turned around? Couldn't they see her, jumping and shouting like Chapel Pete? The ship became a toy boat and then a speck.

There had been no need for such punctuality. Someone was a jobsworth. Someone had stood on deck, watched her and argued against the U-turn and for the schedule. The Company would not be happy. And Carol knew she was here, that she was the last of the family to leave this year.

Self-pity stung Minny's eyes, but the words of the prophets held her back. Even a lapsed follower such as her could find some comfort there. She took a breath, calmed herself and resolved to carry on. What else could she do? The weather wouldn't arrive for a while. The ships always came in good time.

The rucksack dragged at her back, mocked her, as she climbed back to the cottage. Her parents had taken the trolley cases with the main supplies. It was all part of the ritual. She'd always loved The Leaving. Unlike her friends, she had never been desperate to return in the spring. The friends who vowed they would never leave for longer than they had to. They would never move away. Now that she spent most of her time off-island, though, she missed the simple traditions.

As she walked up Main Street, it was not the silence that was unsettling; even during the light months it was quiet at this hour, people busying themselves in homes or fields. Now they were all far away. 'Apart from The Daughter,' she said aloud. It was an old habit and she felt instantly ridiculous. The artefacts were proof of the prophets, the rest was myth and legend.

Pushing the door of the cottage open, she slung the rucksack into the hallway and herself into a chair, not bothering to take off the dust sheets. She stared at the room. Empty of photographs, the white squares on the wall stared back. Her eyes had been drawn to them all week. She had only covered the furniture that morning. Horror films began in rooms like this. She couldn't help but count the shrouded items. Just in case. All present and correct. No extras. She took the sheet off the screen and was about to switch it on when she remembered that the signal had been turned off the night before. The phones would still be working though, one of the few things they didn't shut down.

When Minny put the receiver to her ear, the sound that greeted her was one that she knew well. All islanders did. Only last month she'd attended the gathering for Carol's youngest, had watched him put a shell to his ear for the first time. Had seen the smile spread across his face as he'd heard the beautiful crashing that meant he held the power of the entire ocean in his pudgy hand.

Today, there was no beauty in that sound. It would be fine. The line went down all the time. Sometimes she forgot. It'd be up again later and she could phone The Agent then. Besides, she mightn't even need to. Her family would be expecting her in three days and would raise the alarm when she didn't appear. She'd no idea what The Company would ask for a single passenger trip, but they would have to pay.

Mিনny had been staring, unseeing, out of the window, phone in hand, for five minutes when something black fluttered in the corner of her eye. She ran out of the cottage, onto the path, scanned the horizon... No-one. The trees across the road bent in the wind, gusts tugging away at the leaves, spiralling them away. This was what she'd seen. A trick of the light or of hope. Nobody else was foolish enough to be left behind.

She was hungry now. She'd planned to get breakfast on the ship; had been looking forward to something fresh again. She'd finished The Running Down the day before last and was bored of the packet food. As a child, this had been one of her favourite traditions. Her family always began The Running Down exactly one week before The Leaving. Others started earlier or later, but in every household it began with the perishables. That was just common sense, unless they wanted to return in the spring to a mouldy hovel. The Running Down was the one time when seconds, and even thirds were allowed. If it had been a good year, people would sometimes buy in extra before the start.

Next came the off-island produce. It was said that just as certain foods couldn't travel, other foods were unable to stay. The older generation blamed The Daughter of the Island. 'It's Her vengeance,' they'd say. At school, Minny had been taught that myths and legends were just another historical perspective. And island scholars still debated whether The Daughter was vindictive or protective, whether the islanders could ever really prevent another great flood. Were they not already being punished? The winters were becoming harsher and longer. The generation after next would be forced to spend longer off the rock than on.

To Minny's mind, the reason things ruined was scientific. The weather was changing on the mainland too, and there were no legends to explain that. She didn't deny that, were the wrong item left behind, it would rot or disappear. She remembered the year that one of Dennis's brood had dropped a full travelling dish on the floor as they were about to leave. In the ensuing panic clean, he'd had no time for a final sweep of the kitchen and had missed a tin of off-island meatballs. On their return, three months later, the family were greeted by the smell of rotting meat and maggots, the tin having rusted to a sieve, spilling its contents over the shelf, from where they seeped through cupboard gaps and onto the work surface and floor.

For such disintegration and destruction of doors, Minny chose to blame the poor state of mainland manufacturing and the extremes of the weather, rather than a seaweed clad spirit. In fact, nobody knew how bad the winters really got now, unable as they were to leave even scientific equipment behind. If that couldn't stand up to the weather, what chance was there for a cheap, mass produced tin?

Each year her family would finish the perishables a few days before The Leaving, and would be left with only dried island produce until the big day. If the neighbours had any spare themselves, they might take pity on them. Not always; not this year. But Minny hadn't minded. She loved the rollercoaster of decadent gorging, dropping to bland, processed food and the final surge up to The Arrival. Still, that was when the semi-fasting was over quickly. She couldn't live this way for another week.

She knew what was in the cupboard before she opened it, but always had been taught to be glass half full. If she could miss a ship, what else might she have missed? Nothing. Just one, crumpled packet of local branded oats, hiding shamefully at the back of the shelf. Maybe the neighbours had left something. Not Dennis, of course, but someone else. People had seemed more rushed this year. More opportunities for forgetful mistakes.

She tried next door first. Carol's door was unlocked, of course. 'Winter is The Daughter's time,' Minny heard her mother's voice say. When the living left, The Daughter was said to slip in and out of the houses, checking that all was as it should be, taking back what was hers. 'You can't lock your door to a spirit' her mother's voice again. Those who did, would arrive home to find the frame softened with damp, the lock rusted and shrivelled, the door wide open, the furniture weather ruined. Not everyone believed this was The Daughter's fault. Minny was undecided. Yet she knew no-one who locked their door for The Leaving. Why should they? Even the light months brought no criminals. There was nothing

to fear in the winter. What was there worth taking? The islanders carried anything of value with them. Furniture cost too much to transport, but jewellery, certificates, the smaller electrical items, photographs; all of this they took. There would be no return during the three-month exile and, with no idea which accommodation would be allotted to them, there was no knowing which home comforts would be lacking and which items would prove most useful to barter with. So, the islanders carried all they could and the tradition of the unlocked door continued. The Daughter was able to move without hindrance from one home to the next, and now, so was Minny.

Minny wasn't sure how many pieces of furniture Carol had, so counting the lumps could not reassure her. She held her breath until she'd made it into the kitchen and closed the door. The first cupboard was for crockery, the second, for pans, but the third was a larder. The tins inside were mundanely local, the only vaguely interesting item, a tin of condensed milk. She threw it into her bag. Something sweet, at least. She looked for a pen to leave a note, but Carol must have packed them. No matter, she'd see her on the other side.

In the next house, there was nothing of interest at all; however, in the one after, she found a tin of carelessly left mainland pears. By this time, she was so hungry that she pulled the top off and ate them standing up. She washed and rinsed the tin, then tried to write a note on the fridge whiteboard, but neither of the attached pens worked.

She continued to search the lane, and, by lunchtime, had managed to scratch together enough standard produce to last a few days, keeping a mental note of each item's origin. She wondered if she should go home and try the phone again, but there was still the house where Oriana had tried to teach her piano.

She shoved the door hard, remembering how it used to stick. It flew open with a speed that softened her scream to a gasp. Her knees thudded and her hands slapped cold tiles. She

stayed on her knees for a moment, confused into stillness and put a hot hand under each arm. Her palms continued to burn, so she put them back on the tiles. Not even midday and she had been brought to her knees and to tears. She felt the days stretch ahead as she chased an endless horizon.

She shook her head. The windowless hallway was dark, even with the door wide open. Back on her feet, she kept one hand on the wall to steady her step. Her foot kicked something and she nearly fell again, but her free hand met a banister. The stairs were on the right, so the living room should be on the left. Her dark-adjusted eyes made out the white of the doorway and she moved towards it. It moved towards her. She stopped. A faceless figure loomed out of the darkness. It fluttered at the edges, rippling towards her along the tiles. She closed her eyes and froze. It was surprisingly easy to give in. A cold ball of panic formed in her chest, then melted into her limbs. There was no need to worry anymore. She waited for a hand to touch her; take her. Material rustled, but she felt nothing. She opened her eyes. It was still there, rippling like a ray of sun across a sea bed. Like the flutter in the cottage window. Like a sheet in the breeze from an open door. Slowly, she put out her hand. Her fingers touched rough cotton. She pulled. The sheet fell to the floor and a sudden shaft of sunlight caught a walnut top. She almost laughed. Almost.

Behind the piano, she could just make out the living room door. Tentatively, Minny reached out and pushed it. Light streamed through. She sat down on the stool, lifted the piano lid and placed one finger on a key. Softly, she pressed. For a moment, the jarring sound rang in her ears, drowning out her panic. She tried a different key and pressed a little harder. Not quite right, but its flatness lay across her nerves. Soothing them. Cautiously, she spread her fingers into a chord, and pressed.

Oriana had always wanted her to play the old island songs. ‘Flood No More’ was one of her particular favourites. ‘It’s our most important song,’ Oriana had told her. ‘We sing it to keep the legend alive.’

‘Which one?’ Minny had asked, though she knew the answer.

‘The Daughter of the Island,’ Oriana shook her head and sighed. ‘What do they teach you?’

Minny had, of course, been taught the legend. There had been a young girl from a farming family, living on the island before The Separation, when the three rocks were still joined. One year, the weather was unkind and the crops failed. Fearing they would starve, the girl stowed away on a ferry to the mainland, planning to buy cheap goods to sell at a higher price back on the island. On the voyage back, the crew found her and put her off the boat on the first rock. It was too dark to see the water clearly, but being an island girl, she knew the tides and when the causeways were safe to walk, so started towards the third rock. The off-island goods weighed her down, slowing her pace, but she wasn’t worried. The sea was not one to change its routine. The tide would not come early. But there was something wrong with the sea that night and, when she was halfway between the second rock and home, the waves began to splash across her feet. She threw her parcels away, but it was too late. Neither she, nor the pathways, were ever seen again.

‘Why did it happen?’

‘She should have relied on the island,’ said Oriana gravely. ‘Should have trusted it to provide and not been greedy. And that’s a warning to all of us. Now, are you ready to play?’

The last verse of the song claimed that The Daughter would never leave the island again, that she was always there, scared into hiding by too many summer people, emerging only in the winter. Then, she would claim the island back and roam the roads of now and

before. She had learnt her lesson, but it was one that she needed to pass on. She had become one with the island.

‘Why can’t we see her then?’

As she grew older, the story remained vivid to Minny, but didn’t ring as true. The Separation and The Flood, were, of course, historical facts, but if this girl had existed, surely she had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Still, this didn’t stop Minny’s goosebumps whenever someone claimed to have seen a figure drifting late at night over the one time walkways.

Minny had never liked the song. It made her feel unsettled and she’d never been able to master it. But this was the song that now came into her head. Both hands formed nervously into the chords she thought she remembered. She took a deep breath.

‘She was bor-’

A sudden gust of wind blew through the hallway. The bang of the door in front was followed by another, even louder from behind her, and a crack. She turned to see a shattered frame and a door hanging on one hinge. The piano lid crashed. She ran.

She didn’t stop until she was home with the door closed behind her, a chair up against it, wedging it shut. She looked out of the window. The same trees. Leaves blowing down the lane. She unshrouded the window seat and sat down. No more today. She’d done enough. She could go back out tomorrow. She would. Tomorrow.

An hour of watching revealed no black flutters, no pursuer, nothing, save the fact that she was still alone and would be for a while yet. The rucksack was still packed in the hallway, the scavenging bag unemptied and the furniture veiled. By the time she fell into bed

she was exhausted. There was something else she needed to do. She was asleep before she'd remembered what it was.

She dreamt she was living life over the water again. Not the compulsory life of the dark months, quarantined with family, but a summer life. She was in the back of a car, in the middle seat, a blissfully ignorant friend on either side of her. Relaxed and warm, they passed a bottle between them. Laughing, they watched the lights smear green across the window as they sped through the night rain and into the Old Town. Thick, granite walls grew up suddenly around them, so new they were wet with the sand. She turned to the friend on her left.

‘This town is too modern. It’s only just born.’

He laughed, leant forward to put the music up and sat back with the bottle.

The music was blasting out through the windows that were open now. It flew out into a neon-streaked night, and the air flew back in, soft, heavy and dark. Minny turned to the person on the other side and repeated herself, more loudly. The girl ignored her and reached past her for the bottle.

Where they were headed was too small. Minny shouted, louder and louder, again and again. They paid no attention and carried on their conversation.

She screamed. They stopped, looked directly at her and she breathed a sigh of relief.

‘This! Town! –’

The boy on the left passed the bottle through her. The girl on the right laughed. Minny woke up.

Her throat was dry. The morning light showed those bosom friends for the strangers they were. Just older versions of the modern children from that childhood year on the

mainland. Whenever she'd asked her parents why they'd moved there, they would give a different answer: for work; for the weather; to be nearer someone; to get away from someone else. So, she'd stopped asking.

She hadn't enjoyed that year. It wasn't like the winter exile. She remembered the glances she'd caught mid-exchange at the mention of wall weeding for pocket money; the incomprehension at the cliché, 'going all around the boat'; the giggling when she'd asked what time the electricity went off. It was better not to speak in class. That was fine. The more people spoke, the less they had worth saying.

When she returned to go to college, she was more cautious, but more confident. She learnt to navigate the waters of mainland normality. Criticising home life often worked well. Certain experiences were universal: younger siblings, chores, nosey neighbours, but, even now, there were occasions when innocuous comments were met with a raised eyebrow. When she'd complained how boring it was going to the cat raffle every weekend, and hearing how many so-and-so had won the week before, her friends had been appalled.

*

By the time Minny had cooked breakfast, she'd forgotten the dream. Halfway through eating it, she remembered she needed to call The Agent. As soon as she put the telephone to her ear, the sea roared once more. This was not good, but was not so bad. The ship was still en route, so her family wouldn't know there was a problem. Once it arrived, and they did, they would make The Company send one back. No matter what. Without a doubt.

In the meantime, she had an island to herself. Why not enjoy it? She could do what she wanted. Whatever she wanted. Completely up to her. What was there to do? She could walk to the North Side. There wasn't always the chance on her short visits and the cold

hadn't arrived yet. Besides, for once, she wouldn't have to put up with some annual leave local, daft as a pancake, wittering in her ear.

The roads only existed because the land allowed them to, and it could change its mind at any time. There was no such thing as a horizontal or straight A to B, and no landmark was ever where anyone first saw it, or thought they had. When Minny reached the crest of the first hill, the North Tower was clearly visible, but by the time she had descended and climbed the second one, it had disappeared, the mass of tree tunnels drawing it further away from her. No matter, it was when she was this high that she realised how much she needed it, this undulating green, the sea beyond it, mist lying on top, calling her back. There were no clouds yet, and warm yellow dotted the blue.

There would be no carts today. She ran down the hill in the middle of the road, arms outstretched. By the time she'd reached the bottom, she was on a narrow pathway, her fingertips brushing against granite walls. Mustard dabs off-set the glitter where the sunlight still hit them despite their increasing height.

The third hill opened up into a field that seemed to meet the sky, but she knew that in truth, it stopped abruptly at a sheer drop into the sea that reclaimed more of its space each year. Minny listened to it roar a duet with the wind, and kept three feet of grass in front of her as she walked.

It was years since she'd been here. This was one of the most sacred places on the island. To believers. Salt and wind made the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. White specks broke up the green expanse. She stooped to look more closely, and saw and remembered at the same time. Bones and shells bleached pure white. She could see her mother, checking pockets before a big wash, finding a handful of crushed fragments. It was

the only time she had beaten her. And then they'd moved away. She trod carefully between the offerings. She didn't want to stay.

She chose the widest of three paths down, which soon became a road. Size was fluid. Dirt tracks became thoroughfares, then switched back at will. The roads were intestines and the islanders accepted this lack of pedestrian safety, the weaving in and out of boulders, carrying a base level of anxiety with them on long walks. But not her, not today. On a sycamore-lined trail now, she could feel the end was in sight, a feeling more reliable than her eyes.

The trees fell back and the North Tower stood before her, though 'tower' was too grand a word for it. It wasn't tall and it didn't seem strong (though no-one knew for how many decades it had stood). There were no other towers on the island, corresponding to any other points of the compass. Still, it was vaguely turret shaped, and this was what it had always been called. So, whether it had been an elaborate playhouse or part of a miniature castle, long since disintegrated, was unclear. The scholars had theories, of course. They always did.

She walked around it, studying the ornate walls. She watched the sun highlight pastel shells of unknown sea creatures, catch the edges of glass worn to gemstones by the wind and sea spray, make the orange faces of the dolls glow red. Their eyes stared out, unseeing. Time had taken the roses from their cheeks and their eternally pursed lips would never explain why their dismembered bodies were strewn throughout the walls, limbs jutting out between blue ceramic handles and spouts, a toys' picnic gone horribly wrong. A breeze blew and the dolls winked at her. It was beautiful.

The entrance was so far down the wall that she had to get onto all fours. When she paused in front of the archway and looked in she saw it was more of a tunnel, the walls of the

tower were so thick. She could see no light at the end, just a different shade of black. She was reminded of earlier visits.

For the first metre or so the air inside was warm and dry and the grass beneath her was soft. As she crawled further, this became drier and the air began to cool. It was darker too, Minny herself blocking out the light. She kept going and felt the grass become sparse, then turn to sand. When she reached what she was sure must be the halfway point, the smell of the sea hung all around her. She could barely see and couldn't tell if the sand was cold or damp. Had it always taken this long? She supposed she'd moved faster as a child. The atmosphere seemed thick; heavy. Her arms and legs were both cold and damp, but turning back would be a challenge in itself.

The clammy shuffle was interminable. The air was wet salt. It stung. She couldn't breathe and her heart pounded. She might not make it after all. Slimy fingers stroked her face. She screamed. The fingers stopped moving. Shuddering, she edged forward. They stroked her neck and felt their slithery way down her back. As they traced over her feet the air changed, lifted. She opened her eyes. She was in. She took a deep breath and looked back down the tunnel. Through the seaweed fronds, she could see daylight ten metres away.

She sat on dry ground, with her back against the wall. The light that seeped in had battled its way through the tiniest of cracks, fought through plastic, making limbs and faces glow, been refracted by glass, bringing its colour with it. The space was small, but there was room enough to swing a cat, and the dappled walls seemed to climb endlessly upwards. She felt safe and happy for the first time that day.

As the sun moved outside, so the light and the colours altered inside, a glowing limb extinguished here while another glowed anew over there. It was peaceful, only the occasional

slap of seaweed on the side of the entrance. To be so wet still, it must have been gathered this week. An offering for safe passage.

She didn't know how long she had been watching the colours, but the light at the end of the tunnel had begun to dim. She took one last look around her. To the right was a mound of kelp. She knew better than to touch, but she wondered at the nature of a request that could require a tribute so large. The light shifted and two white stones shone amid the pile. The winking eyes of a doll.

It was easier to shuffle towards the light than away from it. The tunnel seemed less dank, the air less oppressive. She could see the seaweed before it touched her face. The cramped space prevented her from raising her hands to brush it away, but it was softer now, almost soothing. By the time moist fingers were caressing her back, dry grass was scratching her hands. As she felt them slither down the back of her legs, she could taste the outside air. She could almost feel the sun on the tips of her fingers, when other fingers tightened around her ankle.

She pulled her foot towards her, but the fingers held fast. She tried to kick them away with her free foot, but they gripped more firmly. The more she struggled, the tighter they wound, pulling her backwards. She lunged forward from her knees and tried to grab hold of the sides of the entrance. Glass and shells grazed her hands, but she could not reach far enough. She let her arms drop and, for a moment, just a moment, stopped fighting her captor. It stopped fighting her.

She was bound as tightly as before, but no more so. She should have known. Slowly, she pulled the trapped foot towards her as far as she could, so the wet fronds were taut, then across to the side of the tunnel. She rubbed it against the wall. At first, the seaweed slipped easily back and forth: slime on slime, but then it snagged and she pulled the strand to and fro.

There was a rubber-like squeal, then one snap, then another and another until her foot swung freely. She wriggled into the sunlight.

The light hurt her eyes and the day was different. Her ankle was red, but not bleeding and when she looked down the tunnel, it was as black and still as before. When she stood, she saw sharp branches etch into a sky that had turned grey. A protective mist was rising from the sea. She shook a tiny hand sticking out on one side, then turned her back on it and the tower. She could already see Candide's Lane, not too far away, but that meant nothing.

Before bed that night, she picked up the phone, expecting to hear only the sea. There was no sound at all.

*

Another mainland dream. Her family at a restaurant table. Glass back-lit cabinet beamed green halos around their heads. Decadent electricity. A feeling between déjà vu and nostalgia. There was life on the other side of the glass. Her father asked her mother, 'Does she know?' Minny tried to answer, but the words wouldn't come out. When she stood and tried to walk over to the warm glass, hands on either side of her pushed her back in her seat. She shrugged them off and stood. The lights went out.

*

After breakfast, while looking out at the morning, the dream resurfaced. It pretended to be a memory, but when she tried to pin it down, it revealed itself for what it was. The mist had lifted and the sky was uncharacteristically clear. Doubt prodded gently. Could they have been wrong, after all? Had they been duped? She opened the window and the breeze that blew on her face was soft, but there was an icy touch beneath.

Later, she walked to the bottom of the lane, to the bench overlooking the harbour and bathing pools. The ship-free horizon brought no disappointment. This was just part of the routine she had created for herself. She had decided on it that morning. If she were to make it through the next week, or even two, her days must be structured. Ritual was key.

- Shower: for hygiene and health, and reassurance that the pipes had not frozen or been turned off.
- Contact the mainland: the last ship would land there that evening so this was technically unnecessary, but it would be good to know the exact date she would be picked up.
- Breakfast: she'd already made a mental inventory and planned the next week's menu.
- Morning look-out: it was possible a new ship had already been dispatched.
- Chores: supply scavenging. It was unthinkable that rescue would not come. But not impossible.
- Lunch.
- Afternoon look-out.
- Walk: Maybe. She'd have to watch the light. The days would quickly become shorter and the streetlights had finished for the year. A walk in the dark could undo everything.
- Call again.
- Tea.
- Bed.

She took her jacket off and laid it beside her. The sea was refusing to calm itself, despite the weather's kindness. White flashes mixed with greens and blues. The sea smashed

them together and sprayed all upwards; a play fight on the point of turning. She could stare at this for hours; it was a long time since she had.

The day before she left for college, there had been pub drinks, but her friends, already busy with the jobs they'd been born to, had left early. She had watched betrayal chase them away, then come here. The summer had not yet left and the day stayed late. She sat and watched the children, trusted in their safety in the way that the mainlanders frowned on: the older ones, jumping off the end of the harbour wall; the younger ones splashing within the confines of the bathing pool. Some, who the following year would progress to the harbour drop, dared to walk along the edge of the pool, or clamber over it, sometimes in and sometimes out. The sea began to lap over the sides, but the grey outline was still visible beneath the blue.

Amid the climbing, splashing and diving, one child remained perched on the side of the pool. She was blonde and holding a purple rubber ring. Was she waiting or was she scared? There was a lonely gap around her, the other children paid her no attention, but jumped, splashed and tumbled around her.

'Over here!'

'Watch this!'

'That's easy, can you do this?'

The child was safe enough though, the only harm that could come to her would be a lesson worth learning. Minny's eyes wandered over to the horizon. In the far distance was a bank of clouds, and she imagined this was the mainland chimneys, camouflaging themselves with smoke. When she looked back, a purple ring was floating in the centre of the pool. A dark-haired child swam underneath it, then emerged from the hole in the middle. The other children played on. The lonely gap was closed.

Memories were seldom to be trusted. Today the harbour was empty and the pool was submerged. Minny didn't need to see something to know it was there. She didn't want to leave that view, but the rules she'd made were only a few hours old, too young to break. She walked to Rose's Lane to begin the morning search. At the top of the lane, one neighbour had left behind their hedge veg – two misshapen courgettes.

As for the other houses, her neighbours' priorities were not as she'd thought. She found piles of newspapers, a collection of crystal animals, a seaweed tapestry, three lawnmowers, a rowing boat and a wig collection. Items her family had never owned, or, if they had, would not have left to the mercy of winter. There was nothing in the way of supplies. Nothing worth carrying now. She could always go back later, not that she'd need to. They'd come soon.

Chapel Pete's house was at the end of the lane, and even had it not been, Minny still would have left it until the last. She had been in and out of people's homes all morning, but as she stood in the open doorway, it was the first time she'd felt herself a trespasser on a fragile quiet. Yet, she must go in. To avoid it would be to admit there was reason to do so.

She moved quickly through the white shapes of the parlour, the bare room that must once have been the dining room, and into the kitchen. The blinds were drawn, but the greys were light enough to see. Straight in and straight out would do it. Pete had never liked her, and even though he was long gone, his malevolent presence hung like a greasy kitchen smell. There was a carton on the kitchen counter. She picked it up, saw the mainland logo. Careless man. She opened the cupboard above it. Something was lurking at the back. She climbed onto the granite counter to reach it. Kneeling, the stone sent a painful reminder of yesterday's fall. She gasped, but necessity forced a swift recovery and she thrust her arm into the darkness. More off-island pasta. This was more than carelessness. She was about to put it down to

continue her search, when the door slammed shut behind her. She screamed and stumbled. There was a pain in her head, then black.

A blurry figure moved above her. Something cool pressed against her head and there was a sympathetic clicking. A salt sea smell. They must have come for her. They had turned the ship around after all. She tried to speak, but was so very tired. She closed her eyes in blissful calm.

She awoke alone, her vision clearer, but her surroundings unfamiliar. The hard bed swayed in the cold dark. When she sat up, three things happened: red light escaped from behind a cloud; a wave of nausea swept through her; and she vomited onto a torn packet of pasta and sauce. She wanted desperately to lie back down, but couldn't. Not now. She needed water.

She slowly dragged herself to her feet and made her way to the sink. She drank, she splashed her face, she wobbled, she held fast to the tap. Through the window, the light was fading fast. So was she. If she were to make it back home again before night, she would have to leave now, but if she did, she might collapse in the road. She heaved again. More water. There was a chipped mug on the draining board. Minny filled it and sat down at the uncovered kitchen table.

When her dizziness and the light had both nearly subsided, she stood up and fumbled for the light switch. A strip-light buzzed and flickered over her head, hinting at the kitchen's devastation in gradually longer flashes until the final and unpleasant reveal. The door had splintered as it had slammed shut. The powdery contents of the two packets lay squashed, spread and vomited on, across the floor. The red sunlight and electric white mixed to bathe the scene in baby pink. More hideous than this was the realisation she could not clean this up tonight. It would have to stay and stagnate. She put her wet head in her hands. There was a

lump at the back and when she looked at her hands, they glistened in the light of the dying sun. She panicked, then saw it was too thin for blood.

She edged her way through the kitchen, the dining room and the parlour, one hand on the wall, the other holding on to whatever shrouded item it came across. She had no fear of them anymore, just wanted to reach the sofa-shaped one. When she did, she collapsed on it, wrapping its sheet around herself.

*

That night, she walked the Eastern Path, though in her dream it was not the passage between the cliffs and the sea, but between old and the new; island and mainland. To the left, the tide was out further than she had ever seen, releasing the dark landscape that had lain hidden beneath the waves. Brown kelp draped itself over the rocks that cut their way viciously through grey sand. Moss crawled its way over the stones, as if wanting to give chase to the sea. To the right, bright, mainland houses grew brashly, terraced to fit in too many people. Doors and windows open, people hung out of them and called out to her to cross over. Cars sped fearlessly past while lights swung in the trees celebrating her return.

She kept walking. She had been walking all this time. She could not stop. She looked back to the rocks. 'Alien landscape', she'd heard it called. Not alien to her. The cries of the mainland were loud. So many people. So much life. Too much. Those cries meant nothing. Anyone could hear them. Anyone could follow them. They were not for her. She walked towards the sand, to calm. To freedom.

*

In the half-light of the dawn, she saw a figure in the corner of the room. Pale eyes staring in a face framed with a tangle of black. She sat up with a jolt, and it resolved into a combination of sheets and shadows. There remained a dull ache at the back of her head, but the dizziness

had gone and the sleep fug had been shocked out of her. She must be more careful. The weather had not deteriorated so far, but the wind kept creeping up on her. She must learn either to close doors behind her, or ignore loud noises. In such a silent world, the latter was hard to do. With a groan, she remembered the kitchen. Despite all of the unpleasantness there had been over the years, she couldn't leave that to fester. It was an awkward job, and by the time the most offensive part was done, her head had begun to throb again. There was still pasta and powder scattered across the floor, but she'd done enough. Anyway, it was his own fault. She looked around for her bag and made her way to the front door.

It wouldn't open.

She turned the handle but, rather than stopping and catching, it just kept turning around and around. The floorboards upstairs creaked. She pulled on the handle with both hands, then with one foot on the door frame at the same time. The wood groaned, but nothing more. Something on the landing rustled. Blinds, curtains. Hands still on the handle, she leant back as she put first one foot, then the other against the wood and pushed. There was a crack and the doorknob came off in her hand. She managed to put one foot down before she fell. She had spent enough time on the floor. There was a thud at the top of the stairs. The door swung open and sunlight dazzled her. There was a footstep in the hallway. She did not look behind her as she ran.

Only when she was home, when she could breathe again, when her chest had stopped thumping, did Minny's forgotten aches and pains return. She creaked upstairs to her bedroom and examined herself in the mirror. She looked paler and thinner than she had been in a long time. Since her first mainland year. Dark rings under her eyes, even what looked like, but couldn't possibly yet be, the start of wrinkles. The lump on the back of her head was hidden beneath matted hair, long scratches and grazes covered her hands and arms, and when she

lifted her skirts she saw a red welt around her ankle and huge bruises on her knees. No wonder her mind could not be trusted when her body had been so abused.

The bathtub was kept for special occasions. This was one. As the steam rose around her, her muscles relaxed and her mind started to clear. She began recounting events. She was not superstitious. Not anymore, that had been driven out of her, but she appreciated the legends. She didn't have to be a believer to see their beauty. She had had a terrible run of luck: seaweed catching her, phone lines crossing and coming down, doors slamming and scaring her, knocks on her head confusing her. Terrible luck.

The alternative? The phone lines had been sabotaged, she'd been followed on her foraging, dragged back into the Tower. Abandoned. The boat had deserted her, did that not prove anything was possible?

'Ridiculous.'

If she said it aloud, it might become true.

The pain in her head had eased, but she couldn't face the island. Her routine had crumbled. She was unsurprised. Downstairs, she looked at the phone with trepidation. Nothing had really gone wrong today. A broken door, but only Pete's, and he'd been warned. Minny closed her eyes and brought the receiver to her ear. The dial tone purred. She didn't want to open her eyes, but had to, to dial the number she knew off by heart. She held her breath while The Company phone rang out once, twice, three times and then stopped. A pause. No greeting.

'Hello?'

Voices, but not quite words.

'Hello?'

The noises carried on.

‘Hello!’

Something, then laughing.

Did they know she was there?

Silence.

She shouted. Put the phone down. Redialled. ‘Hello?’ Her voice sounded strange, as though travelling from far below.

The sea.

*

Lying in bed at dusk, she told herself that this meant there was hope. If The Company hadn’t sent someone back already, they certainly would tomorrow. They may not have heard her voice, but they had answered her call. They knew they had been contacted.

*

In her sleep that night, she was on the school tractor home, fifteen children in the trailer, the breeze blowing around them. Dan shouted back at them to hold on as he pushed the tractor to its limits, finally free of mainland day-trippers. Rose, ever the idiot, stood up as they reached the top of the hill, arms in the air as they sped downward.

‘Sit down, Rose!’ called Dan, looking behind him and turning the wheel as he did. Rose stumbled onto one leg, bounced once, then once again and over the side of the trailer. Minny grabbed at her foot, but only scraped the mud on the sole of her boot. She looked over the edge. All below and behind was thick and black.

‘I warned her parents,’ Dan said, driving on, ‘they know the rules. Hold on!’

To what? The trailer and the other children had gone, and now the tractor was pulling her along on a garden chair, balancing unsecured on a metal flatbed. Each jolt threw her in a different direction, threatening to reunite her with Rose. ‘But I haven’t done anything wrong!’ she told Dan. He laughed and ploughed in and out of a ditch. She screamed. He sped around a corner, flinging her sideways. She screamed again, and now the islanders had left their homes to watch, laughter lining both sides of the track.

‘Go home!’ Bottom Field Dennis was red with rage.

Carol pointed. ‘She should never have come back.’

Minnie felt a sharp pain in her forehead and a stone clanged against metal. She ducked, but Chapel Pete was an expert shot.

Her parents shook their heads and turned away.

‘Wait!’ Minny called.

The tractor screeched to a halt, sending her backwards on two of the chair legs, then sharply forward. Gravel rushed at her face and seaweed wrapped around her ankle.

*

She awoke in a shiver of sweat. The sun had not yet risen. She hoped it still would. The voices on the morning phone call did not know she was there, but it was good to hear them in the daylight hours. She caught snatches of conversation in strong island accents.

‘ – loss – ’

‘ – understandable – ’

‘ – part of life.’

Minnie walked west that day. The season had finished a month ago, but the hotel kitchens might have some leftover supplies. There would be nothing off-island, the mainland guests paid good money for an authentic fairy tale experience, not true island life.

She walked the tight pathways only true islanders knew. The scent of flowers in stone wall cracks still lingered on the breeze. By late morning, the sun was shining high and bright. Wet heat rose from plants not ready to forget the summer, but the ferns were mottled and dry. The weather was turning. Rosemary and lavender marked the start of Lucille's Path. She stooped to rub both between her fingers and breathe them in, before turning down it. At the bottom of the path she found a field of moss, rebellious blades of grass cutting through it. Did they call to each other in the night?

This was the natural world the mainlanders sought, and the one that she missed when away. On the island, the daffodils and camellias arrived soon after The Return. They would harmonise with each other for a month or so before the blossom trees joined in. The camellias lasted the longest, their dropped petals forming carpets. The daffodils were too brazen to care. They knew they would be back next year and by the time the daisies invaded they were long gone. It was a pretty takeover, the daisies appearing harmless at first, but they would spring up where they were least wanted and it was a constant battle to fight them back. They brought the butterflies too. The tourists would coo at their dancing, while the locals knew better.

Here and there were farmhouses. Not entering them made her feel less alone, as if she could call in for a cup of tea on the way back. The fields around them were brown and bare. The hay bales had been rolled onto the first boat with the cattle. It was unimaginable that they would rot and leave the cattle to starve. She turned onto Matt's Lane, and walked uphill towards the hotel.

The imposing wrought iron gates were, of course, unlocked, as were the palm tree framed wooden doors. The hotel's façade was painted the warm pink of summer, but in the lobby, the smell of yesterday's roast dinner and too many bodies hung in the cold of hibernation. She had only ever been there on school trips, when the class had sat in the lounge and learnt about tourism. Large wooden shutters covered the windows, but she knew the lounge was somewhere on the left. They had never been shown the kitchen, but one of the paraffin lamps on the sideboard, poised to create an authentic island experience, would help her find it later. In the meantime, she pulled at the shutters and light flooded in.

She walked through the lounge, tugging at thick sheets that fell from sofas, arm chairs and tables. Mainlanders were fickle about the parts of the 'authentic' experience they embraced. These deep red and purple monstrosities were too grand for islanders' tastes, but she'd learnt how the guests would relax here after a day's guided walk, and listen to tales of what they referred to as 'island folklore'.

She unveiled the paintings on the wall that the guides would use to illustrate the History lessons. There was a series of four across one wall, depicting the stages of The Flood and The Separation. On the next wall, another four showed the events of The First Running Down, Leaving, Exile and Return. Above the fireplace was everyone's favourite, copied onto mugs and tea towels and mouse mats. Minny pulled gently at one corner, then stood back to take it in.

One picture with two stages. 'The Daughter Before', standing defiantly on the pathway. She held her basket high above the waves, which had already risen to her knees. Opposite her stood another, thinner figure, water also to her knees, but seeming to float within it. There were dark rings under her eyes, her face was pale and her hair black and matted. Blood and bruises showed through the seaweed that wound around her. She held her

arms out towards the girl, and Minny marvelled, not for the first time, at the peaceful benevolence in the face of 'The Daughter She Became'.

The light caught the oil paint and danced on the waves. Minny moved closer and softly touched the canvas. Clammy. Her hand traced the tide and it felt as though the paint was moving around it. She quickly stopped. Could she smudge a painting this old? But there was no paint on her fingers, just condensation. The damp of an empty building. Her hand moved upwards again until carefully, so very carefully, it was touching the hand of The Daughter, whose eyes stared intently at the girl she had once been. They turned towards Minny.

'Not long now,' a voice said.

*

That evening, sitting in her window seat, Minny told herself it had been her own voice. She'd been too long alone, but tomorrow would be the sixth day and the ship would come. As long as it could make it in the weather. She had arrived home only minutes before the downpour had begun. She watched the rain fight its way through a wind that flapped wings around the house. As a child, she'd been convinced that the rain would break through the ceiling and drench her in her sleep; that the wind would shatter the glass and whirl her away. Once she'd learnt what to trust and what not to, she would sit on the windowsill, cheek wet from the pane, as close to the storm as she could be without touching it. She would fall asleep this way, until the morning her father found her sore and crying on the floor, and built her the window seat. If she opened the window tonight, would the wind and rain finally take her with them? Would that be so bad?

In the morning, she wished that she had not sat in safety while chaos reigned outside. Dark skies blew the fence windmill, but it was the whiteness that filled her with dread. It had risen from the sea and was moving slowly, inexorably towards the island.

Even mainlanders told tales of sea mists, of seeing them crawl down their streets, a collection of tentacles rising as though from oceanic depths, wanting to stay as low to the ground as possible for a stealthy return. Yet, mainland mist was not the same as island mist; it did not have the same power. On the island, the mist's arrival was sudden, and streets meant nothing to it, it could not be contained by such flimsy newcomers. It rose, spread, blanketed and suffocated.

Mিনny watched its rapid approach from the window, her world disappearing beneath. She would be safe inside, but what of the ship? She ran downstairs and made the call. The mist was on the line, distorting the voices. She went back upstairs to watch the takeover.

The ship would not, could not come today. She had watched a sea mist from the other side, and knew what would face any approaching vessel. The mist always rose from the bay beneath the North Tower. It looked like the crest of a wave, but it grew and grew and refused to crash. Spreading smoothly upwards and across, within moments it would rise to cover the tower itself. In thirty minutes, the harbour and bathing pools would no longer be visible, and within an hour, it would seem as though there was no island, just a low bank of cloud on the horizon. Then, even the edges of those clouds would fade, and there would be nothing to distinguish between island, clouds and sky. The crew would have no choice but to drop anchor and wait for the mist to pass. Minny turned away from the window. There was nothing left to see.

In the early hours, she saw a figure at the end of her bed. It put out a moist hand and soothed her back to sleep.

*

When the mist lifted, the island felt changed. The sun hugged the horizon. Rise or set? Rise and fall. Was it the beginning or the end?

The phone voices were clearer than they'd ever been, but she still could not make them hear her. She listened to the chatter.

'It takes time.'

'The air changes.'

And then, her mother's voice. 'Not long now.'

Minnie called out to her.

The voices stopped. The line went dead.

Even if the ship had left the mainland the day after it arrived, then had to wait out the mist for a day, it had to come today. She cleared away the breakfast things, repacked her bag, draped the sheets back over the furniture and headed for the hill over the harbour. It might not arrive until the evening, but she wanted to see it as soon as she could.

She waited all morning. There was ice in the wind. Whenever it stopped, the sun hit her, but then both the wind and the ice would start again. They didn't know she would be leaving today. She put her hood up and stared out at the sea. Dark feathers were spreading beneath it, the black rocks that would show themselves more clearly on this side of the island as the season progressed. It occurred to her that a ship might not be able to dock on this side now. The Company would know what to expect, of course, and direct the ship to the Western Harbour. It might even already be there. She gathered herself up and ran.

She arrived out of breath and wet with sweat to another empty horizon. She sat on the stone harbour wall and shivered as the wind blew around her. Only the smaller fishing boats moored here in the light months and now the water was free of even them. Rusted chains dangled down the sides and into the water. Guides told stories of their gruesome origin to the mainlanders who believed every word, forgetting it was they who had forged the real chains. Manacles had snapped around tiny wrists, been locked with keys kept preciously hidden, then all – chain, manacles, wrists, all had been thrown into the water. They had no need of that here. The chains that bound were stronger. By sunset, there was still no sign, not even a distant speck. She walked back, via the other harbour, just in case. Nothing. Dejected, she trudged back to the cottage and to bed.

She walked that night through a tunnel of hot grass, sweetness rising from flowers to lull the insects they needed in the dark. This was a trap, and they were part of it, the birds too. They told her. A hand awoke her once more. A face looked into her eyes and smiled. It was good not to be alone, for even the briefest moment.

She listened to the voices longer than before as they slipped in and out. Some she knew. Laughter recognised, mentions of places she'd been and events she'd lived. Never her mother's voice. No-one spoke her name. She didn't try to speak to them. When the line went dead, she made her way to the Western Harbour and sat there for the rest of the day, letting the wind buffet her. There was food in her pack, but she couldn't face it. And, when light and hope had almost completely left, she returned home via the Main Harbour, though she knew that horizon would be empty.

For the rest of that week, she watched the few remaining greens turn golden, then brown. The wind, the rain, the cold seemed to know she was there for the taking, and made her journey and her vigil even harder each day. Powerless, she watched the elements take

control. The sun had gone now, and grey smothered the sky. At night, in the cottage, the clock chided her, as if she didn't know that time was passing.

In her dreams, the pink lampposts would be lit once more to drown out the ugly, grey mainland beacons. The rusted lion fountain sprang back to life and the grass grew again, bending in the wind to tease her. And she was never alone. It began as a distant silhouette, but the black figure came nearer with each dream, until it stayed by her side all through the night, and took longer and longer to fade in the morning.

*

Not everything died in the winter. The flowers were choked by the ivy. It replaced them, snaking through the stone walls. And then, when even it could no longer survive the cold, the moss was given its chance to thrive. When the final leaf had dropped, the snow came. She had never seen it before, but she knew what it meant. Each thick flake that fell sealed her fate more tightly. There would be no more foraging expeditions, but then, when was the last time she had tried? She didn't feel hungry these days. The clock had stopped ticking and there was little difference between day and night. There were no more voices. The pipes froze and the boiler stopped. She didn't mind. She slept longer, travelling the island with The Daughter. They broke into houses, spilling and breaking the things left behind, waltzed across the harbour, calling the stones to the surface, flew to the North Tower, gathering the offerings they had been left.

When she awoke, The Daughter would soothe her back to sleep. Why shouldn't she sleep? Had she not been fighting for years? A damp hand held hers and cold eyes read the question in her own, answering it with another.

'But how could I leave you now?'

The flowers were waiting to open. Some had arrived early, splashing yellow over the green. The wire of the cottage garden awaited the roses. The camellias would be ready soon and then the blossom would wade in. She was down by the harbour, staring at the view that was part of her now, as she was part of it. She understood how the waves moved. It was a dance choreographed by the wind, but now, there was a wave out of place. She stared at it. If she stared at it for long enough, it would turn.

It didn't turn; it didn't rise; it didn't fall. It wouldn't disappear. It became larger, its shape more defined. Triangular trespass. It didn't stop, and it brought two, then three more. They followed the same pattern – pretending to be one thing, then revealing themselves as another. They were a white armada. She was being invaded.

*

The ships loitered. It was good to be home. The Return was always done en masse. They must remind The Daughter that her time was over, must drive her back. But rules had to be followed and they all knew which ship must go first. It was more than simple tradition.

The crew dropped anchor and threw the mooring rope. When the gangplank was lowered, The Agent helped the woman onto the shore. Her husband, carrying a baby, followed behind. Together, the couple walked along the pier and towards the land. The husband looked only at the child, the woman looked ahead, deep into the island, searching for something.

A black figure crouched at the top of the hill. It stood up. It had seen her. She held her breath whilst the crew, The Agent and the islanders waited. The figure disappeared into the hillside. The woman breathed out. She turned to her husband and took the new child. They could start again.

REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS

Introduction

This thesis examines the short story writer's relationships with different writing spaces, how and why those relationships are created and what the subsequent impact is on both the writer and what is written. The research takes the form of a short story collection (in fact, as I shall argue in the following chapter, a sequence), different stages of which were written in different spaces, and this reflective analysis, which considers the process of its creation.

The genesis for the thesis stems from being both an English Literature graduate and English teacher alongside being a writer of short stories. As such, I have studied and taught the context surrounding the creation of texts, but this teaching and analysis has always been after the fact. An action research project carried out as part of my MA studies, in which I analysed the reactions of Year 8 students in South East London to creative writing workshops in different spaces, further piqued my interest. I wanted to both examine the context and create the text simultaneously.

While I agree that a writer's social circumstances contribute both consciously and subconsciously to her writing (Clark and Ivanic, 1997: 143), this research is concerned with the impact on the writer of the physical space in which she finds herself.¹ I was seeking to discover the influence of a space, sometimes with an expectation of what that influence might be, but without predetermining any details of the short stories in my collection.

Having made the decision to write in numerous spaces, with the expectation of different effects on my writing, I wished to create separate narratives, and therefore a short

¹ Formerly (including in some of the texts referenced in this thesis) the default pronoun used in academic research was 'he', often resulting from 'canonical forms of doing and writing research [...] advocating a White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper classed, Christian, able-bodied perspective' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011: 275). When referring to the writer in third person this research uses 'she' both to navigate away from the patriarchal default 'he', and also because this research is phenomenological, autoethnographic and, as such, from my point of view as a female writer.

story collection, rather than, for example, a novel. To continue with the same text in each space would jeopardise the continuity of a novel-length narrative, there being a risk of creating a disjointed, jarring text, oscillating between different moods and themes. It is possible this could have been avoided if I had constantly ‘written against the space’ by trying to ignore it, but that would have been in opposition to the proposal itself. Moreover, as is explained in the chapter ‘Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny’, in writing against a space, the writer must also acknowledge it.

As both a writer and a reader, I enjoy the unity of the short story form, as well as its escapism. It is able to metaphorically transport a reader to another world, into another life through a narrative that can be read in the space of a couple of hours. At the same time, the perfect short story is the one that the reader returns to time and time again and discovers more each time. As a writer, I enjoy the challenge of creating such narratives through the short story form and the first chapter of this thesis is an examination of this form.

The chapter begins with an explanation that there is not one overarching definition of the short story; no definitive set of elements or characteristics on which all writers and critics agree. I therefore discuss what the key elements of the short story form are to me, drawing on the suggestions of different critics, with reference to both the stories in my collection and short stories by other writers. Those key elements are:

- ambiguity (of setting, character and meaning)
- flashback/memory/stream of consciousness
- unexpressed thoughts and feelings
- concrete details/imagery
- readable in under two hours
- depth/layers of meaning

- unity.

I give examples of these characteristics in the work of a wide range of writers whom I admire, from Donald Barthelme to Shirley Jackson, and also highlight where these features can be found in my own work. As is explored in the chapter, not all of these may be present in one short story, but each of these elements is contained in my collection and they each contribute to the feeling of unity or completeness of each story in which they are found.

In this opening chapter, I explain the reasons for the ordering of the stories in the thesis. There is a discussion, informed by the work of Rolf Lundén, J. Gerald Kennedy, Robert Luscher and James Nagel, of different critical models of story collections, in which the key features of the short story sequence are explained, as well as why my collection is best defined as a short story sequence. Knowing that the writing of the stories would overlap in certain spaces, either as spaces were reused or through distractions (even if minimised through free writing), I was actively interested from the outset in observing and reflecting on what connections among the stories this would lead to, and how I could make the most effective use of them in ordering the stories into a sequence (as discussed in the following chapter). Each narrative in the collection is an independent text; the understanding of one does not require the reading of another. They are all, however, linked by the importance of, difficulty of and/or understanding of space. Just as spaces of writing and their effects are the focus of my reflective analysis, so too, in the stories, each protagonist is attempting to negotiate his or her position within a particular space. In my collection, the stories are linked as a tapestry, so that the connection between the first and the fourth, for example, may not be immediately apparent. However, as is explained, each story is linked to at least one of its neighbours. This may be thematically, through the writing spaces in which they were written, or through the use of certain tropes.

In the final part of the initial chapter, I position my collection in relation to sequences by two other contemporary short story writers, *Pond*, by Claire-Louise Bennett and *Fen* by Daisy Johnson. I do so not only with reference to some of those key short story characteristics mentioned above, but also through identifying other features and themes, such as isolation and the uncanny.

In the next chapter, 'Methodology', I define the key terms used in this research, notably 'writing space', 'contained space' and 'geographical space'. Drawing on recent work in humanistic geography by Lewis Holloway, Phil Hubbard and Päivi Kymäläinen, alongside the writing of Georges Perec, I consider the relationship between 'space' and 'place', and discuss why it is spaces, rather than places, with which I am concerned in this research. The chapter also sets out and discusses the terminology used throughout this thesis to refer to the different stages of the writing process, and explores why affect theory is a useful lens through which to consider the writer's relationship with different spaces.

In this second chapter I discuss how I employed free writing in my research. As I was open to the effects of each space, there were occasions on which a writing space interested me or triggered thoughts or memories to the extent that I wanted to deviate from the story I had been writing, or had intended to write in that session. The free writing with which I began sessions was a way to pre-empt such an effect of a space. It was a way to purge myself of these thoughts or memories and that would then allow me to continue with the original narrative as intended. This was sometimes the case, but on other occasions I became so engaged with the narrative emerging from the free writing as a result of the space that I continued with the new narrative for the whole of that session. Either of these outcomes was beneficial to writing the collection as a whole.

The space's effect of triggering thoughts, emotions or memory could also present itself in the middle of a session, after the free writing when I had returned to first writing or editing. On such occasions, I either made notes on those thoughts, emotions and memories that were distracting me at the back of my notebook, before returning to the story on which I had been originally working on that day, or carried on with the new narrative that had been encouraged as an effect of the space. Again, in the writing of a collection, either of these outcomes is valid. Also, the fact that in my creative practice I typically write more than one story at a time, meant I was comfortable switching from the writing of one narrative to another.

In the chapter 'Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny', I expand on the ideas of space, place and home (drawing particularly on the work of Gaston Bachelard) and how I expected my writing to be affected by feelings of belonging to and familiarity with places. I also discuss how the effects of these were manifested in my stories, as well as why they were brought to the forefront in certain spaces. I discuss the importance of building a relationship with each space and how that played out in my research. I explain that while it was often the case that a familiar space had less of an impact on my writing than an unfamiliar space, my writing was also affected by the degree to which I felt I belonged in a space. I then discuss those spaces which felt in-between and also those spaces in which I felt a sense of in-between-ness. I use these terms in-between and in-between-ness to describe spaces that felt both familiar and unfamiliar at once and in which I felt I both belonged and did not, and I analyse why these spaces generated these in-between feelings.

In the final section of the chapter, I explore how and why this sense of in-between-ness led to the presence of the uncanny in my stories. I refer to different definitions and understandings of the uncanny by Sigmund Freud, Nicholas Royle and Ra Page, and consider the ways that uncanny tropes play out both in my own stories and in the work of other

contemporary short story writers, notably Daisy Johnson in her collection *Fen*. I explain that the existence of these tropes in my work is a result of the fluctuating relationships I experienced with writing spaces during the course of my research.

Each protagonist in every story in my collection is in some way isolated or desires solitude. In the chapter, 'Isolation and Routine', I explore how these themes are presented in the stories and the prevalence of these themes across the collection. I consider how and why the writing spaces led to isolation and solitude within the collection, as well as my own feelings of and about isolation and solitude. I then reflect on how and why ideas of routine are also presented in my collection.

Before my conclusion, drawing together the findings of this research, I discuss memory, with reference to the work of Gaston Bachelard and Annette Kuhn's theories of 'memory work'. As previously mentioned, memory, flashback and stream of consciousness are key characteristics of the short story form for me, both as a writer and a reader. However, in this chapter I investigate the link between the recurrence of memory across my collection and the writing spaces in which it was written. I also draw connections between writing space, the idea of home and memory; how these interact with each other and how this is then presented in the text.

Throughout this reflective analysis there are two critical areas in particular to which I refer and which have informed this analysis. The first of these is affect theory. As Karen Simecek writes in the 2017 edition of *The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*:

'affect' is felt stuff, which ranges from an intentional state (a feeling towards, about, or in relation to something other) to something that forms the background of felt experience, which shapes our subjective experience and engagement with the world. (Simecek, 2017: 419)

Affect theory explores how and why we are affected and influenced by this ‘felt experience’, both consciously and unconsciously. It ‘conceptualises the non-linguistic, pre-cognitive aspects of experience’ and, in doing so, ‘highlights all those areas of experience that seem to fall outside language’ (Hewitt, 2019: 111). It can therefore be used to both illustrate and analyse the writer’s relationship with and reaction to spaces, particularly when these relationships and reactions are strong or unforeseen. This thesis refers to affect theory when examining the themes of isolation, belonging and memory in the collection, as well as the importance of those concepts in this thesis. In its exploration of how emotions ‘speak for themselves’ when ‘the conscious mind does not interfere’, affect theory highlights ‘how often we start acting on emotions before we recognize what they are’ (Figlerowicz, 2012: 3). In my research, this ‘acting’ was the writing, in its various stages and spaces.

In addition to affect theory this thesis also, in its centring on space, refers to theories of space and place. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard explores the connections between space, memory and imagination, and I draw on Bachelard’s work throughout the thesis to support my investigation of these connections. Key to this thesis is the belief that in its effect on memory, emotion and imagination, space cannot but affect the writing that takes place within it; and that there is a symbiotic relationship between space and memory that has an impact on how a writer reacts to and writes in a space.

Drawing on recent work in humanistic geography, this thesis argues that space becomes place only when we have a connection to it. It shows also, that when using a space as a writing space, the writer automatically attempts to build a relationship with the space. This relationship is dependent on underlying factors such as her familiarity with or sense of belonging in that space. As these feelings are not constant, the writer’s relationship with each space is in flux; the writing is either an attempt to make the space more familiar and for the writer to belong, or a reflection of the difficulties in doing so. It is a combination of the

process of building the relationship, the fluctuating relationship itself and the elements that contribute to these that form the basis of the space's effect on the writer and her writing. It is this relationship that this thesis explores.

Short Stories

What is a Short Story?

Suzanne C. Ferguson's article, 'Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form', acknowledges the difficulty in finding one universally agreed definition of the short story form:

Short stories are defined in terms of unity (Poe, Brander Matthews, and others), techniques of plot compression (A.L. Bader, Norman Friedman, L.A.G. Strong), change or revelation of character (Theodore Stroud), subject (Frank O'Connor), tone (Gordimer), 'lyricism' (Moravia), but there is no single characteristic or cluster of characteristics that the critics agree absolutely distinguishes the short story from other fictions. (Ferguson, 1982: 13)

As there is no overarching definition of the short story form, this chapter must first explain what the key 'cluster of characteristics' of the short story is for me and how these characteristics are demonstrated in my stories. It will then explore stories by other writers I admire, that contain some of these features. Finally, it will discuss why and how the stories have been organised as they have within my collection and reflect on other collections.

In 'The Short Story's Way of Meaning: Alice Munro's "Passion"' Charles E. May argues that short stories share the features of Hebraic texts discussed by Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis*. Whereas novels reflect Homeric texts, in that all (or the majority of) elements of their narratives are made clear to the reader and the world around them explained, short stories reflect Hebraic texts as the reader is left to assume information about the story world (May, 2012: 173). Like Hebraic texts, in short stories there is:

the externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else left in obscurity; the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed (Auerbach, 1946: 11).

These are recurring features of the stories in my collection. For example, the work carried out by the companies in ‘Instacising’ and ‘Office Space’ is never stipulated, but is ‘left in obscurity’. The workplaces are necessary to the narratives of those stories in order to create the isolation, tedium and the relationships between characters; however, the details of the businesses are not, and remain ambiguous. Similarly, it is never specified exactly where and when ‘The Daughter’ is set. The reader might assume that it is in an imagined future or alternative reality, but whatever the assumption made by the reader, the key elements of the story remain unaltered. Minny is cut off from the rest of the world and the explicit details of where or when this world is do not affect her relationship with the island, nor the legend, nor any other crucial element of the narrative. In the chapter ‘Belonging, Familiarity and the Uncanny’ I discuss how this element of ambiguity in my stories was also one of the key effects of my shifting relationship with writing spaces, especially in terms of my fluctuating sense of their familiarity or unfamiliarity and my own feelings of belonging or not-belonging.

The extraneous details are omitted not only because of their unimportance to the narrative, but also so that ‘the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized’. The lack of information about the ‘Instacising’ and ‘Office Space’ companies helps centre the reader’s attention on the narratives. This ambiguity of place also enhances the narratives by reflecting both protagonists’ attitudes to work: Steph’s disdain for all aspects of the business and Amanda’s lack of interest in anything beyond her tasks and working environment. In ‘The Daughter’, not knowing about (or knowing very little about) the world beyond the island both increases the importance of the island and emphasises Minny’s isolation, as it is

as though the island exists in a void. Thus, in each of these three stories, ‘time and place are undefined and call for interpretation’, and this lack of definition enhances the narrative. A more extreme example of this is found in ‘Seasalter’, in which neither the reader nor the protagonist discover when or where the narrative takes place, there is only a description of the protagonist’s immediate vicinity. However, this ‘call for interpretation’ is not a call for one specific interpretation. As with ‘The Daughter’, different readers will interpret the setting of ‘Seasalter’ differently: perhaps an afterlife, a dream world or a parallel world, each of which is a valid interpretation. This story, in its ambiguity of place, exemplifies the link between Hebraic texts and the short story form, in that it encourages the reader to both make automatic assumptions about the story world and then to be curious about what that world is.

As in Hebraic texts, there are stories in my collection in which ‘thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed’. For example, in ‘First Snow’, it is not stated that Amal is isolated, or homesick or misses her sister, but this is shown through her memories and her close and solitary observation of the two boys building the snowman. Also, in ‘Time Out’, while there is no argument between Joanne and Josie, the infrequency of and lack of intimacy in their meetings suggests that there is no longer a strong bond between the two friends, but that they meet out of habit. This is mirrored by the pointless habit of allowing the stopwatch to continue. The unexpressed thoughts and feelings in both these narratives help to qualify them as short stories. The notion of unexpressed thoughts and feelings echoes that of the undescribed world around the short story narrative, that the reader nevertheless knows and accepts is there.

Thus, the omittance of details, such as thoughts, time and place that are not of direct relevance to a short story, is both symptomatic of the short story form and also help to enhance it, as it concentrates the reader’s attention on what is truly important and adds to the

completeness, or unity, of the narrative. According to Edgar Allan Poe in his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, this unity is linked also to the short story's length:

We allude to the short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal. The ordinary novel is objectionable [...] it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from totality. Worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal, modify, annul, or counteract, in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book. (Poe, 1842: 369)

Poe reveals here that the short story, despite its name, need not be particularly short. The length of the short stories in my collection range from less than one thousand words ('Seasalter') to nearer ten thousand ('Instacising') and just over that ('The Daughter'). Despite this difference in word count, each meets Poe's criteria for short story length, being readable in less than 'one or two hours'. As such, the reader is able to read them without interruption and to be immersed in the story world, without their attention being diverted back to reality, thus enhancing the impression of unity. There is the opportunity for the details of the outside world to become extraneous and for the reader to fully engage with the narrative. Length cannot be ignored and is one of the features which separates the short story from the novel or novella, but it is unity which is the essence of the short story form. In the longer stories in my collection, section breaks are used to make the stories episodic, in a similar way to the episodes used by Chekhov in stories such as 'Ward No. 6' and 'Betrothed'. Employing the technique of episodes maintains the unity of the narrative, but there are other characteristics of the short story through which this unity is also maintained, which I will now explore.

The unity and impact of the short story also stems from it being, as described by György Lukács in *Soul and Form*, 'a human life expressed through the infinitely sensual

force of a fateful hour' (Lukács, 1910: 92). This 'fateful hour' could be interpreted as Poe's 'one sitting', but it refers to much more than word count. In the case of 'Seasalter', it is 'a fateful hour' which leaves all aspects of the protagonist's life and situation, beyond the immediate, 'in obscurity'. The narrative is only concerned with what is happening to her at that point. Other short stories demonstrate the same feature in different ways, but each time, they present 'the totality of life [...] formally, by giving form to an episode in the hero's life in such a strongly sensual way that it renders all other parts of his life superfluous' (Lukács, 1910: 92). This presentation could be a short episode from a life, such as Amal's morning in 'First Snow', or the protagonist's journey in 'Wednesday', through which more is revealed than unfolds in real time in the narrative. These stories, as well as 'The Daughter' and 'Instacising', demonstrate the short story's use of fantasy, flashback and stream of consciousness to increase the time explored in the narrative, without increasing the real time length of the narrative (Ferguson, 1982: 20).

Lukács' 'fateful hour' is echoed by May, who suggests that the short story form 'requires only the moment, an instantaneous single experience that in its immediacy challenges the social and conceptual framework which has slowly been developed in the process of a life history' (May, 2012: 180). It also mirrors Flannery O'Connor's statement that, 'Being short does not mean being slight. A short story should be long in depth and should give us an experience of meaning' (O'Connor, 1972: 94).² This effect is achieved in 'First Snow', through the flashbacks that increase the time span covered, as well as revealing Amal's relationship with her older sister and her friends, and hinting at her isolation, homesickness and loss. The flashbacks add perspective and distil the significance of Amal's

² Both 'The Nature and Aim of Fiction' and 'Writing Short Stories' by Flannery O'Connor are taken from the collection of her work, *Mystery and Manners* (full details of which are in the bibliography). These chapters are composites with no exact date given for their writing. I therefore use 1972 as a reference as this was the date of the book's first publication, despite this being after the author's death.

‘present day’ situation and narrative. Amal’s world becomes vivid, has greater depth and the impact of her experience on the reader is increased. The real-time narrative is uneventful. Amal is an observer whose only interaction with anyone else is to smile at the children in whose snowball fight cross-fire she is accidentally caught. What she observes triggers memories, and it is through these that the reader learns about her character.

The technique of stream of consciousness, incorporating flashbacks, is also used in ‘Wednesday’ to reveal details and hint at the protagonist’s old friendships and loss. This adds depth to the otherwise ordinary journey she is making and her destination, elevating the significance of the final, simple action of the protagonist’s friend walking into the café. The technique of stream of consciousness is of particular importance to me as a writer. The use of this technique in this collection is in large part the result of the effects of the spaces in which it was written, as will be explained later in this thesis. Yet, even prior to beginning this research, stream of consciousness had always been of particular interest to me as a writer. Although I enjoy writing dialogue, such as that of Joanne and Josie in ‘Time Out’ and the office conversations in ‘Office Space’ and ‘Instacising’, I am much more interested in writing about the thoughts and feelings of a character through interior monologue than action or dialogue. This is because of my interest in stories which do the same, as will be discussed shortly. Stream of consciousness, in its refusal to run in a straight line and its turning at the slightest incident, reflects the distractions of real life and is, to me, one of the most effective ways of tethering a story, if not to an actual reality, nonetheless to a truth that makes characters and narratives believable.

Truman Capote described short story writing as ‘the most difficult and disciplining form of prose writing extant’ as ‘a story can be wrecked by a faulty rhythm in a sentence – especially if it occurs toward the end – or a mistake in paragraphing, even punctuation’ (Capote, 1957: 20-21). Echoing this, in *Writing Short Stories* Ailsa Cox writes that the

‘tightly concentrated’ nature of the short story means that ‘every word counts – and more than that, belongs – precisely in its place’ (Cox, 2016: 61-79). Even the simplest short story is concentrated, so every sentence, every word in the narrative carries with it great importance. As O’Connor states, a ‘story is a way to say something that can’t be said any other way, and it takes every word of the story to say what the meaning is’ (O’Connor, 1972: 96). Thus, in the same way that there are no extraneous details in the short stories in my collection, there is also no extraneous language; there are no words or phrases that have not been redrafted, carefully considered and that do not add to the meaning or journey of the narrative. For example, in ‘The Daughter’, when Minny is crawling through the clammy tunnel into the North Tower, I use the description ‘The air was wet salt’. This creates the unpleasant sense that the air is both suffocating and stinging Minny, as well as being a reminder of typical sea air, which can be both refreshing and comforting. This line is therefore both pleasant and familiar and unpleasant and unfamiliar, a combination that gives depth to this description and scene, in the form of uncanniness. The uncanny features in a number of the stories in my collection and is explored in greater detail later in the chapter ‘Belonging, Familiarity and the Uncanny’.

Carefully chosen language extends to lyrical or poetic language which not only features in this collection, but is, for me, one of the key features of the short story form. Also in ‘The Daughter’, examples of this are ‘The lonely gap was closed’, ‘the weather was unkind’ and ‘The scent of flowers in stone wall cracks still lingered on the breeze’. In this story, this descriptive language, as well as painting each scene, is used to build a setting in which each element of the island – the water, nature and even the weather – adds to the narrative. It mirrors the islanders’ paganistic roots and emphasises the power of the island and the vulnerability of Minny.

In ‘Instacising’, the imagery used to describe Leigh’s posts is also deliberate: ‘The sun glowed a halo’, ‘lightening the bushes below to a brooding green’, as is that of the air vents in the toilets: ‘they needed the dragons’ warmth, but were scared to be seen’. This again, is both to create a more vivid setting, but also to hint at an otherworldliness or fantastic element to the posts and the toilets, to contrast with the drab world of the office, without stepping into the overtly fantastic. The imagery in both these areas of the story also helps to link the two, allowing the toilets, as the place in which Steph first looks at one of Leigh’s posts, to seem more unreal by association, as well as allowing their uncanniness to impinge upon Leigh’s posts.

Because each word of the short story counts, so too does every element. Again, this mirrors the Hebraic texts mentioned at the start of this chapter. Elements such as setting, character and events must serve more than one purpose or have more than one meaning. O’Connor writes of this:

The peculiar problem of the short-story writer is how to make the action he describes reveal as much of the mystery of existence as possible [...] He has to do it by showing, not by saying, and by showing the concrete – so that his problem is really how to make the concrete work double time for him. (O’Connor, 1972: 98)

I will later describe how O’Connor and other writers do this, but first I will refer to how I have demonstrated the creation of multiple meanings in my own work.

Each reference to the mobile phone in ‘Time Out’, other than the final description, is very brief. Yet it is repeatedly referred to, suggesting it has significance. As mentioned earlier, the pointless habit of keeping the stopwatch (on the mobile phone) going mirrors the pointless habit of the friends meeting up; it is also a reminder of the protagonists’ lives ticking away, something to which they refer, and the relentlessness of both that and the lives

in which they seem to be neither completely in control nor satisfied. The fact that it is Joanne's phone, rather than Nick's, that is used to entertain their daughter, highlights Nick's secrecy and hints that he is having an affair. At the end of the story, it is broken and smeared with something that may be food or drink, reflecting Joanne's more chaotic life since she has had her child, or could equally be blood and be representative of Joanne having finally been pushed too far by Nick's behaviour. So, though the use of the mobile phone's stopwatch may be a pointless habit for the protagonists, it is a concrete detail through which much more is revealed to the reader. Also in that story, the 'sharp implement' mentioned in passing as the possible murder weapon foreshadows the 'secateurs' covered in 'red and brown splotches' that hint that Nick may also have met a grisly end. If this concrete detail goes unnoticed on first reading, it is not because it hasn't achieved the desired effect, it is because it has contributed to the realism of the garden party scene. It exists to allow the reader to drill down into a different meaning on rereading of the story.

Another concrete detail used to add depth, this time in 'Instacising', is that of the lump. It begins as seemingly insignificant, but its importance increases throughout the narrative. Not only does it grow, so that the reader is concerned for the character, but also it becomes more and more uncanny (an area explored later in the chapter, 'Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny') – tingling, itching and throbbing when Steph is in a stressful or uncomfortable situation. The lump represents her anxiety, but also reflects how her work-life balance becomes skewed. Despite herself, she becomes more interested in her office life than in the dreams that she once had, and allows the office to dominate her life, just as she ignores, accepts and then enjoys the lump, despite its uncanniness and malevolence. Without the lump, the narrative would work well as the story of someone who gets stuck in a rut; however, the inclusion of the lump lends the events in Steph's workplace (the disappearing staff) a layer of uncanniness. Therefore, this small, concrete detail has a wide-reaching effect.

One final and popular trope of the short story form that this chapter will discuss is that of the single epiphany, climax or twist. Not to be confused with the single episode, this is the ‘privileged moment, which takes the place of the traditional “turning point,” the climax of the plot’ (Ferguson 1982: 20) or the ‘single bizarre occurrence of epiphany of terror’ (Eagleton, 1995: 196). The twist is not unique to the short story, occurring also at the end of many novels, from Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* to Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Akroyd*. Of course, it is not necessary for every short story to have a twist and not all of the stories in my collection have one, but a number of them do, and take slightly different forms. For example, in ‘First Snow’, the twist is the revelation that Amal’s sister and her friends are victims of a landmine; in ‘The Daughter’, it is both that Minny becomes ‘The Daughter of the Island’ and that her family have deliberately sacrificed her to that fate; in ‘Instacising’ that the lump comes to life and Steph assimilates into the Instagram world; and in ‘Office Space’ Amanda is entrapped in an office too isolated even for her. However, though there is a revelation of sorts in ‘Time Out’, when Joanne continues to check on the stopwatch despite it no longer working (as well as the gentle hint that Nick may have been killed), this story is about the journey, rather than reaching any particular realisation. This is true also of ‘Wednesday’, in which details about the protagonist’s life are revealed, but there is not one particular climax or revelation, other than the awareness that the friend is about to walk in. This alone is the epiphany of this story, as it is not necessary for such a moment (within the moment of the story) to be devastating, just for there to be some sense of realisation, or that an ending has been achieved. Moreover, ‘Seasalter’ deliberately has no epiphany at all, but is left as a complete moment, a characteristic also employed by other writers, which I will touch on shortly.

Thus, each of the short stories in my collection, through including the elements previously discussed, is a short story. The fact that they do not each contain all of those

elements exemplifies the lack of critical consensus about the nature, length and structure of the short story form: not only does each short story writer have their own ‘cluster of characteristics’, but also, not all stories by the same writer will contain all characteristics in this cluster. Yet, in summary, the short story features most important to me and to this collection are: ambiguity; flashback, memory and stream of consciousness; unexpressed thoughts and feelings; concrete details; being readable in under two hours; having depth or layers of meaning; and unity. Their importance to me as a reader and a writer of short stories, as discussed in this section is demonstrated by their recurrence throughout my collection and also in the stories by other writers I will now discuss. It is, however, the final point, unity, which sums up the short story. It is this which is enhanced by the other important characteristics.

Stories by Other Writers

As a reader, the beauty of short stories to me is that they encourage, if not demand that you sit down and switch off to everything else in the world for an hour or two at the most, and concentrate on that narrative. Complete in that ‘one sitting’, the best short stories will stay with us. We do not need to know what happens next, but we do return to them to reread and to ponder their meaning further. Such meaning need not extend from a climactic event. The ‘fateful hour’ may be revealing, but it can be calm on the surface, rather than eventful. This is the case in a number of Chekhov’s stories, such as ‘The Student’. There is little in this story in the form of plot, no shocking or dramatic event, just a gentle revelation as the student recounts a Bible story and witnesses its effects. Yet that revelation remains one that can be returned to, and drilled down into again and again. It is an example of the short story as ‘a complete, dramatic action’ in which ‘meaning derives from the whole presented experience’

and ‘a dramatic event that involves a person because he is a person’ who ‘shares in the general human condition and in some specific human situation’ and ‘involves, in a dramatic way, the mystery of personality’ (O’Connor, 1972: 90). The student believes he has learnt something of the nature of human existence, that life is ‘delightful, miraculous, and full of high significance’ (Chekhov, 1894: 110). The reader may agree, but also has the nature of the student revealed to them, who is equally enchanting and marvellous in his renewed joy and enthusiasm.

Earlier, I mentioned the importance of the stream of consciousness and interior monologue to me as both a writer and reader. There are many examples I could cite, but I wish to concentrate on just two: ‘Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street’ by Virginia Woolf and ‘Eveline’ by James Joyce. In the first, the reader follows Clarissa’s geographical journey, ‘we walk the streets of Westminster’ (Woolf, 1923: 2), and simultaneously the journeys upon which her mind wanders off, ‘Victoria’s white mound, Victoria’s billowing motherliness, amplitude and homeliness’ (Woolf, 1923: 4). Woolf’s work was the first through which I encountered the technique of stream of consciousness. Clarissa’s journey to buy some gloves is insignificant in itself; it is the explosion at the end which is, on the surface, the climax. However, their importance to the narrative is the other way around, and this is a result of the stream of consciousness. The explosion’s importance to this story (not to be confused with that in the novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, it later became) lies only in Clarissa’s minimal reaction to it, because the narrative is about her. The journey is important as it allows the reader to follow not only Clarissa’s footsteps, but also her thoughts, and in doing so we find the truth about her. The unpeeling of the layers of her character through thought and memory is the achievement of this story. What happens outside of her head is only important in how it is used to reveal more about her. The explosion coincides with, and perhaps acts as a catalyst

for, her sudden recognition of the other shop customer as Miss Anstruther, which is of greater significance to Clarissa than anything happening outside of the shop (Woolf, 1923: 11).

In 'Eveline', the fourth story of James Joyce's *Dubliners*, we again learn about the protagonist through the techniques of interior monologue and stream of consciousness through which flashback and memory are used. The employment of these techniques begins in the second paragraph when Eveline thinks back to 'the field there in which they used to play every evening with other people's children', until hunted out by her father 'with his blackthorn stick' (Joyce, 1914: 29-30). In this way, the reader is introduced to Eveline's unhappy life of drudgery, violence and isolation. On first reading of the story, the reader may wish for her to get on the ship with Frank, and the fact that the narrative has seemingly built towards an ending with which the reader is not rewarded is frustrating. However, it is this frustration, the lack of change, the fact that Eveline's life will go on, possibly becoming more isolated and violent, that is the point. The reader is allowed to see inside her head for a moment, and, though it may appear to be a crucial moment to Eveline, what is crucial to the narrative and the reader is what that moment reveals about her. Such a revelation could only be done through stream of consciousness and interior monologue – if she had someone to discuss Frank's proposition with she would not be the isolated and tragic character that she is. Again, the point of this narrative to me is not what happens to Eveline at the end, but what that, and the stream of consciousness, reveal about her.

When I have used interior monologue and stream of consciousness in my collection, it has been to reveal details about a character slowly, in a way that cannot be done by dialogue and action, or not by those alone. It has also been to increase the isolation of the protagonists, this being a central theme of my collection. The non-linear nature of stream of consciousness speaks to me as both reader and a writer, as someone whose mind does not work in straight lines, but is instead prone to tangents. My enjoyment of this technique also underlines the

reason for my choosing to write a collection of short stories. I am used to multi-tasking on a large scale (studying my first MA and PGCE simultaneously, teaching and studying different subjects at the same time), so I am comfortable carrying different strands in my head simultaneously. Writing a short story collection allowed me to embrace, rather than reject, new thought journeys and streams of consciousness on which my mind wandered off. They were not only valid but usable, as I will expand on in my 'Methodology' chapter.

Another story containing some of the characteristics mentioned earlier is 'The Lottery' by Shirley Jackson. For example, it is readable in one sitting and the characters have unexpressed thoughts and feelings which are even more vivid to the reader once they realise the true nature of the lottery. Each of these adds to its depth, layers of meaning and overall unity, but the concrete details and ambiguity of setting are of particular interest. The reader makes a number of assumptions regarding the wider setting of this story, assumptions which Jackson leads them to. This world is mundane and recognisable from Tessie Hutchinson's comment, 'Wouldn't have me leave m' dishes in the sink now' and the children talking about school (Jackson, 1948: 228). The concrete details and everyday reality of that world is what creates the horror and shock. When first published in *The New Yorker* it was so hated by some due to its disturbing nature that they were prompted to write to Jackson detailing their dislike of it. For example, 'I read it while soaking in the tub and was tempted to put my head under water and end it all' (Jackson, 1960: 221). The unsettling concrete details of 'The Lottery' are also what make it now one of the most revered, discussed and widely taught short stories.

The reader is told the story is set in a village and that the children have not long finished school. Jackson hints, through the characters' accents and actions, that this rural community is in the southern states of the USA, probably in the twentieth or late nineteenth century. It is only the shock of the stoning that disabuses the reader of this notion. They

realise this cannot be the place in which they assumed the story was set. The reader makes the assumptions about setting unconsciously; it is only afterwards that they realise these assumptions are wrong. Their perception of place altered, the reader pauses, rereads and interrogates the story. The reader asks not ‘What happened next?’ but ‘What has just happened and why?’ Intensity is also created by the lack of detail about the outside world: we know only that this is not the only village where the lottery takes place, and has done for generations. This is why this story is so vivid, and why, in both ‘Office Space’ and ‘The Daughter’, I wanted to create settings with enough concrete details that they would be recognisable to the reader, but then include a detail or a twist which would alter the reader’s perception of that place – changing it from the readily recognisable to the almost recognisable, by making it slightly off-kilter. This sense of the off-kilter is linked to the presence of the uncanny in several of my stories, which I explore in the later chapter ‘Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny’.

Although I have used ‘The Lottery’ as an example of the omission of details of time and place, it is also, of course, an example of a story with a twist. Amongst the other stories which are both favourites of mine and have ‘a twist in the tale’ are Roald Dahl’s ‘The Landlady’ with its macabre taxidermy and Peyton Farquhar’s life flashing before his eyes in ‘An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge’ by Ambrose Bierce. However, I will concentrate on ‘The Balloon’ by Donald Barthelme. The twist at the end of this story is formed of the revelation of the reason for the balloon’s existence and deployment, a change in narrative perspective as the speaker directly addresses the reader, and, in contrast to ‘The Lottery’, a switch from the fantastic to the mundane. The narrator’s temporary estrangement from his partner as the catalyst for deploying the balloon hints that the fantasy before has been purely metaphorical. However, as the final paragraph continues, Barthelme twists the narrative again. He does so firstly by the use of the self-conscious narrator: ‘The balloon, I said, is a

spontaneous autobiographical disclosure' (Barthelme, 1966: 48). Then, just when the reader has accepted the balloon as a metaphor, he changes it back into a tangible object: 'trailer trucks carried away the depleted fabric, which is now stored in West Virginia' (Barthelme, 1966: 48). The reader is left with no choice but to reread the story to decide the reading of events they prefer – actual and fantastical or metaphorical and mundane.

In the previous stories, it is the concrete details that increase the sense of fantasy or uncanniness. As Flannery O'Connor writes, 'Even when one writes a fantasy, reality is the proper basis of it. A thing is fantastic because it is so real, so real that it is fantastic' (O'Connor, 1972: 77). Elements of fantasy within my stories form part of the later discussion on the uncanny. However, according to O'Connor, to 'make the action he describes reveal as much of the mystery of existence as possible', the writer has to both 'show the concrete' and 'make the concrete work double time' (O'Connor, 1972: 98). Discussing how she did this herself with the prosthetic leg in 'Good Country People' O'Connor explains that she let it 'accumulate meaning' throughout the story (O'Connor, 1972: 99). It is already important to the girl who relies on it, but its importance increases as this character 'believes in nothing but her own belief in nothing, and we perceive that there is a wooden part of her soul that corresponds to her wooden leg' (O'Connor, 1972: 99). As the story continues, it reveals how the owner and then other characters feel about the prosthetic, so that by the time the antagonist arrives and steals it, this is not only a heinous crime in itself, but it is as though he has 'taken away part of the girl's personality and revealed her deeper affliction to her for the first time' (O'Connor, 1972: 99). The writer summarises it thus:

If you want to say that the wooden leg is a symbol you can say that. But it is a wooden leg first and as a wooden leg it is absolutely necessary to the story. It has its place on the literal level of the story, but it operates in depth as well as on the surface.

It increases the story in every direction, and this is essentially the way a story escapes being short. (O'Connor, 1972: 99-100)

This is similar to Barthelme's titular balloon, but also to the lump, the mobile phone and the snowman in the stories in my collection.

Lastly in this subsection, there is not enough space in this thesis to discuss all of the short stories which I enjoy, or those which may have influenced my work. Yet a brief reminder that the short story need not necessarily be short will allow me to mention a few other stories in passing. Some of the most well-known and well-loved short stories would push the reader towards Poe's upper limit of two hours for a sitting, but are still within it and maintain their unity, including some of those already referred to here. For example, over half of the stories in *The Granta Book of the American Short Story: Volume One* are over seven thousand words long, such as James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues' and Grace Paley's 'In Time Which Made a Monkey of Us All'. Moreover, Washington Irving's 'Sleepy Hollow' is over twelve thousand words long and Anton Chekhov's 'In the Ravine' is closer to twenty than ten thousand words long. They are short stories not only because they are not novella or novel length, but also because they contain the features already discussed and these features increase their unity or completeness.

The Short Story Sequence

My intention through this research was to write a collection of connected short stories and I hypothesised at the outset that some of the connections would occur organically as a result of each story being a product of a single research project. There are a number of terms that can be used to denote a collection, such as 'cycle', 'sequence', 'cluster' or 'microtext'. There is also the term 'composite', used by Rolf Lundén as an umbrella term, which he separates into

the subgenres of ‘cycle’, ‘sequence’, ‘cluster’ and ‘novella’ (Lundén, 1999: 9). My collection shares certain features of the ‘short story composite’, or ‘composite novel’, as it consists of stories that are both independent and which enhance each other in much the same way as in ‘composites’, yet it is more accurately described as a ‘sequence’. This section will explain what is meant by the term ‘short story sequence’ and why my collection is a ‘short story sequence’. It will also draw comparisons between my work and that of other short story writers, particularly Daisy Johnson’s *Fen* and Claire-Louise Bennett’s *Pond*, as a means of illustrating these, explaining my creative decisions and in order to position my work in relation to other sequences.

The term ‘sequence’ suggests an order or direction to the stories and is more suited to many short story volumes than other terms also used. For example, ‘collection’ suggests no definite structure and ‘composite’ implies a link but no direction. The term ‘cycle’ does give the impression of movement, but suggests something returning to its starting point. The ‘sequence’ has key features other than movement; however, like the short story itself, ‘the story sequence resists precise definition’ (Kennedy, 1995: vii). Therefore, similar to the previous discussion of the short story form, I will provide my own definition of the term ‘sequence’, informed by the work of J. Gerald Kennedy, James Nagel and Rolf Lundén.

Kennedy’s introduction to *Modern American Short Story Sequences* discusses the apparent issue that ‘no clear distinction exists between the arranged short story sequence and the collection of assorted tales’, and that ‘a formal rubric may be said to include all collections of three or more stories written and arranged by a single author’ (Kennedy, 1995: ix). This is the initial starting point from which my definition of the short story sequence springs. The seemingly all-encompassing rubric reveals significant details. These are firstly, that a sequence requires three or more stories, as the presence of three stories, rather than two, allows the writer to create and the reader to determine patterns within the order of

stories; secondly, that these stories must be the work of one author alone, as volumes containing the work of several authors may be collections or anthologies but cannot be sequences; and thirdly, that the order of these three or more single-authored stories must be dictated by that writer herself. In addition to this, there must be links between the stories, which either dictate their order or enhance its effect. The combination of these features leads to the final feature, that of unity. This unity is a reflection of the short story form of which the story sequence is composed.

To summarise, the key features of the short story sequence are:

- Three or more stories written by a single author
- Stories connected by character, theme, setting, trope or concept, whether these connections be overt or implied
- An order determined precisely by the writer, which creates a movement or cumulative effect to the order, relating to the links
- Unity stemming from the combination of the above features.

Although connections between stories are necessary in order for a collection to be defined as a sequence, the nature of these connections varies from sequence to sequence. For example, one feature may be reiterated throughout the sequence, or one of several similar themes and tropes can be repeated in pairs or groups within it. As Kennedy explains, the connection may be:

through a developing character (as in the Bildungsroman), a composite type, or a set of characters; through a dominant, explicit theme, such as isolation or revolt; or through the delineation of a particular locale, milieu or community. (Kennedy, 1995: ix)

In the case of some sequences, such as James Joyce's *Dubliners*, the title itself 'indicate[s] an organising concept that acquires depth and resonance as the story unfolds' (Kennedy, 1995: ix). This is also true of Daisy Johnson's *Fen* and Claire-Louise Bennett's sequence *Pond*, both of which sequences share qualities with my own sequence, *No Place*, as is explained in further detail towards the end of this chapter.

As space is fundamental to my research, my expectation at the outset was that it would also be so to my collection, to the point that the collection would be unified into a short story 'composite'. I correctly predicted that as each writing space was used for the writing of more than one story, there would be connections and/or overlaps between stories that shared a space of creation, and that, in fact, it was appropriate to deliberately draw connections between them. For example, 'Wednesday' and 'Time Out' both explore friendships over time. However, one of the reasons why *No Place* is not a 'composite', but a 'sequence', is that not all of the stories are connected in the same way or by the same theme. For example, although the theme of space is important throughout the collection, the form of this space is very different within the stories. Amanda in 'Office Space' is concerned with contained and personal space, Steph in 'Instacising' is concerned with Leigh's geographical space, as well as her virtual space on social media, and, although the protagonist of 'Wednesday' is making a journey, the crucial space of that narrative is the emotional space between her and the friend whom she is journeying to meet.

The idea of an isolated female protagonist who is between worlds is one of the common elements that occur throughout my short story sequence. Others include: a third person limited narrative (in all but 'Wednesday'), interior monologue and/or stream of consciousness which often takes precedence over dialogue (which may take place only in flashbacks), and endings that are either ambiguous or have a twist. 'First Snow' contains all of these, as does 'Time Out', although that also features the most dialogue. 'Seasalter',

‘Instacising’, ‘Office Space’ and ‘The Daughter’ also share the aspects of fantasy and the uncanny which are explored later in this thesis.

In a short story sequence, each story is not isolated, but is given an exact position in order to create a particular effect and direction; an effect, direction and position determined by the writer, and chosen with as much consideration as the order of paragraphs within a story. This order stems from the writer’s creative decision as to which links should exist where and how loose or tight they should be, and governs the effect and effectiveness of those links in a reciprocal relationship. A short story sequence has a linearity, a sense of direction and a place or realisation that should be arrived at by the end of the book (Nagel, 2004: 13). Sequences are structured by the writer in order to encourage the reader to uncover ‘underlying patterns of coherence by continual modifications of his [or her] perceptions of pattern and theme’ (Luscher, 1989: 148). There is a deliberate ordering of stories to create a ‘progressive unfolding and cumulative effects’ (Kennedy, 1995: vii). These cumulative effects could include a development of character, as in the Bildungsroman, or, as is the case with my story sequence, a linking of dominant themes and tropes, the dominance of which increases throughout it.

The reason that the writer herself must determine the order of the sequence is that though each story within it may stand alone, the complete work created by the writer is the sequence, and it is, therefore, the writer who decides the particular effect through the sequencing of her work. It can be said that ‘textual unity, like beauty lies mainly in the eye of the beholding reader’ and that the reader is free and able to draw connections even between stories collected with ‘more commercial than artistic impetus’ or when details of creation ‘remain ambiguous or even inaccessible to the scholar-critic’ (Kennedy, 1995: ix). However, my research is concerned with the context of creation rather than reception, and so it follows that my definition also stems from this perspective. When writing about my own sequence,

No Place, the details of creation are certainly not ambiguous to me, and, as it forms part of this research, these details of creation are also unambiguous to readers of this thesis.

Therefore, though the reader may draw any connections they wish from this work, and read the stories in an order of their own choosing, the order in which I have chosen to position them is in order to underline links between the stories and also to create a cumulative effect. This effect is a movement towards unfamiliarity and in-between-ness; from reality to fantasy.

At the beginning of my research, while I did predict there would be connections between my stories, I did not predict their moving in a particular direction. This was a structural, creative decision I made after writing the stories. It became apparent to me that, in response to my experiences of unfamiliar spaces, the stories featured elements of the strange and the uncanny, and that therefore an effective direction in which the sequence should gradually move would be from realism to fantasy. This structure is not completely dissimilar to the chronological order in which I began writing the stories. This chronological order was as follows:

1. 'Time Out'
2. 'First Snow'
3. 'Wednesday'
4. 'Seasalter'
5. 'The Daughter'
6. 'Office Space'
7. 'Instacising'.

Had I structured the sequence chronologically, the movement in the genre and tone of the stories would still have been from realism to fantasy, and from light to dark, although this would not have been as straightforward a progression. The explanation for this can be found in the fact that in the structuring of my research, I began in the first year to eighteen months

by concentrating on contained spaces. Then, from the second year onwards, my research increasingly used geographical spaces, in addition to returning to the former contained spaces.³ The size of the unfamiliar spaces required something larger than life, i.e. fantasy, rather than realism to explain its effects. When returning to contained spaces I was already ‘in the zone of’ the new stories and less affected by those spaces, so able to continue with the fantasy.

I also considered using the chronological order in which the stories had begun to be published as a starting point for the collection’s structure, in which case the first three in the sequence would have been ‘Office Space’,⁴ ‘First Snow’⁵ and ‘Wednesday’.⁶ However, I wanted the connection between each story and its neighbours to be more significant than a publication date, which would have made the stories a collection or ‘composite’. I wanted them to have the flow of a sequence. I therefore chose the following structure:

1. ‘Time Out’
2. ‘First Snow’
3. ‘Wednesday’
4. ‘Instacising’
5. ‘Seasalter’
6. ‘Office Space’
7. ‘The Daughter’.

The first story in my sequence, ‘Time Out’. is about the breakdown of a relationship between friends and a couple, without any of the characters really attempting to prevent this

³ A list of writing spaces used can be found in Appendix A at the back of this thesis, in addition to photographs in Appendix B, showing my research notes on which stages of which stories were written in which spaces, as well as my relationships with those spaces.

⁴ https://www.fairlightbooks.co.uk/short_stories/office-space/

⁵ <https://progenitor56.wixsite.com/2021/first-snow-by-jennifer-cavanagh>

⁶ <https://www.grandedameliterary.com/post/wednesday>

from happening, and possibly without them realising. 'Wednesday' and 'Instacising', which both also deal with the breakdown of friendships, could have been second and third, but, instead, I chose 'First Snow'. This story is deliberately juxtaposed with 'Time Out' as, although they are both grounded in the 'real' world, there is a strong contrast between how the protagonists of each perceive the importance of their relationships. Unlike 'Time Out', in 'First Snow', the protagonist is very aware of her isolation, misses her relationship with her sister and attempts to connect with her through building the snowman.

I paired 'Instacising' and 'Seasalter', to encourage a connection between Leigh's photos of scenery and sunsets, those pictures that are empty of people which Steph stares at through the frame of her phone screen, and the empty world in which the protagonist of 'Seasalter' awakes. It is also a hint that the 'Seasalter' world may be the place to which Steph's colleagues have disappeared.

This leads on to 'Office Space', in which Amanda is left alone, in a similar but much less pleasant limbo. This story is paired with the finale of the sequence, 'The Daughter', because at the end of each, it is not merely hinted that the protagonists' worlds have changed, it is clear those worlds have been completely transformed. Amanda, aghast as she is at the thought of a busy office and as much as she deliberately isolates herself from her colleagues, does begin the story with a place in that world, albeit on the outskirts. The security guards recognise her and her 'neighbours' either already know her or want to get to know her. It is she who shuns them and ultimately gets the solitude she wishes for, but in the form of an enforced isolation. In 'The Daughter', Minny is torn between two worlds, but the decision whether to choose one over the other is also taken out of her hands. Her family abandon her, but the island embraces her. She is also left alone, but whether her assimilation is joyful or tragic is for the reader to decide.

The overall movement of my sequence is not towards a solution to a problem, or an understanding of an overarching narrative, but incrementally towards the fantastic; the realisation that the stories, characters and settings have moved slowly from worlds that closely mirror reality, to one which is more supernatural than natural. As mentioned previously in this section, the stories are deliberately grouped within the sequence. To create the overall movement towards the fantastic, there needed to be a specific order to the stories within it. 'Time Out' is completely grounded in reality, with interior monologue and stream of consciousness, but without reference to memory or flights of fancy, and is therefore placed at the beginning. Both 'First Snow' and 'Wednesday' also have no reference to the fantastic, but the protagonist of each story switches between the 'real world' or 'now' and memory, and as such use much interior monologue and stream of consciousness. In 'First Snow', Amal switches back and forth between the boys in front of her and the memories of her sister. In the third story, 'Wednesday', the protagonist spends even less time in the 'now', as she replays memories of friendship as she walks.

The fourth story and middle story, 'Instacising', combines reality, memory and interior monologue and introduces the element of fantasy for the first time. It also marks the first foray into the uncanny and the sequence's movement in this direction. However, while Steph's lump and the disappearing colleagues are uncanny and hint at something otherworldly, she recognises her act of '*Instacising*' as an escape from the real world, has awareness of the difference between the two worlds and makes her own choice, whereas by the time we reach 'Office Space', that choice is taken out of Amanda's hands.

The fifth story, 'Seasalter', is significantly shorter than the other stories in the sequence, and its brevity emphasises its role as a key moment or turning point in the sequence, the point at which the sequence moves definitively from realism to fantasy. The stories preceding it are more realism than fantasy and those following more fantastic and

uncanny. The unknown world in which the protagonist of 'Seasalter' awakes could be a kind of limbo or fantasy world. The reader can push the hinge or their perspective one way and read it as a piece of fantasy. However, if the reader chooses to push the hinge or their perspective the other way and read the story as realism, the protagonist could equally be in a 'real world' facility which she does not perceive as such. Both readings are valid, but the protagonist is either in one world or another, not moving between them. Whereas in 'Instacising' Steph chooses between fantasy and reality, in 'Seasalter' it is the reader who must do so. In my sequence, 'Seasalter' is the brief but key moment when, like the protagonist, the reader awakens to a new or skewed perspective.

'Seasalter' is followed by the sixth story, 'Office Space'. Here, there are two worlds: the everyday 'real world' office and the uncanny basement and Solitaire. Whereas in 'Instacising' there are moments of ambiguity between reality and fantasy (such as when Steph is looking at Leigh's Instagram posts or interacting with the lump), in 'Office Space' it is more certain that when Amanda enters the basement she is entering a world of fantasy. The basement world is uncanny to the reader, but it is the space to which Amanda is drawn (much more strongly than to the 'real world' of the office) and the space to which she belongs. The position of the story at this point in the sequence underlines the sequence's definitive shift, introduced by 'Seasalter', into fantasy and the uncanny, a shift which culminates in the final story, 'The Daughter'.

'Seasalter' (the shortest story) was written in and around a holiday home in Seasalter, Kent, where I wrote for one weekend and did not return. In contrast, the majority of 'The Daughter' (the longest story) was written in the Channel Islands. This is the geographical space in which I spent the longest time, to which I made the most extended visits and with which my relationship changed most dramatically. 'Instacising', 'Office Space' and 'The Daughter' all feature protagonists who end the story by slipping into uncanniness. In the first

two, however, there is some ambiguity and the possibility that the narrator is still in a version of the 'real world', whereas in 'The Daughter' the narrator has been absorbed into a world of fantasy. This is one reason for its position at the end of the sequence. 'The Daughter' was also the fifth story that I began writing, and the last to be finished as a first draft. As such, I had already begun to notice the prevalence and importance of memory, belonging, isolation, familiarity, interior monologue and uncanniness within my short stories, and wanted this story to contain all of those features. It does so, to a larger extent than any of the other stories and so requires a longer narrative in which to unfold, while still remaining readable in under two hours, and therefore a short story. As it contains these features and represents the culmination of the effects of space, as well as when a space becomes so important that it is transformed into a place, it had to be placed at the end of the sequence.

In 'The Daughter', the island becomes increasingly important to Minny (the protagonist), just as my writing spaces became increasingly important to me in the course of my research. As is discussed in greater detail in the chapter 'Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny', the geographical space of the Channel Islands was completely unfamiliar to me at the beginning of my research, but became so familiar by the end of my research that it was one in which I felt I belonged. Nevertheless, there was a sense of in-between-ness created by my relationship with the space, which manifested itself in uncanniness in this story. In 'The Daughter', Minny has a relationship with the island which seems sometimes positive and sometimes negative, but it is one that is always changing and significant. At the end of the story, she is so bonded to the island that she has become assimilated into it. The effect of this is uncanny to the reader, but in the world of the story, she has achieved a true sense of belonging and being at home within her space.

This thesis explores the importance of space, and how the way in which the writer interacts with her writing space reflects her reaction to and sense of homeliness in it. Minny's

acceptance of and into the space of the island is the most extreme example of a relationship with a space that shifts between familiarity and unfamiliarity, belonging and not belonging and the uncanniness generated by this in-between-ness. The story is the culmination of all of the effects of the spaces in which it was written, but also of my research as a whole. It is again right, therefore, that it should be positioned at the end of the sequence. The narrative of 'The Daughter' reflects and reinforces the sequence's movement from reality to fantasy. The world in which the protagonist begins the story, whilst off-kilter, is recognisable as a possible reality. However, by the end of the narrative, she has moved so much into the supernatural world that she has become part of it and has ceased to exist as her former 'real' self. This story itself therefore mirrors both the research and the direction of the sequence.

Positioning My Sequence

As alluded to earlier in this section, my sequence, *No Place*, shares a number of the characteristics of *Fen* by Daisy Johnson and *Pond* by Claire-Louise Bennett. If I were to position my work on 'the sequence bookshelf' it would be between these two. For example, all three sequences are influenced by place and space. Johnson's title, *Fen*, underlines the setting of the East Anglian Fens, the most apparent though not the sole connection between the stories in her sequence. As this sequence unfolds, more connections between the 'in-between' nature of this setting (neither fully land nor water) become apparent. The use of one protagonist throughout Bennett's sequence *Pond* unites the stories in it, as does the theme of solitude. The title encourages connections between the qualities of such a space and the stories in the sequence. The action in several of the stories is often minimal, yet Bennett, through her use of interior monologue and stream of consciousness, continually shows us a microcosm that is calm on the surface, but teeming in life beneath, like a pond. Johnson and

Bennett explore their protagonists' relationship with their settings and their stories reflect, highlight and interact with the particular qualities of such spaces. As I note in the chapter 'Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny' below, the title of my sequence, *No Place*, is a reference to the famous line from *The Wizard of Oz*, 'There's no place like home' (*The Wizard of Oz*, 1939). It acknowledges the importance to protagonists across my sequence of positioning themselves within and lack of belonging to a space. It also refers to the process of creating this sequence through my research which focusses on the positioning of myself in spaces to write. My relationship with my writing spaces was of a shorter term than that of Bennett and Johnson (Johnson having grown up in the East Anglian Fens and Bennett having relocated to Ireland), but each of our sequences is concerned with the relationship with and qualities of space.⁷

The opening story of *Fen*, 'Starver', seems at first to be grounded in the real, though unpleasant, world. There are the concrete details of the history of the eels in the East Anglian Fens, and then Katy (the narrator's sister) collapses and is hospitalised as the result of an apparent eating disorder. Yet, as with Barthelme's 'The Balloon', the references to the water and the eels are revealed not to be metaphorical – perhaps in some readings, but not in the world of the story – but rather, the sister has made the decision to become an eel. The reader therefore knows from the start that this sequence will deal with both harsh reality and dark, almost Gothic fantasy. The harsh reality in my sequence comes from the detonation of the landmine in 'First Snow', but, other than that, though the real world may have its unpleasantness, it does not have the grittiness of Johnson's. In this respect, it is closer to Bennett's. Her story worlds are strange, but not fantastical; they are anchored in an unusual,

⁷As is touched on in the 'Methodology' chapter and explored further in 'Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny', I already had a prior relationship with some of my writing spaces, but this was often not a 'writing relationship'. My relationship with the majority of spaces, and specifically with those spaces as writing spaces, was forged during the process of this research.

real life, but it is not a harsh one. Johnson's sequence contains a lot of supernatural elements, an otherworldliness that does recur in my sequence, but again is not in each and every story. Yet the transformation of Katy from one state to another in Johnson's 'Starver' is mirrored in Minny's transformation in my story 'The Daughter'.

Throughout Johnson's sequence, in stories such as 'The Scattering: a story in three parts' and 'A Heavy Devotion', it is for the reader to decide which world the characters belong to – whether they are experiencing the harsh realities of life or have been made a victim, or perpetrator, of dark and supernatural acts. Whether a choice between the reality of the office or the escapism of Instagram, the relative normality of the mainland compared with the pagan ideals of the island, the past or the present, the characters in my sequence also live between worlds. Sometimes they can choose one over the other, but mainly this is something thrust upon them. Though it does not have the supernatural qualities of 'Starver', opening my sequence with 'Time Out' achieves the same effect – of revealing the central idea of the sequence. 'Time Out' is a story about isolation, relationships gone wrong and characters living between worlds, and these are the themes which recur throughout my sequence.

Connections can be drawn also between the narrative perspectives of both *Fen* and *Pond* and my sequence. Though there is some switching between first and third person, the narrators of the majority (if not all; there is some ambiguity in *Fen*) of the stories in all three of the sequences are female. It is sometimes the only fact about which we can be certain in the supernatural world of the East Anglian Fens which Johnson's characters inhabit, and it is sometimes sex that is seen as a contributing factor to the strangeness of their experiences. For example, in the case of 'A Heavy Devotion', the narrator's son drains her of her language and memories:

There was an ache. Here. Across my belly. I don't remember what the first thing to go was. Only that it was a single word, a city I'd been thinking of perhaps, or my mother's maiden name. (Johnson, 2016: 105-106)

The son is only able to drain the narrator of language because of the physical connection she has with him through having given birth to him. Though he is no longer in the womb, the bond between them is not broken and he continues to feed off her. There are similarities between the narrator's experience and that of Steph in 'Instacising' and Minny in 'The Daughter'. Steph has a strange creature feeding off her in the form of the lump, as she also gradually loses herself into the office world and Instagram world. The Daughter can be also be seen as feeding off Minny in that story, until Minny eventually assimilates into both her and the island.

A fascination with what is or what might be going on beneath the surface runs throughout Claire-Louise Bennett's *Pond*, as well as the importance of solitude. The sequence begins with 'Voyage in the Dark', in which the narrator as a young girl with two other young girls talks directly to and looks enviously at a house. At the end of the sequence she has become, as in the title of the penultimate story, the 'Lady of the House'. However, the movement in this sequence is not one of a Bildungsroman, the majority of the stories being narrated from the point of view of the adult narrator. Nor is it a movement into or away from solitude. In Bennett's discussion of writing the sequence in *The Irish Times*, she states:

In solitude you don't need to make an impression on the world, so the world has some opportunity to make an impression on you. It was the interplay between these destabilising lacunae and engrossing impressions that I wanted to somehow get on the page – and after a perturbing yet enlivening struggle it seems I might to some degree have succeeded. (Bennett, 2015)

Though she is referring to the process of writing the stories, the sequence and movement of the stories reflects this 'enlivening struggle'. While not *Pond's* final story, the reason why 'Lady of the House' is the sequence's finale is that it illustrates what the narrator has achieved. She now has control over the house she once envied and balance both between her need for solitude and companionship, and between her introspection and interest in the minutiae and engagement with the rest of the world. The story that follows it, *Pond's* last story, 'Old Ground', closes the sequence with a reminder of the protagonist's childhood and the beginning of the sequence. The use of third person distances the protagonist from the reader for the first time, to underline the fact that this is not a finale or climax but a look back as the reader walks away.

In the case of Daisy Johnson's *Fen*, in-between-ness and uncanniness run throughout the sequence. In the opening story, 'Starver', the 'real world' is painful, as in that world the narrator's sister has an eating disorder, but it is the fantastic world in which the sister is becoming an eel of which the reader is afraid. By the final story in the sequence, the protagonist of 'The Lighthouse Keeper' is living in a 'real world' full of suspicious characters who make the reader feel unsettled and fearful for her safety. When the protagonist makes the decision, similar to the sister in 'Starver', to enter the water and join the fish with which she has become fascinated, the reader has the impression that she has escaped to safety, rather than entered an uncanny world. The movement of Johnson's sequence could be described as a movement towards uncanniness, but I would argue that it is more towards a realisation of different possible perceptions of the uncanny. What may seem unsettling from one person's perspective may be comforting from that of someone else.

Isolation runs throughout my sequence but, while there is also isolation in *Fen*, there are more relationships and family bonds in Johnson's collection than in my sequence, and it feels louder in comparison. Isolation, however, is central to *Pond*. Bennett uses it to present

the strangeness of the narrator's feelings, feelings exacerbated by her self-imposed isolation. It can touch on uncanniness, but it is not an unworldly isolation; the writer and reader are aware that the strange thoughts are a result of that isolation. For example, in 'Lady of the House', the narrator wonders about the possibility of monsters. In fact, her mind keeps drifting back to the idea despite herself, but this is revealed with humour and owes much more to the idea of stream of consciousness than to the Gothic.

This leads me to the final comparison I wish to draw between these two sequences and mine, and provide a final reason why I would place mine between them on the bookshelf, and that is the use of interior monologue and stream of consciousness in all three sequences. For example, in 'Blood Rites', Johnson uses very little dialogue as the narrator tells the story of how the group have absorbed various men, and this initial lack of dialogue, even though she is part of a group, makes it more apparent from the start that this is not the real world. Direct speech would make it too realistic, whereas it is, in fact, somewhere in-between.

Bennett uses stream of consciousness to once more underline that isolation. The narrator's thoughts are prominent throughout the sequence, as for the majority of time, they are the only words she has to share. If the writer is to represent the moment to us, she can often only describe the scenery or her thoughts. This allows Bennett to add in some humour, however, through mundane thoughts such as 'My own nails are doing very well as a matter of fact' (Bennett, 2015: 17). These thoughts also reveal that the isolation might be affecting her mental health: 'have I had breakfast? Swiftly glances over the banister. Sees empty bowl' (Bennett, 2015: 53).

The interior monologue and stream of consciousness in my sequence have elements of both of these. They add to the uncanniness of 'The Daughter', 'Office Space' and 'Instacising', they add some humour into 'Time Out' and 'Office Space' and they increase

the sense of isolation in ‘Wednesday’, ‘First Snow’ and, once again, ‘Office Space’. In November 2021, I curated a conference session in which four speakers had been tasked with writing a short story exploring how characters interact with a particular city or how the city as a concept spoke to them as a writer.⁸ The stories differed widely in voice, setting, theme and protagonist: a woman in Delhi embarking on an affair, a flaneuse/jogger in Kuwait City; a man living in his car in Los Angeles and a woman protecting her family in the aftermath of the coup d’état against Salvador Allende. However, there were connections between each of the stories which had not been apparent from the abstracts from which I had selected them.

Similar to the stories in my sequence, each narrative centred around a protagonist existing between two worlds, each story dealt with isolation (experiencing it, seeking it or attempting to escape it) and each relied on interior monologue or stream of consciousness with little or no dialogue. While this short story sample is, of course, small, each writer was from a different part of the world and the only connections between the five of us were that we were writers and researchers attending this conference and that our writing was concerned with space (this being both the theme of the conference and of the session). This could suggest that short story writing focussed on space lends itself to interior monologue, stream of consciousness and reduced dialogue. It also suggests that, taking into account the examples of Johnson, Bennett and my fellow conference presenters, my writing fits with current trends in short story writing concerned with space. Each of us, as we wrote about or were influenced heavily by a space, have included stream of consciousness, reduced dialogue and isolation in our work, to convey the experience, common to many of our characters, of being in-between

⁸ AlYaqout, F. ‘Flaneur Flana’, McBurnie, P. ‘‘92 Cadillac’, Mishra, G. ‘Escape’, Berke, C. ‘Hijo’. Cavanagh, J. The City Speaks. How Should We Answer? 118th PAMLA Annual Conference, Las Vegas/Virtual, 11/11/21 – 14/11/21.

two worlds. This sense of in-between-ness is explored later in ‘Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny’.

This chapter has explored what the key characteristics of the short story are both in general and in terms of my own work. It has also looked at some of the stories which I enjoy, the enjoyment of which encouraged me, and continues to encourage me, to write short stories. It has explained why my collection is best defined as a sequence, and explored both the overall ordering of the sequence and the specific connections and juxtapositions among the stories within it. Finally, it has positioned that sequence between two by other writers exploring similar themes and using similar techniques. The next chapter, ‘Methodology’, will look at how and why the stories in this sequence were created.

Methodology

This thesis is ordered into two sections, a short story sequence and a reflective analysis. However, these two strands of research are intertwined. While my creative work stands alone as a short story sequence, neither of the two sections would exist without the other. I chose to write the short story sequence in a variety of writing spaces in order to discover the effect of those spaces. As I was doing so, when I was redrafting and when I had completed drafting the sequence, I was able to reflect on my own practice, experience and writing. This research is creative through the writing of an original short story sequence, and qualitative from an autoethnographic perspective, through its focus on reflection and personal experience, i.e. the effect of the space on the writer. This chapter will explain both the methodology of and terminology employed throughout this thesis.

I use the term ‘writing space’ to refer to any physical space in which any stage of the writing process takes place. In this thesis, the writing spaces fall into two main categories: ‘contained’ and ‘geographical’. The term ‘contained space’ is used when the writer’s immediate environment is a room, building, garden or other space with clearly defined parameters separating it either from other parts of a property or from other properties and the wider environment. Examples of these in my research are Gladstone’s Library and the Everyman Writers’ Room. The term ‘geographical space’, on the other hand, is used when reflecting on the effect on the writer of being in a particular vicinity, be that a country, city or street. These categories can be further subdivided, as both the contained and geographical spaces were either inside or outside the UK. For example, I discuss the impact on the writing of ‘Time Out’ on the terrace of Casa Pedro in Miami Platja as a contained space. However, the geographical spaces in which it was situated (Catalonia and Spain) were also influences on my writing. As mentioned in a footnote in the previous chapter, a list of significant contained and geographical spaces used in my research that contributed to the writing of this

collection can be found in Appendix A at the back of this thesis. I have also included colour photographs of my notes which indicate the writing stages for which various spaces were used, as well as my familiarity with those spaces, in Appendix B.

Divisions can be made between spaces with which I had a prior relationship and those with which I did not, and there were also spaces which were already familiar to me, though not as writing spaces. This point of methodology leads also to one of the main findings of this research, which is that the writer's relationship with the space is key to that space's influence on what is written within it, and each relationship with each space is in constant flux. As Georges Perec writes in *Species of Spaces*:

I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep-rooted; places that might be points of reference, of departure, of origin: [...] Such places don't exist, and it's because they don't exist that space becomes a question, ceases to be self-evident, ceases to be incorporated, ceases to be appropriated. Space is a doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It is never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it. (Perec, 1974: 91)

None of the spaces remained 'stable, unmoving, intangible' as I revisited them. They grew more in familiarity, and, in some cases, my sense of familiarity with and belonging in them differed depending on the writing session.

These changing relationships underline the reason why the title of this thesis, and aim of this research, is concerned with the effects not of place, but of space. In my research, space refers to location, as spaces or locations only become places under certain conditions. This perspective is similar to that of humanistic geography, described by Lewis Holloway and Phil Hubbard as that 'which seeks to reconceptualize place in the context of human experiences

[...] a perspective that emphasizes how the distinctly human traits of creativity and emotion are involved in the *making* of a place' (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001: 67). A writing space does not become a writing place until a relationship has been formed between it and the writer; 'It is the task of the subject to make a neutral space into the specific place by giving it meanings' (Kymäläinen, 2005: 15-16). According to Holloway and Hubbard, 'To develop a sense of place requires that one knows that place intimately and reacts to it emotionally' (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001: 74). As spaces became more familiar to me during my research and I began to feel a sense of belonging in them, I was giving them meanings, and so they became places, but they always began as spaces.

This theory of space becoming place is further described by Päivi Kymäläinen in the example below:

space changes into place little by little as one has moved to a new neighbourhood. At first, everything looks unfamiliar and neutral, and one observes the environment as an outsider [...] As time goes by and the neighbourhood becomes more familiar, one will not know it as an outsider, but has developed a personal relationship with it. A neutral, abstract and objective space has turned into a meaningful, particular and subjective place, to which one can – in an ideal situation – belong and which s/he can consider home. (Kymäläinen, 2005: 16)

My relationship with certain geographical spaces, such as Spain and the Channel Islands, has become stronger during the course of my research. This is as the result of having spent extended periods of time in each area and having returned on a number of occasions. As they are spaces in which I do not usually reside, even though I have become much more familiar with them, I remain an 'other' within them. As an outsider, I have observed customs and aspects of society that may well have remained unnoticed or unnoteworthy had I grown

up within those spaces. My methodology did not dictate that my stories should be set in the writing spaces themselves. Instead, I allowed the writing spaces to exert their influence and then examined in what ways this had been done and why, and a key factor in this was my relationship with each space. Returning to a space, increasing my familiarity with it, changed it from a space to a place.

It could be argued that those writing spaces already familiar to me could be referred to as places, but as they were not known to me as specifically writing places, they began this research as spaces. Moreover, since my starting point with each space was different, as was the way in which my relationship with each developed, when referring to them as a group, it is appropriate to refer to them as spaces. These relationships are explored further in the chapter, 'Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny', in which I detail how certain writing spaces shifted and changed in terms of my relation to them, and how this is reflected in my stories.

Before writing my short story sequence I did not stipulate or predetermine its content, tone or genre in any way but hypothesised that each different type of space would affect me in some way and that this would be shown in my writing. By writing in a variety of writing spaces I gave myself a broad set of results for analysis and affect theory has been a crucial tool in that analysis. Affect is described by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth in *The Affect Theory Reader* as being 'in many ways synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter* [...] affect more often transpires within and across the subtlest of shuttling intensities: all the minuscule or molecular events of the unnoticed' (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010: 1-2). Thus, the exploration of the effects of each space on my writing, effects which are sometimes experienced unconsciously and only become apparent on later reflection, is an exercise in the application of affect theory. Later chapters dig down into the specifics of these effects and the affect experienced, both of which were determined by my interaction with the space. This

interaction was determined by the category of the space (as detailed earlier) and by the stage of writing for which it was being used.

Although the writing process is similar for many writers, the stages into which that process may be categorised vary. An internet search will reveal blogs and articles by writers for whom the creative process can be broken down into several (sometimes into as many as seven) stages: pre-writing/inspiration, planning, first writing/drafting, workshopping, redrafting, editing and publishing (Athuraliya, 2020, Davenport, 2020 and Bello, 2021). More often, this is narrowed down to the three stages of pre-writing/planning, drafting, and redrafting/editing/rewriting (Jamieson, 1996: 13-16; Smith, 1982: 104). For some writers these stages of writing are fluid. As Frank Smith notes in *Writing and the Writer*, ‘prewriting and rewriting merge into each when we come to the actual production of words; in fact prewriting, writing and rewriting frequently seem to be going on simultaneously’ (Smith, 1982: 104). Similarly, Dorothy Parker stated, ‘It takes me six months to do a story. I think it out and then write it sentence by sentence – no first draft. I can’t write five words but that I change seven’ (Parker, 1956: 12). I also redraft as I first write and am often in the process of writing more than one story at once, but my writing process as a whole can be broken down into three key stages which I refer to throughout this thesis as ‘pre-writing’, ‘first writing’ and ‘redrafting’.

The first of these stages, ‘pre-writing’, refers to inspiration, musing and note taking, and can be subconscious or even unconscious, in the form of a dream. As such, pre-writing can happen at any time and unexpectedly, even when the writer had not intended to write. During the course of my research, stories could be at this stage for weeks while I mused on them, before they finally moved to the next stage. As my sequence was not written sequentially, there was always more than one story at a time in the pre-writing stage, as well as a number of other stories at different stages. The spaces that most influenced the pre-

writing stage were the geographical spaces. As I spent extended periods of time in those places, there was more opportunity for them to have an impact on me and, in turn, on my writing. There were occasions on which I was deliberately seeking influence, such as when spending an afternoon walking around Herm Island, images and experiences of which have been used in 'The Daughter'. However, those extended periods of time also allowed a gentle and subconscious drip-feeding of inspiration and musing, such as on the island of Guernsey, a writing space I used three times for six to eight weeks each time. These stays were influential to all stages of the writing of 'The Daughter', but particularly so to its pre-writing, as I was unconsciously carrying out this stage throughout my time there. The impact of this space at the pre-writing stage on the story's genre and tone is discussed in the chapter 'Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny'.

The pre-writing stage may also include 'free writing'. This is when the writer writes continuously with little or no thought of what they are about to write. Instead, they allow words to 'roll out unplanned or unmonitored, sometimes almost of their own accord' with the purpose of making 'the process of writing easier and more comfortable while also bringing out livelier and more natural language' (Elbow, 2010: 6-10). The idea of free writing is to write continuously but not necessarily quickly: 'the goal is the easy nonplanning of language and – gradually – easy movement of thinking' (Elbow, 2010: 10).

My free writing research fell into two categories: completely free writing and focussed free writing. The former was as described above, whereas when carrying out the latter, I determined to focus on the space in which I was writing. There remained a degree of freedom in such sessions, as I did not predetermine form, genre or tone, and it was still unnecessary for the writing to be in sentences or even to be coherent. On those occasions, the only stipulation was that the writing should be related to the space in some way, be that through description of setting or people, or through imagined events somehow connected to

the space. The benefit of using free writing to discover the effect of space on the writer is that it 'tends to enact thinking in process', and does not allow the writer the opportunity to make conscious decisions or 'to run away from all the thoughts, feelings, and experiences' (Elbow, 2010: 14-15). This makes free writing an ideal tool with which to excavate affect and examine how 'feelings speak for themselves, as if they will best do so if the conscious mind does not interfere' (Figlerowicz, 2012: 3). It allowed me to take advantage of the common habit of 'acting on emotions before we recognize what they are' (Figlerowicz, 2012: 3).

When beginning a writing session in a contained space, my practice was to begin with a free writing session of between five and twenty minutes. Each space in which I have carried out 'physical writing' (i.e. pen to paper/fingers to keyboard) or 'first writing' has needed to be negotiated in order for anything to be written on the page. While at the pre-writing/inspiration stage of a story, being uncomfortable is a feeling that is observable and one which informs the narrative without preventing it moving forward. For me, however, physical or first writing requires a level of comfort which will allow me to concentrate in that space. As Perec says, 'I have constantly to mark it, to designate it' (Perec, 1974: 91), in other words, I need to make the space feel like my own in order to concentrate in it. As discussed later, in the chapter 'Isolation and Routine', writers often have a routine they follow when writing and, in my case, I use a particular routine when physically writing in a writing space, in order to negotiate a sense of comfort within it which will enable me to write. I use routine to negotiate a relationship with a space. Starting with free writing has benefited these negotiations. This is partly because it acts as a warm-up activity, and also, as I was seeking the influence of the contained space on my writing, it gave me the opportunity to exorcise any thoughts that were in my mind at the beginning of the session related to factors and events outside the writing space. Unfocussed free writing at the beginning of a session helped me to become detached from those thoughts.

Free writing was also useful when drafting or continuing a story begun elsewhere, or when writing in a space in which I had previously written a different story. It was an opportunity to minimise disruptive effects of the space that would have made it difficult to work, without eradicating the effects of the space completely. In the first year of research in particular and when I was still writing the first draft of the sequence, free writing sessions were actually an opportunity for the space, and therefore its effect on me, to present itself in my writing, regardless of the narrative on which I intended to spend my writing time that day.

In addition to allowing the space's influence to manifest itself in this way, there were also free writing sessions in which I deliberately wrote about the space. In such sessions, though the writing was not as free as others, it was similarly free of restrictions in terms of which aspects of the space I wrote about. For example, I may have written a description of the space, the people within it, how I felt on entering or what I imagined might happen there. Free writing allowed my unconscious mind to catch up with itself, without the interference of my conscious mind – ironically, by being consciously open to affect (Figlerowicz, 2012: 4).

As noted in the previous chapter, the fact that I was neither writing complete drafts of narratives in one sitting nor in the one space was a factor in making the short story form, rather than the novel, the most effective vehicle for this research. As the writing space changed, or my relationship with that space changed, so too could the nature of the story I was writing. I often followed the plan I had made for myself, particularly when there was a narrative on which I had already embarked, but only after a free writing session would I definitely know what I would be working on that day. As my aim was to create several narratives, however, I almost always had the option to put one story aside and begin writing another, because I was not tied to one narrative. Therefore, if I found the space influencing my writing in a direction other than the narrative on which I had intended to work that day, it was acceptable to both my research and the sequence to embrace this. On some occasions,

this meant flicking back and forth between different narratives in the one session, while on others I began writing a new narrative. This also gave me the opportunity, when reflecting on my work, to consider how and why the space influenced me in that way during that session.

In reflecting on the stories and how they have been affected by their writing spaces I became aware of how being able to switch between narratives enabled me to alter the voice and tone with which I was writing depending on the writing space being used. This happened when I was trying to continue the narrative of 'Office Space' whilst in Fuerteventura. Instead, I began the writing of 'Instacising', the office setting and uncanniness of which may owe a debt to my attempts to continue with the writing of 'Office Space'. Sometimes, the writing from free writing sessions was never used again, sometimes words and phrases were selected from it, and on other occasions, it was developed into a story. For example, during a free writing session at Gladstone's Library I wrote a first person narrative from the perspective of someone trapped in an office. This was developed into 'Office Space', despite no complete words or phrases from that free writing session being used in the final story. The variety of narratives within my sequence offer contrasts of effect and affect with more distinction than would be so in a novel-length narrative. As my principal concern was to explore the different effects of different spaces on writing, the writing of different narratives helped make those differences more apparent. Each story, in its unity, was a true reflection of the spaces of creation, and the sequence as a whole reflects the nature and process of my research, without the contradictions that would have occurred in a novel.

There were occasions on which I allowed the free writing period in a space to continue longer than planned. This led to the genesis of new narratives. An example of this is 'Wednesday', the writing of which began during a number of free writing sessions. The first of these took place in the Writers' Room of Liverpool's Everyman Theatre and the story I was prioritising at that time was 'First Snow'. Not only is this an example of free writing

allowing the writer's pre-writing ideas to surface and solidify, but also of writing against a space, i.e. to attempt to deliberately ignore the space and its influence. This space was one in which I had become accustomed to writing, but was still not completely without effect. As discussed in the following chapter, it is difficult to write against a space, as one must acknowledge it to then be able to ignore it.

First writing (or drafting) refers to physical writing, but unlike free writing, it is writing with intention and does not have to be continuous, but is thoughtful and considered. The method itself can be pen to paper, fingers to keyboard or however the writer chooses to record words. The majority of my first writing took place in contained spaces, for the practical reason of needing a surface on which to rest my book or computer. Nevertheless, as with the aforementioned Café Pedro in Catalonia, there were several occasions on which the effect of the geographical space permeated the contained space. In such cases, it is necessary to consider the influence of both spaces. Some free writing can be classed as first writing, when it is expanded into a longer narrative or when sections of it are used within a story draft. This was the case with 'Wednesday', the beginning of which was written in a free writing session. I then continued the narrative for the rest of that writing session.

The final stage of writing, 're-drafting', happens multiple times within the story writing process and, as such, occurred in my work in multiple spaces. As with first writing, practicality dictated this was often carried out in contained spaces, but this was not exclusively so. Redrafting involves the writer not only physically writing, but also continuing to muse on the narrative whilst in other spaces and going about her daily life. As a result, geographical spaces also exerted their influence on the redrafting stage.

When using a writing space for any stage other than pre-writing and free writing, the writing space sometimes had an effect which did not seem to be beneficial to the particular

story, or part of the story, that I was then first writing, redrafting or editing. As this research is concerned with the effect of spaces on the writer, this effect could not simply be ignored. One way I addressed this was to allow the narrative to take a tangent, incorporating this effect and redrafting later. Another way to incorporate distractions and mental wanderings produced by the space was to simply allow myself to momentarily step back from what I had been writing, turn to the back of my notebook and allow myself to write about whatever the space suggested. Had I been writing one long narrative, such distractions might have disrupted the process. However, I was writing a number of narratives at once. Therefore, though some of the writing at the back of my notebooks was not ultimately used, some was incorporated into the story I had been writing on that day, some was used in one of the other stories and some led to the writing of new stories. For example, while first writing 'Wednesday' in the garden of Café Porto in Liverpool, I made unrelated notes, such as 'I haven't once commented on the pond, the switched off fairy lights, [...] I haven't written about the birdsong around me, the Spanish conversations from the house at the back, the moss-covered garden feature or the inactive water feature.' This has not been used in another narrative as yet, but in acknowledging the space, I was able to continue writing. Rather than such distractions impeding my writing, they contributed to the overall sequence and thesis by allowing 'the tension between conscious and unconscious affects to remain unresolved' (Figlerowicz, 2012: 7).

While the narratives of the stories in my sequence do not overlap, each story is connected to at least one other. Some connections are the result of conscious creative decisions made during the writing process in order to tie the sequence together. One example of this is the cross-over of setting and characters in 'Office Space' and 'Instacising' (the main setting of each is an office block and there are similarities between secondary characters, including cross-overs of names). However, as predicted at the outset of my research, certain

connections occurred organically, as the result of writing different stories in the same spaces, or spaces which shared similar qualities. An example of this is the uncanny tone shared by the shortest story, 'Seasalter' and the longest, 'The Daughter', the narratives of which are otherwise very different. Their overlapping geographical writing space was Saint-Malo in Brittany where I spent two nights. The visit took place when I was living on Guernsey, there being a regular ferry route between the two places. At that time, my main writing focus was 'The Daughter', which I continued to work on during those three days. On my second morning in Saint-Malo, I walked along the old city walls and stopped at a café to do some physical writing. Some of what was written during the free writing with which I began my writing session was redrafted and used in 'Seasalter'. However, other parts of the free writing, and also the remainder of that session, were later redrafted into the section of 'The Daughter' in which Minny remembers watching the child disappearing at the lido.

According to affect theory, the writer is never 'neutral' when entering a space, but 'in some way or another moody' and so her 'impression' of that space is dependent on her 'affective situation' (Ahmed, 2010: 36). It follows that the writer's experiences or attitude before entering a space will affect her relationship with the space and therefore what is written. Before this research, I might have attempted to ignore this affective situation in order to concentrate on my intended piece of writing; however, the intention of the research was to discover effects and not to ignore them. Instead, free writing provided an opportunity to express those ideas and feelings which did not seem in keeping with what I was writing on a particular occasion, but to which I could return at a later date. On other occasions, I simply embraced the effects and allowed myself to write about whatever I was feeling that day, whether it was about the space or connected to what had happened on the way there. Experiences which created such effects were examples of unintentional pre-writing in

unintended writing spaces, such as the journey to the geographical writing space of Guernsey discussed later in this thesis.

Whilst each text in my sequence is a work of short fiction, it is connected, through the writing process, to specific spaces and journeys. The writing of a short story sequence allows the writer the opportunity to be influenced by the space, and by multiple spaces, without having to channel this influence into one overriding narrative direction, climax or solution throughout the sequence. Neither does each story in the sequence have to point towards the same meaning. If a novel is non-linear, or has multiple narrative strands, there must be a cohesion between those strands, they must meet, or cooperate with each other, to form a revelation by the end of the novel. The different strands within a short story sequence do not need to adhere to this. Amongst the stories in my sequence are non-linear narratives with flashbacks driving the chronological narrative forward, such as those of 'Wednesday', 'Instacising' and 'The Daughter'. I enjoy reading similarly non-linear narratives such as those examples of stream of consciousness mentioned in the previous chapter. As Flannery O'Connor states, 'there has to be a beginning, a middle and an end, though not necessarily in that order' (O'Connor, 1972: 93).

There are parallel temporal or geographical settings in my sequence, for example the island in 'The Daughter' and the limbo of 'Seasalter'. Again, these are settings I enjoy in the short stories of other writers, such as the surprisingly bureaucratic and haunted afterlife of Mavis Gallant's 'From the Fifteenth District' and China Miéville's dystopian London of 'Looking for Jake'. That these types of setting and narrative structure feature in my sequence is partly the result of my interest in reading them in the work of other writers, but their presence is also a result of the effect of the writing spaces. Certain spaces encouraged the resurgence of memories and others encouraged a sense of feeling in-between spaces. This is explored in the chapters 'Memory' and 'Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny'.

Although I did not stipulate the themes of my writing prior to my research, repeated themes within my sequence include isolation, memory and displacement. There are three contributing factors to this. First, as previously discussed, there are parallels between this research and humanistic geography. Humanistic geography is concerned with ‘insiderness and outsiderness’, as well as with memory and with concepts of home (Kymäläinen, 2005: 16). Secondly, according to Frank O’Connor, a key characteristic of the short story form is ‘an intense awareness of human loneliness’, and the short story is a form that has always represented those that are ‘other’ or who belong to a ‘submerged population’ (O’Connor, 1962: 19). Thirdly, the prevalence of isolation, otherness or loneliness in my sequence can be explained by my constant awareness and deliberate consideration of my position within each writing space. In constantly reflecting on my relationship with each space, I was, to a certain extent, setting myself up in opposition to it. At the very least, I was considering my position within it. This resulted in feelings of isolation, both conscious and subconscious, which then presented themselves through my stories.

Third person subjective narrators dominate my sequence, only ‘Wednesday’ being written in first person and directly addressing the reader as the estranged friend. My free writing was almost always in first person, but when I came to redraft that into a story, or when I first wrote a story, I usually felt more comfortable writing in the third person. As is explored in the following three chapters, my relationship with each writing space and the building of those relationships had a large impact on my writing within them, and I believe this is what led to me feeling more comfortable using the third person limited perspective. My building of relationships with the spaces is reflected in the subjectivity of the narrative perspective, my desire to fully inhabit the spaces being mirrored in inhabiting the narrators. However, whenever deliberately thinking about the space, I was actually distancing myself from it, as I was not simply relaxing and inhabiting it in the ‘usual’ way. I was experiencing

it, but was not 'of' it. In addition to this, continually switching between writing spaces led to a certain degree of unfamiliarity with and lack of belonging in each writing space. Both of these factors led to a slight disconnect between me and the writing space, which is mirrored in the third person narrative perspective.

'Wednesday' is the one story in the sequence not written from a third person subjective perspective, but in the first person, using the second person to address the reader. Moreover, the narrator's tone as she talks to the reader/her friend is confrontational, in a way not found elsewhere in the sequence. Both these elements of the story are the result of my attitude towards and relationship with the spaces in which it was written (noted in Appendix B). During the writing of 'Wednesday', I was continually interrogating spaces in an attempt to remember or create memories for use in the story. This led to some feelings of frustration within spaces as I was hoping they would influence me in one way (for example, evoke particular memories), but I was, of course, unable to control their influence on me. This occasional frustration encouraged the confrontational tone.

Though a third person subjective narrator could also be confrontational, I wanted the narrator's antagonistic attitude to be turned outwards towards another character, rather than inwards towards herself, as that might make it less aggressive and more self-deprecating. This was a creative decision, but also a reflection of that confrontation. In each story, the narrator's viewpoint is subjective, a result of my being conscious not just of the influence of the space, but also that this influence was something that I was actively seeking. Each protagonist and the majority of the characters within my sequence are female, which is not always so in my short stories outside of this sequence. It is possible that I was more aware of my gender when using some writing spaces as gender can be a contributing factor in how both a writer and characters are positioned in and react to a space. However, I did not feel

that the relationships I had with the writing spaces used in this research were notably affected by my gender and this is not an area explored in this thesis.

How and why each of the stories in the sequence was influenced by each space was dependent on the category of that space, my position in and fluctuating relationship with it, and the stage of writing that took place within it. These concepts are explored in greater depth throughout this thesis.

Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny

During the course of my research I used a combination of writing spaces that were familiar and unfamiliar, some in which I felt I belonged and others in which I felt I did not. The spaces did not remain static in each category, however, my sense of belonging changing and the spaces becoming more or less familiar. The effect of each writing space on my writing was governed by this evolving relationship with each space and the process of creating that relationship. This chapter discusses how the degree of belonging to and familiarity with each space informed those relationships and how this is reflected in my short story sequence. In the final section of the chapter I explore how various experiences of in-between-ness led to the presence of uncanny elements in my story sequence.

Space, Place and Home

To form a connection with a space is not only to transform space into place, but also into a home. Space is abstract and neutral, whereas place is a ‘subjective place of belonging’ (Kymäläinen, 2005: 17). Holloway and Hubbard state that ‘To have an authentic sense of place [...] is to have a sense of belonging’ (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001: 76). They use the ‘home town’ or ‘home region’ as examples of places that are fundamental to our identity (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001: 76), but in my research I have found that this sense of belonging can also be generated in and by writing spaces. In *The Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard states that ‘all really inhabited space contains the essence of the notion of home’ (Bachelard, 1958: 27). The process of forming relationships with spaces in my research was an exercise (albeit sometimes an unconscious one) in increasing both my familiarity with and sense of belonging in those spaces, and therefore making each space a temporary home. As mentioned in the ‘Short Stories’ chapter, the title of my sequence, *No Place*, alludes to

Dorothy Gale's famous repeated line in *The Wizard of Oz*, 'There's no place like home' (*The Wizard of Oz*, 1939). The title acknowledges the practice of creating homes out of the writing spaces used in the writing of my short story sequence, as well as the importance to protagonists across the collection of positioning themselves within space; of making a place out of a space. It acknowledges their difficulty in doing so, as well as the feeling of being in-between, or in 'no place' in particular that they each experience in different ways. The title is also a nod towards one of the key features of the short story form, that of ambiguity. The recurrence of this feature throughout my sequence is the result of both my own creative choices as a writer and the effects of the ambiguous or in-between nature of my relationships with writing spaces. This, and the importance of 'in-between-ness' is discussed later in this chapter.

At the outset of my research, my hypothesis was that the effect of a space on a writer, and in turn on the writing, is determined by the writer's familiarity with, sense of belonging in, or feeling of being 'other' to it. When using a writing space for the first time I expected to be heavily influenced by that space, particularly during free writing. In contrast, I hypothesised that the impact of a familiar, contained space would be lessened by my knowledge of it. I would be aware of how and when to use it to best suit my comfort level and where to position myself in order to have the preferred level of noise, light and so on. I would be somewhat able to control the space and thus reduce its impact.

I expected that when writing in an unfamiliar space, and therefore being in the position of the outsider, I would be inspired to write characters who were outsiders and narratives concerned with the idea of 'the other'. This proved to be largely true, yet all of the stories in the sequence deal with protagonists who are in one way or another, 'other' or isolated. For example, Amal is separated from her home and family in 'First Snow', Amanda does not fit in with (and does not want to fit in with) the rest of her office in 'Office Space',

and Minny is cut off from the rest of the world in 'The Daughter'. One explanation for this is that as I oscillated between spaces and stories, there was always at least one stage and one section (and usually more) of each story which was written in an unfamiliar space. This made the protagonist as outsider prevalent within the sequence, as there was at least one point in the creation of every narrative at which I felt myself to be an outsider in the writing space.

Each writing space, whether geographical or contained, previously known or unknown to me, was a space with which it was necessary for me to build a relationship. This was an attempt to create a temporary home, a process assisted by and resulting in the evoking of memories, which is therefore discussed later in the 'Memory' chapter of this thesis. The home or house is often associated with safety and I found creating such homes helpful to my writing because 'the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace' (Bachelard, 1958: 28). When first writing in contained spaces, it was important that the writing space should be a safe space in which to write, one in which I felt comfortable putting pen to paper, where I could establish a 'home', at least for the period in which I was carrying out this research.

When making a repeat visit to any of the contained writing spaces, I found that I would gravitate towards a particular part of that space and follow a particular routine. A pre-existing knowledge of the space was not enough; I was building a stronger relationship with it; increasing its familiarity to me. This gravitating towards a routine (discussed later in the chapter 'Isolation and Routine') increases the writer's feeling of being at home in a space. If one accepts Bachelard's theory that 'all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home', the writer, who already feels on some level that the writing space she inhabits is home, augments this feeling through the creation of a routine. In exploring the effect of writing spaces on my writing, my research depended on my using new, unfamiliar and, perhaps, unhomely spaces in which to write. Nevertheless, it was natural for me when

carrying out physical writing to try to make the space seem more familiar to me, to make it more of a home. The last section of this chapter will discuss the impact of the unhomely or uncanny space.

In *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* Annette Kuhn explains that when a space is revisited it becomes part of our 'territory', our familiarity and 'sense of belonging' increasing on each return (Kuhn, 2002: 137). However, an increased sense of belonging in a writing space reduces the extent to which that space affects the writer. This, in turn, should have an effect on affect. It took a number of visits to some of the writing spaces before they felt familiar enough to be considered my territory and spaces in which I belonged. Three such contained spaces were the Everyman Writers' Room, the National Theatre and the British Library. These spaces were ones that were familiar to me before my research, but unfamiliar as writing spaces. Approaching these spaces in a new way affected my initial sense of belonging in them.

When a writing space became familiar to me, this reduced the impact on my mood, and consequently on the tone of my writing. When I was writing in a space for the first time, the unfamiliarity of the space often manifested itself in dark subjects and tones. For example, after my first visit to Guernsey's Little Chapel I wrote the description of the dolls in the North Tower in 'The Daughter'. The chapel is very pretty and ornate, constructed of and decorated with thousands of pieces of ceramic and glass. However, rather than inspiring descriptive writing of something equally beautiful, I wrote the following:

Their eyes stared out, unseeing. Time had taken the roses from their cheeks and their eternally pursed lips would never explain why their dismembered bodies were strewn throughout the walls, limbs jutting out.

The unfamiliarity of the chapel drew me towards uncanniness (an area explored in the final part of this chapter) and dark imagery and tones.

Once a space became familiar to me, the dark themes and subjects did not disappear, but they became less dominant. For example, both the Liverpool Everyman Writers' Room and World Museum Café are spaces that became familiar to me during this research. Both spaces had already become familiar to me by the time I came to write 'First Snow' and 'Wednesday' in them and, although there is a darkness in both of them in the forms of estrangement and grief, they are not uncanny. I had already begun writing both of these stories in other spaces, knew the direction I wanted each narrative to take, and was continuing their first writing and redrafting in the Writers' Room and World Museum Café, rather than pre-writing or seeking inspiration for them. These now familiar spaces allowed me to continue writing with a predetermined tone and to a predetermined plan, without my thoughts drifting and the story segueing into another.

While familiarity diminished the impact of a writing space, the impact did not completely vanish. It is no coincidence that Joanne and Josie in 'Time Out' meet in and around theatre spaces, as much of the story was written in the Writers' Room and National Theatre. On the surface, it could be argued that writing in theatre spaces simply inspired me to write about similar spaces. However, beyond the buildings and their designated purposes, they are also spaces of high emotion, as well as a pretence of emotion; of both art and life. Joanne and Josie have an emotional connection through their friendship of many years, but their connection is not necessarily as real as they pretend to themselves. They (particularly Joanne) are surrounded by drama, but neither can be certain that the other is all that they seem – they speak to each other, but without always listening, and this story contains more dialogue than any of the others in my sequence. Though written from Josie's narrative perspective, each scene in which they meet, other than the garden party, is almost a duologue.

These duologues, which do not occur elsewhere in the sequence, are a reflection of the theatrical spaces used as writing spaces throughout the writing of the story.

The effects of one, particular theatrical writing space can be found in the part of ‘Time Out’ when Joanne tells Josie she is pregnant. During the conversation, Josie is distracted by a choir rehearsing somewhere unseen:

Laptops tapped at different points around the foyer. Amplified by the marble, they provided a backbeat to the singing which was coming from a rehearsal room somewhere. Josie didn’t know the song, but she knew that everything had changed.

This was written in a writing session in the Writers’ Room during which I was continually distracted by hearing snatches of the Everyman Repertory Company rehearsing a musical. One might presume such an occurrence in a theatre would be common enough to be inconsequential, but it was the first and only time this happened during my research.

In distracting me from what I had been writing, it allowed the familiar space to influence me. It made the familiar unfamiliar, which was a greater influence on me than the singing itself. As the last section of this chapter will explain, the familiar becoming unfamiliar can lead to uncanniness, and sometimes did so in my own work, but on this occasion, this unusual occurrence felt natural in that space. Therefore, though it created an impact on the story, it did not lead to feelings of negativity. It served to remind me of the space, rather than distance me from it. The distraction of hearing the actors within the writing space led to the inclusion of the similar distraction at this point in the story. I used the technique of stream of consciousness (discussed above in the chapter on short stories) to reflect this incident in the writing space, while simultaneously demonstrating the rift between Josie and Joanne, as Josie allows something that should be expected within that space to distract her from the important news of her friend’s pregnancy. Thus, the stream of

consciousness is both a reflection of the effect of the writing space and is used to enhance another key element of the short story form – layers of meaning. Moreover, as I was familiar with this writing space at this point, my direct focus was not on the space, but on my writing. The actors' singing shifted my focus back and forth between the writing and the space. This changed my perspective of the space once again, and reminded me of the space's in-between-ness and ambiguity. The effect of this shifting focus is not only mirrored by Josie's distraction at this point of the story, but is also manifested in the later ambiguity of the possible affair and murder of Joanne's partner. Focusing in and out of the space and ambiguity towards and within the space led to both ambiguity and layers of meaning in the story.

One space which began as unfamiliar, but which became increasingly familiar during my research, is the History Room of Gladstone's Library in Hawarden. This is a subsection of the library, more intimate and with fewer readers than the main Theology Room. Whenever I could, I sat at the same desk, upstairs in the centre, shielded by bookshelves on three sides. This gave the impression of being surrounded and somewhat protected, as if sitting in a corner, a space which Bachelard describes as 'a symbol of solitude for the imagination' (Bachelard, 1958: 155). Bachelard states that 'whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter' it automatically begins to either 'comfort itself with the illusion of protection' or 'mistrust the staunchest ramparts' (Bachelard, 1958: 27). It is instinctive for a writer to seek out a secluded space within a space in order for the imagination to flourish and, like a corner, this space offered the feeling of protection on three sides, and therefore 'the illusion of protection'. It was here that I wrote the majority of the first draft of 'Wednesday'.

Being able to think clearly and feeling comfortable within the space helped me to decide the direction of the narrative for the first part of the story, up to the narrator having breakfast. It could be argued that I was writing against the space as an initial read of the

story's setting suggests it bears little relation to my real world setting. However, much of the narrative is internal monologue, as the narrator directly addresses a friend who the reader never sees. As discussed in my 'Short Stories' chapter, interior monologue and stream of consciousness are techniques that are particularly important to me as both a reader and a writer of short stories. Therefore, it is unsurprising that these should be found in the stories in my sequence, yet the frequency with which these features occur is also an effect of the writing spaces in which they were written. For example, the silence and solitude of the Gladstone's Library is reflected in there being no dialogue at the beginning of 'Wednesday', the narrator's family being present in the house, but unseen and unheard as she deliberately contrives to be alone. In fact, in each of the writing spaces in which I wrote, I was observing and being open to absorbing the world around me. Yet, I was also solitary, focusing my own research, my own thoughts and my own writing; my own reactions to each space. Thus, the ubiquity of interior monologue and stream of consciousness within my sequence also demonstrates the effect of this solitude.

After a number of times working at my chosen desk in the History Room of Gladstone's Library, I began to find it disconcerting if I arrived to discover someone else already working there. The familiarity, strengthened by repeated visits, routine and 'the illusion of protection', reached the point almost of territorialism. As my relationship with this space developed, so too did the nature of the writing produced within it. Originally, I found that the themes within or tone of my notes and freewriting sessions were dark. For example, 'A spiral path of gravestones holds the memory of young summers' and 'today has a darkness about it which is more than just the weather'. The first floor gallery is subtly lit, most readers choosing to use desk lamps for study, and is built and furnished with dark wood. Even the book bindings tend to be dark colours and it was this darkness that was reflected in the free writing. Once I was familiar with it, the effect on work seemed less intrusive.

The degree of familiarity was also a crucial factor in my relationships with the Everyman Writers' Room, the National Theatre and the British Library. These were familiar spaces to me before my research, but less so as writing spaces. Each of the spaces is welcoming to, well-used by and, in the case of the Everyman Writers' Room, dedicated to writers. In fact, while I had used the Everyman Writers' Room and the British Library café as writing spaces on a handful of occasions, I knew both much more as social and recreational spaces, and I had never previously used the National Theatre as a writing space. I was frequently the sole user of the Writers' Room and therefore should have been able to work there unselfconsciously from the outset. Both the British Library and ground floor of the National Theatre should have been comfortable spaces in which to work, for the contrasting reason of the anonymity provided by the vast numbers of people also working there. Nevertheless, when I began my research in all three spaces, I felt somewhat self-conscious and uncomfortable. The unfamiliarity of spaces, in particular those which are not typically used for writing or study, also produced feelings of self-consciousness and discomfort. I was occupying these familiar, contained spaces in a way to which I was unaccustomed, thus altering my relationship with them to one of both unfamiliarity and not belonging.

A sense of belonging and familiarity was generated in my geographical writing spaces, through both repeated visits and extended stays. These spaces were transformed not only to spaces, but to places, in which I belonged. I made repeated visits to Gladstone's Library for a few nights at a time and three six-week visits to the Channel Islands, where I not only wrote, but taught, made friends and became part of the community, remembered and welcomed each time I returned. It was therefore not only the extended period of time, but also the repeated visit that was a key factor in the establishment of a relationship with the writing space.

According to Päivi Kymäläinen:

Because of the close relation between a writer, text and place, it is difficult to define where the outside ends and the inside begins. If place is understood beyond a subject/object relationship, one cannot be totally outside place. (Kymäläinen, 2005: 34)

Kymäläinen discusses the difficulty in remaining objective when describing, writing about or creating art in or about a space. One's experiences and one's position either inside or outside the space influence one's perspective. Also, if – as I was doing in my research – one is both investigating the effect of space while also on occasion attempting to write against it, one cannot remain impartial, as to write against is a deliberate act which involves acknowledgement of the space on some level. At the same time, it is difficult to shut out the world outside the writing space completely, both for the same reason that a deliberate act to do so involves an acknowledgement of that space, but also because the writer brings herself into the space, a self that is formed of all of the experiences leading up to her entering that space. As Sara Ahmed argues in 'Happy Objects':

If bodies do not arrive in neutral, if we are always in some way or another moody, then what we will receive as an impression will depend on our affective situation [...] how we arrive, how we enter this room or that room, will affect what impressions we receive. After all, to receive is to act. To receive an impression is to make an impression. (Ahmed, 2010: 36-37).

That one is influenced not only by a space, but by one's experiences and attitude on entering a space, is a key tenet of affect theory and demonstrates the relevance of that theory to this research. For example, the Everyman Theatre, the National Theatre and the British Library are each creative spaces that I used as writing spaces. When writing in them, I was very aware that those around me were working creatively, and that the people who had occupied

the spaces before me had also been working creatively. I wanted to feel a camaraderie with the other occupants, but my feelings veered more towards inadequacy. For example, in my first free writing session at the National Theatre I wrote ‘I am facing the window. Partly, so I can see the people walking past; partly, so I can’t see the other people writing here.’ I felt similarly self-conscious on my first visits to the Everyman Writers’ Room, writing, ‘I am glad no-one else is here to hear the silly scratching of my pen.’

This insecurity is not only an example of affect, but also imposter syndrome, as defined by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes as ‘an internal experience of intellectual phoniness’ and a belief that one’s success is ‘due to luck’ which ‘eventually some significant person will discover’ (Clance and Imes, 1978: 241). Affect provides an explanation for such feelings of insecurity and imposter syndrome. I was unable to be neutral entering those spaces, and so the ‘impression’ I received of them – their impact on me – was dependent on my ‘affective situation’ (Ahmed, 2010: 36). The mood of those spaces was ‘already angled’ (Ahmed, 2010: 37). While I aspired to be as creative as I imagined those around me to be, I did not yet feel that I had earned the right to share the spaces with them in that way. This was not due to any occurrence within the space, only that they were ‘my’ spaces, but not my writing spaces.

This lack of belonging is manifested in the free writing from these sessions which is peppered with examples of self-consciousness. Rather than being about the space, or the genesis of a story, it refers to feelings of embarrassment and discomfort, as well as memories of such feelings. The former is a straightforward reflection of my discomfort in the space; the latter (the resurfacing of memories) was caused in part by a subconscious need to compound these feelings, exacerbating the lack of belonging in a vicious circle. However, these memories of discomfort also arose for the opposite reason – to help forge a connection with the space. Though the memories may have been uncomfortable, they were ones that I knew

and recognised, and as such, ironically helped me to identify with and feel as though I belonged in those spaces. In the last chapter, the idea of using memory and imagination to strengthen bonds with spaces is explored further. For now, suffice it to say that memories of situations of discomfort and embarrassment were a combination of a reflection of the writing space and an unconscious attempt to combat discomfort, creating a positive out of the negative. They increased the feelings of belonging in writing spaces.

However, though the mood in which one arrives in a space has an impact on how we react to it, the same mood is not necessarily maintained during the whole experience of inhabiting that space (Ahmed, 2010: 37). As with other writing spaces in my research, my relationship with these creative spaces did not remain static, but gradually changed until I felt them to be spaces in which I belonged. While my notebooks reveal those initial feelings of insecurity, they were also the means by which I could be divested of them. In writing my thoughts out, I was able to air them, then move on, allowing my sense of belonging and security to grow. It could be argued that directly acknowledging the discomfort was a way to benefit from it creatively, allowing it to positively influence my work.

Furthermore, repeated visits transformed these alien spaces into familiar writing spaces, and then into spaces in which I too belonged, and felt entitled to be creative. For example, on one occasion, I saw a member of theatre staff taking a group of young children on a tour of the theatre while I was in the Writers' Room. She briefly stood outside the room door with them and gestured towards me and it. Presumably, she was explaining to them the purpose of the room and that I was one of the writers using it. It occurred to me that she might enter and ask me to justify my presence there and that I would struggle to do so. No sooner had this thought entered my mind, however, than the children all smiled and began waving at me as they continued up the stairs. This affirmation, the idea that others were

seeing me as a writer, increased my sense of confidence and belonging as a writer in that space.

After using the National Theatre as a writing space a number of times, I began to feel as though I were also a ‘real’ writer within that space, though I still preferred to sit looking outwards at the South Bank rather than at the inside of the theatre itself. In one of these more confident free writing sessions there I wrote, ‘The people walking past might sometimes cast an eye in our direction, but it’s cursory. We are in one world and they are in another. If they notice us, it is as one group, we, the writers.’ Eventually then, these spaces did feel as though they were my territory; that they belonged to me. In turn, I began to feel as though I also belonged to them and had a right to be part of these creative spaces. Once this relationship was established, I was able to allow other aspects of the spaces to influence me, as well as allowing myself to be influenced by affect from outside of these spaces. The combination of familiarity and belonging both had an impact on how those spaces affected my work, and gave me some control over how I allowed them to do so.

The In-between

The degree of familiarity with and belonging to geographical writing spaces that I felt also had an effect on what I wrote in them. This was particularly so in the case of Guernsey and the other Channel Islands where I wrote, as well as Saint-Malo in France. My initial stay there was for six weeks, although I subsequently returned for three more six-week periods. Having never visited the island, or any of the Channel Islands before, it was an opportunity to explore what stories could come out of a place that was completely unfamiliar to me and in which I had no idea how comfortable or uncomfortable I would be. In forming a sense of belonging to a community or a country, one comes to occupy ‘an insider’s position [...]

realising one's own contribution in creating worlds' (Kymäläinen, 2005: 33). In becoming part of the community on Guernsey, I began to occupy such 'an insider's position'. While Kymäläinen is referring here to connections between a person and a geographical space such as a community or a country, this is also what I have been doing through this research, firstly by 'realising' in the sense of 'making' my own worlds in each space through the medium of the short story; then by 'realising' in the sense of reflecting on those creations. Interestingly, Kymäläinen mentions how experiences and emotions linked in some way to the environment can be revealed through art (Kymäläinen, 2005: 33), which is also what is shown in this research.

One of the reasons why I chose Guernsey as a writing space was because of its unusual status as a Crown dependency and position between France and the UK. I was interested to see which, if either, world it most belonged to. The answer was both and neither. There are road signs in both languages, a lot of street, house and place names are in French, but their pronunciation varies from typically French, typically English to a specifically Guernsey pronunciation. The Guernsey accent sounds similar to that of the West Country, and so I was initially confused when the islanders referred to the English and England as something 'other'. Yet they did so because the islanders are not English. Guernsey has its own government, laws and form of sterling, which includes pound notes. Even neighbouring Jersey, I was told, was nothing like Guernsey, but 'just like a suburb of London'. As this writing space became somewhere familiar to me, somewhere I belonged and was welcomed, I would forget those distinctions, then be reminded of the differences. I was always either stranded, pulled between the two worlds or in-between. The theory that '[a]ffect is born in in-between-ness' (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010: 2), combined with my already being open to the influence of the space, increased the impact of the sense of the in-between on my writing. Thus, in 'The Daughter', the majority of which was written on Guernsey, Minny is pulled

between two worlds: the island and the mainland; reality and myth; and the past and the present.

Guernsey's neighbouring islands of Sark and Herm were also influential writing spaces. Both smaller than Guernsey, they are popular with tourists due to their beauty as well as their quaintness. Cars are forbidden on both, so anyone who needs to travel across the island quickly (as I had occasion to do when there was a weather warning), does so by tractor. There is little street lighting on Herm and none at all on Sark. Despite the popularity of both islands and the regular ferry service, as soon as the passengers have disembarked, it's easy to spend an hour walking without seeing anyone else. On Herm, in particular, I knew both the islanders and other tourists could not be far away, and I could see Guernsey and its industrial centre, The Bridge, in the distance. I felt I was both alone and not; between the past and the present; between the familiar and unfamiliar.

The pre-writing of 'The Daughter' began before I even arrived in Guernsey, while I was at Manchester Airport. I missed my early morning flight and had to be booked onto the next flight, twelve hours later, leaving me in airport limbo all day. Being impersonal spaces which people inhabit only temporarily, airports fit Marc Augé's definition of a 'non-place': 'If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place' (Augé, 1995: 64). In common with other non-places, airports are spaces dedicated 'to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral' (Augé, 1995: 64). The chain cafés in Manchester Airport at which I bought breakfast and lunch provided a semblance of a typical day, and the presence of chain shops in which to browse were reminders of a typical high street. However, as the familiarity of those shops and cafés was due to the fact that near identical outlets exist in airports across the country, as well as in other countries, this made them seem less 'real' spaces, as they diminished the relationship between the airport and its surrounding area. This,

in turn, led to the airport seeming less real to me, as it made it a space that could have existed in lots of other places.

When I eventually did board a flight, it was on a small propeller plane, with very few other passengers – all of which was a new experience to me, and yet felt very old-fashioned at the same time. That plane was then unable to land, and had to fly back to Exeter, so I still felt I was in a limbo, not knowing what this place which I had ‘psyched myself up’ to go to was like, more than twenty-four hours after I had left home. This incident was clearly a pre-writing inspiration for how the narrative should begin, with Minny missing the boat, but it was also the beginning of my extended stay in this new writing space for me, a writing space that kept bringing me back to the idea not only of being between worlds and in limbo, but, as will be explored in the final section of this chapter, also to ideas of uncanniness and of fantasy.

As discussed in the chapter, ‘Short Stories’, ambiguity is one of the key ‘cluster of characteristics’ of the short story form, and is key to several short stories in my sequence, including ‘The Daughter’ and ‘Seasalter’. The shifting relationship between familiarity and unfamiliarity and belonging and not-belonging in numerous writing spaces in my research gives an added explanation for the presence of ambiguity within my short stories. As my position within a space often felt ambiguous, this ambiguity was transferred to my writing. As each space switched between being familiar and unfamiliar and from being one in which I belonged and one in which I did not, this created a sense of in-between-ness. The frequency of this feeling of in-between-ness or ambiguity led to the prevalence of ambiguity within my sequence. Moreover, the fact that each space could have numerous effects on me, that these effects could have different effects on my writing on different occasions, and that my relationship with the space was always changing was an inspiration to create stories with

layered meanings. Alternative readings of the stories can create different effects in the same way that a space can have a different effect when returned to by the writer.

Another geographical space, or subset of geographical space, to which I made repeated visits throughout my research and which also has a sense of ambiguity, was suburbia. The suburbs are intrinsic to the work of certain writers and have been the geographical space in which a number of the contained writing spaces have been situated in my research (the homes of friends and family in Chester, Southport and London). In 'The Short Story in Suburbia' Joanna Price explains that writers such as John Cheever created a 'suburban aesthetic and sensibility' (Price, 2018: 256). The short story and the suburbs complement each other so well because they share similar qualities. The suburbs are between the city and the countryside in the same way that it could be argued that the short story lies between poetry and the novel (May, 1994: 214). Examples of the effect of suburbia on my writing can be found in 'Time Out' and 'First Snow'. Firstly, the geographical space of the suburbs is reflected directly in the setting. However, these stories also reflect the idea of being in-between, or not quite one thing or another. In 'Time Out', Joanne and Josie meet only for short periods of time between the important parts of their life. They are not part of each other's work or family, they are something other and between. Some of the settings in which they meet are also between spaces – the balcony, where they are at the party, but also outside of it; the theatre café, where they are in a theatre building, without being at the theatre. In 'First Snow', while Amal is physically in the park, she does not truly engage with that space until she begins building her snowman; she is mentally and emotionally flitting between the boys in the park in the present and her home with her sister in the past. She has chosen to visit that space deliberately because in reminding her of her childhood while offering her a new experience, it connects her simultaneously to the past and present. In both

of these stories, it is not only the setting that has been influenced by suburbia; it is also the tone, the meaning and the feeling of being in-between.

The Uncanny

This feeling of in-between-ness led on occasions both to a feeling of uncanniness in the writing space and to elements of the uncanny in my short story sequence. Before expanding on what these elements were and the connections between them and my relationship with the writing spaces, I will explain how I understand and deploy the terms ‘the uncanny’ and ‘uncanniness’. For, as Freud writes in his essay, ‘The Uncanny’:

There is no doubt that this belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread. It is equally beyond doubt that the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, and so it commonly merges with what arouses fear in general. Yet one may presume that there exists a specific affective nucleus, which justifies the use of a special conceptual term. One would like to know the nature of this common nucleus, which allows us to distinguish the “uncanny” within the field of the frightening. (Freud, 1919: 123)

A definition of the term is also crucial because ‘uncanny’ is (or was), of course, a ‘best fit’ translation of the German, ‘unheimlich’, though the manner in which English speakers use this word today most often coincides with Freud’s definition. Freud writes that ‘the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar’ (Freud, 1919: 124). He then spends some time on the dictionary definition of the word, as well as referring to the definition given by Ernst Jentsch. For Jentsch, in ‘On the Psychology of the Uncanny’:

this word seems to express that someone to whom something “uncanny” happens is not quite “at home” or “at ease” in the situation concerned, that the thing is or at least seems to be foreign to him. In brief, the word suggests that a *lack of orientation* is bound up with the impression of the uncanniness of a thing or incident. (Jentsch, 1906: 2)

More recently, in his book *The Uncanny*, Nicholas Royle describes the uncanny as:

a peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar. It can take the form of something familiar and unfamiliar unexpectedly arising in a familiar context. It can consist of a sense of homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home. (Royle, 2003: 1)

Finally, in the introduction to the short story anthology *The New Uncanny: Tales of Unease* edited by Sarah Eyre and Ra Page, Page describes the uncanny as ‘that subtler, added texture in a film or story (in the best cases the *only* texture) specially applied to instil an inextricable air of unease, a cognitive dissonance that mounts and mounts until we are almost literally “unnerved”’ (Page, 2009: viii).

To combine ideas from each of these definitions, the uncanny refers to an unpleasant sense of in-between-ness caused when something or some place that we feel we should know, that should be familiar to us, is somehow subtly altered, so that it becomes only just unfamiliar to us. It is when something or some place that should feel known and homely to us has something within it or about it that, in being slightly askew, makes it unknown or unhomely and this leaves us with a creeping sense of dread. As the world, the place or the thing is neither totally one thing or another, we are feeling left in-between, on uneven ground and with a feeling of uncanniness.

Although I have long had an interest in uncanny literature, television and film, from Roald Dahl's short stories (including the Jeremy Dyson adapted stage production *Twisted Tales*), to Jordan Peele's *Us* and Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror*, it is not a genre in which I have typically written. I was, therefore, surprised that some of my stories did contain uncanny tropes, those stories being 'Instacising', 'Office Space', 'Seasalter' and 'The Daughter'. Amongst the eight uncanny tropes that Freud lists in his essay, five feature in my sequence. These tropes, as paraphrased by Page, are 'inanimate objects mistaken as animate', 'the double', 'coincidences or repetitions', 'some all-controlling evil genius' and 'confusions between reality and imagination' (Page, 2008: vii-viii).

Examples of these in uncanny short stories by other writers include both the repetition of events and a fate controlled by someone or something else, as well as 'the double' in 'Midnight Express' by Alfred Noyes; the uncannily animate inanimate object in 'Tamagotchi' by Adam Marek; and the confusion of imagination and reality in Neil Gaiman's 'Troll Bridge'. There are uncanny tropes laced throughout Daisy Johnson's *Fen* and the frequent 'confusions between reality and imagination' reflect the in-between state of the East Anglian Fens themselves. Being not quite water and not quite land they can be seen as both familiar and unfamiliar. 'Blood Rites' and 'Starver' both use 'the double', as in the former, the protagonists begin to become the men that they devour, and in the latter, the narrator's sister, Katy, slowly transforms into an eel. The all-controlling evil genius makes an appearance in 'A Heavy Devotion', as the narrator is seemingly helpless to prevent her son's stealing of her language and memories. There are extra layers of uncanniness as the familiar body of a sister becomes unfamiliar in 'Starver', and in 'A Heavy Devotion', the son, who should be a familiar figure to both the reader and the narrator, acts in an unfamiliar way and, through his draining of the narrator's body, makes that unfamiliar to her.

In my sequence, 'Instacising' features both doubling and coincidence in the similarities between Steph's disappearing colleagues and the people appearing on Leigh's Instagram posts, as well as the photographs of Leigh herself, and the inanimate becomes animate as the lump squirms and moves. This mysterious lump makes Steph's familiar body seem unfamiliar, similarly to the new unfamiliarity of the bodies in both 'Starver' and 'A Heavy Devotion'. The doubling element of the Instagram posts in 'Instacising' reflects what has been described as the uncanniness of the modern, digital age, in which social media and gaming afford us both the opportunity to create a duplicate self, and to put ourselves at risk of hacking and having our identity stolen (Page, 2008: x). 'The Daughter' contains both the picture of The Daughter of the Island and dolls' heads in the North Tower that seem to come to life, The Daughter herself is both a double and possibly an all-controlling genius (she ultimately controls and takes over Minny) and Minny's world begins to slip between dream and reality. Both the increasing fluidity between Minny's dream self and assimilation into The Daughter demonstrate how the uncanny 'disturbs any straightforward sense of what is within and what is without, and alerts us to the "foreign body" within us' (Page, 2008: x).

The supernatural figure of The Daughter is also representative of 'that immortal twin-spirit of ancient mythologies, the "ka", accompanying us through life and [certainly in Minny's case] transporting our soul after death' (Page, 2008: xii – xiii). Finally, the man from Solitaire in 'Office Space' is the all-controlling genius who disrupts Amanda's routine, the strip-lights in the basement corridor seem to be conspiring against her, though they are inanimate, and there is repetition in Amanda being both witness to and the owner of the face at the window. Both coincidence, a fate controlled by someone else and an alternate reality are demonstrated in Amanda finally achieving the solitude she desires, but at a price she had not intended to pay. Her fate is also uncanny because of 'the uncertainties of silence, solitude and darkness' (Royle, 2003: 2), which are also foreshadowed by the flickering strip-lights of

the corridor and her one time escape of the basement. This idea of one's fate being in the hands of a possibly malevolent being is therefore present in my stories 'Office Space', 'Instacising' and 'The Daughter' (and arguably in 'Seasalter'), as well as in Johnson's 'A Heavy Devotion' and 'Starver'. These similarities are further reasons why, as mentioned in the chapter 'Short Stories', I would place my sequence on the shelf next to Johnson's.

The occurrence of these elements is an effect of that fluctuating degree of familiarity and belonging which I have discussed. The stories of mine in which uncanniness is a feature are those of which large parts of their pre-writing or first writing took place in writing spaces in which I felt on some level in limbo. They were places that were somewhere between familiar and unfamiliar, in which I both belonged and did not.

Uncanniness is intertwined with fantasy, and elements of fantasy also occur throughout my sequence. According to Tzvetan Todorov in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, fantasy obliges 'the reader [...] to hesitate between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described' (Todorov, 1975: 33). That is to say that in the same way that the uncanny lies between the familiar and unfamiliar, the fantastic lies between the natural and supernatural. Both the uncanny and fantasy are concerned with being between worlds and ideas, of being in limbo, and in my research, both are generated by those factors.

One example of this occurred when my relationship with one of my favourite writing spaces (Gladstone's Library's History Room) swiftly changed. When staying at the library overnight, guests are allowed access to the library until ten o'clock at night. During one of my stays, a new system had been put in place whereby the room was locked after five pm and only residents who had requested the key earlier that day could use the room. This increased the intimacy of the space, as it was much darker at night and there were fewer people with the

opportunity to use it, as even those readers staying overnight tend to stay in the Gladstone Room (a sitting room) rather than the library proper. I took the opportunity to request the key and found myself locked into the History Room alone from around eight o'clock to nine o'clock that night. This made this space very unfamiliar and affected my attitude to it. I attempted to enjoy the privacy, but found the experience very uncomfortable. I did some free writing, and made notes, but the familiar space had become unfamiliar. Unable to concentrate, I moved my work downstairs, but determined to return to work there under the same circumstances at a later date, with the aim of using this feeling of unfamiliarity and discomfort in a new story. This story was 'Office Space'. It contains a number of uncanny elements, but, as noted above, is by no means the only story in my sequence to do so. This frequent recurrence of the uncanny is the effect of relationships with other writing spaces that have also switched back and forth between familiar and unfamiliar.

The gallery of the History Room at night was such a space, its darkness and solitude making it unfamiliar and preventing me from making my usual home within it. Freud states that 'it seems obvious that something should be frightening precisely because it is unknown and unfamiliar' (Freud, 1919: 124-25), providing a possible explanation for some of the uncanniness across the sequence. Every single story in it had at least one stage of it written, and usually at least one part of it 'first written', in a space that was completely unfamiliar to me. Examples of this playing out in the stories include the sighing and shrieking vents in the toilets in 'Instacising' and the 'dismembered' dolls threaded through the walls of the North Tower in 'The Daughter'. The first description of the vents was written in my first writing session in the Liverpool World Museum Café, and that of the North Tower followed soon after my first ever visits to Herm and, as mentioned earlier, the Little Chapel. While both descriptions owe a debt to the physical appearance of these spaces, the uncanny angle is a result of the unfamiliarity of the spaces.

‘The Daughter’ is the story in my sequence containing the most elements of both fantasy and the uncanny. The rituals that the reader is told must be followed, such as ‘The Leaving’, in order to avoid The Daughter’s retribution are followed by all islanders, even Minny. Another of Todorov’s conditions of fantasy (though not a necessary condition) is that a character within the text may hesitate to accept an unusual situation, just as the reader does (Todorov, 1975: 33). Though not a fervent believer, and with a practical attitude to addressing her predicament, Minny is initially sympathetic to the islanders’ anachronistic and somewhat pagan practices. Island traditions, such as the ‘cat lottery’ and seaweed offerings, are familiar to Minny and yet not to the mainlanders and the reader. Those not of the island see them as pagan, alien and sometimes cruel, similar to aspects of Shirley Jackson’s ‘The Lottery’, Henry Slesar’s ‘Examination Day’ and David Pinner’s *Ritual*.

While the setting is more unfamiliar than familiar from the outset, as the story progresses, her world becomes more unfamiliar, more unhomey, and more uncanny to the reader, and Minny chooses to accept the unfamiliarity as her reality. When she becomes The Daughter, it is clear that she has been unwittingly involved in a ritual in which she has been sacrificed and this creates a ‘sudden sense that things seem to be fated or “meant to happen”’ (Royle, 2003: 1), therefore enhancing the uncanniness of the story. A key feature of liminal fantasy, according to Farah Mendlesohn in *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, is its reliance on ‘dissonance’, in that both the reader and the protagonist may observe the fantastic, but their contexts and interpretations differ (Mendlesohn, 2008: 182). As Minny increasingly accepts the unfamiliar as her reality, so ‘The Daughter’ moves closer to liminal fantasy as defined by Mendlesohn, and in the process takes on more of an uncanny feel for the reader. However, it is a representation of my own awareness of a lifestyle and culture on the islands of Guernsey, Herm and Sark which was different from my own, but one into which I assimilated.

One of the steps along Minny's journey towards acceptance of the unfamiliar and 'The Daughter's' shift from a possible realism to liminal fantasy is Minny's visit to the North Tower. This setting was inspired partly by Guernsey's Little Chapel, which is decorated in broken ceramics and shells, and also by Herm's obelisk, an impressive and unexpected monument which stands by a cliff in an otherwise empty field. The first time I pre-wrote in this space, I was standing at one end of the obelisk's field. Although the beach and cliff are just beyond it, all that could be seen was the grass, the obelisk, and the shells and bones left behind by birds. It was as though I was in one world, but one false step could have made me drop off the edge of it and onto another. Unlike the Little Chapel and obelisk, the North Tower is a grotesque and unsettling construction, yet to Minny it is a sacred place, that she has grown up knowing to be beautiful. This is a reflection of my occasionally finding parts of Guernsey life (such as meat raffles, pound notes and secondary school students owning mopeds) surprising, but these being understandably unremarkable to those around me.

The Tower, the rituals and the idea of The Daughter of the Island are uncanny because, like the tropes listed by Freud:

they remind us of repressed belief systems; either from childhood (like the belief that dolls can come to life, or the yearning to return to the womb), or from primitive stages of human development (like the belief in a protective twin-spirit accompanying us through life and death). (Page, 2008: viii)

Because of the surface level of familiarity or belonging, or the expectation of familiarity or belonging, the feeling of uncanniness is unexpected. Both my visits to Guernsey and the nocturnal History Room produced a sense of the uncanny in me and in my writing because of a 'an experience of liminality [...] a feeling that only happens to oneself, within oneself but is

never one's "own" [...] It may thus be construed as a foreign body within oneself, even oneself *as* a foreign body' (Royle, 2003: 2).

In the same way, an unexpected and unexpectedly contained writing space presented itself to me in March 2020, which in its unexpected unfamiliarity led to the positioning of myself as almost a 'foreign body' in it. At that point, my short story sequence was almost ready for submission; however, my intention was to revisit as many of my writing spaces as possible at least once more. Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and UK 'lockdown', this became impossible. My multiple writing spaces were reduced to one, that of the family home. Rather than this signalling an end to my research, it afforded me the opportunity to consider a writing space upon which I had not previously reflected. The writing space of my home should have been well-known enough so as not to impinge upon my writing. Yet the circumstances that led to it being the only writing space to which I had access were completely new. Instead of halting my research, this reduction in writing spaces provided support for my findings, as I once again found elements of the uncanny in the free writing sessions which remained part of my routine. If 'intellectual uncertainty' (Jentsch, 1906: 16) is a prerequisite for uncanniness, it is unsurprising that at a time of global uncertainty, my writing should contain elements of the uncanny. Although this was a familiar writing space in which I belonged, the unprecedented events outside also continued to influence me 'un- or pre-consciously' (Figlerowicz, 2012: 5). I was still experiencing the world outside, albeit predominantly virtually, enabling it to continue to have an impact on my perception of the writing space (Brennan, 2004: 6). I found myself in an uncanny world, between the familiar and unfamiliar.

Isolation and Routine

Isolation and routine are recurring themes in my short story sequence and important factors within my research. Each writing space I used, whether contained or geographical, familiar or unfamiliar, resulted in some degree of isolation, both conscious and unconscious. At times this was manifested in a negative sense of separation, at other times in a more positive feeling of solitude. The manner of isolation informed my relationship with each space and the effect on my writing. My attempts – both deliberate and unconscious – to combat that isolation strengthened my relationship with the space, further affecting the impact on my writing.

It is also possible to draw connections between feelings of isolation and of needing solitude while in writing spaces, and the presence of two of the key characteristics of the short story sequence in my sequence – interior monologue and unexpressed thoughts and feelings. Coupled with my pre-existing interest in the uses of interior monologue within the short story (for instance as a means to expand time within a short narrative, as discussed above in the chapter on short stories), this solitude helped to push my stories in the direction of interior monologue or stream of consciousness. Similarly, the fact that when I was first writing or redrafting in a space, I was not in discussion with others around me, is mirrored by the feature of unexpressed thoughts and feelings in my stories.

The isolation I felt within the writing spaces is manifested in feelings of isolation in the protagonists of my short story sequence. For example, the first writing of the garden party in ‘Time Out’ took place in the contained space of the terrace of a café called Casa Pedro in Miami Platja, Catalonia. Parts of this scene, descriptions of concrete details of the setting refer directly to this writing space, such as, ‘Here and there, a lemon coloured leaf poked through the branches that crossed like Mediterranean vines.’ However, on analysis it is apparent that the feelings I had while within that space have also been unconsciously written

into this scene. The atmosphere was very relaxed and this is reflected in the story in the attitude and behaviour of the majority of the party guests. Yet this attitude and these feelings are not shared by Josie, from whose perspective the story is narrated, who instead feels on edge, out of place and isolated. These contrasting perceptions of the space and events within the story are reflections of my simultaneous and contrasting reactions to my writing space.

I spent two hours using the café as a writing space for first and free writing on just one occasion and it was a comfortable, pleasant environment in which to work. Yet, while the atmosphere was conducive to writing, I was simultaneously aware that my presence within that space was different from that of the other clientele. I unconsciously (and a little consciously) felt isolated. Although I was not the only non-Spanish or non-Catalonian person there, I was the only British person and, while I was neither the only woman in the space nor the only person sitting alone, I was the only woman sitting alone. Also, unlike the majority of the cafés that I had previously used as writing spaces, I was the only person writing. My experience in this unfamiliar writing space was not negative but on reflection, it is apparent that my awareness of my difference from others in the space, and of the difference in how I was using the space, created feelings of isolation. The effect of these feelings and of the space is present in the isolation that Josie feels in the garden.

The initial first writing of 'Seasalter' also took place in an unfamiliar space where I knew I would be spending only a limited time and to which I would be unlikely to return. The writing space was the conservatory of a house in Seasalter, Kent where I was spending the weekend. The conservatory led off my bedroom onto a garden, at the end of which was a small road, on the other side of which was the beach. The garden wall hid both the road and the sand, giving the impression that the garden opened onto the sea. Although I had rented the house with friends, when I started the free write on the Saturday morning I was alone and had not yet seen or spoken to anyone else that day. This, along with the conservatory looking out

on an empty garden, clear sea and the fact that there was no traffic, made this feel a very isolated space, despite my knowing that this was not in fact the case. I also knew that I would only be occupying this space for another day and a half and that I would not be returning to it during my research, meaning that I would also not be able to build a strong relationship with it. It would remain an unfamiliar space. I therefore felt isolated not only from people but from the writing space itself.

This isolation is manifested in the isolation of the protagonist of 'Seasalter' who wakes up alone in an unfamiliar space. As in 'Time Out', some of the descriptions of setting are direct descriptions of the writing space and the result of a deliberate decision to allow the space to affect the text. For example, 'Shells bought wholesale. Factory faded wood cut into cute shapes by industrial lathe' relates to the writing space. However, the lack of interaction between the protagonist and any other character is also demonstrative of the impact of the writing space. During the writing session I was alone and isolated, which was a contrast to the rest of that weekend.

The previous day had been very hectic and eventful, involving journeys into and out of London and meeting up with friends whom I hadn't seen for a long time. Yet none of this found its way into my free writing. The calm, quiet isolation of the contained writing space that morning had a greater impact on my writing due to its juxtaposition with the events of the previous day and the busy plans for the remainder of that weekend. In the story, the protagonist is aware of the other people – the jogger with 'hair swinging behind, as if it were a happy dog'; the man with 'baggy trunks sat on pink, saggy flesh' – but (other than an ignored or unseen wave) there is no interaction and they are distant from her rather than part of her space. I was aware that others were in the house with me, but in that writing space and in that session I was similarly remote from my friends, as they were all upstairs and out of sight.

In 'Seasalter', ambiguity surrounds the space in which the protagonist has awoken, the reason why she is there, and whether the other people she sees are real or imagined. This is again representative of the type of isolation I was experiencing in that writing space. I was alone but not, both inside and outside (in the conservatory) and on land but feeling almost at sea because of the view. The door of the writing space was not '[w]ooden and whitewashed' but the door in the story is a representation of it. Once I went through it, I knew that the weekend's celebrations would continue. At the same time, this return to real life would mean there would be no more 'alone time' or isolation that day and no more writing. Although walking through the door would lead to something positive and an end to isolation, I was as reluctant to do so as the protagonist, as I was invested in my work, and to join the rest of the party meant leaving it behind.

The brevity of my stay in this house, and the isolation of the writing space within it, led directly to the aspects of 'Seasalter' that I discuss in the 'Short Stories' chapter: its shortness, its ambiguity between realism and fantasy, and therefore its ability to act as a 'hinge-point' within the sequence as a whole. These aspects became more apparent to me when I began to consider the ordering of the stories, and decided to place 'Seasalter' between the longer stories 'Instacising' and 'Office Space', acting as a kind of brief glimpse into another possible world.

Whereas there is a clear underlying negativity to the isolation experienced by the protagonists of both 'Time Out' and 'Seasalter', in 'Office Space', isolation is a goal actively sought by Amanda. Yet, when she ultimately finds herself working in solitary confinement, she realises that it is not what she wants after all. The spaces in which this story was written included the History Room of Gladstone's Library, the Tate Modern Members' Bar and the Everyman Writers' Room and the effects of these spaces are discussed in the chapters 'Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny' and 'Memory'. In fact, 'Office Space' was

influenced by my experience of and attitude to all of the writing spaces throughout my research, as it was one of the later stories written. In the discussion of 'Seasalter' above, I mention my positive view of isolation. Isolation (while physically writing) was something that I, like Amanda, sought even when writing in public places. However, unlike Amanda, I did not want to be shut off from the rest of the world. My ideal was to have space in which to write undisturbed, from which I could observe the rest of the world. I was looking again for that corner that would be a 'solitude for the imagination' (Bachelard, 1958: 155). Amanda seeks out the space in the office which she knows will minimise social interaction, and has found the ideal place to spend her lunch breaks where she can eat in complete solitude. She is fearful of other people because she does not understand them and, by removing herself from them, she is able to control the situation. Her routine, from the time at which she takes the Tube to when she returns home, has become a ritual which she must follow to keep that control. Although not fearful of others or social interaction I too removed myself from the centre of spaces in order to observe the space from the edge, limit interactions and control the space. I was looking for a degree of solitude that would allow concentration, not absolute isolation. For example, I preferred to be alone when in the Everyman Writers' Room, but on those occasions I was still able to see people walking around the theatre and along Hope Street. As I will discuss shortly, I would not have wanted to be unable to see anyone else at all.

As with Amanda and her office space, I was very aware that the people within and around a public writing space were unknown quantities that could not be chosen like a particular desk or pen. Whereas this is a source of antagonism for her, I predicted that their effect on my work would be more positive and take the form of inspiration. This proved to be true, but there was a tight-rope to walk between influence and disruption. An overheard conversation or an event witnessed would lead me to write down what had been said or seen

in the back of my notebook, before continuing with the story on which I was working. Such distractions proved more beneficial to pre-writing and free writing than to first writing and redrafting, as the distraction was never something that fitted with what I was writing at that very moment. During those sessions in which there were frequent distractions, I found myself becoming annoyed and frustrated. These feelings were fleeting as I realised the absurdity of being frustrated by the presence of the public in a public place. It was ridiculous to be annoyed at people quite reasonably using a space as intended, rather than acknowledging they were entering my writing space. Amanda's attitude to others, and ultimately detrimental desire for isolation, is a reimagining of that attitude of mine in my writing spaces – my frustration with distractions and elements that were out of my control. Taken to extremes, it is a reminder of both the absurdity and perils of such unfounded territorialism.

Amanda learns too late that complete isolation is not really desirable after all. The writing of her comeuppance was directly influenced by the one occasion on which I felt completely isolated in a writing space. This was when I was given the opportunity to lock myself into the History Room at Gladstone's Library to work alone at night. As already discussed in greater detail in 'Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny', this proved to be disconcerting and not as immediately productive as I had hoped. Nevertheless, it was my reaction to the isolation of that writing space in that session, and the fact that the isolated writing space I had coveted had proven to be unsettling, that inspired the outline of 'Office Space'. Amanda's search for isolation is a reflection of my own desire for isolation throughout my research. The unwanted isolation that she ultimately receives reflects my pre-writing experience of unexpectedly undesirable isolation.

This experience of unwelcome isolation illustrates how the initial effect of the writing space on the writer may be negative, while ultimately having a creative and productive effect on the writing. Whether the feelings of the writer are affected positively or negatively, the

writing produced is equally reflective of the effect of the writing space. In the pre-writing or other 'non-physical writing' stage of writing a story, feelings of discomfort or negative isolation were easier to acknowledge and use within the story, as I was able to spend time considering them. The most prolonged and extreme example of isolation in the sequence is that of Minny in 'The Daughter'. It is an isolation externally imposed and unwanted, but which she gradually accepts and to which she succumbs, becoming part of the island legend which she had once denied. Minny is isolated from her family and 'normal' life, the island is isolated from the mainland and the 'real' world is isolated from the fantasy world. As previously explored in the chapter 'Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny', the majority of this story was written on Guernsey, with some stages also written on the islands of Herm and Sark and in the city of Saint-Malo in France. The uncanny effect that these writing spaces had on this story has already been explored, but the significance of isolation is also apparent.

Much of the pre-writing and first writing of 'The Daughter' took place when I first arrived on Guernsey; however, I was constantly writing different stages of it throughout my visits there. On my first visit, like Minny, I was separated from the mainland, as well as from family, friends and the life I was used to. I spent much of the first week there on my own, either exploring the island, visiting Herm or writing. Unlike Minny this was something I had chosen and an opportunity I embraced. The following week, I spent one day working in a school, after which the island had its first snow in five years, leading to two school 'snow days' and the island effectively shutting down. There were particular events and experiences during those first, somewhat strange two weeks that influenced the story. These included the 'panic buying' when the island was 'cut off' by the snow (which inspired the 'Running Down'), getting lost on both Guernsey and Herm, and discovering that Herm had its own micro-climate. It was, however, that initial extended isolation in this writing space that gave the story direction.

In pre-writing, feelings of isolation and discomfort can be negative while providing inspiration. When physically writing, however, while still allowing myself to be influenced by the space, it was crucial to my research that feelings of isolation or discomfort were not so great as to hinder my writing. One way in which I consciously and unconsciously strengthened my relationship with a writing space was to attach a routine or ritual to it. Each writer's writing routine and how they control a space varies greatly. There are those who 'can plop at the kitchen table without clearing the breakfast dishes' (Burroway, 2019: 249). Maya Angelou used to book a hotel room with 'all the paintings and any decoration taken out' to use from half past six in the morning until two o'clock in the afternoon (Angelou, 2013), whereas during a Northern Writers' Awards roadshow I attended, Okechukwu Nzelu said he found he worked best late at night.⁹ Khaled Hosseini and Haruki Murakami both believe in the importance of repetition and writing every day. Hosseini states 'You have to write every day, and you have to write whether you feel like it or not' (Hosseini, 2012), and Murakami says of his regimented daily routine, 'I keep to this routine every day without variation. The repetition itself becomes the important thing; it's a form of mesmerism. I mesmerize myself to reach a deeper state of mind' (Murakami, 2004). My preferred writing routine for 'physical writing' is to sit at a desk or table and to write with a biro in a hardbacked, lined A6 or pocket journal. For this research, I also had a structured routine for 'physical writing' sessions, which was usually: free writing; writing about the space; resuming work on the current story. The position in which I chose to write within a space was also part of the routine: something to lean on; a view to look out on and no one behind me, providing me with 'the illusion of protection' (Bachelard, 1958: 27). My routine, and I believe also that of most other writers, emphasises that 'essence of the notion of home' (Bachelard, 1958: 27) that is explored in

⁹ Northern Writers' Awards: Blackpool Roadshow, Blackpool Central Library, 18th January 2020

‘Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny’. Thus routine increases the sense of belonging and familiarity, and while it may enhance the feeling of solitude, it decreases that of isolation.

Routine is also associated with ‘normal’ life; productivity; being part of society; and (if we instigate it ourselves) gives us the feeling of control over a situation. Minny uses routine in an attempt to avoid losing her identity: ‘If she were to make it through the next week, or even two, her days must be structured. Ritual was key.’ Ironically, her implementation of a routine to attempt to hold onto her sense of herself as she is now is interconnected with the idea of ritual, and therefore with her past and that of the island. Nevertheless, her justification for parts of the routine indicates practicality rather than superstition, such as ‘supply scavenging. It was unthinkable that rescue would not come. But not impossible.’ This routine is also a way of keeping her fears at bay; of acting to avoid thinking or accepting the worst. She pretends that the daily attempt to call the mainland is ‘technically unnecessary’, but her need to justify it – ‘it would be good to know the exact date she would be picked up’ – hints at her anxiety.

It is no coincidence that Amanda in ‘Office Space’ also follows a strict daily routine, catching ‘the Tube into work early every morning’, choosing ‘the same corner desk’ and taking her lunch break ‘at precisely twelve o’clock’. She is controlling the situation and spaces in the small ways that she can – knowing who the other Tube passengers will be, what her immediate work environment will be and when she will be eating. She is limiting the unknowable quantities and controlling her situation through routine. As mentioned earlier, I found myself guilty on occasion of being frustrated by my inability to control all elements of the writing environment, and routine was a way to combat this. ‘Office Space’ began as a reflection of my own need for routine in my research and then developed in both first writing and redrafting into a self-critical allegory, the moral being ‘Be careful what you wish for’.

Like Amanda, I found myself guilty of being somewhat territorial about my writing spaces (for example, the previously mentioned upstairs desk in Gladstone's Library's History Room). I wanted to be in a specific position within the space, to be alone or with very few people in the space and not to be disturbed. However, I chided myself for having such an unrealistic and selfish ambition. Also, as discussed in 'Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny', when I actually had the opportunity to be completely alone in the History Room, I found it a very uncomfortable experience.

'Office Space' is, therefore, a result of the effect of various writing spaces, as well as my awareness of how I attempted to affect my relationship with those spaces. 'Instacising', already connected to 'Office Space' by setting, is also connected to it by both isolation and routine. The protagonists of both experience self-imposed isolation, and routine plays a key part in this. Whereas Amanda uses routine to isolate herself, Steph's sceptical attitude to office life, her colleagues and all aspects of the office routine in 'Instacising' also leave her similarly isolated. While this is her choice, unlike Amanda, Steph's ultimate goal is not complete isolation. Steph and Leigh's friendship is built on criticism of their workplace and the people in it – they bond through this, and in doing so, isolate themselves from their colleagues. However, when Leigh leaves, Steph is left isolated from the others and remains resistant to becoming part of the routine, comparing this world unfavourably to that of Leigh's travels. Thus, she isolates herself further. In reality, Steph is not only geographically isolated from Leigh but also, despite their supposed friendship, she has no communication with her. Steph is left in limbo, isolated from both routine and freedom. However, as she realises her isolation from Leigh's world, she is drawn towards the other world of office quizzes and befriending the colleagues she formerly ridiculed. The story ends with the sentences, 'Hair wax, charm bracelet, baseball cap. The lump moved.' This hints not only at the connection between the lump, the Instagram world and the office world, but also that in

being drawn into one, Steph has been assimilated into all of them and has disappeared as her colleagues have done before.

The number of spaces in which I wrote stages of 'Instacising' is second only to 'The Daughter' in my sequence. The seventeen spaces used in the writing of 'Instacising' can be found in Appendix B. They include seven that were already familiar to me at the start of my research (for example, my family home and Barcelona) and six were spaces in which I was not the sole writer (for example, the Tate Britain Members' Room and the Liverpool Lime Street – London Euston train). One explanation of how this variety of spaces led to the prevalence of routine in 'Instacising' is that the quantity of spaces reduced the impact of one space over another, while increasing the impact on my behaviour and routine across all spaces. However, whereas I used routine to fortify my position within a space, routine is perceived negatively by Steph.

An alternative explanation is that 'Instacising' was the last of the sequence that I began writing. I had begun to think back not only over the years of research, but also to my career prior to it. I was aware that once my research had ended I was unlikely to have the freedom and time to write and research in this way, and was perhaps fearful of having to return to an externally determined routine. I was equally aware of my good fortune in having had the opportunity to write, research and dictate my own routine. Steph's attitude is an exaggerated reflection of my own fear of returning to routine life, and my feelings of guilt about this fear are manifested in her unreasonable attitude and eventual capitulation.

Memory

As noted earlier in the ‘Short Stories’ chapter, György Lukács argues that a short story presents ‘the totality of life’ by ‘giving form to an episode in the hero’s life’ in a ‘strongly sensual’ way (Lukács, 1910: 92). Despite its relative shortness, the short story is ‘long in depth’ and gives the reader ‘experience of meaning’ (O’Connor, 1972: 94). Memory is a method through which the short story writer can create this depth and totality and for this reason I established it as a valuable technique in that chapter. As the focus of my research was the effect of writing spaces I became particularly interested in the relationship between memory and space, which was not always straightforward, as this chapter will explore.

Early on in my research I noticed that memories often appeared in my free writing as well as appearing in my pre-writing and first writing, albeit to a lesser degree. This was true no matter whether the writing space I was using was contained or a geographical area. Neither did the memories’ surfacing depend on my familiarity with the space, nor on my sense of belonging or isolation. Sometimes, the connection between the remembered events and scenes was apparent, such as the memories of discomfort mentioned in ‘Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny’. On other occasions, the connection between space and memory was not related to emotion nor the physical appearance of the writing space nor remembered space, but on reflecting on them I have found links between the two. For example, one of the first writing spaces of ‘Wednesday’ was a café in Southport. This was where I ‘first wrote’ the section of the story in which the large group of friends are together in a club:

Black hallways where we sat for privacy, and a lounge we only congregated in on New Year’s Eve, the extended group, the interchangeable six. Sitting on the sofa backs, never the seats.

The setting described is based on memories of dark and busy clubs I went to in my late teens and early twenties full of people of a similar age; memories that came to mind while I was free writing in the café. There was little in common physically and visually between the writing space and remembered spaces, the café being small, very bright and half full of customers aged forty and above. The only connection between the writing, the story and the remembered spaces is that they are all hospitality venues. Although the atmospheres are not identical, they are similar in that they are spaces in which people socialise. While I was writing alone, there were conversations happening around the café and although there is no dialogue in this section of 'Wednesday', the narrator is remembering socialising with friends, whereas she is solitary for the majority of the story. The atmosphere of the writing space therefore evoked memories of spaces with similar atmospheres. As mentioned in the chapter 'Belonging, Familiarity and the Uncanny', the interior monologue and stream of consciousness throughout 'Wednesday' also demonstrates the effect of writing spaces such as Gladstone's Library in which though I was observant, I was also solitary and absorbed in my own thoughts and work.

An explanation for the emerging of memories in general within my writing spaces can be found in Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. As discussed earlier in the chapter 'Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny', Bachelard states that all 'inhabited' spaces contain 'the essence of the notion of home' and he explores the close relationship between 'home', 'memory' and 'imagination' (Bachelard, 1958: 25-27). Whenever I used a writing space during my research I was inhabiting that space, whether that was for a couple of months or a few hours. The space then became one which bore 'the essence of the notion of home', as I tried to make a home for myself and my writing. Furthermore, as discussed previously, each time a space was unfamiliar to me, or I lacked a sense of belonging in it, I both consciously and unconsciously tried to rectify this situation and make myself feel more

comfortable in it by, for example, establishing a routine. When I did so, I was increasing the homeliness of the space to me.

According to Bachelard, the sense of home and ‘comfort’ one feels within a space is augmented both by ‘imagination’ and by ‘reliving memories of protection’ (Bachelard, 1958: 27). This function of the imagination, to increase the homeliness of a space, is unintentional and unconscious. In using a space as a writing space during my research I was also using imagination intentionally. It therefore follows that inhabiting a space in order to write should make it even more of a home to the writer than when not writing, as the imagination is working both consciously and unconsciously. If imagination does emphasise the protective and homely nature of a space, the very act of using it consciously to write a short story would make that space more of a home.

Memories were one way in which the imagination acted unconsciously in order to augment my sense of connection and home within a space. As mentioned earlier in ‘Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny’, even a negative memory can enhance the writer’s relationship with a space because it is still creating a connection with it. Bachelard writes that an ‘empty shell’ generates ‘daydreams of refuge’ (Bachelard, 1958: 127). Each of the writing spaces I have used, while having qualities that have influenced my writing, has been an ‘empty shell’ to me, that I have entered with the intention of filling with a narrative. The memories that surfaced in my writing spaces were ‘daydreams of refuge’, made safe by the certainty of known and completed events, providing a refuge from uncertainty and unfamiliarity.

As this thesis is concerned with my interpretation of the effects of writing spaces on me as a writer, it is therefore phenomenological, being an ‘interpretive study of human experience’ (Seamon, 2000: 1). Bachelard theorises that when a ‘phenomenologist’ is in a

new home, 'memory and imagination' are closely linked as she seeks to uncover the space's 'original shell' (Bachelard, 1958: 26-27). In allowing myself to be influenced by the space and interpreting this in my writing, I have been using imagination to uncover the 'original shell' or essence of each space. This uncovering was unconscious (even though I was consciously allowing it to happen). When the memories of clubs surfaced during my free writing in the space of the café, they represented such an uncovering. It was the 'original shell' that influenced me, rather than the more obvious physical and visual features of the café. In considering the effects of each space on my writing, I have also been consciously uncovering its 'original shell' by drilling down to analyse which part of the essence of each space has created particular effects on myself and my writing. In the case of the café, it was the atmosphere that was the essence of that space and that which gave it its sense of homeliness and connection to me. This was represented in the memories that surfaced.

The importance of memory to both the creative and critical aspects of this thesis creates commonalities between my research and memory work. In *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, Annette Kuhn describes memory work as a 'practice of remembering which takes an inquiring attitude towards the past and its (re)construction through memory', and that 'takes what is remembered as material for interpretation' (Kuhn, 2002: 157). The memories that have surfaced in my pre-writing, free writing and first writing, which have then been redrafted for use within stories, are 'material' that I have interpreted. In reflecting on those memories and their interpretation, I have taken 'an inquiring attitude' towards the relationship between memory, writing space and writing.

When writing 'Wednesday', I knew that the narrator would be constantly thinking back to her relationship with the estranged friend that she was going to meet. I wanted the flashbacks to coincide with her walking past places on her journey that were significant to their friendship. I therefore decided to make a number of similar journeys to the narrator,

some of which involved walking past or near spaces that were of a similar significance to me at a younger age. This was in order to use my memories as ‘material for interpretation’ and to reconstruct those memories into the narrative, as well as an exercise in self-consciously writing using affect. I wanted both to use the spaces that I encountered in my description of setting and to stimulate the remembering of emotions, atmospheres and events for use within the story. I used memories in this way in order to give the reader ‘an experience of meaning’ and to make the story ‘long in depth’ (O’Connor, 1972: 94). The flashbacks in ‘Wednesday’ give ‘form to an episode’ in which not much happens in real time in a ‘strongly sensual way’ (Lukács, 1910: 92).

One of the routes I took, which is also that taken by the narrator of ‘Wednesday’, was from Allerton Road in South Liverpool to the Liverpool Royal Court Theatre in Liverpool city centre. On this walk, not only was I consciously carrying out memory work, but I was also acting as a flâneur, someone who walks the streets, ‘in the heart of the multitude’ and ‘away from home’ (Baudelaire, 1863: 9). Each walk was an exercise in pre-writing, during which I made observations and notes of descriptions and memories, as well as undertaking some free and first writing. The notes on these spaces did prove beneficial in describing the setting of ‘Wednesday’. However, the memories were less relevant to the narrative. When the specific space along the route was not one to which I had a personal connection, perhaps that should be unsurprising. Nevertheless, given the general prevalence of memories during free writing sessions, I expected there to be some memories from these walks that I could use in my narrative. Yet even the known spaces on this journey with which I did have a prior connection did not stir memories I could use in the narrative of ‘Wednesday’.

There are three explanations for this. Firstly, I wanted the narrator’s flashbacks to be negative, but my memories of those spaces were generally positive, and therefore were not helpful in creating the narrative. Secondly, first writing in unfamiliar writing spaces and those

in which I lacked a sense of belonging encouraged memories that strengthened my connection to the space. However, when walking through spaces not known to me with the aim of pre-writing, there was little time to encourage such memories. Therefore, it was unnecessary for my unconscious mind to strengthen my relationship with these spaces to make me feel more comfortable. Thirdly, any connection I did have with the writing spaces through which I was walking was now distant. Not only was I much older than when those spaces were important to me, but I was also approaching these spaces as a writer. There was too much of a disconnect and no real need for the unconscious mind to make me feel comfortable in them and provide ‘daydreams of refuge’, my overt keenness to inspire memories perhaps even forming a greater barrier to this.

On a quest for both description and memory, I visited one of the spaces along the walk: a club where I went when I was the narrator’s age in flashback. I was using this space for pre-writing and inspiration rather than first writing, not least because to do the latter would have been impractical. I hoped spending longer in the space might evoke memories that would inform the characters in ‘Wednesday’, as well as building on the description of the club that I had written in the Southport café. Unlike the other occasions when I had consciously chosen to make a space my writing space, I was accompanied by a friend, but one who had no prior connection to the space. Having discussed the club and memories of it with that friend, I then carried out a first writing and free writing session the following day at the Tate Liverpool Café. Not only did some memories surface during the free writing that I later redrafted for use in the narrative, but it was also a productive first writing session. I was able to combine my memories of the club with my friend’s detached perspective on the space itself. This proved more useful to the narrative than the walks, as I used the pre-writing space not to force memories to the surface, but to encourage them in a more natural, organic way through conversation and reflection.

Although the walk discussed above did incorporate places with which I had a prior relationship, the walk itself was not one of emotional significance to me. I did, however, use some other walks as pre-writing and first writing spaces which were both familiar and of importance to me. One such walk was along the South Bank in London, London being the city where I have lived most of my adult life, but from which my research dictated that I spend a lot of time away. I have made the journey from London Bridge Station to the Royal Festival Hall on countless occasions and it includes several spaces en route with which I have connections and which evoke memories. London Bridge is the station where I arrive when taking the train into Central London from my home in South London. The route goes past Southwark Cathedral, the Tate Modern, the National Theatre, the National Film Theatre, the Queen Elizabeth Hall and finishes at the Royal Festival Hall. Each of these landmarks are spaces of which I have memories of visiting over the years and which I have also used as writing spaces. I took these research walks while consciously thinking about the spaces around me, pre-writing, free writing, and first writing. As I was frequently away from London during the course of my research, I was prevented from taking this walk as often as I have in the past. Therefore, when I did make this journey, though it felt familiar to me, it also generated feelings of nostalgia, loss and separation. This mood was transferred to ‘Wednesday’, as well as to ‘Instacising’.

One of the writing spaces on this walk was the Tate Modern. I used the gallery itself as a source of inspiration in the pre-writing stages of ‘Time Out’, ‘Office Space’ and ‘Instacising’. I also used both the Members’ Bar on the fifth floor (a café bar with terraces either side) and the Granville-Grossman Members’ Room (which takes up the eighth floor of the Blavatnik Building) as free writing and first writing spaces for those stories. One side of the Granville-Grossman Members’ Room faces the NEO Bankside apartment building, the floor to ceiling windows of which allow Tate members to look directly into the residents’

homes. This resulted in two particular effects on my writing. I had already written some of what would become the descriptions of Leigh's posts in 'Instacising'; however, this influenced my choice to have the protagonist use the Instagram posts as a kind of voyeurism. She looks on the life of her friend, which on one level seems very close to her, separated only by a screen, in the same way that the Tate members appear to be only metres away from the lives of the NEO residents. In the same way that there is both a frightening drop and a huge status gap between the public gallery visitors and the owners of the multi-million-pound properties, there is a huge geographical difference between Leigh and Steph, as well as a difference in their statuses within their friendship (as realised by Steph as the narrative progresses). Yet the distance between Steph and Leigh is also a reflection of the distance created by time and memory. I was reminded of visits I had made to the gallery with friends, but I was now using the space to work, while they were also working in different spaces. These were, once more, 'daydreams of refuge', while also representing the difference between these two parts of my life.

The visitors of the gallery look directly into the NEO apartments, but I noticed that some of the residents have chosen to direct their furniture towards the inside, away from the prying eyes of the tourists. The impact of this on my writing can be found in the inward-looking nature of Amanda in 'Office Space', of Joanne and Josie in 'Time Out', and particularly in Steph in 'Instacising'. She is living vicariously through the lives of others, both online and through the television. There is envy and regret there, but it is her choice to look inwards instead of outwards. Looking at these apartments also served as a reminder of Bachelard's 'empty shell' (Bachelard, 1958: 127) and 'essence of the notion of home' (Bachelard, 1958: 27). The glass, and the apartments' openness, make them seem less cosy from the outside, and one would imagine that the inhabitants have chosen to live there in order to look out at the world, rather than inwards at the cosy shell of home. Yet even they, in

turning their furniture inwards, have tried to create ‘protection’ for themselves and ‘the notion of home’ (Bachelard, 1958: 27). In the same way, Steph in ‘Instacising’ may try to convince herself she wants to look out at the world, but she ultimately feels safer and more at home looking inwards at what she knows.

I also used the Tate Britain Members’ Room as a pre-writing and first writing space for ‘Instacising’ and ‘Office Space’. Its white walls, high ceilings and pillars are loosely reminiscent of the inside of the Liver Buildings, where I worked after graduating from my first degree. The Liver Building was already the inspiration for the office in ‘Office Space’, but the similarities between it and the Tate Britain Members’ Room inspired memories of it, and is one of the reasons for ‘Instacising’ also being office-based. As it was a writing space I had not visited prior to my research and one to which I will not have access once I have left Liverpool John Moores University, it was somewhere I felt somewhat of an outsider looking in. The room is accessed via a lift to a floor on which there are no other galleries or facilities for non-members. Although very friendly and unassuming once inside, it is therefore surrounded by an aura of exclusivity and separation compared to the rest of the gallery. Members can even look over a rail in the centre, into the Rotunda and literally down on non-members. This idea of separation also became central to ‘Instacising’. It also fed into the idea of one person looking out at another world which they are not a part of, one which they can use as ‘material for interpretation’ as one does with memory. In ‘Instacising’, Steph is the person on the outside looking in, whereas I was, despite how I might have felt, on the inside looking out at the rest of the visitors from the confines of the Members’ Room.

As mentioned earlier in ‘Belonging, Familiarity and The Uncanny’, when the UK ‘went into lockdown’ in 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, I found my multiple contained and geographical writing and research spaces reduced to one – the family home. I was, of course, not alone in having my freedom of movement inevitably curtailed and,

despite the isolating nature of the lockdown, that isolation was a nationally and internationally shared experience. For example, closed gyms and theatres led to the popularity of Joe Wicks and the National Theatre at Home. There was also a collective lean towards nostalgia in shared, virtual spaces. In an interview with *The Guardian*, George Saunders compares the pandemic to being a ghost observing the world but unable to interact with it: ‘you can remember being in it and loving it and not having to worry about wearing a mask [...] So it does, in the same way being a ghost would, make a little pause. Like: “Hah! Wow! This world is crazy. It’s wonderful. I wish I was in it again!”’ (Saunders, 2022).

The recent past and the idea of getting back to the lives we had been living up until the pandemic were attractive, but equally so was the more distant past. It was representative of safety, as people leant into those ‘daydreams of refuge’ (Bachelard, 1958: 127) and ‘memories of protection’ (Bachelard, 1958: 27). Not only was I part of this collective lean, but, in analysing the when, where, how and why of the writing of my stories, I was continually reflecting on their past and my own. I began to investigate the concept of hauntology, as I was working with the past, while in a time that felt ‘out of joint’ and with no ‘possibility of gathering together’ (Derrida, 1993: 263). This, in addition to the concept of vertical travel, for which one travels ‘down into the particulars’ of a space (Cronin, 2000: 19) encouraged me to begin to look at a familiar writing space (the family home) in a new way.

In this thesis, memories (representative of imagination) reflect and combat those themes and emotions discussed previously: familiarity, belonging and isolation. They also represent separation and the need for or loss of the idea of ‘home’. In a writing space, memory is a vital tool with which the imagination can find refuge, ‘protection’ and ‘the essence of the notion of home’ (Bachelard, 1958: 27). In changing the world around that space, the pandemic both informed my research and suggested avenues for future research.

Conclusion

Both my short story sequence and this thesis demonstrate that the writing space does affect that which is written in it, and the manner in which it does so is dependent on the relationship between the writer and the space. The more open a writer is to a space and its effect, the greater the influence on her work. Conscious consideration of the space increases its impact on the writer, and therefore on the writing. Space becomes place once the writer forms a connection with it. Each interaction with a writing space is either a reflection of the extent to which the writer 'knows that place intimately and reacts to it emotionally' (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001: 74), how much it 'bears the essence of the notion of home' (Bachelard, 1958: 27), or a manifestation of the writer's attempt to uncover these.

While familiarity with a space can make the writer feel comfortable in that space, it can never be taken for granted: factors beyond the writer's control, as borne out by both affect theory and this thesis, can easily transform the space to one which is unfamiliar, or force it into a limbo somewhere between the two. When a writer uses a familiar space in a way in which she has not done so previously, she alters her relationship with the space, its familiarity to her and therefore its effect on both her and her writing. For the short story writer open to the influence of the space, this may inspire a switch in the direction of a narrative, or provide the genesis of a new one.

A continuous consideration of the space's familiarity and unfamiliarity and the writer's awareness of the precariousness of her relationship with the space is conducive to the writing of uncanny stories that reflect the space's fluctuation between the two states, as well as the themes of solitude and isolation, sensations of which the writer becomes more acutely aware. These experiences can draw the writer towards the use of particular narrative techniques, such as interior monologue, as well as ambiguity and multiple layers of meaning.

The reader is put in a similar position to that of the writer, switching perspectives and between possible different interpretations or understandings

As the degree of familiarity with and belonging in a writing space changes, the writer's 'sense of homeliness uprooted' (Royle, 2003: 1) is reflected in her writing, particularly when pre-writing or first writing in a space that seems in-between or a 'non-place', a space that 'cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity' (Augé, 1995: 64). This feeling of being between worlds, of something seeming slightly off-kilter, may manifest itself in uncanny tropes in the writing.

The writer's sense of belonging in a space is governed by both the nature of the space, and by her own feelings before entering a space; again, by those factors outside of her control. It is for the writer to determine whether such feelings should be exorcised in a free writing session or embraced and followed to their creative conclusion. However the writer chooses to address feelings of unfamiliarity and a lack of belonging, whether she confronts them, accepts them or puts them to one side for later consideration, her aim is the same – she is trying to tame the space into a home for herself and for her writing and to 'comfort' herself 'with the illusion of protection' (Bachelard, 1958: 27). It is through the attempt to make a creative home – an illustration of the correlation between 'home', 'memory' and 'imagination' (Bachelard, 1958: 25-27) – that the effects of the space on the writing are manifested.

Though prior experience may inform a writer as to what the effects of a writing space will be, it cannot be assumed that the space will induce a particular effect on the writer and her writing. The space cannot be induced to create specific emotions that will have a specific effect to be transposed onto a pre-existing narrative frame. Memory plays a key role in strengthening the bond between writer and space unconsciously, and one might expect the

evocation of certain memories, but one cannot pre-determine the effect of those memories on an existing narrative, nor how they might inspire the writer to ‘take what is remembered as material for interpretation’ (Kuhn, 2002: 157).

When the writer is open to the possibility that the space will affect the text, the space will do so. The space evokes memories and emotions. The writer may choose to incorporate and be directed by these in her work in order to increase the homeliness of the space and its ‘illusion of protection’ (Bachelard, 1958: 27), thus allowing imagination to flourish. Alternatively, she may embrace them momentarily, then put them aside for later consideration. These cannot, however, be ignored once the writer is open to affect and the effects of the space and to the uncontrollable ‘areas of experience that seem to fall outside language’ (Hewitt, 2019: 111). A writer has two fundamental requirements from a writing space: solitude and homeliness. The writer may seek solitude, but the affective connections of a space to her and her writing mean that she is never truly isolated when she and her writing are embedded in that space.

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Appendix A

Writing Spaces

This appendix is a list of those contained and geographical writing spaces used during this research that were in some way significant to the writing of one or more stories in the collection.

Geographical

Contained

UK

Borth - Y- Gest

Holiday Home

Chester

Brother's House

Storyhouse Library

Hawarden

Gladstone's Library – Bedrooms

Food for Thought

Gladstone Room

Grounds

History Room

Theology Room

Liverpool

Café 38, Liverpool's Royal Court

Café Porto - Garden

FACT

LJMU John Foster Building – 103a

– G03

Krazy House

LIV Café

Liverpool Central Library – Picton Reading Room

Liverpool Everyman Theatre Writers’ Room

Radisson Blu

Ramada

Tate Liverpool – Café
Galleries

The Beatles’ Story

Tribeca

World Museum Café

London

Battersea Arts Centre

British Library

Friend’s House (Sutton)

Friend’s Apartment (Lambeth)

National Film Theatre

National Theatre

South Bank Centre

Tate Britain – Galleries
Members’ Room

Tate Modern – Galleries
Granville-Grossman Members’
Room
Members’ Bar

Port Sunlight

Lady Lever Art Gallery Café

Seasalter, Kent

Holiday Home

Southport

Bold Hotel

Caffè Nero, Chapel Street

Family Home
Lakeside Pub
Make It Workshop
Remedy, Churchtown
Remedy, Lord Street
Southport Pier and Café
Sparrowhawk

Outside UK

Channel Islands

Guernsey

Bordeaux Harbour
Candie Gardens
Castle Cornet
Le Dehus Dolmen
Fermain Valley Hotel Library
Guernsey Museum at Candie
Guilles Allès Library
Hideaway
Hojo
Jerbourg Hotel
Laval
Le Priaulx Library
Les Rocquettes
Little Chapel
Octopus
Saumarez Park
Slaughterhouse

States of Guernsey Accommodation

St Pierre Park

The Old Government House Hotel & Spa

The Terrace

Moulin Huet Bay

Herm

Belvoir Bay Café

Ship Inn

The White House

Jersey

Hotel de Normandie

St Helier

St Ouen

St Brelade

The Boathouse

Somerville Hotel

Sark

Sue's B&B

Stocks Hotel

Sunflower Café

France

Saint-Malo

Hotel Elizabeth

Hotel De L'Univers

Le Corps De Garde

Plage de Bonne Secours

Spain

Barcelona

Zoo Hotel

Darvaza
Fuerteventura Holiday Apartment Terrace

Miami Platja Casa Pedro
 Holiday Apartment – Balcony

Nerja

Santiago de Compostela

Geographical Space – Journeys

A Mrs. Dalloway Walk in London (www.virginiawoolfsociety.org)

Bordeaux Harbour – Beaucette Marina

Guernsey – Herm Ferry

Guernsey – Sark Ferry

Guernsey – Saint-Malo Ferry

La Fosse de Haut – Moulin Huet

Manchester Airport – Guernsey – Southampton Airport – Guernsey

Vale – St Peter Port

Liverpool Lime Street Station – London Euston Station (And Return)

Leeds – Liverpool

London Bridge Station – Southbank Centre

Manchester Airport – Southampton Airport – Guernsey

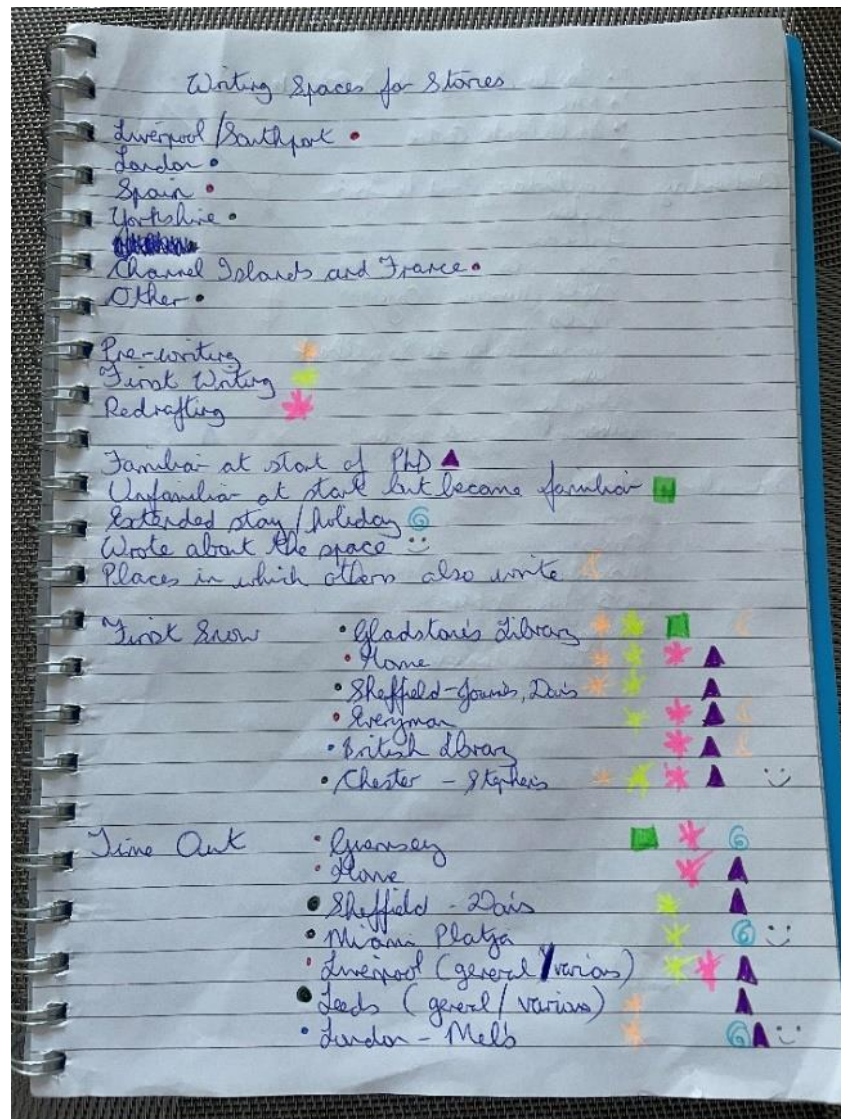
Smithdown Road – Liverpool City Centre

Saint-Malo City Walls

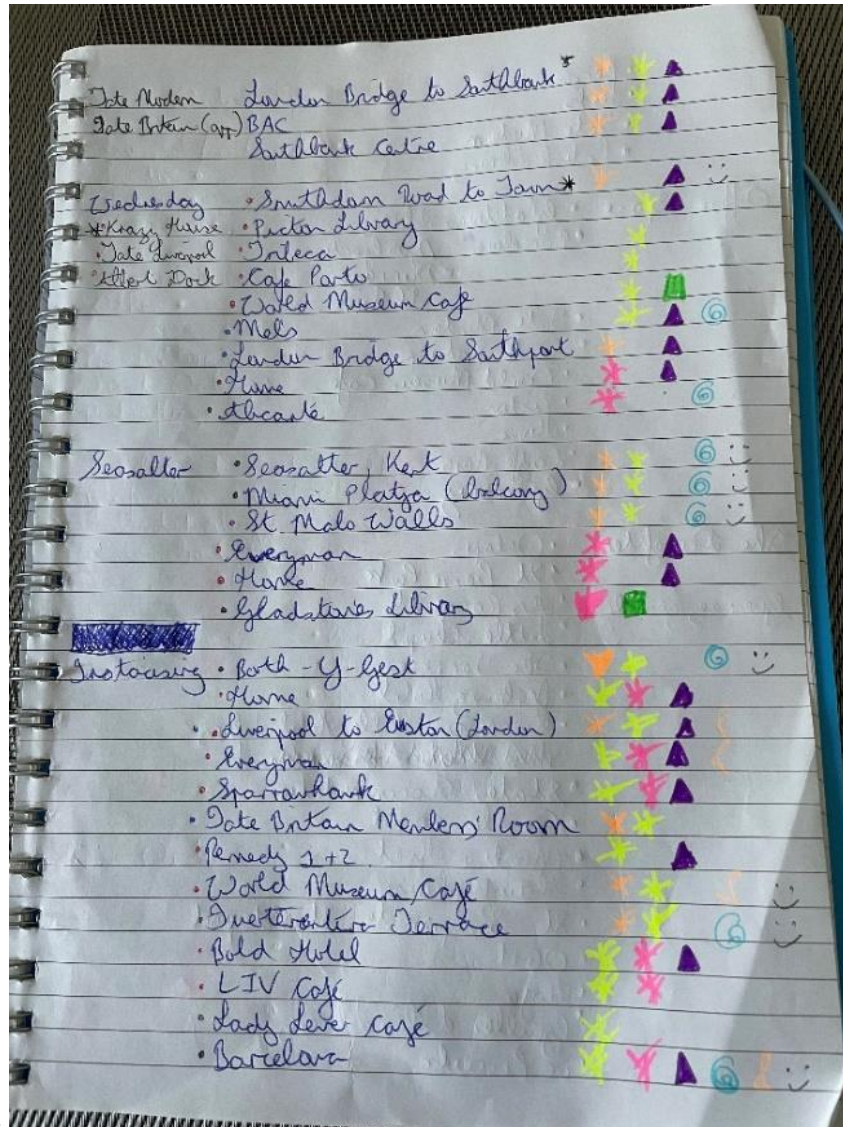
St Sampson – St Peterport

Appendix B

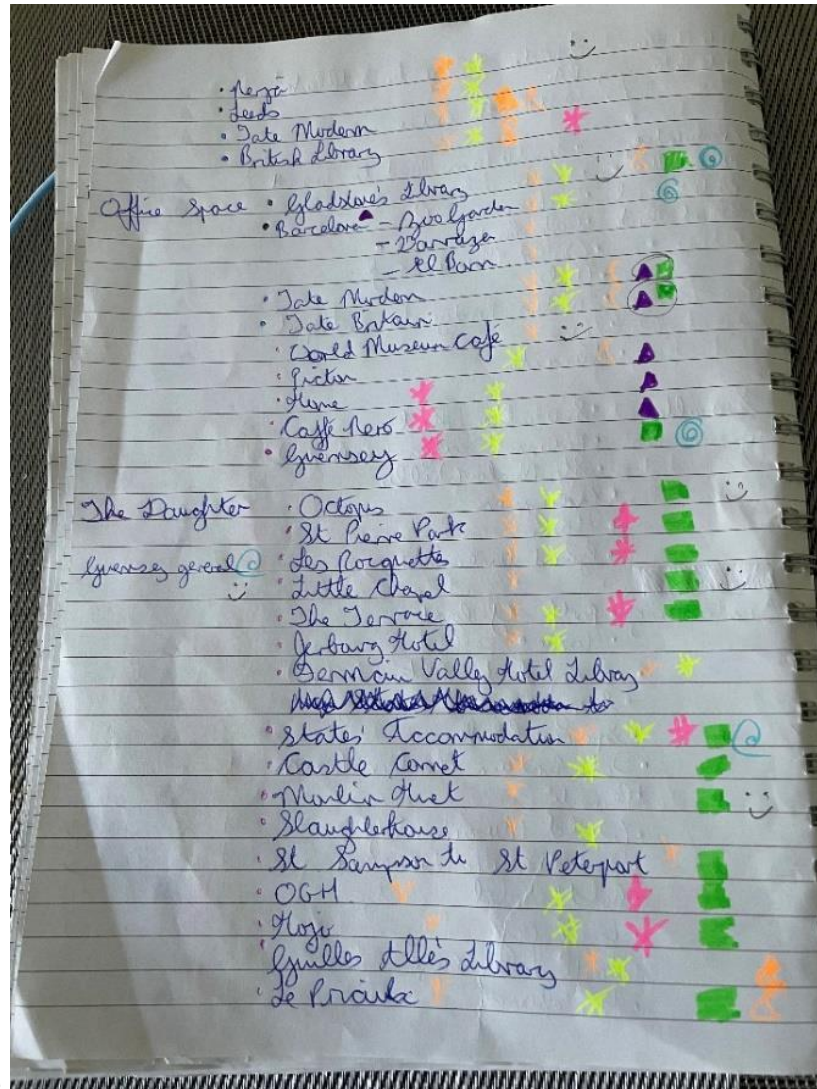
The following are photographs of notes made during my research. Though not exhaustive, they were made as a reminder/guide of which stages of which stories were written where, and my degree of familiarity with those spaces.



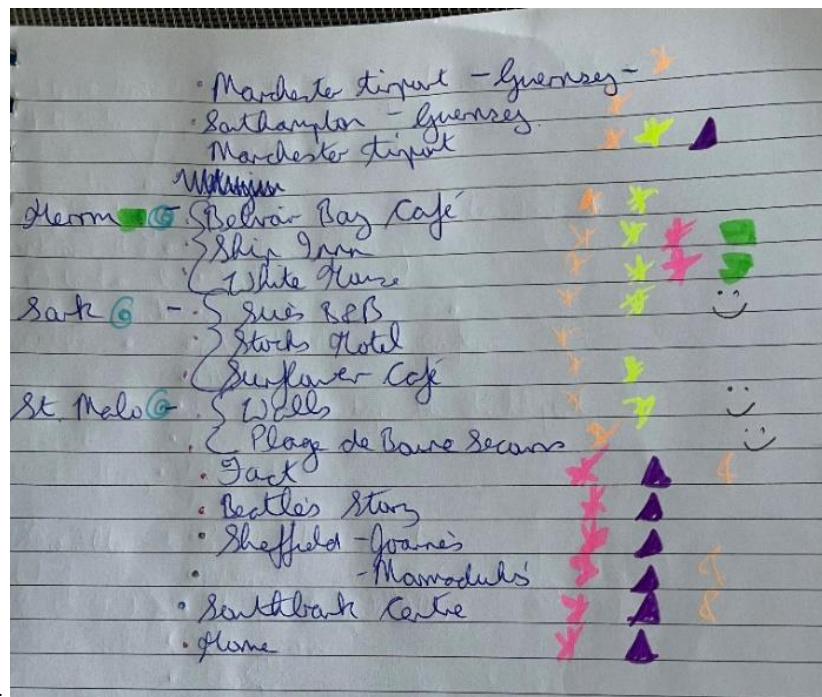
Notes p.1



Notes p. 2



Notes p. 3



Notes p.4