

# SHORTS

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COLLECTION FOUR

TDC | THE DRAFT COLLECTIVE

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# WELCOME TO SHORTS

Collection 04 marks one year since we sent the first collection of *Shorts* to subscribers. Hurrah! But it took us about a year before that to actually get our idea off the ground.

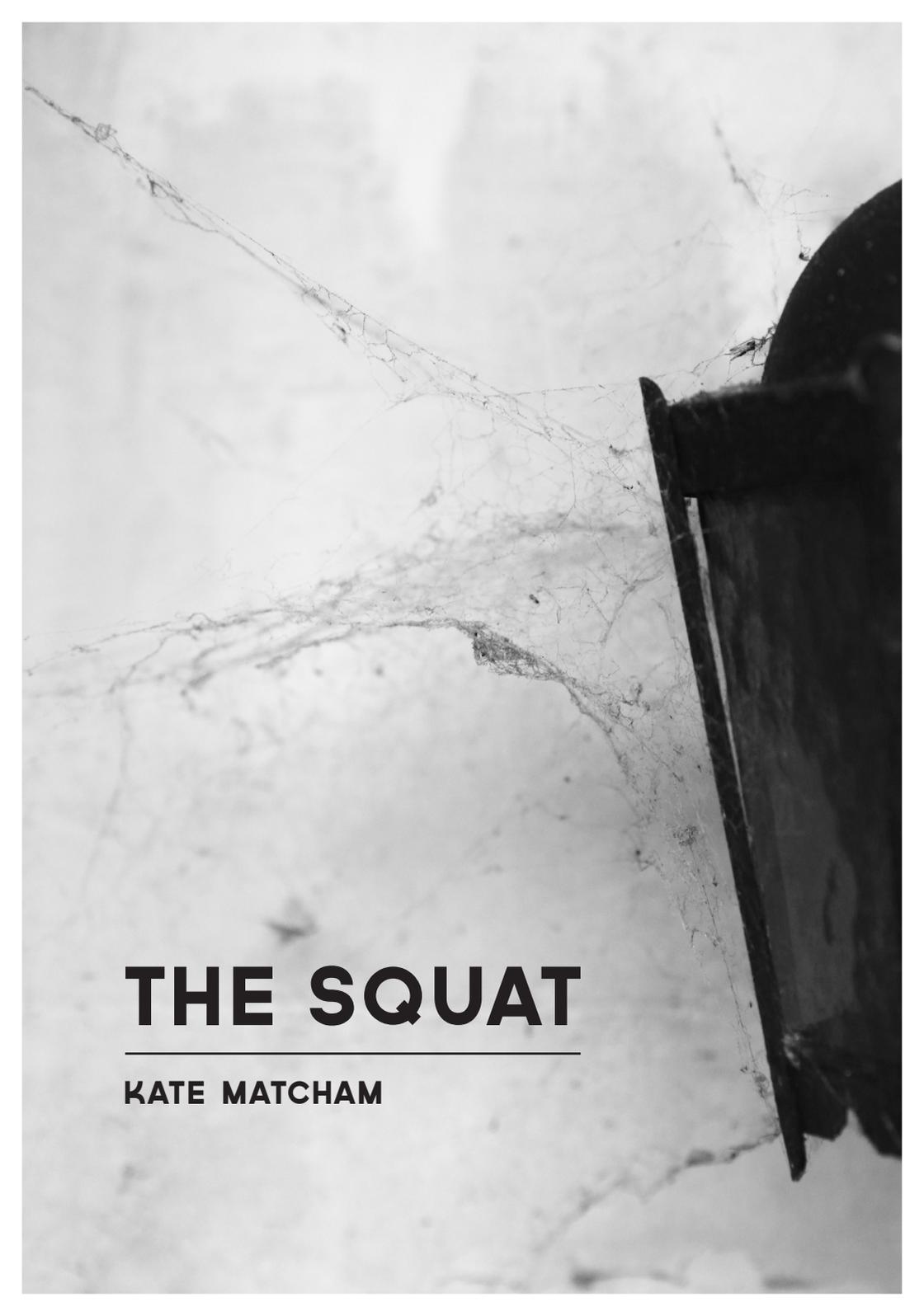
Our aim was simple — give unread stories somewhere to be read, provide people who like to write with a space to send their work and be treated like writers, and to present our community with a free, beautiful product that encourages them to read and maybe even write something themselves.

We have always been big on celebration here — the last item on every run sheet for each collection is always ‘celebrate our success’. So this month we will celebrate!

Getting to the point of publishing Collection 01 was momentous for us. One year on and we are super proud of what we’ve built (yep, this is where we give ourselves a pat on the back). We have a pretty cool website, four collections of *Shorts*, 10 blog posts, 17 contributors, 20 edited and published stories, hundreds of Instagram followers and even more subscribers! The Draft Collective now spans two continents and stories are coming to from all over the world, from London to Colombo to Bowral to Paris. On a personal note, between The Draft Collective team we’ve changed jobs, kicked goals, impressed our bosses, got a dog, put a ring on it, continued our educations, found love in far off places and taken a shitload of risks. So we definitely feel like it’s time to celebrate!

Thank you for reading these stories and giving them an audience. Thank you for supporting us and celebrating with us!

**Jess Harvie and Ash Hardman**  
Editors of *Shorts*



**THE SQUAT**

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**KATE MATCHAM**

**S**omeone had lived here once. Evidence of a past life lies around on shelves and in drawers as if the person could return at any moment. Only a thick layer of dust and a faint musty smell offers confidence that the flat belongs to them, at least for now.

On the first day they clean the bedroom, kitchen and bathroom from top to bottom. She states her expectations and they set to task with rubber gloves and various cleaning fluids. The dust makes her sneeze and her eyes itch and the chemical sprays make them both heady, but they continue late into the night. By the end of the weekend, the place is as clean as it can be, short of buying new furniture or curtains. Their belongings are neatly folded in the available cupboards.

Once upon a time it must have been grand, this abandoned apartment. On the third floor of an old apartment block, its architecture indistinct from thousands of others like it in Budapest's inner city districts. In its internal courtyard, neighbours smoke and watch the goings-on, housewives hang damp sheets and cats loiter, all eying them suspiciously.

From the damp concrete square, a palatial stone staircase in one corner leads up to each of the three levels. The lights above the staircase have long since died and no one, it seems, has ever bothered to replace the globes. The smooth, cool stone of the staircase has been worn down in areas under the pressure of hundreds of years of trudging footsteps. When it rains, they become especially treacherous so that making it down from the third floor alive is a feat worth celebrating.

Inside, the kitchen is a hodgepodge of old dishes, cutlery and utensils seemingly collected at different times from different people and places so that none match. But aside from a few items that they purchase from the local department store, it has everything they need. The kitchen is his domain; once it is clean to her satisfaction, she retreats to the kitchen table to watch him bring to life recipes handed down by his abuela, flavours prompting memories of a childhood far away.

The person that lived here before had been an avid rock collector. Perhaps a Geologist. Rocks of all shapes and sizes take pride of place on every available shelf. None of them have any interesting or unique features. Just dull, grey rocks that smell of soil. She can't bring herself to throw them away in case someone would miss them, so instead she stuffs them into bottom drawers and cupboards so that the place feels more like their own. Every now and then a cupboard door pops open, its catch weakened with age, revealing its unremarkable geological entrails.

They explore the local area like tourists, eager to be outside the apartment. They create a whole world within a block of their doorstep and fall neatly into routine: the bakery on Saturday mornings for pastries; the local craft beer bar on a lazy mid-week evening to cure the boredom of a working week; the smoke shop that sells the

slim cigarettes she likes on a Saturday night to go with the cheap wine they buy at the 24-hour convenience store.

Every local shop they frequent knows them. Their exotic complexions from two opposite corners of the globe and their heavily-accented Hungarian make them memorable. In some stores they are greeted affectionately by name; others with the more typical Hungarian reticence. Even before people hear them speak their strange mix of English and Spanish, it is clear they are not from this country: they laugh too loudly and too often. Wherever they go, she seeks him out; reaching for the warmth of his hand or leaning in to the comfort of his chest like a shield against the foreignness of the outside world.

Once they walk past the local florist and she mentions in passing that the lilies in the window are her favourites. From then on, he takes to buying a bunch at the start of every weekend, placing them on the table in their bedroom in a chipped ceramic mug that he found somewhere in the depths of the kitchen cupboards. As if flowers alone can make up for the shower taps that only emit water at either freezing or scalding temperature, or that every night they huddle together to sleep on an old dusty daybed that belonged to someone else a lifetime ago.

He covers the daybed with throw rugs to protect her from the dust ingrained deeply in the fibres. There is no blanket big enough for both of them, and anyway, she is prone to stealing the blankets during the night, so they sleep with one each, necessarily squeezed up against each other since they have little more space than a single bed. The daybed is the scene of her most schizophrenic moods – the place where they make love recklessly then, only hours later, where she exhausts herself with racking sobs before finally going to sleep.

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**EVERY LOCAL SHOP THEY FREQUENT KNOWS THEM. THEIR EXOTIC COMPLEXIONS FROM TWO OPPOSITE CORNERS OF THE GLOBE AND THEIR HEAVILY-ACCENTED HUNGARIAN MAKE THEM MEMORABLE.**

On weekends, they while away afternoons drinking wine at the table in their bedroom. The windows are large, harking back to a more graceful era. They open them wide and pull back the heavy curtains to let the last

of the afternoon sun stream into the room. The smoke from her slim cigarettes meanders into the outside air. They talk about advanced mathematics and philosophy and ancient Greece until the wine makes them sleepy and nonsensical, and they retire to the daybed.

News from home seems surreal. Weddings come and go, babies are born. Houses are bought and sold. She experiences these events through photos, from a distance. She has none of the grand life events to report back that she should at her age; for her, time is marked mainly by her monthly pay check, the last week always the most tenuous. Her best friend of nearly 25 years gives birth to a baby girl. It's too hard to send a gift.

It will have to wait until she sees her again, though she doesn't know when that will be.

Only a few weeks later, she stands in front of the toilet, shoulders tensed. She takes a look inside the box she holds in her hands and wonders if her best friend had the same feeling in the pit of her stomach when she had done her own test less than a year ago on the other side of the world. There are two more boxes on the hand basin because she bought the cheap ones and she doesn't quite trust them.

Peeing on the stick correctly is a challenge because there is a hole in the toilet floor about the size of a human head. She has to be careful to only put weight on one side of the toilet seat. The hole is the legacy of a recent visit by a plumber, who had advised them in a matter of fact tone that he had a work order to repair the pipes to stop them leaking into the apartment below.

At least, they think that's what he said – they hadn't quite been able to follow his Hungarian.

She's not sure this arrangement is any better as she peers through the hole directly into the toilet of the apartment below. It's not clear when, or even if, the plumber is returning.

It's ironic that two small lines can carry so much significance. Or rather six small lines. One neat little blue pair on each plastic stick. She stands in front of the hand basin surveying the scene in front of her and laughs, despite herself, at the sheer ridiculousness of it. She can't bring herself to leave the toilet.

She tells him sitting on the daybed. It's nearly dark outside now; he has closed the windows but the curtains are still pulled back letting in the only light in the room. A flicker of a smile crosses his face when she first tells him. He wipes his chin.

They sit huddled and gingerly discuss their options until long after the room goes dark. She realises how small they are in this large, dark room. In the end, they agree on the conclusion that she had come to the moment the second blue line had appeared on the first plastic stick. But she feels better for having gone through the motions. She tells herself that she has done the right thing by including him in the decision. She suddenly feels very heavy.

That night, she dreams of a warm far-away place. She is in a large living room surrounded by his family: his mother and four aunts busily prepare food supervised closely by abuela. He sits outside with his uncles, smoking cigars and avoiding the feminine hubbub inside. She can feel the small hand of a child enveloped in her own, but as she looks down to see the child, she wakes.

In the morning, he goes about the usual routine as if nothing has changed. Nothing has for him she supposes, and nothing will. Like runners in a relay, he has passed the baton to her to race to the finish line alone.

The air is thick with the perfume of the lilies. She can taste it like honey on the back of her throat. The smoke from her slim cigarette curls in the sunlight, perfectly lavender blue and then dissipates into the crisp Autumn air.

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# POSSUM

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JESS HARVIE

**H**e came in through her window and stayed three marvelous weeks.

She had heard him and his friends on the roof, running — they had woken her. She came to only seconds before she realized that, behind the curtain, her window was still open. She could hear them on the roof, still outside — they were so close. Tentatively, she reached over and slammed the window closed. She never intended to trap him, in fact, her intent that night was to keep him and his friends out. And she was ninety percent sure she had — which is how she was able to go back to bed that night and work the next day.

It wasn't until Day 2 that she saw him. She had been doing that thing where she pretended something didn't exist in the hope that it wouldn't, but really the apple had given it away. The day before, when she saw the discarded apple with bite marks on the floor, she assumed she had started eating it herself. But, she was usually pretty neat and leaving a half-eaten apple lying around wasn't really for her. That was something she came to learn about him though, he left things lying around without much thought for making a mess. She forgave him these faults. Too easily, she knew.

So on Day 2, when she was ready to acknowledge her house guest, she peeked behind the bookshelf that sat directly under her windowsill, the darkest place in her room. He was as cute as a wild marsupial could be. But he was shaking. She shuddered in response. She had read somewhere that possums were most dangerous when trapped. She tried to give him as much space as she could to make him feel less trapped, without giving him enough space to actually get out. That proved more difficult than she thought, so she just left him trapped. And then she sat on her bed and wondered what to do.

Her roommate Sheily was out of town for the week. Her parents lived in a different city. She didn't know her neighbours, and she did have a couple of friends, but they were new, and she didn't think this was the kind of situation that you invited new friends into. I mean, in hindsight it probably would have been a great bonding experience that would have solidified friendships and down the track they would have laughed about it like, remember when I helped you get that possum out of your bedroom? Ha ha ha. She giggled to herself as if it was a real memory. Hindsight.

She sat for a little while longer and then decided that if she couldn't make a decision, she would just do nothing. So that day she did nothing. She would occasionally peek behind the bookshelf to see if he was still there. He was.

And the next day she also did nothing. Except read some stuff about possums on the internet. And drop a few pieces of apple behind the bookshelf. She discovered

this US podcast called Awesome Possum, a title that rhymed when said in the host's American accent, "awe-sum, paw-sum", but sounded forced in hers. The podcast was a documentary-style program by a guy who was recording his journey of domesticating a possum. She was bummed that there were only two episodes.

The day after that (let's call it Day 4), she had to go to work at the company that sold Japanese printers. When she came home, he had come out of his hiding spot and was sitting on the bed. They locked eyes. She smiled hesitantly. He stared back, expressionless. She was nervous but she handed him the piece of apple she had precut in anticipation of his late afternoon snack. He took it in his furry (very sharp) little claws and started nibbling on it in a cartoon-ish way. They continued to watch each other. He stayed on her bed. He buried himself in her pillow and gazed up at her. She knew he had been through a lot in the last few days so decided to let him stay on the bed for a little longer. Besides, with him on the bed, she finally had a chance to get behind the bookshelf and clean some stuff. Her room was starting to smell. She had read on a possum website that possums will urinate and rub oil from glands on their chest, chin and anus to mark their territory. She thought that was gross and hoped it hadn't happened here.

When it was time to go to sleep, he still had not moved from her bed. She tried to coax him off with food but he didn't react, and when she tried to shoo him off, he hissed and squealed. Her housemate had returned that day but she wasn't quite ready to explain why she wasn't sleeping in her room, it seemed like a long story, so she grabbed two extra pillows and slept on the floor. She was happy with how they were co-existing and they continued this way, he on the bed and she on the floor, for a number of weeks.

The time that he was there was brutal, but only in the best way.

When she would leave him in the morning to go to work, she felt guilty. When she got to work she was distracted – constantly watching the clock, wondering when she could go home. She spent hours thinking about what special treat she would take home for him each day. Usually something that would keep him distracted the next day, to stop him from getting bored and lashing out. Or leaving.

But it certainly was nice to have a 'someone' to talk about. She especially loved being able to say no to her boss when he asked her to stay late because someone was waiting for her. She liked the sound of that almost as much as she liked the look of disbelief on her boss' face that soon turned into dismissive nods of understanding that turned into him no longer asking the question. She liked that other people knew

she was needed. What she didn't know or care to think about was that other people didn't have a clue about her life and didn't wish to waste time thinking about it.

It was only the tiniest bit annoying that she had to wear long skirts to work to hide the scratches. She could cope with that though. They were comfy and flowy and it was summer so she was grateful she didn't have to shave her legs. She'd read on a blog that single women don't wear maxi skirts because men don't like them. She thought that was stupid but guessed that it made sense for her current situation.

Everything else was wonderful.

Except for Sheily. Sheily was her roommate and she hated him staying there, thinking he was messy and unhygienic. But she really didn't get to know him. Initially, Sheily was excited to hear about the additional housemate. Then she started getting annoying, making ridiculous suggestions about splitting bills three ways and the excessive use of toilet paper – which was crazy, he didn't leave her room, especially not to use the bathroom.

The only time he did leave her room, he saw Sheily and panicked. He bolted to her room and hid in her wardrobe. It was a strange move, but he was shy and Sheily was kind of scary. When she went to get him, he was hugging Sheily's fur coat with all his might. She wrapped him in the coat and took him back to her room, hurriedly. Sheily was mad. Or confused. Or perhaps both. She told her she would dry clean the coat and give it back. Sheily asked for it everyday for a week but she kept telling her that she forgot to get it from the cleaners. Truth is, it's one of the things he loves most about her room and she kept it in there to keep him happy.

It was about Day 18 when the man with the cage came, and she knew it was Sheily who had called. Sheily had been the one to let him in and Sheily was the one that stood at the door looking guilty as he swung the cage easily over his shoulder clad in a khaki shirt with "Possum Busters" scrawled in yellow on the back. He went straight up the stairs to her bedroom and she hurried to keep up.

She asked him what he was there for, and he said he was there to fix her problem, love. To rid her of that pest. She laughed nervously and told him that there was no pest – if he was talking about the possum in her bedroom, he just visits from time to time. He's harmless. The man looked at her like he knew a joke that he didn't care to share. In here is it? He pushed open the door to her bedroom.

He hissed and scratched and squealed at the man and his cage, who picked him up with one hand in a blanket from the middle of the bed.

Huh. That looked much easier than she thought it would have been.

When he was in the cage, he hissed and scratched and squealed again. And then he was gone.

The man was good about it. His eyes only briefly rested on the make-shift bed on the floor and the platter of cut up fruit with nibble marks in it on the bed. She had hoped the man would give her a knowing look, like he had seen this before, it happens all the time, people getting too attached to possums. But the look never came.

After he left, she didn't wash the sheets for as long as she could bear the smell. She went back to work and started staying late again. Nobody asked any questions. She went to brunch with her new friends, the ones she didn't think she could have told about him, and desperately wished she could have told them how depressed she was and have her turn to be upset. Instead, she told them about how a few weekends ago, that weekend that they organised a picnic that she couldn't come to, a possum jumped in her window and stayed in her room for two days. She told them how she actually didn't notice for a whole day but when she did and called the possum guy immediately to come and take him away in his cage. Her friends laughed and shrieked and asked wasn't she scared? Oh yes, terri-

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fied.

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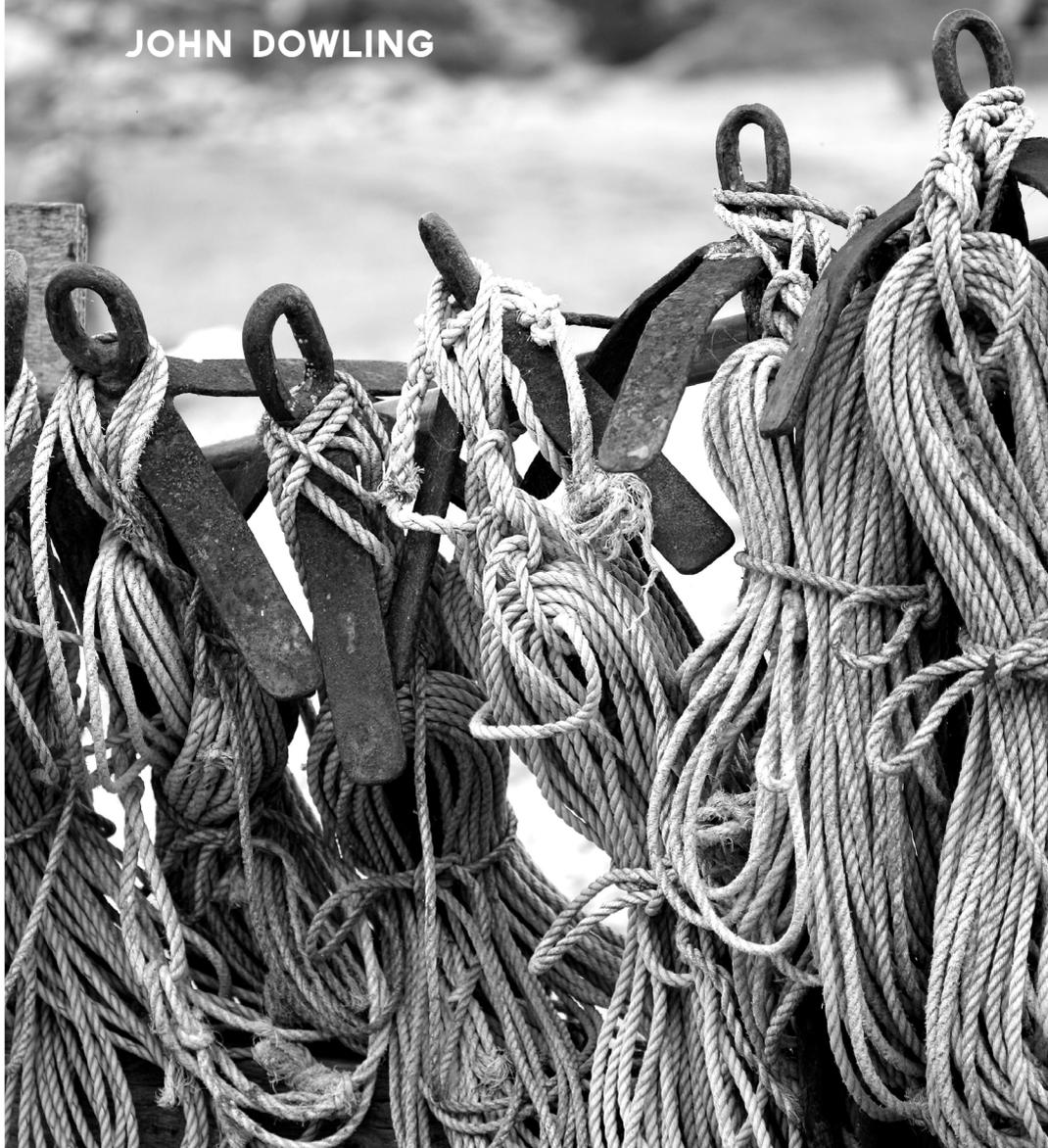
When she got home these days she usually went straight to her room. She'd formed a new habit of opening the window wide each night. Then she'd sit on her bed and stare at the curtain flapping from the breeze,

listening for any sounds. That day, after brunch, the wind was chilly so she closed the window. When she tried later to open it, the latch caught and it wouldn't budge.

# MID-AFTERNOON SERMON

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JOHN DOWLING



**T**he clock on city hall declared it was about half past noon and the Abel Brown's stools were filled. Wall to wall barely any space shown, all cluttered with antiques and keepsakes. Some lanterns, license plates, pictures showing yellow in age, even a main boom from a scrapped schooner acted as the ceiling beam from which a chandelier, adorned with sea glass in the place of crystals, glittered dull light across the pub.

Each seat sat still and flat, the leather-cushioned tops bearing the impression of their daily owners as a boulder carved by running water. Men leaned on the damp bar top and the lacquer shined the gloom up their arms. Below the ceiling sat an orb of stale smoke, which grew in size as the clock ticked and the mugs drained. One smoked a pipe. A radio played a muffled tune with a flute leading the band and none showed any care for its melody. Behind the counter sat shelves of liquor in its various persuasions before a massive mirror on which gold-plated Clydesdales stood for the artist.

The man working the bar stood behind the few tap handles with a tray of glasses before him. He wiped each with scrutiny before placing them on the shelf, occasionally interrupted to refill a patron's mug with vice. His face was as hard as the men he faced, but he smiled and shook as he scrubbed. Amongst the men, one spoke the loudest above the rest and with some attention and reluctance the others listened.

I don't give a rat's ass what this new road will bring this town, diggin' up bodies just isn't right. That road may drop gold bars at our doorsteps but not at the cost of disruptin' the dead where they lay.

Most of the men shook their heads in agreement.

I'm not a superstitious person but who knows what happens to ya when ye die, none of us know. Yeah, ye go to heaven and all, but what 'bout if you still feel things like when you're alive and all, just what if. What if they got a rule up there that ya can only be in heaven if your bones are in the same place forever, who knows, none of us ever been there so we can't be sure.

The pause after his speech let open an orchestra of comments from the men.

You know, them farms furtha out in the country were built on Indian burial grounds and when they dug them bones up they sure as hell did something. Not only did nothing grow, but when it finally did, they started having all this trouble wit the cattle and the horses.

Yeah, I heard about that, happened to Smolder's.

Yup, they had to have McGrabe come down and bless with the place with holy water and do some sort of exercising shit to it.

Exorcising.

What?

You mean exorcising.

What I say?

Exercising, the man replied, putting an emphasis on the middle syllable as he held up his fingers as if holding up a hair found in his drink.

Whateva the word is, don't matta, eitha way it didn't do shit.

So what'd they do? Interrupted the bartender.

They went out to one of the reservations out there by the quarry and had some chief guy come out and bless the place using their old ways or whatnot, burning sage and shit.

Did it work?

I don't know, I guess so, they got pumpkins and apples comin' outta there by the truckload.

I've neva understood the need for pumpkins, can't do much withem.

Their apples are good.

By the way what's the difference between saying exercising and exorcising? They sound the same.

Pumpkin pie, that's all I can think of.

They gut different meanings.

Yeah so?

Pumpkin muffins, forgot 'bout them.

The man who talked the loudest slammed his mug down and the men returned to listening. His voice boomed with poise.

They moving old Dunnyes' bones this morning, They gonna dig up that rickety old box he was buried in nine years ago and move his shackled corpse to the far end of the cemetery, by the road to the O'Connell's. If Dunny's up there looking down, ain't no way he ain't pissed. Guy used to whip my ass when I'd run on his lawn, let alone someone diggin up his fuckin body. Ain't no doubt he's flipping shit up there.

As the words left his mouth another man emerged from the far corner as if birthed by the darkness. He pulled a black wool cap from his head and revealed his white hair, slicked back with the oils of unhygienic conditioning. His overcoat was unbuttoned and hung low by his shins, and underneath his white shirt's neck stretched down his chest and his pants cuffed above his black boots as if they were both part of his body. His age showed in his face but his shoulders were wide and he walked with a confidence and overall indifference. The men stopped speaking and drinking. Even

the radio's signal lapsed as if it too feared the man yet heeded his word.

The man who spoke the loudest gave him a steady look and then spoke.

You got something to say?

The man in black shook his head and clicked his tongue against his lip before speaking.

You know, the Norwattucks believed-

He heaved into his fist violently and cleared his throat further.

That upon dying, the dead crossed a great river, a great journey so to speak, to the other side, a journey that only the soul took. And it was on that foreign bank that they would find a place acceding paradise, a place of purity and innocence unbeknown to the modern world and to men like you. A place where the trees were always green and the flowers in constant bloom and the sky shined like a topaz before a flame.

The bartender quit his scrubbing and the cigarettes now burned unpudded on the cusps of each ashtray.

There was no fear of sickness, as there was no body to fall ill. There was no fear of the animals, as the wolves and bears welcomed man in their kingdom. As did the deer and the hawks and the foxes, as they showed no concern of man, because in this place there was no hunger or thirst, there was no hunt. Together, the walking and crawling, the swimming and flying, the hopping and burrowing, lived together

in concord, living on as one entity, one being, for eternity.

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**THE BARTENDER QUIT  
HIS SCRUBBING AND THE  
CIGARETTES NOW BURNED  
UNPUFFED ON THE CUSPS  
OF EACH ASHTRAY.**

Some shook their heads while others just stared with blank eyes.

They would put the bodies in canoes and shove them off down river, freshly bathed

and naked. They didn't give them any weapons or tools, food or blankets, just the uniform of birth, to be welcomed back to this place as if untouched by civilization.

The man in black pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket and coughed harshly into it, wiping the sides of his lips before folding and stowing it away. The loud man who had led the talk previously, responded and the other men echoed.

That sounds like a good enough heaven to me.

If that be the case, I ain't dreading' death one bit no more.

Aye, do me a favor and shoot me.

As they chuckled at the last made claim, the man in black smiled.

You're all forgetting one thing. You aren't Norwattucks.

Yeah, so?

All you can look forward to when you die is death itself.

What you mean by that, sir?

Allow me to explain, he breathed in deep.

As children they learn of this afterlife and believe in it. They believe in it for their entire lives until that last beat pulses in their hearts, and that's all that really matters. That when they face the end, they still believe.

That's what you think; I could make myself believe that, even staring death in its black eyes and all. I could do it.

Me too.

The man in black nodded.

It's what you think that matters.

The man in black began buttoning his coat while the men at the bar listened nervously, some writing off his insight, others dropping their foreheads to their forearms from the uneasiness he divulged. The bartender sat back against the counter aside the archaic cash register and sunk his chubby fingers in his pant pockets.

You all are good Christian men, and since the day you learned what God was, you knew about this place called heaven that was waiting after death. However, you knew that you had to obey the rules set forth by this biblical holy code; obeying commandments, practicing your devotion, receiving the sacraments, and so on. Now in your time in this world, have you doubted your faith? Your heaven? Your god?

He did not wait for any reply.

Of course you have, because your religion is not instilled in you, as the end all be all, like the Norwattucks. You have knowledge at your disposal that makes it quite easy to nullify the teachings of the Church, and in turn, easy to disbelieve.

The man who spoke the loudest now pouted unknowingly and his eyes glassed like a child awaiting punishment.

Now gentlemen, before I bid you good day, allow me to say that is the principle in what comes after death that makes it so. Whether it is the St. Peter pearly gates or the great plain across the great river, without the commitment to its existence, it simply will not be. Because, you see, with death the mind stops and whatever follows is irrelevant to you. It is simply...immaterial. Thus the belief in the existence of such a heaven is the true nature of its gift: a provision of hope that there is a thought after

all thinking ceases, and it is that, friends, that holds the dying hands as they expire, not the place itself.

He turned and exited with the tail of his coat blowing as he hopped onto the street. The men returned to their ale and one to his cigarette and the man who spoke the loudest walked towards the back of the room and into the toilet. The bartender picked up his cloth and whipped it over his shoulder and turned the volume of the radio up a few clicks and threw a glimpse to the man at the bar.

What'll it be.

A beer'll do.

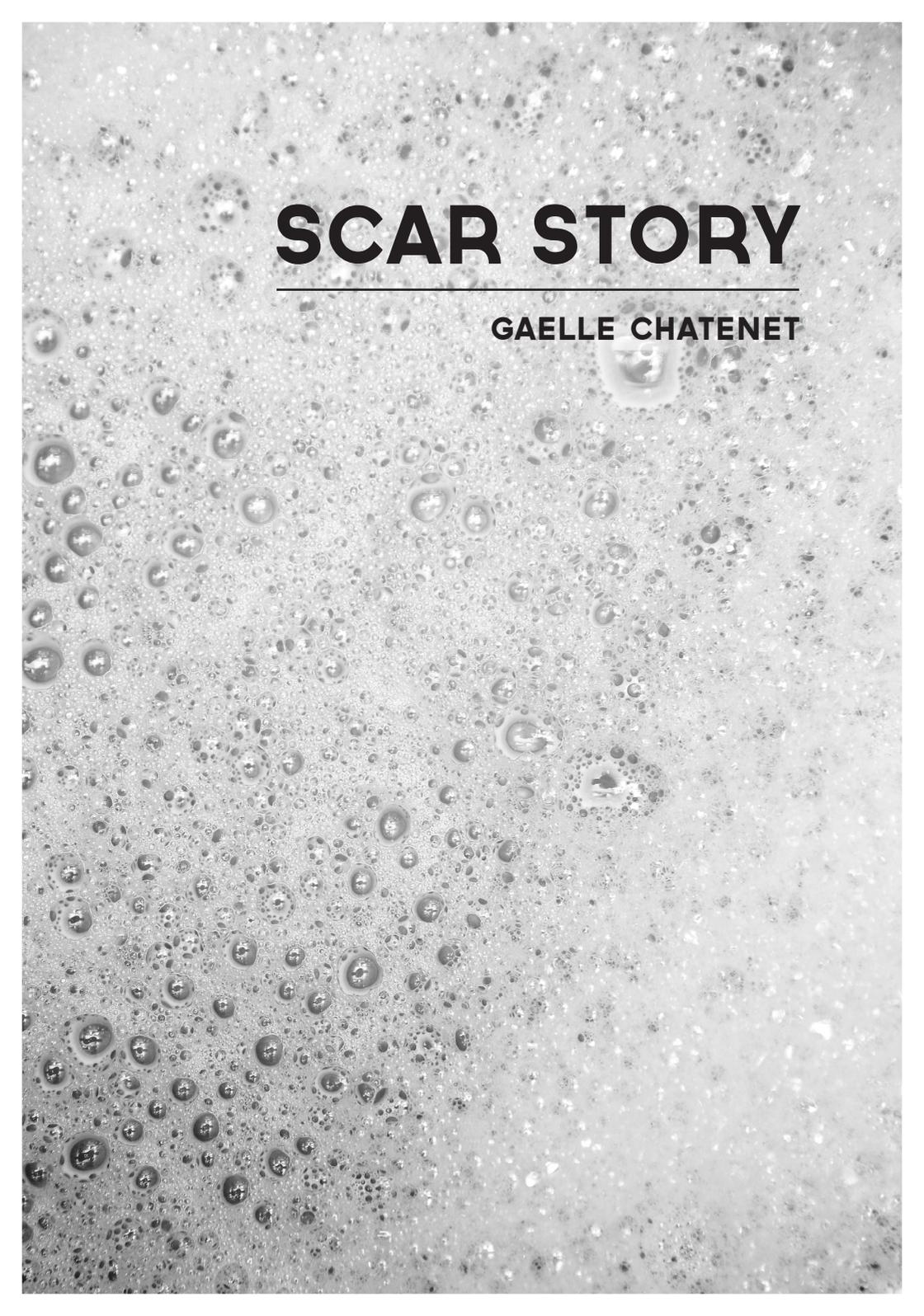
The bartender's fingers clung to the mugs handle as if it was to open a door and he sipped slowly. The patrons drank in the silence of each other's voices and in the noise of the radio but mostly in turmoil of thought. They searched their minds; some for reason, some for peace, some for apathy. Anything to shake away the thought that maybe there was nothing after death, or at least nothing like they have anticipated. Or perhaps the lives that they have led thus far will bring them away from a possible paradise and it was too late to change that. They drank without thirst and they drank without pausing and they drank and drank and until their senses dulled and it was all forgotten.

The man who spoke the loudest lit a cigarette and spoke into the empty mug as his head hung forward as if his neck were broken.

Poor Dunny boys, got nowhere to go out there, just floating round the graves and who knows where else. God bless ya Dunny.

He lifted his glass and tilted it toward the bar before taking a sip and the bells of the parish sounded and the sun crawled further west.





# **SCAR STORY**

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**GAELE CHATENET**

**B**oys! It is 6 o'clock!" called Natsuko. "You know what you are supposed to do!" "Bath time!!!" answered Ken-chan with a huge grin on his face. He ran into the bathroom followed by his little brother, still wobbly on his chubby legs but no less happy. They undressed in seconds and waited for their Mom. The bathroom was divided in two parts, area with a tap and small stools on which they would sit and scrub themselves clean. And next to it the deep tub of hot water where they would soak afterwards. Like most Japanese mothers Natsuko was in the habit of bathing with her children.

They went inside. Ken-chan sat on his little stool and started dutifully scrubbing his legs. Natsuko helped her younger child, who was having trouble climbing onto his own low stool, and led his hand with the damp cloth. He was trying his best to copy his brother and do things by himself but he was not two yet and his movements were still hesitant.

"Mommy will you wash my back?" asked Ken-chan. Natsuko gently took the cloth from him and started wiping. Little Brother reached for the cloth and his Mom laughed.

"Do you want to help your brother?" she asked and handed him the cloth. She couldn't help smiling at the mixture of pride and effort on the little boy's face.

Once both boys were covered in soap Natsuko used the big wooden ladle to rinse them with some bath water. They giggled under the hot spray. She told them to get into the bath and not wait, worried they might get cold.

"No," said Ken-chan, "we will wait for you Mommy"

She smiled again at the two stubborn little faces looking up from their stools and started cleaning herself. And so the game began. A game they had played many times before. The boys called it 'the scar game'. They always started at her feet.

"What is this Mommy?" asked Ken-chan pointing at her left foot.

"That's a scar," she answered.

"And how did you get it?"

"It was on New Year's Eve many years ago. Before you were born. The last day of the Year of the Sheep. I was frying some rice crackers for Daddy and myself. I thought the oil had cooled down already and so I started emptying it. But it was still hot and some water spilled in. It just started bubbling and splashing and a big drop fell on my foot and burned some skin right off. It left a big hole and it was so scary. Daddy had to take me to the emergency room and we never had rice crackers for New Year's ever again!"

"Did it hurt?"

"It sure did..."

"Do you like this scar?"

"Yes I do. I like that it taught me to be more patient and more careful. When I want to rush things I look at it and remember I should let myself cool down and think instead of acting

in haste and making things worse.”

“I understand,” replied Ken-chan looking very serious. His little forehead creased and his jaw set in concentration.

Then he pointed to his Mom’s thigh. “What about this one?”

Natsuko couldn’t help but smile gently.

“This one was made by my neighbour’s dog, when I was a teenager. It had always been a friendly dog but this time it bit me. It was not a deep bite but I was only wearing a light cotton kimono and so it still left the mark that you can see.”

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**SOMETIMES WHAT  
LIES AHEAD CAN SEEM  
SO SCARY AND DARK  
THAT YOU CANNOT SEE  
BEYOND THE SHADOWS**

“Why did the dog bite you if it was a good dog?”

“Well, she had just had puppies and they were lying in the grass a few steps away. I didn’t know that and walked towards her. She was scared for her babies and she snapped but she didn’t mean to harm me, just to warn me. If she had wanted to hurt me she could have taken a full bite and it would have left a much bigger mark.”

“Do you like this scar Mommy?”

“Yes I do.”

“Why?”

“Because when I look at it I remember that even the people I think I know well have their secrets. And that there are days when we all feel more vulnerable than others. On those days we might react in ways that will startle others. We might snap at people we like or seem cold or angry. If someone reacts this way with me, I try to keep in mind that they may just be scared or hurting and that this will pass. That I should not let this disrupt our relationship.”

“So we should be nice to our friends?”

“Yes we should.”

“Even when they are not nice to us?”

“Well, to a certain extent. If you find out that a friend is acting distant or cold because they are actually hurting inside then you should try to help and not hold it against them. The same way you wouldn’t want it to be held against you.”

“I see...” answered Ken-chan his brow even more creased than before.

Then a light smile brightened up his little face again.

“What about this one?” he asked, pointing at his mother’s belly.

“Which one?” Natsuko smiled back pretending not to see.

“This one! This really big one! On your tummy!”

“I don’t see a scar,” replied Natsuko, “I only see a smile!”

“That’s not a smile!” cried the little boy. “Bellies can’t smile! It’s a scar!”

“Ok,” answered his Mom. “It is a scar, but a happy one.”

“How can a scar be happy?”

“It is a happy scar because what made it made me happy.”

“Did it hurt?”

“A little bit.”

“Did you cry?”

“Only with joy.”

“Tell me what happened!”

“Not again ...” she smiled.

“Yes again!!!” he almost shouted, clapping his hands together.

“Ok then...But come close to me you two!”

She kneeled down so she could hold one of her boys in each arm, pressed against her, naked like they had been on that very first day.

“This scar,” she said, “is where Doctor Sakamoto opened my belly to take its treasure out.”

“What was the treasure?” Though he knew the answer the little boy could barely contain his excitement.

“Well, at first it was you my love,” she said brushing the top of his head with her lips, “and then it was your little brother,” she continued, kissing him too.

“Why did he have to open your tummy Mommy?”

“So you could come out and I could finally see your beautiful faces,” she answered.

“And do you like this scar?”

“More than all the others. I cherish it.”

“Why?”

“Because it reminds me that sometimes we need to go through some pain to get to happiness. Sometimes what lies ahead can seem so scary and dark that you cannot see beyond the shadows. But you should keep in mind that if you stay brave and face your pain and fear, once on the other side you’ll realize what you mistook for the night was just a cloud and everything beyond is bright.” Ken-chan smiled and hugged his Mother.

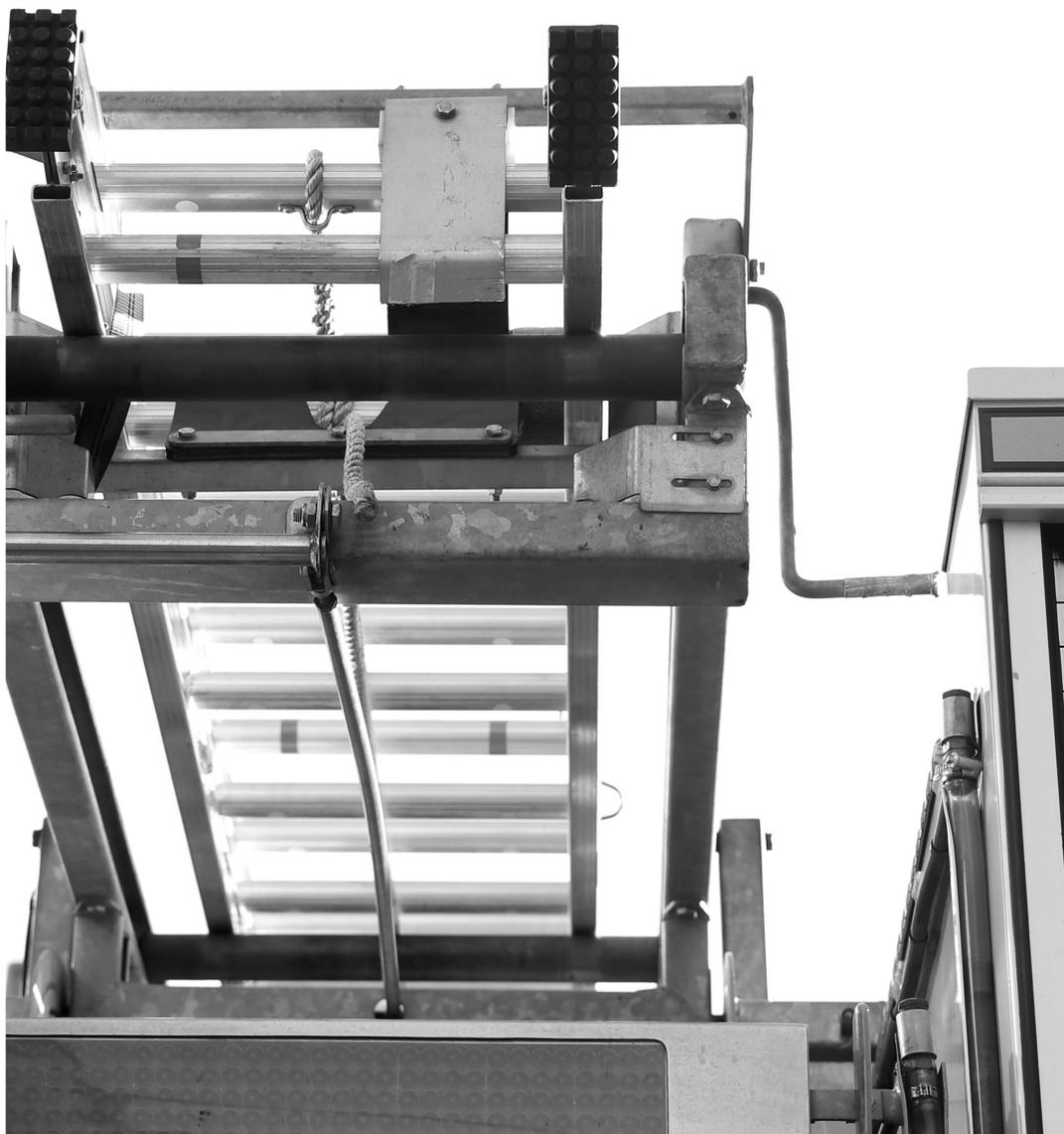
“One more time!” he cried.

“Maybe tomorrow,” answered Natsuko. “Now hurry up and climb in the bath.”

# DINNER'S READY

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NADIA L KING



Joel enjoys an adrenaline rush. He also appreciates when a television crew turns up and an attractive young reporter like Macy Lane interviews him. Joel Finch is the youngest Fire Station Officer in the metro region.

The adrenaline rush hits him today just like any other day but for a split second Joel thinks maybe he should have chosen another career. Maybe one where he had a cubicle; a small space in which to pass his days. He could have worked in a bank and approved mortgage documents for young couples filled with excitement and misplaced enthusiasm. He could have been a PE teacher and inspired kids with his love of sport, footy and all things fitness. But Joel decided a long time ago that being a fireman was the thing for him.

When he was just a little fella, Joel obsessed over emergency service vehicles. His parents bought him Matchbox police cars and Lego fire stations. Those birthday and Christmas gifts were nothing compared to the excitement Joel felt when he spied an emergency service vehicle speeding along a suburban road. Joel loved the sound of police sirens, the self-importance of ambulances and the shiny red fire engines as they manoeuvred through traffic to save lives. Joel's parents always pointed them out in case he missed them. He sat up higher in the backseat, straining to catch a glimpse, usually with a fire truck clutched to his chest.

In Year 3, Joel's class went on an excursion to the local fire station. For the other kids it was the highlight of their week. For Joel it was the highlight of his year. Mrs Starkey's cousin was a fireman, and he paid particular attention to the serious eight year-old, chewing on the inside of his cheek and asking questions about the heat resistance of thermal imaging cameras and could he please explain the standard time-temperature curve and volume computation? Joel tried on a fire helmet and the heaviest jacket in the world. He climbed up a ladder and even flicked the switch for the siren and watched delightedly as Mrs Starkey jumped and the other kids plunged fingers into their ears.

During high school, Joel liked to detour past the fire station on his way home from school. He slung his bike in the long grass and hung out just inside the large doors to the station. If he wasn't at school or the fire station, Joel was at footy practice. The other lads trained in earnest to win the premierships and Joel trained for the Candidate Physical Ability Test.

After graduation, it was no surprise when Joel tried out for the fire services. He was accepted of course. It was years since the examining officer had seen such dedication and enthusiasm. All the young recruits were energetic, physically fit men with an occasional woman thrown in. But there was something special about Joel.

Joel had fifteen years in the job under his belt and was the youngest FSO in the city. He was Mr May in last year's fundraising calendar and had competed in the World

Police and Fire Games three times. Joel was without a doubt the best firefighter in the West Australian Emergency Services Corp.

There's the usual run of the mill things firemen do. Like smashing windscreens, saving kittens stuck up trees and freeing kids whose heads are caught between railings. Joel's removed several engagement rings from pudgy fingers although usually a squirt of Morning Fresh or a dash of olive oil will do the trick. Joel has also cut quite a few people out of crumpled motor vehicles. Although, he turns his head away every time the crew pulls a dead child out of a crushed Toyota or from an incinerated dwelling.

Joel relishes being fit and strong and being seen as a hero. He delights sitting at a bar, his biceps barely contained in his t-shirt, and when a pretty girl showing some skin

asks what he does for a living his heart soars.

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**SMOKE PULSES OUT FROM AROUND THE WINDOW FRAMES OF APARTMENT 6 ON THE TOP FLOOR. PETE USES A HALLIGAN TO BREAK DOWN THE FRONT DOOR.**

Joel likes the way women's mouths make a small O when he tells them he's a firefighter and the way their eyes rake up and down his torso lingering on his tight abs. Joel's had a string of girlfriends but after a while most broads get sick of shift work, smoky clothes and worrying. Women like the idea of a

hero but not the reality. Heroes are far better left in fantasies along with princes on white horses and swashbuckling pirates.

At 2:37am, as Joel finally nods off in his bunk at the station, he's toned out of bed. It's a Code 3. Joel dresses in bunker gear and is in the truck within two minutes, his partner Pete beside him. Pete looks ready for anything. The call was radioed in right on the edge of district nine. A six-pack apartment block is burning heavily on the corner of Corona Crescent and Fleming Avenue.

As soon as they arrive Joel sizes up the situation. The call came in from a neighbour and information obtained says it's a 'hoarder fire'. Joel knows his team can handle anything but hoarder fires have a tendency to burn large due to an increased fuel load. Residents are evacuated from five apartments. One of the residents is particularly jumpy and tries to stop them. He's muttering incoherently about the woman inside and Joel shuts his words out concentrating on the task at hand. Smoke pulses out from around the window frames of Apartment 6 on the top floor. Pete uses a Halligan to break down the front door. Wood splinters and smoke rushes out at them as if finding a welcome escape. Joel and Pete complete the primary search.

Shoulder to shoulder, the two men move through thick smoke. Visibility is non-existent and although this is supposed to be a hoarder's flat there's nothing to feel but the usual furniture in a residential dwelling. They move slowly like the newly blind, and can't feel the stacks and towers of belongings usually stashed by over-enthusiastic collectors. It's all empty space. Breathing heavily through their SCBA,

the men extricate the female occupant. She's heavy and together they pull her from a lounge chair and take her outside to safety and the ambos. The ambos do their job and bring the female back to life. One of the ambos, Terry, nods in recognition when he sees her body.

Joel is puzzled. He's not sure why this was called in as a hoarder's fire. Was the neighbour delusional? The space feels depleted. Holding on to Pete's shoulder, blind in the fire, a quiet popping sound meets his ears in the dark. Each step brings the sound and Joel begins to worry about his ears. He needs to hear cries for help and his partner's words and the lifesaving radio. There's no such thing as a deaf fireman.

Pete soon extinguishes the blaze with the No 1 pipe. Pete and Joel bring in huge industrial fans to clear smoke and introduce fresh air into the scene. The smoke clears and Joel sets up spotlights flooding the area with light. Once there's fresh air and bright artificial light, Pete and Joel get down to the hard work of determining the cause of fire.

The female occupant has gone off with the ambos to hospital. Terry, the ambo, said they had been called out last week for the same patient. She's bulimic and had collapsed on the stairwell complaining of chest pain.

The burnt out apartment is a charred mess. District nine is the kind of location you live in when you've given up on life. It's a wasteland inside the metro area with high crime and squandered dreams. Joel wonders about the female occupant — heart problems last week and back in hospital today and nowhere to live. He wonders how people fall into such deep holes.

The spotlights highlight the bleakness of a life lived in poverty. Joel takes note of the singed ceiling and incinerated TV. He can still hear the popping sound and glances over at Pete. Pete's crouched down looking at the wall behind the TV and frowning. Pete's a bit of a frowner but he's a damn good firefighter.

'Mate, you hear that?'

'Yeah it's weird. I heard it when we first came in.'

'What the hell?'

With the spotlights in place, Joel can finally inspect the floor. It's littered in an array of charred, smoking plastic supermarket bags. A sea of plastic. Each one filled with a semi-solid substance and tied in a neat knot. It's a dolphin's worst nightmare.

'She's a hoarder yeah?'

'Mate, what's in those bags?'

Pete holds one up in his gloved hand. The bag splits and a detritus of vomit spews forth slopping over Pete's boots.

'Mate, that's puke!'

‘That was the noise?’

Joel laughs. It’s a deep laugh which rumbles from within his perfect abs. It echoes off the blackened walls and lifts ash from the ceiling. It’s the kind of laugh that makes you feel good to be alive. Pete’s laughing too. He’s hanging on to the backs of his knees and his shoulders are shaking.

‘Mate, this smells like dinner when Franco cooks.’

‘Hey Franco,’ Joel calls into the radio.

‘Franco mate, dinner’s ready.’

Author note: Believe it or not, this story is based on true events and dedicated to my baby brother, who is as good a man as Joel Finch, and a life-saving firefighter.



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# CONTRIBUTORS

## **CARLY EARL PHOTOGRAPHER (SYDNEY)**

Hailing from the Hunter, Carly joined The Draft Collective as a fully fledged member in mid-2015. She is our resident photographic genius but when she's not shooting incredible images for *Shorts*, she is a legit photojournalist, producer, assistant director and film all-rounder. Carly also co-owns her own production company, Charcoal Productions.

## **VIRGINIA "VB" BATSTONE DESIGNER (SYDNEY)**

VB is a member of The Draft Collective the reason that *Shorts* looks so damn good. She is our design guru and, with a cool head and great eye, she is our consultant on all things style. VB worked patiently on The Draft Collective's logo, as well as the logo for *Shorts* and the whole look and feel of each collection. She works at BMF as a 'Finished Artist'. That's her real title and we love it.

## **NADIA L KING WRITER (PERTH)**

Nadia L King was born in Dublin, Ireland in the 1970s. She reads voraciously and enthusiastically. She is an overexcited person who adores words and writes short stories amongst other things. Her first book "Jenna's Truth" is due for release in October. Nadia lives near the Swan River in Western Australia. You can find her blog at [www.memopipwrites.wordpress.com](http://www.memopipwrites.wordpress.com).

**KATE MATCHAM**  
**WRITER (SYDNEY)**

Kate has been a loudmouth since birth and has been known to tell a damn good pub story. She has recently decided to put this obnoxious talent to good use, mainly as a distraction from her soul-destroying corporate day job. When she's not exploring creative interests, you'll find her hunting down the best coffee that Sydney's Inner West has to offer.

**JOHN DOWLING**  
**WRITER (NEW YORK)**

JD is a Boston native that grew up in a room tiled with books, continuously mused by the gothic nature of New England. After touring for many years in punk bands, he received a degree in Literature from the University of Massachusetts. He now resides in Brooklyn, where his imagination is slowly disintegrating as he ages into dust.

**JESSIE HARVIE**  
**WRITER (NEW YORK)**

Jess is a co-founder and editor of Shorts. She struggles to finish a story unless excessively encouraged, pressured and harassed by her co-founder Ash. But she has found getting back to writing quite wonderful and in turn excessively thanks Ash for being patient and supporting her silly story from across the seas.

**GAELE CHATENET**  
**WRITER (TOKYO)**

French by birth, Gaelle has been living in Tokyo for the last 13 years with her Chinese husband. She loves to write however does not often get the chance, stealing moments when her kids are asleep to work on her writing.

# THANKS TO EVERYONE WHO CONTRIBUTED

To everyone who submitted stories—thank you for choosing to be part of this lovely little thing we call Shorts, it takes guts and perseverance to offer up your work. To our writers for this collection—you have been patient with us, responsive to our comments and edits, and your positivity makes what could be a chore, a true pleasure. To Carly Earl—this was probably your busiest time and you still found space for Shorts, we are so grateful. To VB—may you have a beautiful wedding and thanks for finding the time to fit us in. The good city of New York—for taking such good care of our Jess, helping her find love and pushing her to her limits. Kenji—you are pure joy, thanks for making Ash remember how nice it is just to dance. To the Board—as always you help us make the hard decisions. To the good people at Arcadia Liquors in Redfern—for providing a warm place to hold us and cold drinks to calm us. And to You! Our readers—this is all about you. Thanks for enthusiastically consuming every story and sending us feedback and love. Share your Shorts, #showyourshorts and enjoy!