

SHORTIES

A collection of my shortest work

Marina Pacheco



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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to my first collection of short stories, some flights of fancy, some semi-biographical. Here I explore the possibilities of the shortest of short stories from 5000 words down to 6. I also experiment with perspective, first person versus third. My novels are all written in the third person because I'm not that keen on first-person narratives for an entire novel. But, in a short story, a first person perspective can work well. I have also experimented with a couple of different styles of writing, and a few different genres. I hope this collection will give you a taster of my writing and make you curious to try my longer short stories or one of my novels.

SUNSET AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

I wrote this short piece to accompany a photograph of silhouetted couples facing the setting sun at Cabo de São Vicente for a photo exhibition. The photographer was the incredibly talented Bae Soojoo. It's the first time I drew inspiration from an image and had a word limit, but I enjoyed the challenge.



Summer, late afternoon, we've made a trip to Cabo de São Vicente. There's magic in location; this is the south-westernmost point of Europe. If you leap off the cliffs, immerse yourself in the icy blue waves and start swimming, you'll eventually get to America.

This is where the Portuguese set off on their voyages of discovery. This is where Henry the Navigator set up his naval

school and opened Europe up to the world. This is where lovers come to reaffirm their commitment to each other.

I take his hand, soft and warm, with a rough, firmer edge. We wend our way among the pale beige rocks and stunted silvery-green shrubs, the only plants that can cling on in this hot dry salty air. There are a few clouds, but they don't protect us from the prickly heat.

We stand on the cliff edge and look down at the waves washing up towards us, white-edged and fragmented. They sweep over the striated rocks in spectacular attack and retreat to lurk in the pools below before rearing up again in ceaseless motion.

We find a broad flat rock to share. It's pleasantly warm through my thin cotton dress. Around us are more couples, chatting, laughing, holding hands, absorbed in each other. A few admire the view, but more are here to be together, to share some time and to wait.

It doesn't take long. The sun dips towards the sea. Sunset is approaching, the reason all these lovers are dotted about.

A soft breeze signals a change. The sun breaks through the scattered clouds. A sigh ripples through the crowd. We stand up, facing the west. The chatter dies away. Golden light suffuses the air, the sea sparkles, the sun is a golden disk dazzling in its brilliance.

We are united in our awe. We become silhouettes basking in the glory of the setting sun. We are a part of this moment that will stay with us forever.

— e l e —

I LOST MY BOSS

I am a member of the Lisbon Writing group, a tremendously supportive group of writers who, because of Covid induced Zoom sessions, now have members from around the world. One member during our weekly updates mentioned that he'd lost his boss. He just meant that his boss got a new job, but the phrase spurred my creativity. This story reminded a few of the writing group of Roald Dahl, which I shall take as a compliment!



I lost my boss. It wasn't intentional. I stepped out of the office for a gossip with the girls downstairs and when I came back, he was gone. That was a month ago.

I thought nothing of it at the time. When I returned to the office, his jacket was hanging over the back of his chair and his computer was on. He'd been looking at emails, as always. A half-drunk cup of coffee was sitting just a little too close to his workspace. Since he'd knocked over his mug, splashing coffee across the keyboard only a few days ago, I moved it to the end of the desk. The mug was still warm.

I assumed he'd gone to the loo, or to smoke a fag and went back to my desk.

There's only the two of us in the office. We're a small local outpost of a large multinational. I often used to joke that Head Office would never know if we didn't come in to work.

My boss was the self-important type who was certain, down to the very bottom of his brown Oxfords, that the company needed him. They would fall apart if he wasn't around. For this reason, he never took a sick day and only half his allocated annual leave.

I got distracted by the report I was writing, so didn't notice till lunchtime that he'd not come back. It had been two hours. His trips to the loo could be fairly long, but not two hours.

So I texted him. A discrete ping came from his leather satchel, placed where it always was against the side of his chair. I didn't dare dig around in the bag, so I went for lunch. I was certain he'd be back when I returned.

He often ate at his desk. He was too important to be unavailable should Head Office phone. Even if he went out for lunch, he'd keep it short. In the seven years we worked together, I can't recall him ever taking more than half an hour for lunch. I took my full hour.

When I got back to the office, he still wasn't there. Usually I like it when I have the office to myself. I don't feel like I'm being continually observed and judged. According to my boss, my performance is just below satisfactory. Personally, I think he uses that as an excuse not to give me a pay rise.

This time, I felt a bit lost. I swung my arms about, twirled on the spot and let out a sigh that puffed up my cheeks. What to do, what to do. Without really knowing why, I walked over to the open window and leaned out, checking the ground below.

We weren't very high up, just on the fourth floor of an old factory building that had been converted into offices a decade or so ago. There was the usual car park full of grey, black and white cars. Nobody buys a colourful car anymore. I wonder why.

Aside from that, was the threadbare strip of garden planted with a meagre collection of over-pruned shrubs and half-dead trees. I guess you can't expect management to bother with proper gardeners on the money we pay for rent.

Thankfully, there wasn't a splattered body, splayed out on the paving stones below, either. My overactive imagination gave me a flash of what that could have looked like; protruding broken bones and rivulets of blood wending their way into the parched soil of the flowerbeds. I hastily pulled my head back inside, closed the window and made sure it was properly latched shut.

Maybe he had gone to the loo and something had happened: a heart attack or a stroke. Maybe he was slumped, pants around his ankles, in one of the stalls. Was that possible? Wouldn't somebody have noticed already?

Best to check. I hurried to the gents, finding it difficult to breathe just imagining what I might discover. Then I stopped, took a fortifying breath, and was about to push my way inside.

At the last second, I turned my push into a knock and shouted, 'Is there anyone there? Boss, can you hear me?'

I listened, counting to ten while waiting for a sound, a hint that it was safe to enter. Nothing. Now I had no choice. I'd come this far, I was going in.

The smell was disgusting. I don't know why men think urinals are such a great idea. They always stink.

Trying not to inhale, I walked briskly down the short corridor between the urinals and the stalls. Fortunately, most of them stood open. It was just the end one that was shut.

I flicked it with my fingers. Already imagining a grey, lifeless face. The door creaked open.

Empty, thank God.

I hurried back to the office, hoping he'd returned, but by now, not expecting to see him. I was right, still no sign of him. So I went to my desk and, keeping my eyes on the office door, willing him to come back, I phoned reception.

‘Hi Willy, it’s me from 406. Have you seen the big man this morning?’

It was a long shot. Willy works for the building owners. He controls the flow of visitors, takes in parcels and manages building maintenance, but he isn’t the most observant person in the world.

‘No, I haven’t. Not since he came in this morning.’

‘Are you sure? You didn’t see him step out around 10ish, maybe a bit later?’

‘Neither hide nor hair.’

That was pretty accurate, even if Willy didn’t know it yet.

‘Thanks,’ I muttered and hung up.

That was that. He didn’t show up that day or the next. By the third day, I poured out the undrunk coffee because it had grown a layer of mould on the milk that had separated and risen to the top.

I also wondered whether I should call the police. I decided his wife had probably already done that. Although it was odd that she hadn’t called the office to find out if he was here.

Maybe she didn’t need to. Maybe he was at home. Maybe I should call his house and find out? The thing was, I didn’t want to.

He never spoke much about his personal life or ask me about mine. That was fine by me. I was glad that he wasn’t the overly sharing type because he might expect the same from me.

In the end, I decided to let sleeping dogs lie. I always did his emails for him; he wasn’t very technical. The boss came from an era where he’d had an administrator do things like type his letters for him. He was so useless at IT he’d always ask for my help whenever he had to do more than straight number entry into Excel. So, from the second day onwards, I had an out of office message on his emails and I just responded to the important ones.

At the end of day three, I composed an email, pretending to be him, to Head Office, asking to take the rest of my annual

leave. He still had three weeks owed him. I expected HQ to come back with a query. After all, he'd never asked for more than two weeks all year.

They okayed it within the hour. So much for being essential, I thought.

The next three weeks were bliss. I did what I wanted. I dressed casually, had long lunches with the girls downstairs and went home bang on 5pm.

Week four was trickier. At some point, somebody was going to want to see the boss. His holiday was supposed to be over and financial reports were due. To be fair, I'd done most of the work for them. I was pretty certain I could send them into HQ with no questions being asked.

The thing that bothered me, really worked under my skin and made me feel uncomfortable, was his leather satchel. It sat there, resting against the chair leg, the flap open, some random papers and the paperback he'd been reading on his commute poking out the top. His phone had stopped its occasional ringing and pinging a week ago, presumably because the battery had gone dead.

It was eerie, accusatory. Every time I looked at it, I knew something was not right. But I'd been far too happy to have the place to myself to really think about it. Now it sat there like some sullen brown leather beast skulking in the recesses of my conscience.

So, I called the police. It was one of the most embarrassing conversations of my life.

'He's been missing how long?' the incredulous voice on the other end of the line had said.

They came and took away his satchel. It turned out he'd even left his wallet, and his wife hadn't reported him missing because they'd separated. Three years ago. I can't believe he never mentioned it.

The pair of cops who looked over the office and took away his things said they didn't think we'd ever know what had happened

to him. Some people, apparently, just vanish. No rhyme or reason, they just disappear.

'Probably depressed,' the policewoman said vaguely as she went through the drawers of his desk.

I tried to think back, to guess at his state of mind. He'd either been depressed for the full seven years we'd worked together or he'd hidden it well if he became depressed later, because his behaviour had never changed.

I wanted to feel sorry that I hadn't noticed he was suffering, but I didn't really, not deep down. That was kind of sad. Maybe that was why he'd vanished. He was so unimportant, the only one to notice his loss was me.



MAKING a scene

The challenge was – Making a Scene – and I decided to try this both literally and figuratively. It's a scene about scenes. I was always very well behaved at school, but yes, I usually sat right at the front like the protagonist because I'd realised you could actually get away with more up front.



Third row into the classroom, three desks in front of me, three desks behind. Slap bang in the middle with nowhere to hide. Damn, it couldn't get any worse. My second preference is right at the back, where the teacher has less chance of getting to you when they're working their way down the desks. But right at the front is the absolute best.

Not many people realise this, but I've made a speciality of hiding from teachers at the front. The teacher, you see, often stands in line with the front desks and looks out into the body of the class. They usually forget about the people right in front.

Then there's reverse psychology working for you too. People assume you're a keen student if you're sitting in front. It looks

like you want to get involved. A teacher never asks the front row. They just assume you are engaged, listening, and will know the answer.

Their gaze always homes in on the students in the middle. Doesn't matter if you put your hand up or not, they're going to pick on you. Worse luck than that, I've landed on ground zero, maximum teacher attention zone.

Ms Anderson is at the whiteboard, black marker in hand, black stains on her fingertips and a smear of ink across her nose and forehead, her frizzy red hair escaping from a loosely tied scarf. I mean, who uses a scarf to tie up a ponytail? The woman is a mess.

'Today class, we're going to talk about scenes. Last week, we learned about story structure, what needs to happen and at which point to create a satisfying story. Today you'll learn about scenes. If you think of structure as the skeleton of a story, then scenes are the muscles. They do the heavy lifting and propel the story forward. Every scene must have a reason for existing. If they are just pretty description but don't move your story along, you should excise them.'

She turns to the class, grubby face beaming. Is she seriously proud of her vocabulary? Should it impress us that an English teacher uses a word like excise? I snort and realise it was too loud.

'Do you have something to add, Bernice?' Ms Anderson says, looking right at me. But she even manages to make that vague when her eyes slip off mine the moment they make contact.

I annoy myself by also looking down and notice she's wearing mismatched socks, one pink, one baby blue, both edged in lace, peeping out of brown lace-ups.

'No, Miss,' I say, looking back up, sensing that everybody is watching us, waiting to see who'll win this battle of wills. 'Although, I might have said: eradicated, expunged, extirpated or maybe even bowdlerised, instead of excised. Or maybe,' I say, emboldened by the faces of the other students, eyes glowing,

mouths twitching. They want to smile. Oh yes, they do. 'Maybe we should use simpler, everyday phrases that everyone would know like, delete, cross out or remove.'

She stares at me, and the class holds its collective breath.

'Thank you, Bernice, If you've finished nitpicking, I'll continue.'

'Hair-splitting, quibbling, or cavilling,' I murmur.

She moves like an Olympic athlete, swoops down on the duster, turns her body halfway back to the board, then unwinds and flings the duster at me.

I don't have a second to react, and the duster connects with my head. I shouldn't have been rocking in my chair, but I do that when I'm feeling cocky. Big mistake. I tip over, arms flung wide. Bang, I'm on the floor.

'Oooh!' the class cries.

I'm staring at the white and grey speckled ceiling. It was so quick. One minute I'm upright, the next I'm on the floor. No slow mo, no sense of falling. Nothing in between. Strictly binary. Up, now down.

'Are you okay?' Susie asks, leaning over her desk to look at me.

'Shit,' I gasp.

'Get up!' Ms Anderson snaps and she comes marching down the aisle, pushing students out of her way.

I've just realised two things. One, I'm still in my chair, my legs poking up above me, although gravity has pooled my skirt into my lap. Two, everyone else has rushed over and is huddled around me, looking suitably surprised.

'Out, out!' Ms Anderson shouts, pushing the biggest boy in the class aside so violently he staggers sideways.

And then she's standing over me, hands on her hips, breathing like she's run a marathon, her face red, her eyes blazing.

'Shouldn't you ask if I'm okay?' I wheeze.

'I've had enough of your crap,' Ms Anderson says. 'Why don't you give me a few synonyms for that?'

Balderdash, hogwash and baloney actually do occur to me, but I know better than to say it out loud. Ms Anderson's lost it. I've never even heard her raise her voice. We all think of her as harmless and ignorable.

'You threw the duster at me. You should apologise.'

'Me? Apologise to a little troublemaker like you? Someone who thinks it's clever to undermine the teacher. Someone who acts up to get a laugh out of the class. Someone who could be a halfway decent student if she bothered to put in the effort, but instead slinks about undercutting everybody? Do you really think somebody like that deserves an apology?'

'But, miss,' Susie says, 'Bernice fell. She might have hurt herself.'

I roll my eyes. Susie looks funny from this angle, so does Ms Anderson. Foreshortened. Skirts with legs vanishing into them and heads looming overhead.

'Everybody out!' Ms Anderson says, and she actually sounds implacable. Like a proper teacher.

It works too. The kids troop out, some casting surreptitious glances back at me, but nobody's hanging about to help me. Point to Ms Anderson.

The class door clicks shut, slowly, carefully, like they don't want to annoy the teacher with any slamming.

Ms Anderson lets out a shaky breath, and it's like she's deflating.

'Are you alright?' she asks and sits side on at the desk next to mine.

I don't really know what to make of this, but I roll onto my side, then over onto my hands and knees and then settle cross legged on the floor. I don't dare stand up yet. Ms Anderson may have gone back to looking shapeless and dejected, but she might turn into an Olympic shot-putter at any second.

'My head hurts a bit.'

Ms Anderson leans forward, and I turn so she can see the back.

'It isn't bleeding, but you should go to the school nurse and have it looked at.'

'Yes, miss.'

'I'm sorry I lost my temper.'

I doubt it. Deep down, Ms Anderson is probably feeling relieved.

'Sorry,' I say.

'For what?' Ms Anderson asks, a teacher to her fingertips.

'For being a nuisance, pest and irritant.'

'I'm glad you're aware of it,' Ms Anderson says and holds out her hand to help me up.

— e l e —

100 LINES

This is another of my Saturday afternoon short stories. Triggered by one of the writers who said something, I don't remember what, was a violation of the code. Since we were sitting in a shopping mall at the time, the communal space and the clothes of the cleaners and servers inspired me. It was more fun reading this story out loud to the group than reading it in my head because, unexpectedly; the story elicited quite a few laughs. Try it, maybe at a breathless pace, and see if it changes the feel of the piece for you.



100 Lines.

That's all I need to balance the books and save my skin. One hundred calculations to placate the boss. So I'm sitting in the corner of the glass, concrete and steel headquarters, my laptop balanced on my knees, frantically juggling numbers.

98 lines now.

'You can't sit there, ma'am. It isn't allowed. It's a violation of the code.'

The woman is tense, not up for a confrontation but not avoiding it either.

Brown apron over black trousers and a black long-sleeved t-shirt, hair scraped back into a tight ponytail. Mop in hand, bucket on wheels at her feet. Just doing her job.

97 lines

‘What code?’

‘Health and safety. No sitting on the concourse. You’re blocking access.’

96 lines

‘Access to what?’

Behind me is a glass pane. Tucked under the beam is a sad-looking ficus being used as an ashtray. No plant looks good indoors unless it’s being grown by drug dealers.

‘The code says no sitting in non-designated areas. This area isn’t designated for seating.’

95 lines

‘Look, what’s it to you?’

‘I work here. We’ve been told to enforce the code. If we don’t, our pay get’s docked.’

‘Sucks to be you.’ If I don’t get my work done, I’ll get docked. Permanently.

94 lines.

The woman glares at me. I manage to fill out three whole lines on the spreadsheet before it gets too distracting to carry on.

91

‘Listen, just let me finish this and then I’ll be gone. Never to darken your little alcove again. I swear.’

‘You should leave now. If you don’t, I’ll call the supervisor.’

‘You do that.’

I’m down to 77 lines when the supervisor arrives. She’s the big guns in every sense of the word. Unusually tall for a woman, heavily built, with a face that could curdle milk. The cleaner hovers behind her like a toddler behind her mum’s skirts.

‘I’m sorry, ma’am, I’m afraid you can’t sit here.’

'Don't tell me, it's a violation of the code.' 76 lines. 'You know, I'd get done a lot quicker if you leave me alone.'

'It's not a matter of leaving you alone, Ma'am. You can't sit here.'

75 lines.

What can she actually do if I refuse to budge? I weigh her up, figuratively, literally, too. I reckon she weighs more than me. If she and the cleaner are determined, they could probably drag me out of my little workspace.

Head back down, focus on the numbers.

74 lines.

She won't get physical.

'Give me ten minutes,' I mutter.

'I can't give you any minutes,' the woman snaps, getting louder. 'If you don't move, I'm going to have to call security.'

I say nothing, typing frantically.

71 lines.

'Right, that's it. I'm fetching security.'

70 lines.

I nod, not looking up. I can get maybe another 20 lines done while they're off fetching the enforcers. After that I'm sunk.

I glance across at the door to the left. Brass plaque says CEO. It's maybe 10 steps to get there. The boss is inside, waiting for the figures. Him and his men will make mincemeat out of me if I don't show up on time.

67 lines.

'Fine, if that's the way you want it,' the supervisor says, spins round and stomps off.

The cleaner is looking all worked up now as she scurries after her.

I'm at 43 lines when supervisor, cleaner and two security guards return. They're all twitchy. Heaven knows what the big woman has been telling them.

'Excuse me, ma'am,' Guard One says, hands on hips.

42 lines.

‘I understand you’ve repeatedly been informed it’s against code to sit in this area.’

38 lines, nearly there.

‘Ma,am, I’m sorry, ma,am, but we really have to ask you to leave.’

37 lines.

‘I’m nearly done, please, just a couple more minutes.’

36 lines.

‘Ma,am, we’re being as polite as we can, but if everyone else can follow the rules, you can too.’

34 lines, I keep going; the end is in sight.

‘I’m sorry, ma,am, if you don’t leave right now, we will have to get physical.’

32 lines. I nod without looking up. The keyboard clacking away.

31 lines.

‘Alright, Alphonse, you take that side. I’ll take the right,’ the guard says and grabs hold of my elbow.

30 lines

If I can hang onto the laptop and keep typing, I might just be able to get this done.

Alphonse takes hold gingerly. I can tell he’s not used to getting physical with people. Guard One is rougher. Still, they can’t afford to injure me or damage my property. I get line 29 and 28 done as they pull me off the concrete wall.

27 lines.

‘This will be a lot easier if you co-operate, ma,am,’ Guard One says.

‘For who?’

26 lines

‘We don’t want to hurt you, ma,am,’ Alphonse says as he and Guard One drag me away.

It’s awkward keeping the laptop level as I frantically carry out the final few lines of calculation.

25, 24, 23, 22.

They're pulling me towards the down escalators. I need to buy more time. I let my lower body go limp. The guards can't hold me up anymore. I'm heavy, semi-recumbent on the floor.

21, 20, 19.

'Ma,am, seriously, you're only going to hurt yourself.'

Now they're dragging me across the well-polished marble.

'I'm nearly done. You can let go,' I say, still typing, although my laptop is being pulled away from me.

18, 17, 16, 15.

'Give it back. It's vital information.

14.

'Ma,am!' Guard One is really pissed off now. 'At this rate, I'm going to have to call the cops.'

13 lines.

'Good idea.'

I pull myself into a sitting position, yank my keyboard closer and cross my legs.

12, 11, 10.

More than enough time, if they decide to call the cops. Embarrassing for them, people have stopped to watch, phones out.

'Seriously, ma,am, this is no joke.'

9, 8, 7.

'I'm nearly done, just 6 more lines and I'll be out of your hair.'

6, 5, 4

The CEO's door starts swinging open. Time is really running out now.

3, 2

'It's the boss,' Guard One whispers, and leaps to attention.

1 line.

The boss steps out, hair slicked back, immaculate grey pinstripe suit, a scowl etched on his neanderthal brow.

'Jenkins, what are you doing on the floor?'

Zero! Made it.

'Nothing sir, just waiting to report back to you.'

His face lights up.

‘You’re done?’

‘Would I ever let you down?’ I say, waving the laptop like an Olympic gold. I made it, the numbers add up.’

— e e —

THE END OF THE UNIVERSE

My writing group had been chatting about Ulysses, by James Joyce, and how he could be difficult to understand. We'd also been set the writing challenge of – The End of the Universe – so I combined the two. This is my attempt at a Joycean style, punctuation included. While I'll never be a master like Joyce, I learned a lot from imitating what I understood of his style. It made me realise that the way he smashes words together is very efficient when writing descriptions.



We've come to see the end of the universe, Molly and me. The trip of a lifetime.

– All lifetimes, all everything, Molly opines, sweaty hand gripping slippery phone, tickets glowing on screen.

Through the gate, jostled by millions, plaingrand nothing special.

– Makes everything feel normal, nothing to worry about.
Molly again.

She rambles when the nerves get her. Her idea to do this trip, her nerves to deal with, but I take her hand. Gripped tight. Through the gate, like we're going to the funfair. Tickets inspected by a red beam seeall scanner. Washed along by the impatient crowd. Up the stairs, two, three at a time.

– No pushing in the main hall. Take your reserved seat. Flight will commence in one hour, the speakers blare over roaring humanity.

We've come to see the end, the end of everything.

Rushing, pushing, plunging, shoving people on every side. The ticket has an arrow. Wave the phone and the arrow spins compass like, guiding down the maze of jet black grid layout chairs. Most still empty, some test-driven by newfound owners, leaning back, head rest deployed gazing up through the still blank overhead window.

– It's bigger than a football stadium. Molly's grip tightens, fear quivers her voice. Minute sweat droplets on her downy top lip. – We're not going to make it to our seats in time.

– Time's running out for all of us.

Bad joke, not appreciated. Molly turns, following the arrow, down a flight of stairs. Only not down, Escheresque, down becomes up in a sick stomach twisting reversal.

– There is no up or down in space.

Molly emerges at the top of the flight to another checkerboard row of seats. Arrow turns from red through orange to green.

– Here.

Molly plops down, bouncing faux black leather enveloping plush. Lets go of my hand and grips armrest. It's suitably high-tech. Makes up for the amphitheatre feel of the ship.

– Ladies and Gentlemen, please take your seats, departure to the end of the universe will commence in ten minutes. Please

ensure all seats are in the upright position and safety restraints are fully deployed.

– Hurry, Molly says, anxiety lighting pale blue eyes.

I strap in. Ten minutes can feel like eternity. What will the end of eternity feel like?

Engines drown all sound, more shaking than I expected. We're not escaping a gravity well, we're shooting through time. Does time have friction?

Memory rolls back, morning at the breakfast table. Sunlight streaming in, two heads bowed over the pamphlet. Retirement gift, better than a round the world trip. I have my doubts, but it's too late to say so.

Heaving, shuddering, thundering ends abruptly. I feel the need to check I haven't lost consciousness. Relief washes over as majestic music fills the air. Gut tightens in anticipation.

– Ladies and gentlemen, our tour of the end of the universe is about to begin. The ship will open its windows now. For best viewing, we recommend you push your seats right back.

Shaky smile from Molly, emotion overcome, voice lost but no matter, too much noise to hear her, anyway.

I lie back, suspended weightless in gravity chair. The shields clatter back, light gradually dims then turns off. Velvet black envelopes us, floating in space. I stop breathing, realise, take a breath. It comes out like a gasp.

– Our ship will now start a series of pre-programmed time jumps. The end of the universe takes place over millennia. To benefit from the full effect, we will take you on an epic journey through time. Please enjoy the ride.

No need for that. My dream is fulfilled, floating in space, Molly by my side, galaxies spiralling.

Smooth time jumps, imperceptible, must be smaller than the takeoff. I drift, not noticing at first as the outer edge galaxies dim and vanish.

– It's getting smaller.

Whispers from the dark seeing what I see. Galaxies drifting together. It feels like we're floating away, further and further into the dark.

– What happens in the end? Molly's voice, soft, uncertain. The fear is back. – What happens when it all ends?

A slow motion reverse firework, galaxies coalesce from millions to hundreds, from hundreds to dozens, from dozens to one bright white dot. It hangs in eternity, impossible to believe it can't go on forever.

I take Molly's velvetsoft, trembling hand. Comfort for her, courage for me.

– It's not the end for us.

Time's up. The ship lights come back orangebrown through yellow to white. We shoot back to our time before the last ember vanishes.

Nothing happens at the end of the universe. Nothing.

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LIFE IN REVERSE

Lately, I have been involved in a couple of joint novel writing endeavours. One is a thriller where the protagonists chase around the world trying to stop villains who are about to set off a catastrophic experiment that could make the earth inhabitable. The authors came from around the world and wrote the chapter relating to their country. That novel will be published in mid 2022. During that project, I got to know a Japanese writer who suggested a time travel romance where the female protagonist travels back in time, while the male character travels forward like all of us. This short story was my first attempt to wrap my head around the concept.



She didn't cry at her husband's funeral.

How could she? She'd never met him. The rest of the mourners stood around her, weeping at the open grave. Massive cumulonimbus clouds towered above them, dark grey and ominous. It was nearly funeral weather but not quite. They'd been spared the rain.

Stella actually felt excited, that tingle she always got when she was about to meet somebody new and exciting. She watched with increasing interest as the soil fell upwards out of the grave. The coffin was winched out of the ground and landed on the stand set up for it beside the hole. Then the pallbearers hoisted the coffin and made their solemn way back to the church. As they approached the building, the clouds parted and a shaft of light lit up the ancient limestone and turned it golden. It felt like the beginning of a new chapter.

Then the huddle of mourners returned to their seats in the church and bowed their heads as the priest conducted the funeral service. Kay, her best friend, took her hand in a warm grasp and patted it gently.

‘Hank wouldn’t have wanted you to cry,’ she said comfortingly.

Stella nodded and her attention slipped away, back to considering her peculiar brief life. She’d woken on her deathbed, alarmed by the weeping people that surrounded her. She was in a hospital, attached to a multitude of tubes and cables. The light was so bright it hurt her eyes and the symphony of beeps made it impossible to think.

Not that thinking had been required much in those early months. Nurses had run around, seeing to her every need, which was nice of them. It wasn’t long before she was sitting up, looking around the ward and chatting to the other women there.

Then it was on to a home, where again she didn’t have to do much thinking for herself. They cooked her meals for her and she was wheeled about in a comfortable chair that they most often set up in a sunny spot overlooking a pretty garden.

That’s where she met Kay. This pretty, diminutive little woman with the tight snow white curls who had chatted away to her as if they were best friends. It turns out they were. They spent glorious days together gossiping, laughing and

flirting with the nursing house staff, especially one particularly handsome young man.

Kay had also been there, looking sympathetic, when she'd risen from her walking chair and taken her first hesitant steps. At that time Stella couldn't figure out why Kay had looked so sad at such a happy moment. After a while she came to realise that it was the same for everyone at the home. Everything that made Stella happy upset the rest.

It had taken a few years of listening and putting clues together, her mind getting sharper as the months wore on, for Stella to realise that she was different from the rest. She suspected that while time flowed in one direction for her fellow residents; it flew in exactly the opposite direction for her.

This was confirmed on the day she checked out of the home.

An elderly man was being checked in at the same time and had grumbled under his breath, 'Oh dear, this is it. The only way I'm leaving this place is in a coffin.'

With those words, everything fell into place and Stella just stood there blinking in the innocuous foyer with the checked floor, the wicker furniture and the arrangement of pot plants. The whole place had an air of shabby finality. A home, a place people go to on the last leg of their life.

Only Stella was being pulled away by a pleasant young man who led her back to a taxi, loaded her bags into the trunk and drove her to what he insisted was her house. She'd never seen it before, but it looked nice. The kind of place she'd choose to live in if she could.

That was her life, exploring the house and putting together the clues left all around. The most astonishing were images of her with a man. Her husband Hank, who she'd learned about from Kay. The two of them at different ages, across decades. Here she saw what she'd look like in a few years. The house was also filled with ornaments and furniture that felt comfortable.

She had tea with Kay, who dropped by regularly to update Stella on her grandchildren. Stella gathered that she and Hank had never had kids.

‘Ah, the lottery win glasses,’ Kay had said when Stella took out a pair of exquisite crystal flutes for the champagne she’d just drunk to celebrate her “retirement”.

‘You saved my family with that lottery win,’ Kay said. ‘You’ll never know how grateful I was to you, then. I don’t understand why you never accepted any of the money.’

Stella wondered about that comment. It had no context yet. She’d learned that keeping notes and paying attention yielded explanations in time. And so it was with Kay’s lottery win, although it was a good twenty years later.

Kay had phoned up, giddy with joy, and offered to share half her lottery winnings. Stella had declined. Two days later, she’d been watching TV with her husband and happened to notice the lottery numbers come up. A week after that, she’d had coffee with Kay, both of them now busy English teachers. Kay was struggling after her husband had left her and her three children. In sheer desperation, she’d taken to buying lottery tickets.

‘No,’ Stella had said, without thinking about it, ‘change that seven to a thirteen.’

‘But Stella, why change a lucky number to an unlucky one?’
‘You’ll see.’

And so the pieces fell together.

Stella couldn’t tell Kay that sharing the money was meaningless. She’d already lived through the days where the money might have been used. She was living towards a time when she had less and less, and there wasn’t a thing she could do about it.

So it was with Hank. He’d grumbled in their early days together that she grew colder and colder towards him. How could she explain she was meeting him for the first time at his oldest and, as each day passed, she was learning more about

him? She supposed from his perspective she was growing colder towards him.

In truth, she wasn't very attached to him at first. It was difficult maintaining a relationship when they had no common frame of reference. It was a problem Stella had with most people and why she had a reputation for being cold and aloof. The one advantage for Stella from her long relationship with Hank was that he could tell her more about what she had in store in her future, his past, than anyone else.

It was from him that she learned about her family, her father and mother, uncle, aunt and cousins. He knew so much about what was to come for her. They'd known each other for a long time since they'd met on their first day at university.

Fortunately, Hank liked to reminisce, and, especially in her early days, Stella would ask him to tell her about their life together. It helped her navigate her world and understand what people were referring to when they spoke of what they assumed were shared memories.

As she grew younger still, she grew fonder of Hank, who became progressively more handsome. The seemingly endless days of middle life felt like they would go on forever, but before she knew it, Stella was in the midst of a whirlwind of early wedded bliss and dating at university that kept her distracted. It came as a shock when she realised that her time with her husband was nearly up.

While Hank was around, she had an anchor in the world. Somebody reliable, who kept her connected to the people in her life. And she was about to lose him.

Endings came to everyone, but they seldom knew the exact date and time for it all. The future was a mystery to most people, but not to Stella. Her birth certificate gave her the exact date and time of when she would cease to exist. Would she even be aware of that when it happened?

That question became an obsession, and she found herself watching young children, trying to guess how much they were

aware of. How much did they remember? How much of her personality she would retain, she wondered, examining a baby sleeping quietly in a pram.

Would it be the same as when she'd first become aware of her surroundings in the hospital? Did she have to expect a slow decline in her mental function? She certainly faced losing the ability to speak, and to walk, till finally she would simply be a slumbering, barely self-aware bundle wrapped in swaddling and cradled in her mother's arms.

The realisation of how close she was to the end of her life, and the end of her romance with her husband, brought bitter tears. She collapsed onto the wide stairs leading up to the vast university Senate House, unable to contain her grief.

She was sobbing on the day she met her husband.

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THE SARDINE CAN DEAL

My writing group doesn't always provide prompts, but they're fun to attempt when offered. This particular Saturday, we had multiple prompts. Usually I pick one. This time I decided to try to work them all into a single story. The prompt I was given directly was up a creek without a paddle. The rest were, the sardine can deal, Mexican soap opera, rain and suspense, blisters and grape jelly, pink, purple, serpentine and, evil triumphs. See if you can spot them all.



She was literally up shit creek without a paddle. Okay, maybe not literally. She was being washed down the Uruguay River, a major Amazonian tributary, a ghost sitting cross-legged, calm as you please, on her prow while lightning fizzed, ear shattering, gut shaking, thunder roared and sheets of rain filled the canoe. Moments before she'd hit a hidden rock, the canoe tipped, and she'd jabbed forward to right herself with the paddle. It hooked into a crack, or mud or who knew what, and she screamed in

vain as the current wrenched her grip free. The last she saw of the oar was it upright, like a flagpole, in the middle of the rushing water.

How the hell had it come to this?



It had started, like most ill conceived ventures, as a drunken bet at the end of a boozy night with Eduardo. She should have been more careful. Eduardo was living proof that evil often triumphs. He'd made a fortune selling looted artefacts from the war zones of Syria, Afghanistan and anywhere else he could sniff out a treasure. Teodora usually avoided him, but on occasion he'd been able to sell items she'd found to secretive millionaires who deposited their ill-gotten gains in vaults far better protected than those of the most cautious banks.

The two of them had been staggering home, each of them with an arm wrapped around the other's waist, not out of affection but of the necessity of propping each other up.

'You'll never do it, Teodora.'

Eduardo had looked too smug, too certain of himself for her to let it go.

'What would you give me if I succeeded?'

They came to a halt before the gaudily lit entrance to one of those peculiar canned fish chain stores designed purely for tourists, lit up like a funfair, with rows of yellow lightbulbs, and serpentine pink and purple paths wending their way past towers of canned fish of every conceivable description.

'It you make it. If you get to the lost chapel of the Jesuits and pick up the talisman, then...'

Eduardo paused, stroking his chin. 'If you get the talisman back to me, here in Lisbon, in one piece, I'll give you a tin of the finest Portuguese sardines.'

'My God!' Teodora gasped and doubled over with laughter. 'You want me to risk my life for a tin of sardines?'

'I knew you'd never do it,' Eduardo said, and there was an odd gleam in his eyes that disconcerted her, even in her inebriated state.

'I would never do anything for such a paltry prize.'

'How about a dozen cans, then? Gift wrapped with the biggest gold bow they can achieve.'

'Then I might just consider it,' Teodora said with a nonchalant wave.

To her amazement, Eduardo stepped out of her embrace and bounded into the shop. Moments later, he reappeared with a bag that he held up for show. 'Your winnings, should you make it.'

'What aren't you telling me about this treasure?'

'It's protected by a guardian spirit,' Eduardo said, grinning toothily. 'By the name of M'Bororé. So far, he's prevented anyone from taking the talisman.'

'Oh please, you know I don't believe in that sort of thing.'

'Which is what makes you perfect. But, you know, my grandmother was a shaman from Brazil, and she saw things and knew things no human could know. I found out about the talisman from her diary.'

Teodora shook her head. It always amazed her how even the most modern, self absorbed, self-centred human beings could still fall for tales of the supernatural.

'What else?'

'She warned every member of our family to stay out of Brazil.'

'Why?'

'Who knows? Gangs, crime bosses, kidnappings, anything is possible.'

'Is that why you're sending me?'

'It doesn't hurt to be careful, especially when it's a warning from the canniest woman I ever knew.'

'And? Why now?'

‘Brazil is decimating its jungles. I’ve heard loggers are within a few kilometres of the chapel. It wouldn’t surprise me if they blow it up when they reach it.’

‘Destroying your precious talisman in the process.’

‘I’ll pay all your expenses and living costs while you’re out there.’



Now, lashed by the rain and floating out of control in a twisting, spinning, bouncing dugout, Teodora was cursing her epic mistake. She clutched her chest, feeling for the narrow stone artefact she’d taken from the temple. She’d expected the job to be easy. Why else make such a foolish bet? All she’d really been after was an excuse to go on an adventure.



The small, white, windowless chapel had been exactly where Eduardo said it would be. The stone talisman, carved with a geometrical snake zigzagging its way along its length, stood propped up against a plain wooden cross in the centre of a stone altar. Two thick, stubby candles stood to either side. The candles weren’t lit, possibly because she’d arrived during the day, or because they were only lit for services.

The only source of light came through the door. Since storm clouds had been building for the last hour, it was mostly dark inside. Teodora walked around the chapel, checking the shadows to ensure she was alone. Then she went back to the door to make sure none of the locals from the nearby logging camp had appeared. They were bound to come check why somebody had undertaken the arduous seven hour drive down the deeply rutted jungle road usually only used by lorries weighed down with felled trees.

The coast was clear. So she returned to the altar, took the cotton sample bag out of her pocket, palmed the talisman, dropped it into the bag and slipped everything into the inside of her multi pocketed photographer's vest. Even though she wasn't superstitious, she did pause for a second, waiting even though she set no store in Eduardo's tale of an ancient Guarani chieftain guarding the treasure of Jesuit missionaries.

There were far too many inconsistencies in the story. Why would Jesuits leave behind a treasure? Why would a pagan chieftain guard the treasure rather than distributing it to his people? And why had nobody ever found the treasure? The place wasn't even hidden.

All the same, the temperature in the chapel dropped as she turned to leave and her breath even came out in a puff of white mist. Atmospheric conditions, she decided, probably something to do with the coming storm. Time to leave.

Teodora jumped as lightning streaked across the sky, illuminated the interior and outlined, in a preternatural bluish, white glow, an old, bandy-legged, barrel-chested man with a jaguar teeth necklace and a cape of birds of paradise feathers, staring at her.

'Shit!'

Teodora ran for the door as a gust of wind roared over the tops of the jungle trees, bending them towards the chapel. It hit Teodora with such force she staggered back. She took a deep breath, bent over, ran into the wind and forced her way to the car.

A bolt of lightning smashed into her car, blinding her with its intensity. It filled the air with the smell of ozone as a blast of thunder rocked the ground. It was so loud and rumbled so long it took a while for her to realise that the car alarm had gone off. The hazard lights emerged out of the dissipating blackness, blinking first a dusty orange that gradually got brighter, the wail of the alarm merging with the black smoke rising from the roof and being whipped away by the wind.

‘Fuck!’

Teodora’s legs turned to jelly, and she dropped the car keys. She reached down to pick them and fumbled about, her fingers shaking. As she straightened up, she froze. The old man was standing by the driver’s door, arms crossed, feet planted firmly like somebody who wouldn’t be moved. He was still the same glowing bluish white which she’d put down to being illuminated by lightning, but was starting to doubt.

‘Move,’ Teodora muttered and pointed the fob at the wailing car.

Nothing happened.

Damn it, the noise would attract people. She’d watched enough Mexican soap operas and Brazilian Telenovelas to know that loggers weren’t the most welcoming. What they’d make of a woman on her own in this wild territory was anybody’s guess.

Fortunately the ghost, or whatever, she didn’t have mental space to think about him, stepped aside as she approached the door. Still shaking, she kicked it with her boot, in case it was charged by the lightning. Nothing happened.

But over the waow, waow, waow of the alarm she heard voices. She peered over the rooftop at a dozen men running towards her, red faced, shouting and waving their arms. Damn the risks of being shocked, Teodora grabbed the door handle, pulled and shrieked as burning pain enveloped her hand. She let go, staggering backwards. Of course, you idiot, she thought, what did you think lightning would do? There were going to be blisters.

‘Hey!’ one man shouted as he got closer. ‘What are you doing? This is private land.’

‘Damn,’ Teodora muttered under her breath, clicking the fob. Still nothing.

The ghost pointed away from the men down a track that led into the jungle. Teodora dropped the key and ran down the track, God only knew why.

'Stop!' the men shouted and a couple of stones landed about her feet.

Were they seriously throwing rocks at her? That gave Teodora an extra spurt of energy and she careened down the track, wind lashing the branches of the trees and stones raining down around her. A painful couple hit her back.

She burst out of the jungle just as the first splashes of rain fell, followed by another blinding lightning strike. Before her was an expanse of water too deep, wide, and fast flowing to swim across. The men were closing in, still shouting.

Was it better to drown or be grabbed by them?

That was when the ghost reappeared and pointed at a patch of shade below an overhanging tree and a simple wooden canoe. No time to think. She heaved against the unexpectedly heavy boat, pushing it into the water. Then, still pushing, she waded out up to her waist, trying not to think about piranhas or caimans as the men burst out of the jungle.

'Bye suckers,' Teodora said as the current took hold of the craft and she hoisted herself aboard.

The men stood on the shore cursing and throwing anything they could get their hands on, but none of them tried to follow her. The ghost was also still on the shore, apparently unnoticed by the men. Then the glowing bluish man leaped towards her, flew in a graceful arc across a distance no man could manage and landed on the stern of the boat.

Teodora braced herself, expecting the boat to rock upon impact, but the pitching of the canoe didn't change as the man landed. He sat down where he was, perched at the end of the narrow stern, his legs and arms crossed, apparently oblivious to Teodora now that he had settled.

That was when the full ferocity of the storm struck and water poured down, obscuring the men on the shore, the river banks, and the jungle. All Teodora could see was a meter of choppy iron grey water about the canoe.

Teodora grabbed the paddle, wincing as her burned and blistered right hand rubbed against the wood and got to work, guiding herself along with the current and towards what she prayed was the opposite bank.

‘Hey,’ she shouted through the pouring rain at the ghost. She didn’t want to admit to seeing anything supernatural, but considering the glow, and that he wasn’t wet while she was soaked despite her rain resistant, high tech adventuring gear. ‘Now would be a good time for a hint.’

To her surprise, he uncrossed his arms and pointed and Teodora, surprising herself, tried to manoeuvre in that direction. The going was tough, though, because of the strong current and fast undulating waves.

That was when the water got choppier. Waves that had only been half a meter grew to over a meter. She sensed she was picking up speed and, in the process of keeping herself upright and in one piece, Teodora lost the oar.

Then the canoe rose over a particularly high wave and crashed down with such force that the nose buried itself in the water and a wave washed over Teodora. The roaring of the rain sounded different as she bobbed up back into the air, coughing and gasping for breath.

‘No, damn it, no!’ Teodora cried as she realised the new sound wasn’t rain.

She was approaching the Yucumã Falls. She’d stopped beside them the day before to admire the world’s second longest waterfall, over a thousand kilometres long, up to three kilometres wide, and going to a depth of 100 meters in places. A beautiful wonder of nature when being photographed from the banks, certain death when careening towards the falls over flood-swollen whitewater peaks.

‘We’re done for now, old man,’ Teodora shouted, clinging to the sided of the wildly pitching canoe. ‘Looks like you’re going to be guarding this talisman at the bottom of a watery grave now.’

The ghost tilted his head, as if giving this some consideration. Then he flicked his hand and, to Teodora's surprise, as the canoe hit another wave, it bounded into the air spun about, twirling like a propeller blade and splashed down so hard on the edge of the river bank it snapped in two. Teodora went under again, clinging to the front half of the canoe. She bobbed upwards; the water dragging at her and gushing between her fingers. She grabbed onto the fibrous roots of a tree, barely holding onto its own soggy real estate, and pulled herself out of the water, heaving and spewing up muddy water.

With her last ounce of strength, Teodora crawled on hands and knees up the muddy riverbank and collapsed when she guessed she'd got far enough inland to no longer fear getting washed away. She rolled over onto her back, blinking into the rain that had finally slowed to find the ghost standing over her.

'Thanks,' she muttered. 'I owe you one.'

The ghost gave a solemn nod that left Teodora with the powerful impression that he intended to get full repayment one day.

'Are you really M'Bororé, the old Guarani chieftain?'

The ghost nodded again, just as the rain stopped as abruptly as it had started.

'No shit?' Despite her aching body, Teodora laughed. 'Are you really protecting a Jesuit treasure?'

M'Bororé shook his head.

'Yeah, I thought that was too fanciful,' Teodora said, and pushed herself upright. 'So what were you protecting?'

M'Bororé pointed at Teodora's chest and she reached up to feel the lump of the talisman.

'This? Do you want it back? Should I return it to the temple? It's the least I can do after you saved my life.'

M'Bororé shook his head and pointed into the jungle, away from the river. The clouds above were dissipating, the strong Amazonian sun was returning along with a swarm of buzzing insects and cacophony of bird calls. The sudden arrival,

downpour and clearing was typical of tropical storms. Now the ghost looked faded, barely visible in the dappled shade.

‘Will you get me safely out of here?’

The ghost nodded, and Teodora decided she had no choice but to be guided by him. All she had in her multiple pockets was her Swiss army knife with built-in compass, some lightweight freeze dried rations, her grandmother’s grape jelly, a tube of insect repellent another of sunblock and a tight roll of cash, none of which would be particularly useful for getting out of a jungle.



‘You’re looking well,’ Eduardo said as he arrived at the cafe Teodora had chosen as their meeting point.

It was neutral ground, a collection of outside tables set in a sunny, people filled square surrounded by 18th century buildings with elegant balconies and tiled walls, a classical statue in the middle and reassuringly boring pigeons strutting about foraging for scraps.

Eduardo pulled out the plastic chair and took his time settling, leaned the bag of gift wrapped sardine tins against the table leg and shouted an order for a coffee to the waiter loitering at the entrance to the cafe. What he probably couldn’t see, or made no show of seeing, was that M’Bororé took up position behind Eduardo, crossing his arms and glaring down at the top of the man’s head. The old chieftain was a reassuring and comfortable companion for Teodora these days. But he looked so serious now that it worried her.

‘Looks can be deceiving,’ Teodora said, making sure her irritation came through even though she knew it was a waste on Eduardo. He wouldn’t care how gruelling her journey home had been. All the same, she was going to force him to listen. ‘You owe me a damn sight more than a dozen cans of sardines for

this jaunt. It took me two weeks to walk out of the jungle. I lost ten kilos because all I had was a few of packs of rations and my gran's grape jelly. I love her cooking, but after eating that jelly one mouthful a day, I don't think I'll ever be able to eat it again.'

Eduardo laughed and said, 'Why even take something so odd with you?'

'Don't you know how much energy is packed into the sugary goodness of grape jelly? Aside from that, it's good for my morale to have a taste of home, especially in the depths of the Amazonian jungle. Your grandmother may have been a shaman, mine is a miracle worker with food. It's a different kind of magic.'

Eduardo shrugged. He was never really interested in what Teodora had to say. All he cared about was what she could bring back.

'Did you get the talisman?'

Teodora glanced up at M'Bororé, wondering what he was thinking. She wanted to help him by way of repayment. Not only had he got her away from the loggers and out of the river, she was pretty sure he'd kept her hidden from the additional dangers of wild beasts and prowling humans in the jungle.

'What will you do with it? Do you have a buyer lined up?'

Teodora was still trying to decide whether she told Eduardo about the treasure. It would be easy enough to say she'd lost it overboard when the canoe had smashed in two.

'Since when have I ever told you about my buyers?'

'Since when have you paid for goods in cans of sardines?'

Teodora asked as she leaned back for the waiter to place two cups of expresso before them.

'You got your money's worth from this little adventure. I paid all your expenses, no questions asked, including the week you claimed you needed to recover at that luxury Rio spa.'

'It was very generous of you.'

That was the nub of the problem for Teodora. Eduardo was a miser. Even the tinned sardines weren't as weird as him agreeing

to pay for her recuperation. She looked up again, wishing M'Bororé would give her a sign. As she did, she touched the tip of her fingers to her chest where the talisman was nestling. M'Bororé gave a slow, solemn nod.

'Okay,' Teodora said, in reply to man and ghost.

She reached into the inside pocket, took the talisman out and laid it on the table between the two of them. It was nothing special to look at. The zigzagging snake was worn and indistinct, blotchy greenish-grey lichen further obscured the detail. Teodora was enough of a treasure hunter to know better than to try and clean the piece. One could do more harm than good that way.

Eduardo's face split into a grin that Theodora could only call lecherous, and far more enthusiastic than she'd seen him for far finer treasures.

He reached for the talisman and Teodora held up her hand.

'Ah, ah, ah, my payment first.'

Eduardo laughed and handed over the bag of sardines.

'It's a pleasure, as always, doing business with you.'

Then he downed his coffee in a single gulp and picked up the talisman. As Eduardo's hand touched the stone snake, there was a hiss and M'Bororé turned into ethereal steam and merged into Eduardo's body.

'Aaah, finally,' Eduardo said, although he didn't sound like himself.

His voice was deeper pitched and more solemn.

'M'Bororé?' Teodora said even though it couldn't be, not really. Could it?

'It is I, grave robber.'

'I'm not a grave robber. Not like you're thinking at any rate. Although, I will admit, some of what I do is on the grey side. But never graves, and I never take anything of deep cultural significance.'

'It is no matter,' Eduardo / M'Bororé said. 'You have played your part and for that I thank you.'

Teodora gazed in fascination at the man so much like Eduardo and at the same time not.

‘Have you possessed him?’

‘I have.’

Teodora took a tentative sip of her coffee, keeping her gaze on M’Bororé all the time while she considered the problem and wondered whether she could or even wanted to do something about it.

‘Why?’

‘Because he was promised to me.’

‘How is that possible? He was born in Lisbon. You have been guarding a talisman in the depths of the Amazon.’

‘I gave his grandmother her magical gifts. In return, she promised me her first grandson.’

‘Are you serious? Like in a fairytale?’

‘Do you think fairytales are only to entertain children? They are lessons. Pay close attention to them if you wish to keep yourself safe.’

‘Do you think she intended to follow through on the deal? I mean, she moved continents. I’m sure that was to get away from you.’

Eduardo shrugged.

‘Whether or not she did, she would have been aware of the binding inevitability of a magical deal.’

‘Is he still in there?’ Teodora asked, pointing at the man whose voice and even facial expression and gestures had changed.

‘He is for now. Over time, I will absorb what remains, his memories included.’

‘So you’re going to take over his life?’

‘That remains to be seen.’

‘What about me?’

‘You are free to return to your life, although I recommend a change in profession.’

Teodora nodded. A ghost, a possession and two weeks in the jungle had convinced her it was no longer a career she wished to pursue.

‘I’m getting too old for this, anyway. But you, you’ve got a whole new beginning. What will you do now?’

‘Now I will eat for the first time in centuries. There are many wondrous foods in your city and in this era.’

Teodora put a large note on the table, more than sufficient for a hearty lunch, tip included.

‘Have your first meal on me.’

She smiled in farewell and hurried away. It was safest to be far, far away from Eduardo and whatever he was going to become. She joined the mass of tourists and drifted along with them, allowing herself to be swept down a flight of white cobbled stairs and into the broad boulevards of downtown Lisbon. She was back on that creek, but a figurative one this time and without a guide. It was time to find a new paddle.



MY SOLO CHRISTMAS

I wrote this story for the Lisbon Writing Group. The theme had been something like troublesome relatives. It's semi-biographical, which is ironic as I'd also just told the group that I could never write a biography because I have a terrible memory. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be able to recall enough for a novel. But the prompt brought back this memory, so here it is.



‘But I don’t want to go to Grandpa’s for Christmas!’

I didn’t mean for it to come out as a wail, but it did. Christmas used to be nuclear, mom, dad and my two brothers, just us. No uncles, cousins or great aunts and definitely no patriarchal grandfather. As the eldest of fourteen, fourteen! he saw it as his right and duty to host the family for Christmas. In his freezing cold house, in a medieval village in the god-forsaken centre of Portugal, eating boiled cod with the smell and texture of old socks, making small talk with relatives I’d never even met till I was in my twenties.

Our family Christmases used to be the best. In blazing sunshine, with fake snow and a Christmas tree on the porch, within view of the pool. We'd nibble at the spread of our favourite foods planned weeks in advance, steaks or giant prawns, venison pie or goose. Never turkey and definitely, absolutely, positively, never cod.

'Don't come then,' dad says, perfectly calm and I know he means it.

'What?'

'We'll tell them you're flying in late, that you won't be in Portugal till after Christmas. The choice is yours.'

So that's how I found myself, alone, luxuriating in my parent's apartment, sipping port and eating a rich fruity Christmas cake, feet up on the coffee table, a schmaltzy show on the TV and the twinkling lights of the tree making everything mellow and cheerful.

Two days later, the rest of the family, nuclear only, arrive back home. They're laden with cheap presents from relatives who don't know us well enough to give anything meaningful.

'How was it?' Dad asks.

'Bliss,' I say as we exchange hugs all round. 'Best Christmas I've had in years.'

— e l l e —

CROSS BONES

I wrote this while living in London. It encapsulates part of the reason I loved the place. People there have an eagerness to share knowledge. It is also a city packed full of history, sometimes in the most unexpected places.



I had just finished a large if somewhat disappointing Full English Breakfast and was meandering my way down the back streets towards London Bridge Station. I try to avoid main roads as much as possible. These large, straightened roads full of roaring traffic draw the eye, deafen the ear and numb the mind. Because they're roads that have been enlarged, they're also devoid of character. The ones around Borough are filled with Subways, Caffè Nero, Starbucks and Pret. All overpriced purveyors of standardised bland fare. I had to walk quite a way to find an authentic local café. The one I had intended to visit had been replaced by a Costa. I assume because only the multinationals can afford the exorbitant rents on the main thoroughfares.

The side roads are quieter, less polluted and more interesting and, if you have the time, which I did, worth getting lost in. You never know what you might find. The heart of Borough is an ancient part of the city and has been built and rebuilt so that there are layers of history. Much of it nowadays is harsh, industrial or falling apart. Some is degraded by thousands upon thousands of people using it, living in it or simply passing through it. Amongst this constantly changing landscape, buildings are constantly being torn down, replaced or repurposed.

You will often come across some real gems. A quirky old building, an ancient doorway with a characterful door knocker, or an unexpectedly pretty community park. I saw all of that this morning as I strolled through a fine mist of rain that drifted about and drenched me despite my umbrella.

Then serendipity took me somewhere new. I walked past a chain-link fence covered in, what the press always call, floral tributes. This was so much more. There were small bundles of flowers, real and artificial, sheaves of dried wheat (which is unusual), ribbons and laminated pictures of loved ones.

Across London you sometimes come across these sad shrines, usually at the corners of busy roads or at train stations. They mark places where a loved one was killed. This felt different, like the mementos weren't just for one person or a single event, it felt like a communal fence of remembrance, covered up to three meters high with grave gifts. It reminded me a bit of the bridges across Europe groaning under the weight of padlocks attached totem-like by optimistic lovers. This fence was so covered in mementos you could barely see through it into what looked like a shabby little garden beyond.

Shabbiness in winter is the inevitable look for any English garden. Almost anything of delight dies down to an uninteresting mass of shapeless tan stalks, so this isn't an aspersion on the garden. As I stopped to work out what I was looking at, I saw that several of the ribbons on the

fence referenced Cross Bones Graveyard. A solid wooden fence, beside the chain-link, of the kind put up around building sites and painted green, had a couple of pieces of plastic covered A4 pages stapled to it.

This is one of the things I love about London: people know their history and want to share it. This was the case here, too. It was an explanation of what Bones Gate was all about – a graveyard going back as far as the Middle Ages that was set up as a place to bury paupers and people deemed unworthy of burial in consecrated ground.

A document from 1598 revealed that the site was used predominantly to bury prostitutes. A colourful part of Southwark's history (of which Borough is a part) is that the Bishop of Southwark allowed prostitution, unlike the rest of London at the time. It was therefore the place all the women and their clients congregated. Despite being licensed by the bishop, these women were deemed unfit for burial on consecrated ground and their bodies were dumped in a permanently open mass grave. It continued to be used until 1853 when it was closed due to being, "completely over charged with dead".

The numbers of bodies buried on the site must have been tremendous. In the 1990s the Museum of London carried out a partial excavation of the site and removed 148 skeletons, which they estimated was less than 1% of the total number of people buried at the site. It's a shocking statistic.

As a writer, it was also a useful piece of information. I squirrelled it away, ready for use. I have no idea when. It might form part of a scene in a future novel, or just add an element of drama and sense of time and place to one of my books. You never can tell.



SHORTEST STORIES

*How short can you make a story? Ernest Hemingway's famous:
For sale, baby shoes, never worn, is well known. Mine aren't at
that level, but hopefully they also tell a tale.*



Squeegee, Beethoven and stilettos: apartment life.



Woman strolling by. Phone call. Heartbreak.



High waves weather warning – surf's up.

— e l e —

Surfboard for sale – found on beach

— e l e —

Challenge set, attempts made, variable results.

— e l e —

Cat demands, door opened, cat hesitates.

— e l e —

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ABOUT AUTHOR

Marina Pacheco a binge writer of historical fiction, sweet romance, sci-fi and fantasy novels as well as short stories. She writes easy reading, feel-good novels that are perfect for a commute or to curl up with on a rainy day. She currently lives on the coast just outside Lisbon, after stints in London, Johannesburg, and Bangkok, which all sounds more glamorous than it actually was. Her ambition is to publish 100 books. This is taking considerably longer than she'd anticipated!

You can find out more about Marina Pacheco's work, and download several freebies, on her website:

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