HAMISH HAMILTON PRESENTS

Five Dials

NUMBER 39

Don't Go Too Soon

Deborah Levy | *On Bowie*
Molly Prentiss | *At Dinner*
Jessica Westhead | *New fiction (set in Toronto)*
Trevor Quirk | *Marking time with the smartest people in the world*

Plus: new poetry by Sophie Collins, the life of bike courier Emily Chappell as she courses through traffic. And some very Frequently Asked Questions.

Contributors

EMILY CHAPPELL studied at Cambridge and SOAS, and since 2008 has worked as a cycle courier in London. Emily's writing has featured in the *Guardian* and in 2012 she won Travel Blogger of the Year at the British Travel Press Awards, and a Jupiter's Traveller Award from the Ted Simon Foundation. She delivered her first lecture to the Royal Geographical Society in 2012. She spent 2011 to 2013 cycling across Asia – from Wales to Japan – and in 2014 she cycled across Iceland. Emily has just completed the Transcontinental Race from Belgium to Istanbul. She can be found @emilychappell and her website is thatemilychappell.com

SOPHIE COLLINS grew up in North Holland and now lives in Edinburgh. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Poetry, Poetry London, The White Review, Ploughshares, Poetic Series* (Sternberg Press), *The Best British Poetry 2014* (Salt), *The Best British Poetry 2015* (Salt), and elsewhere. She received an Eric Gregory Award in 2014, and in 2016 edited *Currently & Emotion*, an anthology of poetry translations to be published by Test Centre in September 2016. Her first collection will be published by Penguin in 2017.

DEBORAH LEVY has written for the Royal Shakespeare Company and her dramatizations of Freud's iconic case studies, *Dora and The Wolfman*, were broadcast on BBC Radio 5. She is the author of six novels: *Beautiful Mutants, The Unloved, Billy and Girl* and the Man Booker-shortlisted *Swimming Home.* Her latest novel, *Hot Milk*, is set on the Spanish coast and tells a hypnotic tale of female rage and sexuality, of myths and timeless monsters. It was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize in August 2016.

MOLLY PRENTISS grew up in a commune in Santa Cruz, California. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from the California College of the Arts and was a Writer in Residence at Workspace at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. She lives in Brooklyn, New York. Her first novel, *Tuesday Nights in 1980*, was published in May, and follows the lives of artists, socialites, dealers and collectors in downtown New York at the beginning of a new decade.

TREVOR QUIRK lives and writes in Salt Lake City. He recently published a chapbook on metaphor in science that can be found at his website: trevorquirk.com

JESSICA WESTHEAD (www.jessicawesthead.com) lives in Toronto, Canada. Her fiction has been shortlisted for the CBC Literary Awards, selected for the Journey Prize anthology, and nominated for a National Magazine Award. She is the author of the novel *Pulpy & Midge* (Coach House Books, 2007) and the critically acclaimed short story collection *And Also Sharks* (Cormorant Books, 2011), which was a *Globe and Mail* Top 100 Book and a finalist for the Danuta Gleed Short Fiction Prize.

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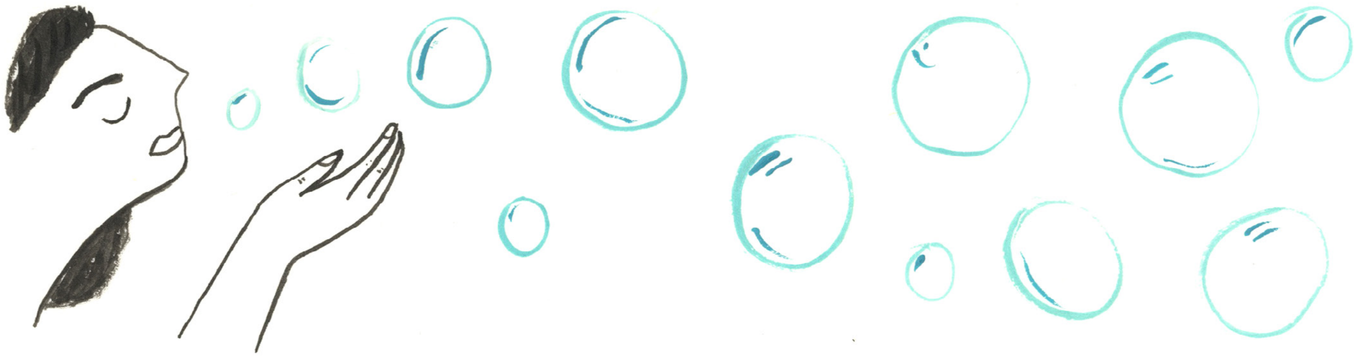


Unable to Contribute

KHADIJA ISMAYILOVA is an award-winning investigative reporter and a program host on Radio Azadlyg, the Azeri service of the U.S. government-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. She was arrested after she was summoned to the prosecutor's office in the Azerbaijani capital, Baku, on 5 December, 2014.

Authorities charged Ismayilova with inciting a local man to commit suicide and ordered her to be imprisoned for two months pending an investigation into the case, news reports said.

In January 2015, a Baku court extended Ismayilova's imprisonment for another two months; a few weeks later, the general prosecutor's office amended the charges against her to include separate counts of embezzlement, illegal business, tax evasion, and abuse of power. If convicted, she could face up to 12 years in prison.

Ismayilova is known for her exposés of high-level government corruption, including her investigation into ties between President Ilham Aliyev's family and some lucrative businesses. For years, Ismayilova also covered Azerbaijan's grave human rights record.

Ismayilova is being held in the Kurdakhani pre-trial detention facility, according to a letter she wrote from behind bars that was published in February 2015 by *The Washington Post*. She was released from prison on 25 May, 2016.

Police arrested blogger and freelancer **MOHAMED CHEIKH OULD MOHAMED** in his home in the city of Nouadhibou, Mauritania, on 2 January, 2014, on charges of apostasy in connection with an article he wrote that was published on the news website *Aqlame* on 31 December, 2013. The article, called 'Religion, religiosity and craftsmen,' criticized Mauritania's caste system, and said that followers of Islam interpreted the religion according to circumstance, Reuters reported.

Mohamed has frequently written articles for news websites that criticize Islamic religious beliefs and conservative practices in Mauritania. He was charged under Article 306 of the Mauritanian criminal code. If convicted, he could face the death penalty. The editor of *Aqlame*, Riad Ould Ahmed, took down the article from the website and issued a statement on 4 January, 2014, saying it had been posted accidentally.

On 11 January, 2014, Mohamed issued a statement from prison denying that he intended to insult the prophet.

Mohamed was convicted to death on apostasy charges on 25 December, 2014. On 21 April, 2016 his conviction was upheld by a Nouadhibou appeals court. The appeals court referred his case to Mauritania's Supreme Court, which has the power to repeal the sentence, reports said. Under article 306 in the Mauritanian penal code, if the Supreme Court rules that a defendant is repentant, it can reduce the sentence to up to two years in jail and up to 60,000 Mauritanian ouguiya (US$172.93).

ESKINDER NEGA, a prominent online columnist and former publisher and editor of now-shuttered newspapers, was arrested by Ethiopian security forces on vague accusations of involvement in a terrorism plot. Eskinder's arrest came only five days after he published a column on the U.S.-based news website *EthioMedi*. The column was critical of the government of Ethiopia for misusing the country's sweeping anti-terrorism law to jail prominent journalists and dissident intellectuals.

In 2011, police detained Eskinder and threatened him in connection with his online columns that drew comparisons between the Egyptian uprising and Ethiopia's 2005 pro-democracy protests, according to news reports. His coverage of the Ethiopian government's repression of the 2005 protests landed him in jail for 17 months on anti-state charges at the time. After his release in 2007, authorities banned his newspapers and denied him licenses to start new titles.

Following Eskinder's 2011 arrest, state television described him as a spy for 'foreign forces'. Despite consistently proclaiming his innocence, Eskinder was ultimately convicted on the basis of a video of a public town hall meeting in

which he discussed the possibility of a popular uprising in Ethiopia if the ruling party did not deliver democratic reform, according to reports.

In July 2012, a federal high court judge in Addis Ababa sentenced Eskinder to 18 years in prison. That same year, a U.N. panel found that Eskinder's imprisonment was 'a result of his peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression,' according to a report published in April 2013.

In May 2013, Ethiopia's Supreme Court rejected an appeal and upheld the sentence. Eskinder is being held at Kality Prison in Addis Ababa, with restricted visitation rights.

YUSUF RUZIMURADOV is a reporter for the Uzbeki opposition newspaper *Erk*. He is one of the two longest-imprisoned journalists worldwide, research from the Committee to Protect Journalists shows. He was jailed on anti-state charges after extradition from Ukraine.

In a September 2014 report on political prisoners in Uzbekistan, the international organization Human Rights Watch said that Ruzimuradov was being held in Tavaksay prison colony outside Uzbekistan's capital, Tashkent. Human Rights Watch said that Ruzimuradov was due to be released in May 2014, but that authorities had extended his sentence for an undisclosed period because of unspecified violations of prison rules.

Ruzimuradov was first detained in Ukraine along with another Uzbek journalist, Muhammad Bekjanov. At the time, Ruzimuradov and Bekjanov lived in exile and produced the newspaper *Erk*; Bekjanov was the editor of the paper and Ruzimuradov reported for it. Both were extradited from Ukraine at the request of Uzbek authorities.

In September 1999, a Tashkent court convicted both Ruzimuradov and Bekjanov on charges of publishing and distributing a banned newspaper. Both were also convicted of participating in a banned political protest and attempting to overthrow the regime.

Both men were tortured before their trial began, according to CPJ sources and news reports. After the verdict was announced in November 1999, the two were jailed in high-security penal colonies for individuals convicted of serious crimes.

On 24 November, 2014, eight U.S. senators sent a public letter to President Islam Karimov, calling on him to release Ruzimuradov and Bekjanov on humanitarian grounds.

ILHAM TOHTI is a Uighur scholar, writer, and blogger. He was taken from his home by police on January 15, 2014, and the *Uighurbiz* website he founded, also known as *UighurOnline*, was closed. The site, which Tohti started in 2006, was published in Chinese and Uighur, and focused on social issues.

Tohti was charged with separatism by Urumqi police on 20 February, 2014. On 23 September, 2014, at the Urumqi Intermediate People's Court, Tohti was sentenced to life imprisonment. He denied the charges.

Tohti's appeal request was rejected at a hearing in a Xinjiang detention center on 21 November that was scheduled at such short notice that his lawyer was unable to attend. He has asked to be moved to a Beijing prison to be nearer his wife and children, his lawyer told *The Washington Post*.

ABOU ZEID, a freelance photographer, was detained while covering clashes between Egyptian security forces and supporters of ousted President Mohamed Morsi during the dispersal of the pro-Morsi sit-in at Rabaa Al-Adawiya in Cairo, according to news reports.

Abou Zeid has contributed to the U.K.-based citizen journalism site and photo agency Demotix and the digital media company Corbis. After his detention, Demotix sent a letter to the Egyptian authorities confirming that Abou Zeid had been covering the clashes for the agency, the photographer's brother, Mohamed Abou Zeid, told CPJ. Abou Zeid was first detained by police and held in Cairo stadium with other protesters and foreign correspondents who were released the same day.

In September 2013, the Egyptian general prosecutor's office extended the journalist's pre-trial detention, accusing him of weapons possession, illegal assembly, murder, and attempted murder, the journalist's brother, Mohamed Abou Zeid, told CPJ. The same allegations were levied against hundreds of protesters detained during the clashes. As of February 2015, no official charges had been filed against him. Human rights groups said Abou Zeid's health had deteriorated in prison.

On 14 May, 2015, Abou Zeid appeared before a judge for the first time since his arrest. The judge ordered him to speak about his case and renewed his pretrial detention, according to the Freedom for Shawkan campaign. The journalist, whose lawyer was not in court, told the judge about his arrest and denied the allegations against him.

Abou Zeid has been diagnosed with hepatitis C, and his lawyer and his campaign say that his health is deteriorating in prison. He was scheduled to appear in court on 21 July 2016, according to news reports.

FAQ

What's going on with Noam Chomsky these days?

HERE IS YOUR ANSWER

Where does this estuary go?

HERE IS YOUR ANSWER

What does manic depression feel like?

HERE IS YOUR ANSWER

How do I define chuggypig?

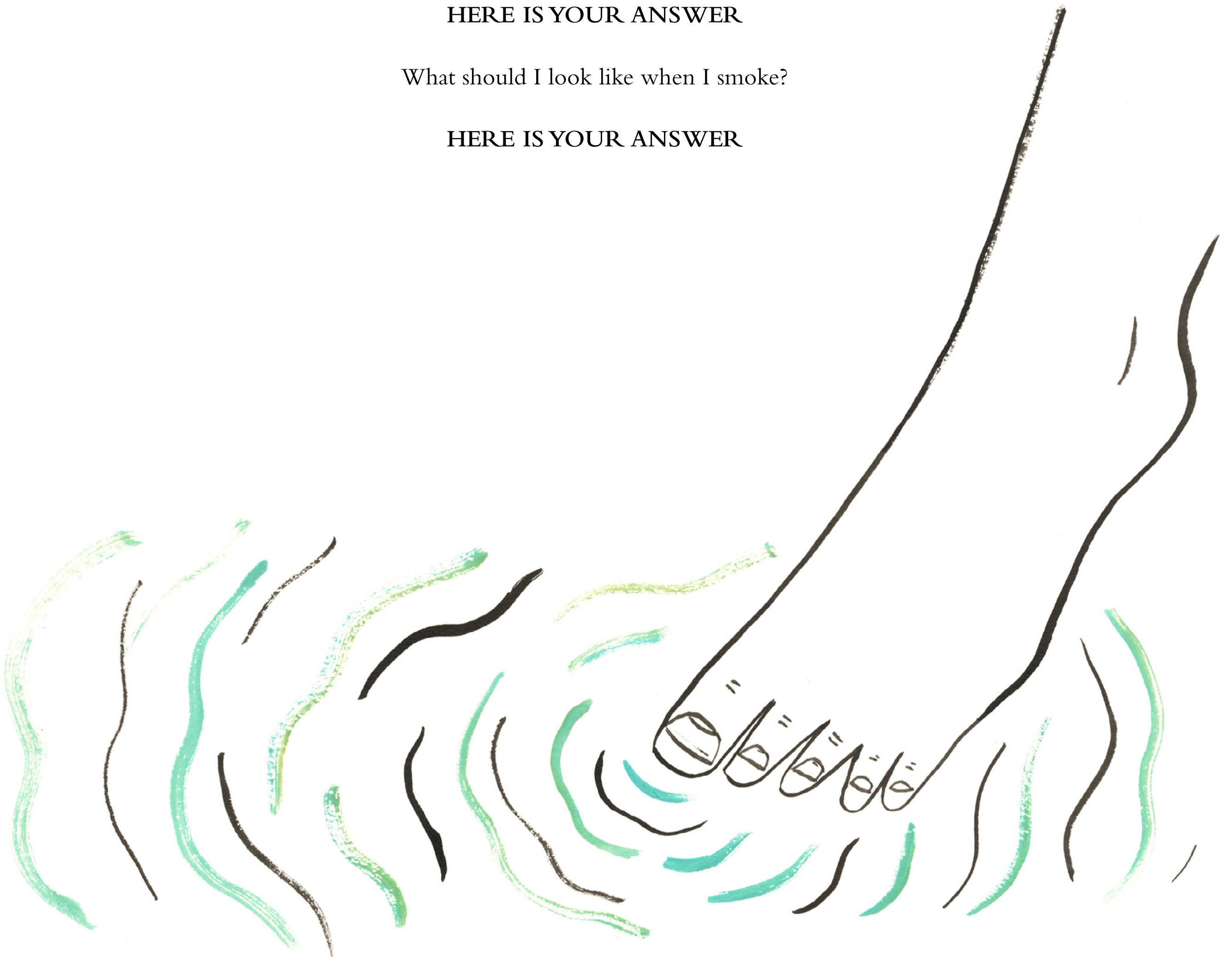
HERE IS YOUR ANSWER

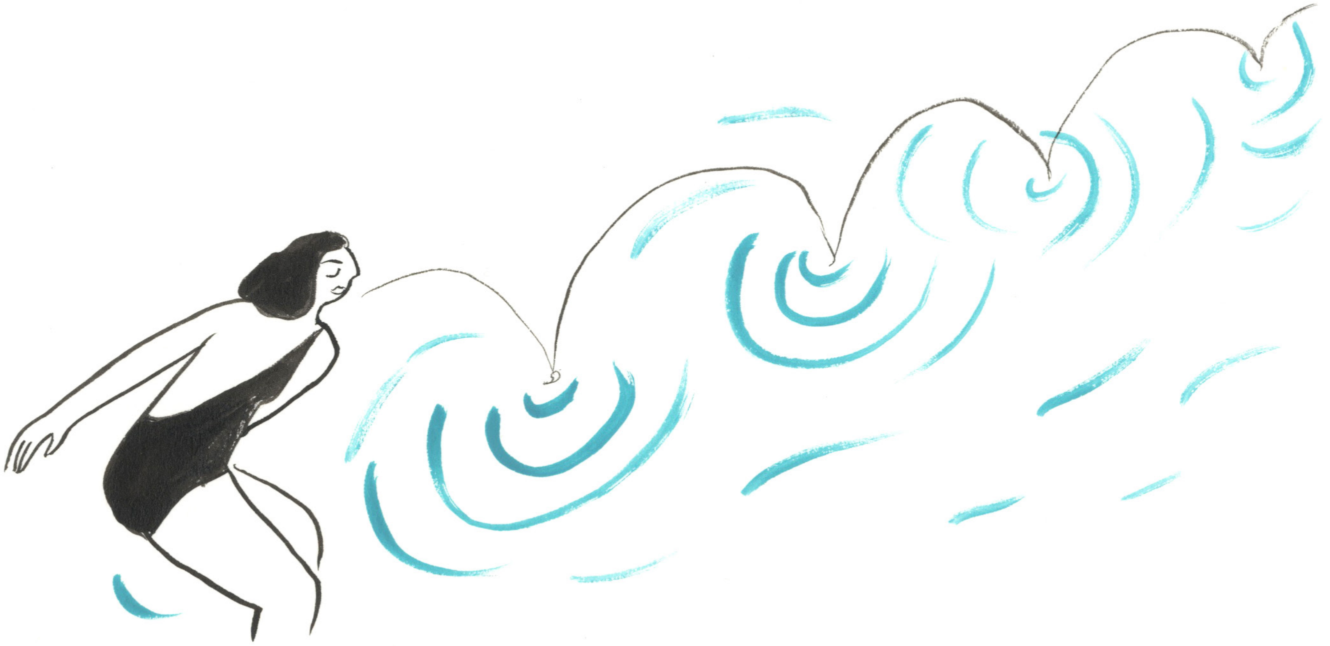
What should I do with my hands?

HERE IS YOUR ANSWER

What should I look like when I smoke?

HERE IS YOUR ANSWER





OUR TOWN

What Goes Around

A Cycle Courier Reflects

By Emily Chappell

Couriers are splendidly anachronistic figures – in an age where almost everything is mechanized and digitized, seeing actual human beings on bicycles darting among the traffic to deliver packages seems almost equivalent to spotting Roman chariots racing between the buses on the Euston Road. Part of the courier's romance, I realized, came from this incongruity. He was, manifestly, a human body among machines – a heartening reminder that, despite the advances of technology, there will always be a place for, and a need for, flesh and bone and muscle. Couriers seemed to me at once to have sidestepped society, and yet to be ubiquitously visible within it, striding sweatily into reception with a package, pedalling alongside the bus for a moment before disappearing into the traffic jam ahead, sitting at the tables outside my habitual sandwich shop, radios blaring – a constant reminder to disillusioned wage slaves like me that there is another side to the desk, and a whole world outside the office.

Becoming a cycle courier seemed just as likely as becoming a surgeon or a firefighter – by no means impossible, but so far removed from my narrow rounds of temp jobs and postgrad applications that it might as well have been. Until a couple of years before I started couriering, I didn't even know there was such an occupation, and planned to make my living using my mind rather than my legs. And when I first strapped the radio to my bag in 2008, I envisaged the job as a short adventure rather than a career – something I'd do for six months or so, and which would give me a good story to tell in years to come, when I'd rejoined the real world, and found a sensible, responsible way of earning my money. Six years on, it's my most enduring love affair; the career that's shaped my life, made me what I am, and entirely derailed any hope of a normal existence.

Six years on, it's my most enduring love affair; the career that's shaped my life, made me what I am, and entirely derailed any hope of a normal existence.

There was no test, and no interview. Derrick, the fleet manager at Pink Express, a steel-haired man with tattoos on his

forearms and a paternal air, took down my bank details and national insurance number, and explained that the deposit for my radio and Xda would be deducted from my first payslip, and a weekly equipment hire charge from all subsequent ones. Then he told me to call in at eight the next morning, warned me to 'take it easy for the first couple of days', and dismissed me with a fatherly wink.

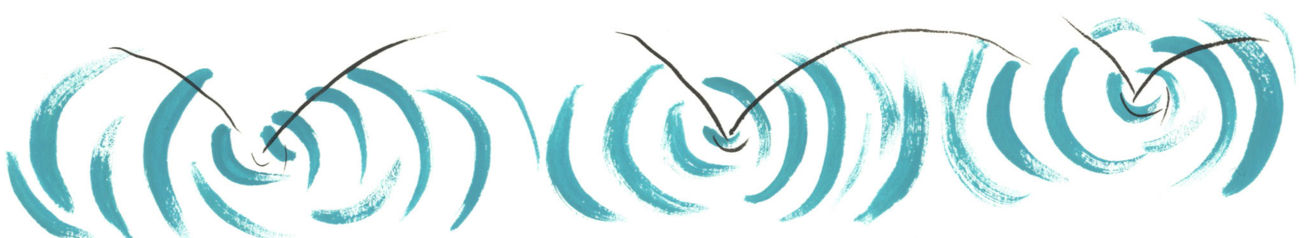
By far my strongest memory of those first few weeks on the road is the exhaustion, which flavours, obscures and crowds out most of the others. Thursday, I learned, is the real killer. You already have three days of hard riding in your legs, and your body's crying out for a rest day. Friday is somehow never quite so bad, infused as it is with the adrenalin of everyone else's last-minute deadlines, and the promise of a whole weekend's rest in just a few hours' time. My second Thursday on the road, I hauled myself up the slope that leads on to Waterloo Bridge, my legs sore and slow and aching, remembering how, when this was part of my seven-mile commute into Bloomsbury, I'd dart up on to the bridge with legs like springs, overtaking men on road bikes, and watching my speedometer climb to the 20 mph I'd set myself as a daily challenge to reach at that point. Today I had the same legs, and the same bicycle between them, and yet I could barely move. It was not a kind October: the sky was grey, and a cold wind whipped crisp packets and stray leaves in and out of the harsh concrete blocks of the South Bank Centre and the National Theatre. My exhaustion seemed similarly grey, weighing me down, and creeping through all my limbs, sapping my energy like a parasite. I tried to muster the vigour with which I'd sped up the bridge just a few weeks previously, but couldn't – it was as if I were now a different person.

Surviving the winter became my first objective benchmark of courierhood.

Another courier told me, 'You're not a real courier till you've done your first winter, that's what they say!' he grinned, little realizing how much I'd take these words to heart. Surviving the winter became my first objective benchmark of courierhood – if I could meet this challenge (November, December, January and February, I decided), then I would have earned the title of courier. I would be one of them, rather than an outsider who could do a convincing impression.

You spend a lot of time alone as a courier, though the constant sound of your controller's voice on the radio can sometimes make you forget this. Andy's perpetual monologue, crackling out of the radio and into my left ear, quickly became such an essential part of cycling that if I ever rode my bike through central London at the weekend, without my radio, I'd have the sensation of having gone slightly deaf; of something missing, of the world being quieter and at more of a distance than usual, since the noise around me came from the pavements and the traffic, rather than a small black box strapped to my chest. The voice on the radio is the courier's only means of sustained human contact, and after a few months she'll become attuned to it as one does to the voice of a spouse or a childhood friend – able to pick up on the tiny tics and changes of cadence that show when the person is annoyed or upset or distracted or hasn't understood you.

Sometimes it'll work the other way too – if you become friends with your controller, or are good enough or bad enough to stand out from the rest of the fleet, he might start to recognize your moods as well. The sense of intimacy the courier feels is mostly illusory, or at least one-sided, but it's not always easy to remember this. When something's gone wrong, or when you're exhausted, frustrated, angry or in pain, often the most obvious person to vent this on is the one with whom you spend most of your time, whose voice is constantly in your ear. Occasionally, being former couriers themselves, controllers might sympathize when you tell them about the violence of a driver or the inhumanity of a security guard, but most of the time they're just interested in getting the necessary information across as quickly as possible, because the phone's ringing, and there are half a dozen riders waiting to call in with queries. Nor does he really need to know when your knees are hurting, when your brake pads are about to wear out or when you're so hungry, cold or exhausted that having stayed on the road for nine hours feels more like a heroic achievement than a day's work. You're often tempted to inform him, though – partly to pre-empt and justify any errors or delays, partly to remind him that in between your clean and curt radio responses are miles and miles of pushing and panting and



sweating, of dirt and noise, of shrieking ambulances and snarling taxis, of blazing sun or pouring rain or driving snow.

There is respect and solidarity in this job, of course there is. But it occurs against a backdrop of almost constant solitude, of private pain and private pleasures, of knowing that the world can afford you little sympathy when things go badly.

This, in fact, is probably the very reason for our solidarity. I stopped at the lights next to another courier once, during a sudden torrential rainstorm that had sent all other cyclists and pedestrians running for cover, so that the streets were curiously deserted, save for us, a few cars, and a million raindrops. I remember the squelch of my sodden gloves on the bars, and seeing the drops of water from his hood dripping past his smiling face. Until the lights changed we simply sat and grinned at each other, and it would take me more than a thousand words to explain exactly what was behind that grin. It acknowledged suffering and discomfort that was so obvious there really wasn't any need to say anything about it. It said, 'We're crazy to be here, aren't we, but we chose this.' And it laughed at the absurdity of two couriers, sitting at the lights, soaked to the skin while everyone else waited inside. Most of all, it spoke of the relief of company and sympathy, because no one but another courier could know exactly what we were going through at that moment – no one, in fact, could have understood that grin without the need to resort to language. The lights changed and we pushed on into the rain, both of us feeling, I suspect, momentarily less alone.

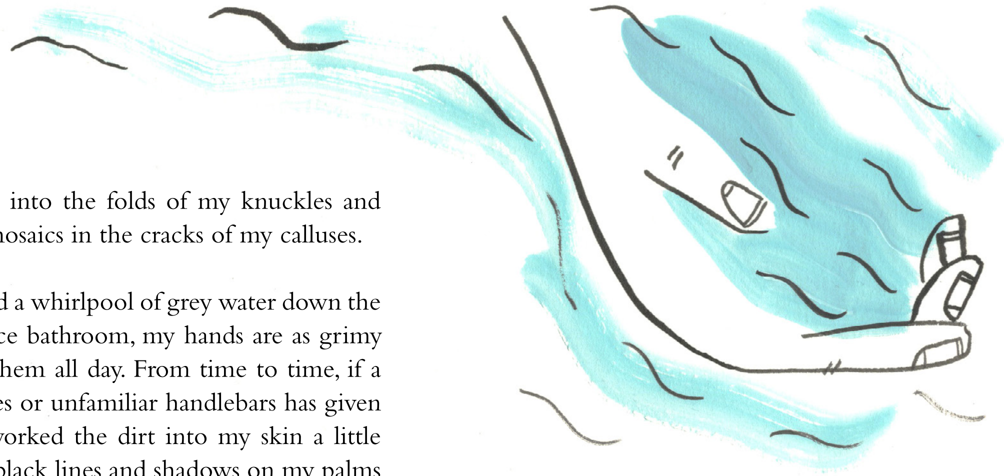
One hot sunny day at the height of June I was riding north over London Bridge, that doleful conveyor belt shovelling commuters into the furnace of the city, and I swear that just for one elusive second the scent of roses drifted past me, blowing sweetly from some unseen garden or roof terrace or flower stall across the river. By the time I'd filled my lungs a second time, wanting to confirm and savour the fragrance, it was gone, and my airways were scorched once again with the sour taste of road fumes. I noticed smells more in my first summer. In winter they're contained in layers of clothing and deadened by the cold air; in spring the streets are freshened by breezes and washed by rain. But in summer the air is thicker and the streets fuller. There is far less space to breathe, but breathe you must. Riding past a crowded pavement on a hot day, swallowing consecutive gusts of perfume, sunscreen, cigarette smoke, and sometimes even halitosis, you realize just how helplessly intimate we all are in this city, uncomfortably close, crowded together whether we like it or not (and mostly we don't), sharing the same air, inhaling the vapour that rises from other people's skin, along with the effluence of exhaust pipes and the dust whipped up by millions of feet treading through the same parks and streets, carried to and from distant corners of the city by the commuter trains, fanned through the streets by the traffic, settling and smudging in the sweat on all of our seething skin. No matter where the dust came from and what colour it started out, it inevitably ends up the same dark grey. I have ridden through countries where the soil was red and brown and golden; stuck to my sweaty skin, it was always dark grey. London contains people of a thousand different colours, what each of them puts into and on to their body is unique, yet we all cast off the same dark-grey dust.

Riding past a crowded pavement on a hot day, swallowing consecutive gusts of perfume, sunscreen, cigarette smoke, and sometimes even halitosis, you realize just how helplessly intimate we all are in this city.

It's a memento mori, a miniature death that is – or should be – a continual reminder that, no matter what our differences, we'll all go the same way in the end. Dust to dust. It's not only the people. There are days when the Albert Embankment smells puzzlingly of toast.

The cluster of Japanese restaurants at the western end of Brewer Street, where Soho begins to fray into Piccadilly, gives you two warm, nutty breaths of cooking rice as you ride between Regent Street and Glasshouse Street, and the waffle stall at the southern end of Wells Street wafts a deceptive cloud of sweetness (deceptive because waffles and crêpes never taste as good as they smell, and you might as well not waste your money) at you as you leave Fitzrovia. There was one afternoon back in 2009 when Great Eastern Street smelt of decomposing flesh (I actually checked the news that evening, to see if some builders had stumbled across a mass grave or charnel house), and one morning in 2011 when Parliament Square smelt exactly like an old man's breath before breakfast. It's a subtler filth than the open sewers and unsealed roads of two centuries ago, but it's filth nonetheless.

Arriving home after a hot summer's day on the road, pouring with sweat, I'll find myself covered with dark-grey smears – the patches on my bare forearms where I slid down the sides of buses in order to balance myself through some of the tighter gaps; the rock-chick shadows under my eyes that makes it look as though I'm ill-advisedly wearing make-up to work; the tide marks on my ankles that merge with my tan lines, so that I'm never quite sure when to stop scrubbing them. No matter how often I wash my hands during the day, they are always black with dirt – it collects



under my nails, settles into the folds of my knuckles and ingrains itself in tiny mosaics in the cracks of my calluses.

Ten minutes after I send a whirlpool of grey water down the sink of someone's office bathroom, my hands are as grimy as if I hadn't washed them all day. From time to time, if a pair of worn-out gloves or unfamiliar handlebars has given me a new callus, or worked the dirt into my skin a little harder than usual, the black lines and shadows on my palms don't even disappear when I stop cycling at the weekend, and I wonder if they're now a permanent feature that I'll one day show to my grandchildren, like the small blue-grey line on my left elbow, which looks like an amateur tattoo, but is actually a memento of that long-ago day, the summer before I started couriering when I wrote off my bike outside Richmond Park, grazing myself in various uncomfortable places, and absorbing more grit than the nurses were able to tweezer and scrub out of me. I don't really mind things like this. I like the fact that the road has left its mark on me, that I've absorbed some of the molecules of London (which, in all likelihood, have passed through many other bodies before mine), and kept them, and made them part of me. That in this great heaving transitory city, there is at least some permanence.

There are days when the Albert Embankment smells puzzlingly of toast.

Cycling itself is, as far as I'm concerned, probably the purest form of auto-eroticism. There is no exchange or intervention or conquest or surrender; no doubt and no climax – this jouissance is perfectly contained and sustained within my own body, which sings and surges as it flies through the streets, consumed in an ecstasy of motion and sensation. My thighs hum with energy as they pump and flex, pushing the bike forward, and my hips roll warmly from side to side, steering it with countless minute adjustments. To turn left I'll jut my right hip out, press myself into the saddle, and feel my left sit bone pivot cleanly against its firm leather. I notice the individual muscles of my waist flexing as I balance, and every inch of my flesh, from my chest down to my knees, tightening and resettling with every movement, every pedal stroke, every twist and turn. The pores of my skin and the fibres of my muscles are wide, wide awake, voluptuously drinking in the sensation of the air flowing around me, and responding to the texture of the road beneath me.

Never before has my body felt so alive, so supple, so liquid. I have no idea whether this exhilaration might be shared by someone watching me. I sometimes catch a glimpse of it when I watch other cyclists in flight, and know from experience what it is they might be feeling, but for all I know, to the outside observer I am merely a slightly ungainly woman pedalling a battered bicycle slowly along the street. I'd almost prefer it if that were the case, because then the pleasure would be mine and mine alone. It is a beauty without pride, without vanity, without any need for the eye of a beholder. And it was a beauty so all-consuming that, as long as I was on the bike, my periodic qualms about where my life was going were easily disregarded.

Of all my many maps of London, the emotional one is the most elusive, but also the most powerful. The unlikeliest street corners will have some tattered threads of memory fluttering from them like a flag, because of something I did there once, or someone I spoke to, or simply because of something I happened to be thinking as I rode past one day, which then popped back into my mind as I rode past again a few hours later, and after that was forever lying in wait for me on that particular corner, like a swarm of insects, or the gust of hot fragrant air that I savour every time I ride past the bakery on Brockley Road.

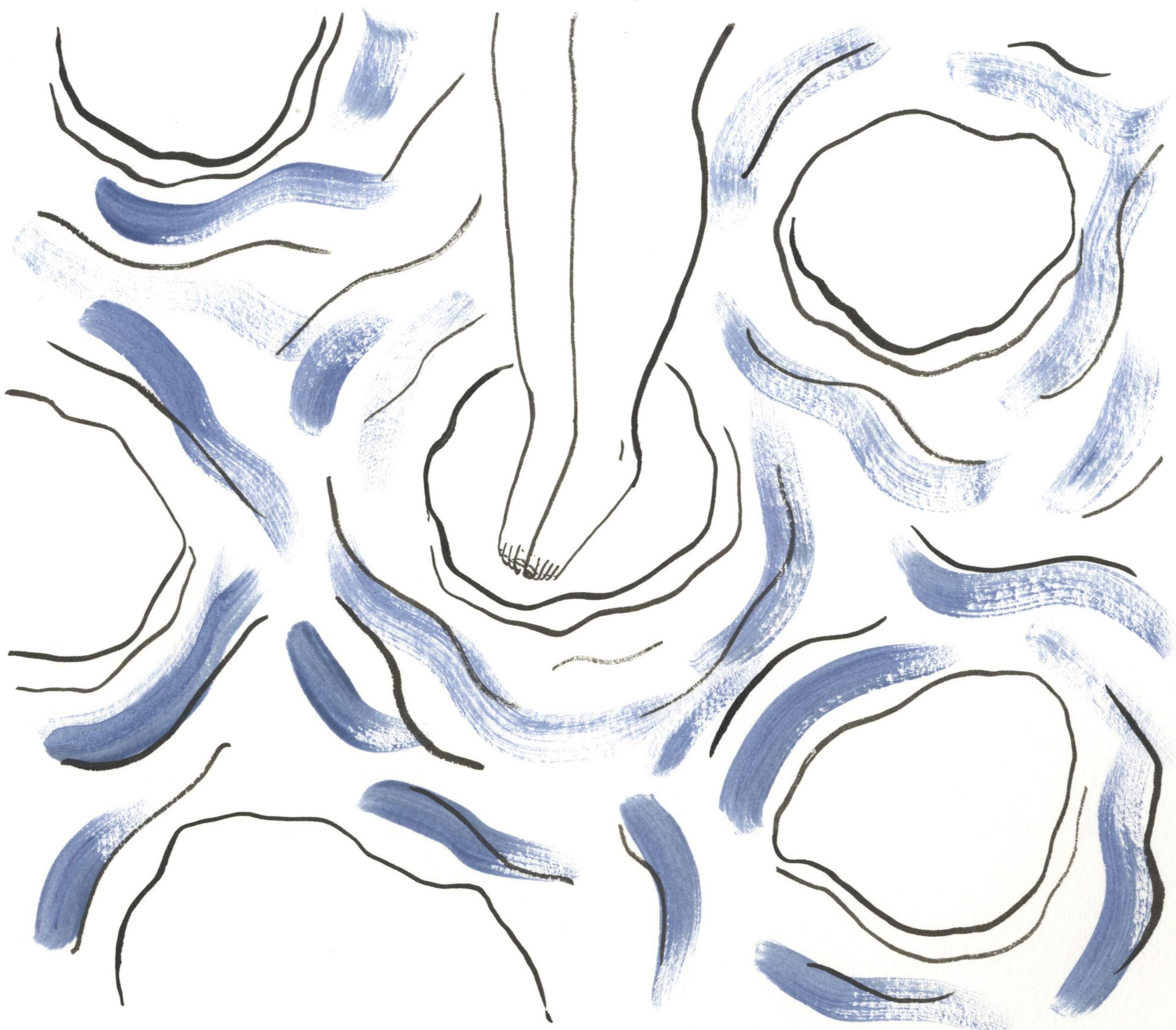
It's almost as if the memories have overflowed from my head and scattered themselves about the city – or as if London itself has become an extension of my consciousness. Some parts of my life I can recall simply by thinking of them; others I think I'd remember better if I went back to a certain part of London and plucked them from the tree I'd hung them from, or retraced them from the park bench I'd scratched them on, or snatched them up as they blew around in circles in an alleyway like a discarded carrier bag. I once spontaneously burst into tears as I bumped up on to the pavement on Albany Road and wiggled in between the bollards at the entrance to Burgess Park. It was

a few months since an awful heartbreak, and the ensuing weeks when I'd ride home each evening in helpless tears, always by this same route. The grief abated eventually, as I knew it would, but a few strands of it were still strung across the entrance to the park like cobwebs on an autumn morning, and that evening I forgot to duck, and rode straight into them.

But by the time I'd reached the other side of the park I was smiling. Here on the right were the bushes where I'd once stopped for a wee, late one Friday night in the middle of that glorious summer of 2010, on my way home after a riotous post-work party outside the Foundry. Someone had turned up with speakers mounted on a bicycle trailer, and we'd all danced, exuberantly and goofily, grinning at each other, through the long summer evening and into the night. It was a couple of months after I'd abandoned my PhD plans, a week or two before I realized I wanted to cycle around the world, and I was embracing the heady sensation of leaping off into a completely open future, with nothing to my name but the present moment. I know I was frightened at times, but what lingers from that summer is the roaring sense of freedom, of having no plans and therefore few obligations, of being aware that wonderful things were going to happen, but not yet knowing what they might be.

I remember squatting there in the darkness, in the corner of Burgess Park, listening to the hot hiss of my urine and watching the insects floating in the beam my front light was casting over the long grass around it, my sweaty skin caressed by the fresh warm air, and feeling an immense surge of love for all that I was part of (the dancing couriers, the pretty girl I'd met who hadn't been able to take her eyes off me, the delicious sensation of cycling home along quiet roads with the night all around me), and for all the wonders that lay in the wings. When I cycle through Burgess Park (rarely these days), I revisit that moment as I would the grave of a loved one, simultaneously rejoicing in the past and grieving for it. The girl came and went, as did all my other moments of grief and elation, as did the delicious sensation of not knowing where I was going, and illuminating the future only as I stepped into it.

This excerpt is taken from What Goes Around: A London Cycle Courier's Story, *published by Guardian Faber Books.*



Q&A

Levy/Bowie

The Author of *Hot Milk* Reflects on a Starman

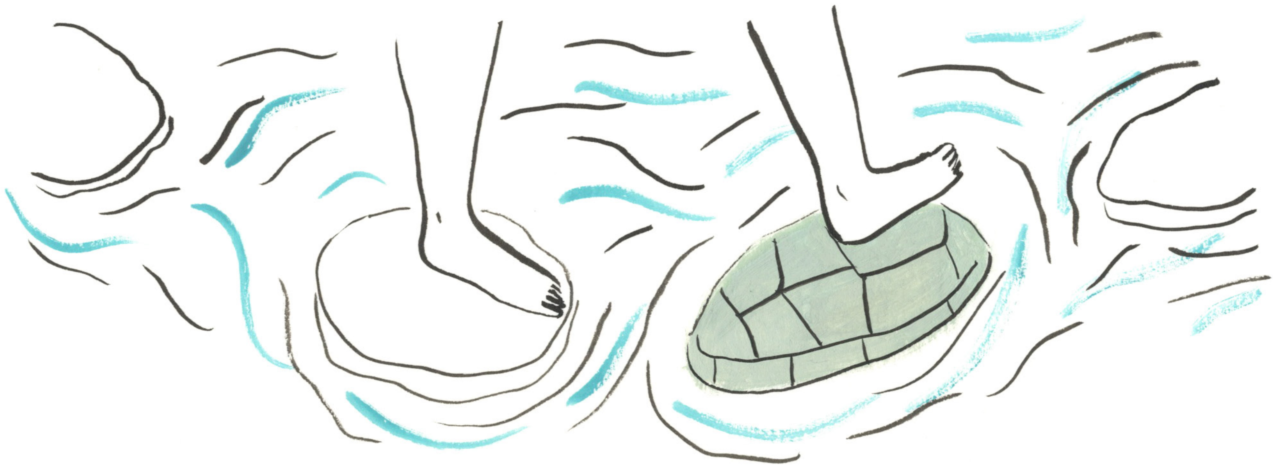
By Deborah Levy

There was only one subject we wanted to discuss with novelist Deborah Levy. The death of Bowie was still fresh in our minds, the sadness was still pooled all over New York and London, the graffiti on the tribute walls still fresh. Levy took our Q&A questions and used them to pay tribute, but also included some advice for writers and spoke of the necessary risk – the risk Bowie knew well – of estranging the audience to further the art.

Please, starman – fly me away from
my life in West Finchley; listen,
don't worry, you can blow my mind,
THAT'S JUST WHAT I WANT.

FIVE DIALS

What were your first memories of Bowie? How were you introduced to him?



DEBORAH LEVY

Bowie crashed into my front room in West Finchley when I first glimpsed the starman on *Top of the Pops*. I think I was thirteen. Glimpsed is the wrong word – more like gawped. There were crisps all over the carpet and I was arguing with my older brother who was nineteen with hair down to his shoulders, wearing a Che Guevara hat and the sort of khaki coat worn by Fidel Castro's revolutionary army. It was apparently my job to hoover up the crisps. Yes, Aristotle told us that all politics start in the family. So I was in the throes of hoover rage when Bowie appeared on the screen to tell me there's a **starman waiting in the sky, he'd like to come and meet us, but he thinks he'd blow our minds**. His voice was slightly hysterical, which I was too. **Look out your window I can see his light, if we can sparkle he may land tonight.**

Ohhh. In twelve seconds Bowie, in the guise of a cool, sexualized, alien human, had lifted me far far away from the atmosphere of my brother's beardy maleness and replaced it with spiky red hair, a catsuit, make-up, other-worldly eyes – and he was more or less snogging handsome Mick Ronson, who was wearing a gold satin suit. Bowie even lifted up his thin arm and pointed at me (via the camera) when he sang, **he'd like to come and meet us**. It was my desire to be lost and found by a starman who knew I was dying in the suburbs! Please, starman – fly me away from my life in West Finchley; listen, don't worry, you can blow my mind, THAT'S JUST WHAT I WANT.

FIVE DIALS

Why did he become important to you? You write a homage to him in your new novel, *Hot Milk*.

DEBORAH LEVY

Well, in a way, Bowie told the truth in a voice we had not heard before, and he told it in the most hip and flamboyant way possible. What was the truth? We were alienated. Girls

and boys were so pinned down in the seventies. There was a lot of anxiety about the ways we were told to be feminine and the ways we were told to be masculine – we wanted some space in-between. He opened up an imaginative space that was inside us anyway, and we were inspired by his artful personas. It was so thrilling to have found a pop star that our parents could not understand. It's complicated, because despite his apparent androgyny and bisexuality, he was a man who clearly adored making love to women.

Despite his apparent androgyny and bisexuality, he was a man who clearly adored making love to women.

My male friends in their late teens wore ice blue eye shadow and kohl. Bowie gave them a space to freak out and subvert the rigid masculinities their own fathers had grown up with.

FIVE DIALS

Was there mystery to him? Did you fully understand his personas?

DEBORAH LEVY

No, I never fully understood his personas and that's just how it should be. Bowie knew that full comprehension is not what art is about. Why would we gaze endlessly at a painting or a photograph if we totally understand it? I always say to students who want to be writers, 'today write something you don't understand, tomorrow start chasing it. Search for something you wish to find.' And if we do find 'it', the writing becomes lighter and it becomes deeper. That is the pleasure of Bowie's lyrics – they are light and deep and dark and darker and a bit mysterious.

FIVE DIALS

Did Bowie give you licence to do something or become someone?

DEBORAH LEVY

Yes, in a way he gave me license to experiment, to be playful with my own personas. Look at his difference to Mary Hopkins and Donny Osmond, who were also around at the time. It started with Bowie because of the intensity of teenage longing and all the rest of it. Later, I felt the same excitement about film, literature, performance, philosophy. Reading Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* was as thrilling as listening to 'Rock 'n' Roll Suicide'; so was discovering Edmund White's biography of Genet – what a phenomenal labour of love. And, of course, Bowie references Genet in 'The Jean Genie', and he trained with the dancer Lindsay Kemp, who adapted Genet's novel for his thrilling one-man show 'Flowers', which I saw at the Roundhouse, London. So there are all these cross-references. Bowie was an artist of the highest order. I'm thinking now about his difference to Marc Bolan, who also has a special place in my heart. I still love his 'Life's a Gas', but at the time I didn't believe that Bolan truly believed that life was a gas – perhaps because he was quite a nervous performer. But I remember the words:

I could have loved you girl / Like a planet / I could have chained your heart / To a star / But it really doesn't matter at all.

Bolan's intonation was slightly American whereas Bowie's was south London, which felt closer to home. I enjoyed the way Bolan sang the word 'gas' – gassssszzz – with that i personation of an Elvis wobble, but he did not have Bowie's intense, delirious, imaginative reach.

And then, of course, in my late twenties, I set about inventing my own writing personas. When I wrote my first novel, *Beautiful Mutants*, at the age of twenty-seven, the only training I'd had to write a novel was as a reader. There was no one saying to me – always show, never tell, never start with more than three characters, etc. No, it was more like – slip paper into the typewriter, lift right hand, fingers on the keys, tap, tap, tap, and the first line emerged: 'This is the age of the migrant and the missile.' Did I understand those lines? Sort of. But the point is, I was making a statement that was bigger than myself. I was making a voice via the avatar of a character that could speak for me – a literary persona – just as Bowie had found Ziggy to speak for him. My 2014 short story 'Stardust Nation' (from the collection *Black Vodka*) is an oblique homage to Bowie's personas.

FIVE DIALS

How would you listen to his music? What kind of stereo did you have? Was it yours? Where would you buy the albums?

DEBORAH LEVY

I bought the albums in Camden Town – perhaps at Compendium Books, which I think had a record shop downstairs.

It was a big deal starting my own record collection. I played 'Rock 'n' Roll Suicide' over and over again in my bedroom in West Finchley. What kind of stereo? Um, yes, sorry to disappoint, but I reckon I played the vinyl on Auntie Molly's record player – which had somehow been given to me. How did Aunt Molly come to have a wooden record player with matching wooden speakers? I used to lie on the bed with my feet on the pillow and my head sort of dangling towards the floor, singing oh no, love you're not alone, you're not alone, let's turn on with me and you're not alone, while six joss sticks smouldered in a milk bottle.

FIVE DIALS

Did you ever see him live?

DEBORAH LEVY

No! I don't know how that happened, because I saw Mick Ronson live.

A few years ago, I had cause to meet Bowie's official photographer from the early seventies, Mick Rock, who also directed the video of 'Space Oddity' in 1972. Mick was partly responsible for one of my best-ever birthday presents – a black and white photograph he took of Bowie and Ronson wearing sharp suits with extreme lapels, eating lunch on a train. Do you know what happened to that photo? When I moved house three years ago, it was accidently packed with stuff I stored in the garage, so it got damp and it's ruined. I love Mick Rock's photos from that time – he just got it – with Bowie in particular, he manage to convey introspection as well as sexual energy and all the rest of it.

FIVE DIALS

Which were the lyrics that most spoke to you?

DEBORAH LEVY

There are so many, but it's the early and most recent lyrics. When things go wrong in my life, I still think of the words from 'The Man Who Sold The World', **Oh no, not me, not me**.

It is 'Space Oddity' though that can make me cry. I don't know why – maybe something to do with feeling as a teenager that I too was lost in a tin can, far, far away. I'm aware there are all sorts of narcotic narratives knocking around to explain that song, but I don't want to be told how to interpret it. For me, 'Space Oddity' is all about the deadpan tone. Queen Bitch's bipperty-bopperty hat always cheers me up.

She's so swishy in her satin and tat / In her frock coat and bipperty-bopperty hat / Oh God, I could do better than that.

And then, to skip over the decades to 'Where Are We Now', Bowie seemed to be asking the same questions that I was asking of myself. This is an older, more melancholy voice; most of the theatricality has been erased. Bowie sounds nearer to himself in 'Where Are We Now', as if the starman has finally landed and is looking at the view.

Its chorus, **the moment you know, you know, you know**, is such an alluring mix of the ethereal and matter of fact. Tony Oursler's genius film, in which we see the faces of Bowie and the artist Jacqueline Humphries (their bodies have been disembodied) serenely looking out, just sort of breathing and thinking – that was perfect, it's actually very hard to achieve that sort of quiet, reflective presence, but they all pulled it off. As for the final work, *Blackstar* and 'Lazarus', I am still taking it in.

FIVE DIALS

You refer to 'Space Oddity' in *Hot Milk*.

DEBORAH LEVY

Yes. But that is to be discovered and I don't want to explain it away. The title *Hot Milk* refers to many things, and one them is the galaxy, the Milky Way. This novel is full of shattered stars.

FIVE DIALS

Did you understand his choices as an artist? Or were you ever mystified?

DEBORAH LEVY

I was sometimes mystified and that is fine by me.

FIVE DIALS

Did you ever become estranged? Did you listen consistently to his new work?

DEBORAH LEVY

I never became estranged, though his alter egos and music in the eighties and nineties were not so interesting to me. All the same, it was entirely necessary for Bowie to kill off his most successful alter ego. Ziggy was holding him back, but in my own imagination, Ziggy will never die, no way, he stepped into history and I met him at a too-impressionable time. But I understand that his creator had to move on.

There was more work to do and Ziggy was too crazed to help him move forward.

I understand that his creator had to move on. There was more work to do and Ziggy was too crazed to help him move forward.

All artists have similar problems. We have to take the risk of estranging some of our audience. When I read from my books at various events and festivals, I am sometimes asked by a reader, if I think my writing 'has changed'. The implication is that he/she prefers the earlier books. It's a fair question, because in current work I am using narrative strategies that are not available in earlier books. I still have some nostalgia for J.G. Ballard's early short stories, particularly, 'The Day of Forever'. All the same, I was not estranged when Ballard moved on to a more subversive project in his later novels – he took his surrealist imagination and his psychological acuity and his hard-edged critique of contemporary movements and moments to the fragile utopias of suntanned ex-pats in Spain and to the shopping mall of Britain. In this sense he was a true avant-gardist and not a faux-surrealist or a faux-modernist. I have pinned up a Ballard quote on my study wall: 'I believe in the beauty of all women, in the treachery of their imaginations, so close to my heart.'

Likewise, I believe in the beauty and treachery of all Bowie's work.

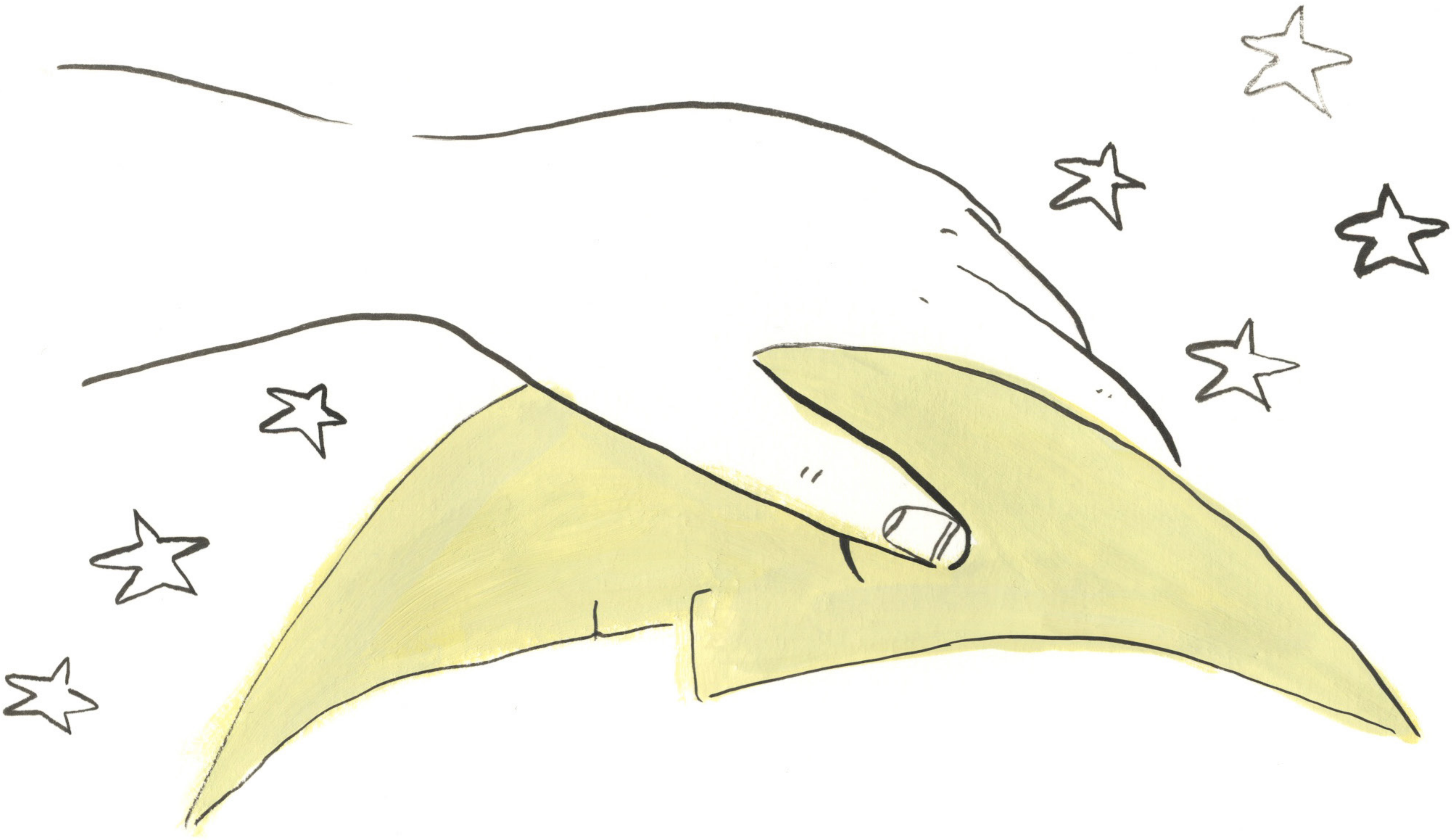
FIVE DIALS

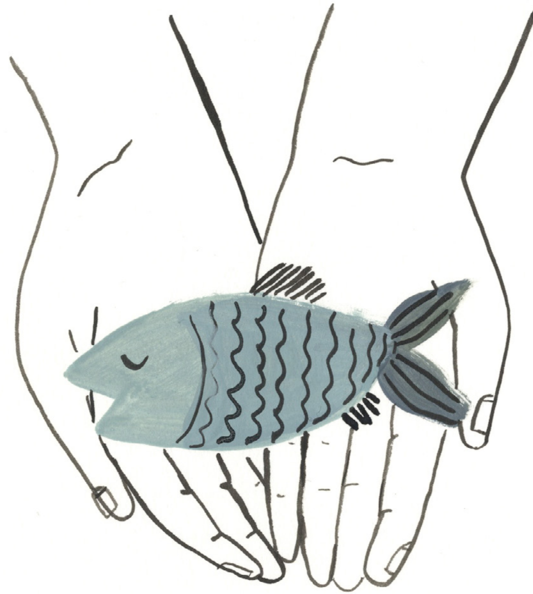
Is there a place – London, Berlin – that reminds you of him or that feels particularly Bowie-esque?

DEBORAH LEVY

It's London of course, though he made his new life in America. Yes, it will always be London. Memories of soggy chips wrapped in newspaper, walking in our flares and platforms through the snow in shivery satin halter-neck tops. When the starman from Beckenham, in all his freakishness, lifted his hand and pointed, via the camera, at myself aged thirteen, I was hospitable to his provocation because he reached

out to my need to express my own freakishness, my difference from the story that had been written for my gender. This is a story of great complexity and I have attempted to shake it up in everything I have written so far.





EATING

The Ideology of Dinner

How Nightly Communal Meals Shaped my Commuity and my Life

By Molly Prentiss

I'm ten years old and it's Mary's night to cook. She's made Mexican, which is cause for celebration among the kid contingent: burritos officially rule. Plus my sisters and I have a plan for tonight. We're going to try to escape to watch Nickelodeon while we eat, instead of sitting at the table with the adults. It will be easy, we figure. We'll just quietly slip away, plates in hand – casual. And then we'll get to have our two favourite things at once: food and mindless entertainment, and it will be nothing short of bliss.

Our plan fails massively, which we should have seen coming. We've eaten dinner at the huge round table every night since we were tiny babies – with the exception of Fridays, which are Out to Dinner Nights. We should have known better, we tell ourselves after we've had the inevitable lecture from the parents: dinner is eaten at the table, together, that's the rule. It's one of our only rules in life; as far as restrictions go; we're a pretty lucky bunch. Still, at the table, we're miffed. We sulk through our burritos. We tune out the adults as they talk about their boring adult stuff: politics, politics, politics; news, news, news; people we don't know who are old, people we don't know who are old, people we don't know who are old. As a ten-year-old, these obligatory dinners were often brutal. As an adult, I see that they were the core of my childhood, our community and my life.

In 1979 my parents bought ten acres of land just south of Santa Cruz, California, with seven other people. The other people part was mostly out of necessity; in those days no one could afford to buy land on their own. Plus communes were a thing, an option people still considered; the idea of living with others had not been dragged through the proverbial mud due to the infamous failings of so many cultish communes of the sixties and seventies. My parents and their cohorts built houses from salvaged materials: rafters bought cheap from a burned-down bus depot, the bones of old barns, sheets of glass windows from defunct commercial greenhouses. They first constructed the 'Big House': open floor-plan, industrial kitchen, skylights, the giant dinner table. Then each family built their smaller house, connected to the others by way of crude brick paths running through rambling gardens.

The 'commune' (as it was dubbed many years later by my high-school boyfriend) did not have any religious pretence or founding ideology. Its members were not polygamous; they were not vegans; the community did not sustain itself from the food in its own garden. There were no goddess gatherings. There were no scary cult leaders, or leaders at all. There weren't even any meetings, at least in the proper sense. Instead, there was dinner.

My parents and their cohorts built houses from salvaged materials: rafters bought cheap from a burned-down bus depot, the bones of old barns.

Dinner at the commune is at seven o'clock every night. Each of the members – there are six that still live there – has his or her 'night to cook'. On your night to cook you plan, shop for, cook and clean up the meal. Everyone else shows up at seven, and you all eat together around the big round table; there are always candles and there is always wine. There is also conversation (from banal to big issue), argument (from political to practical), decision making (whether or not to cut down the pine tree in the drive way, where to build a fence) and drama (occasionally someone will get up from their seat and storm down the path to their own house; they'll always show up the next evening). Dinner is the one consistent commitment the commune members have made to each other. My mum argues that without their nightly dinners, the place would fall apart.

Now, in my adult life, dinner holds *me* together. If I don't have a proper dinner, I feel that the day is incomplete, and I have trouble sleeping. This, again, has little to do with being hungry. It has to do with the only ideology that I grew up with: the ideology of dinner. Dinner means a designated space and time for a shared experience that happens to revolve around the act of consuming calories. Dinner means respite from work, the marker of the end of a day. Dinner means garlic smell and wine lips. Dinner means conversation or quiet. Dinner means sharing. Dinner means home.

Since I left the commune when I was eighteen, I have tried to institute a dinner rule wherever I've gone. I wrangled college roommates into making tacos together and sharing grocery expenses. I made kale for my chain-smoking roommate when I first moved to New York; she didn't touch the stuff, but she sat with me while I ate it, smoking, of course. I have a firm mutual assumption in place with my soon-to-be-husband: we eat dinner together. And if for any reason we can't, we let the other know well in advance. He knows that if I'm left without a dinner partner at the last minute, it isn't pretty.

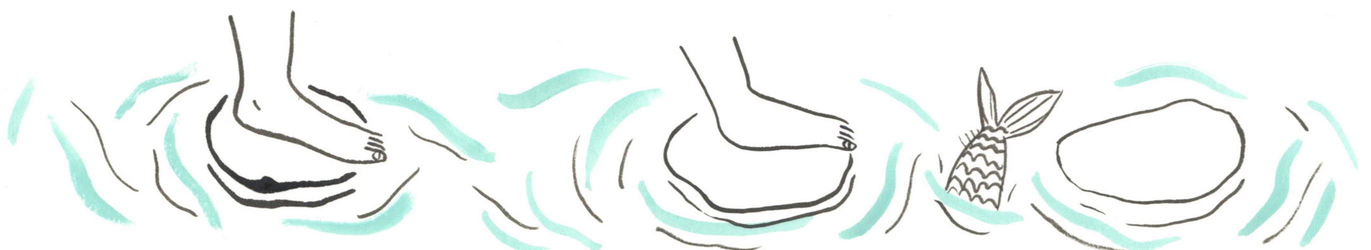
Because here's the thing. I believe in dinner. I believe in sustenance, and communing around sustenance. I believe in feeding people and being fed. I believe in meeting over dinner like some people believe in going to church: a gesture towards community and togetherness, an act of faith.

Studies show that children who eat dinners every night with their families do better in school, have less chance of getting into trouble, become more successful in the long term. This is probably less about the food they're being fed (though that is definitely a part of it) than the sense of stability that comes with family routine.

Often, when someone throws a party at their house, they deck out their living room or dining room or parlour, thinking it will be the space where the guests will gather and mill. Inevitably, guest by guest, the party migrates to the kitchen. This is more about the desire to help the hostess, or to spend time with her, than checking on the food in preparation – either that or the warmth and smell that drifts from there is beaconing you like a hearth.

Michael Pollan, in his new book and television series *Cooked*, speaks of what he calls the 'cooking paradox': the fact that we cook for ourselves and each other much less than we used to, but we are more interested in cooking than ever – we watch countless mindless television shows about it. He thinks the reason we watch and obsess over the shows is less about the food (though that is certainly a factor) and more about the memories they evoke of being cooked for by a mother or grandmother or friend or spouse, which he argues is one of the most comforting and generous acts that there is.

My mother is a radio producer. One of her most successful series was *Hidden Kitchen*s, which tells off-the-beaten-path stories involving food – communities of taxi drivers who gather at pop-up food trucks after their night shifts; prisoners who develop delicious recipes using only meagre ingredients and basic tools; the wild, unexpected history of Rice-A-Roni. Eventually, the radio series became a book. Bookshops always file it in the cookbooks section. But my



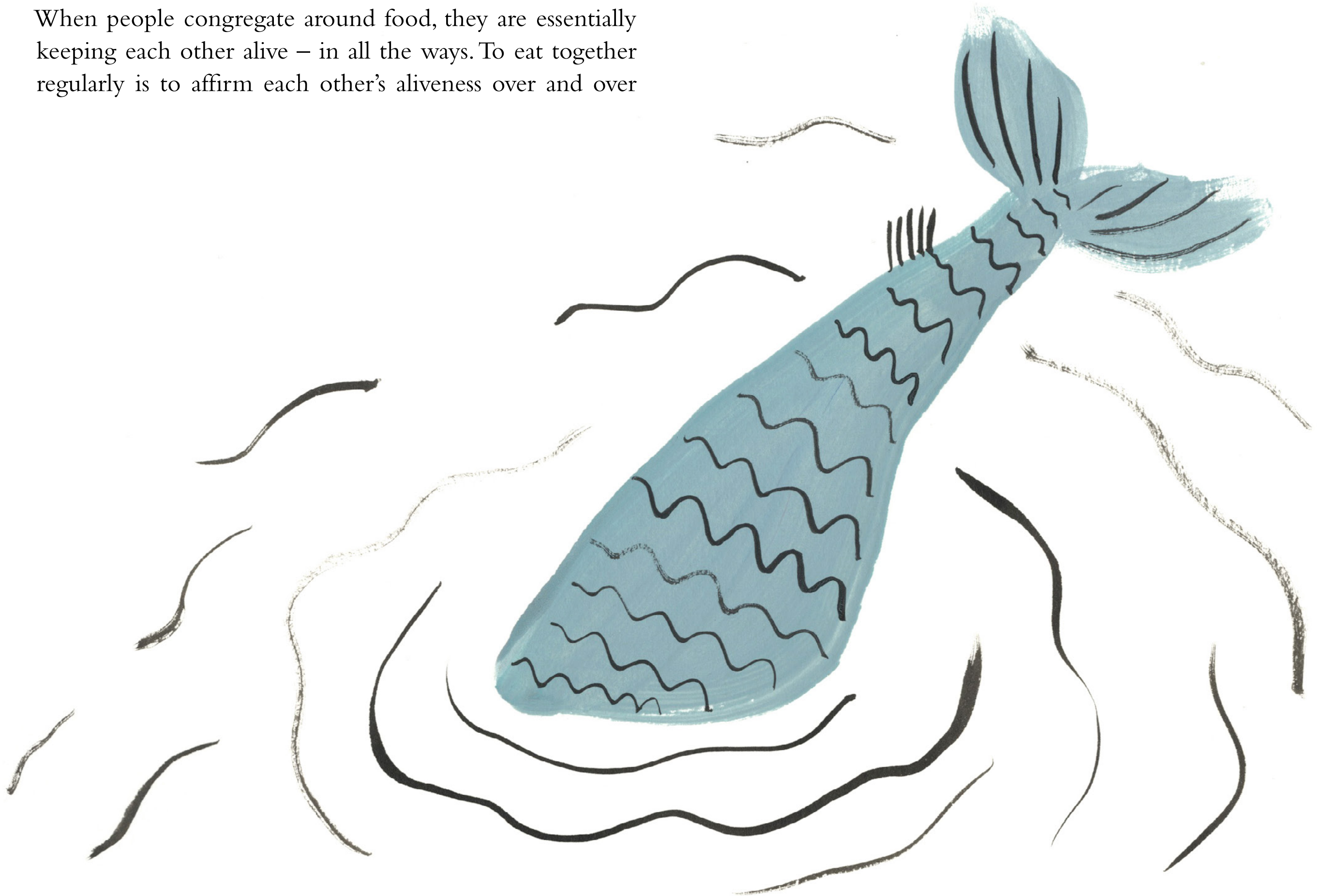
mum always moves it when she goes to her local bookshop. 'The stories aren't even about food!', she always says. 'The stories are about people!'

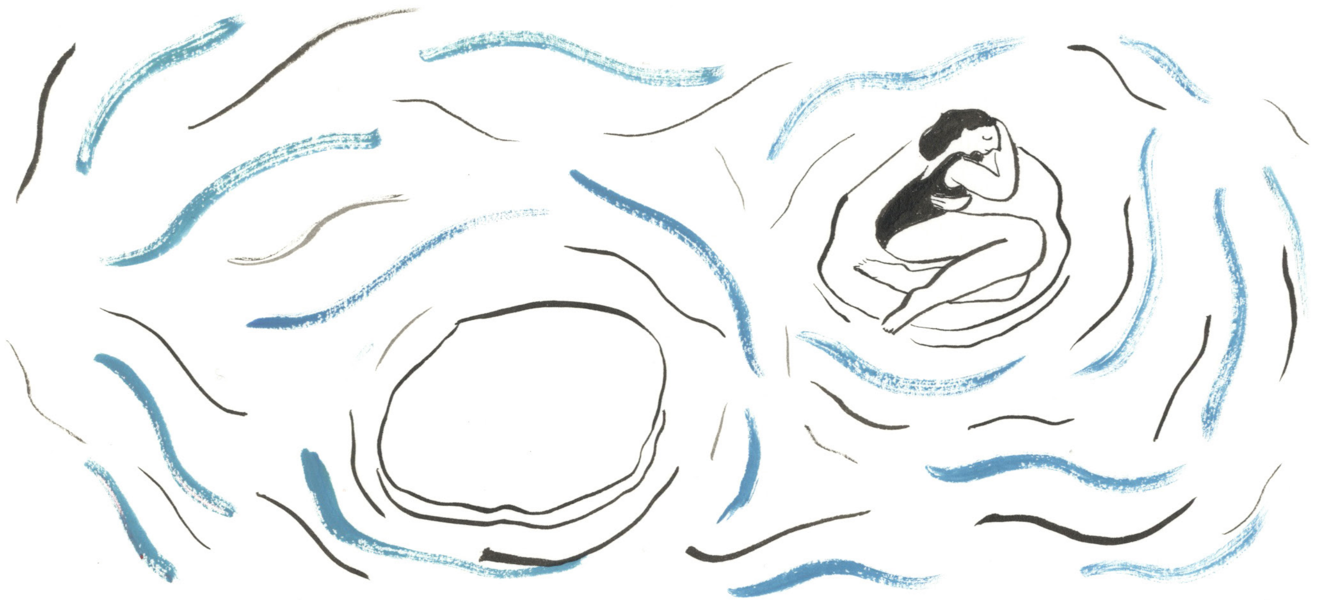
It's never really about the food, not really. The food is essential, yes. Everyone needs to eat. If you are a fourth grader with an attitude problem and a love for bad television, you need to eat. If you're a middle-aged stockbroker, you need to eat. If you're rich or poor or in-between, you need to eat. But the food is also an excuse. Baking the pie is an excuse to bring it to the neighbour. The pop-up food cart is an excuse to turn a parking lot into a late-night pow wow. Brunch is an excuse to spend the whole day with someone (no one goes home after brunch). The dinners at the commune were an excuse to convene, to solve problems and, most importantly, to be together.

The dinners at the commune were an excuse to convene, to solve problems and, most importantly, to be together.

When people congregate around food, they are essentially keeping each other alive – in all the ways. To eat together regularly is to affirm each other's aliveness over and over again, quite literally to *sustain* each other. I believe we ritualize food in order to hold on to that transcendence, to keep it close. When I have friends over to my tiny Brooklyn apartment for dinner, I am also telling them that I love them.

My sisters and I kick each other under the dinner table while we wait to be excused. After dinner, wired from the food, we'll hit the living room hard: cartwheels on the carpet, pillow forts, headstands on the orange couch that's been here since the seventies. But before that, we'll have to finish our plates (there are starving children in Africa) and drink all our milk (we'll thank our parents for the calcium later). We'll also have to thank whoever made dinner for us, and then we'll have to clear our plates. We itch for the television and the warm carpet, eager to climb down off the too-big-for-us dining-table chairs. When we are finally given the go-ahead we say, in unison, THANK YOU, MARY!!! And run off into the realm of children: that safe, elated space we'll come to realize later was particular to *after dinner*, the feeling that was brought into being by that big round table.





FICTION

Not Being Shy

By Jessica Westhead

Judy remembers how she used to get excited about the little things. Back in voice-acting college, for example, when she was out walking and stumbled upon that backyard dump with the rusty appliances and stained mattresses and garbage everywhere, and then she saw the mama pig and her piglets emerge from a cardboard box and it was like a miracle was taking place. And maybe to other people that scene would not have been so extraordinary – they might have thought, *Oh look, pigs.* They wouldn't have been totally blown away with wonder like Judy was, which is why she was described by her boyfriend at the time as 'whimsical'.

Judy has not felt whimsical for a while. Her most recent boyfriend, whose name is Jasper, was in the news last year because he constructed an elaborate underground chill-out room furnished with a beer fridge and a TV and a beanbag chair in a remote wooded section of a large public park.

He spent most of his time there, but one morning when he was at home with Judy, a city employee plummeted into the tunnel opening, which Jasper had concealed with mud and leaves and discarded fast-food packaging.

The worker later told his manager that he'd twisted his ankle really badly and was quite freaked overall by the whole discovery, so he needed to take a few hours to rest before heading back to the office to report what he'd found. His description of the mysterious burrow went viral, and by the end of the day everybody knew that the fridge was stocked with boldly flavoured micro-brews and an assortment of prepackaged snack cakes, the TV got a bunch of channels and the beanbag chair felt like a big, fluffy cloud.

The authorities assumed terrorists were involved, because why wouldn't they be, so there was a lot of fear circulating around until Jasper came forward and explained to the police department that this was just a place for him to hang out, away from his girlfriend, and watch what he wanted to watch and eat what he wanted to eat and just enjoy himself with no strings, right, and the male cops were like, 'Oh yeah, we totally get that, no worries at all.' And the female cops were like, 'How does your girlfriend feel about all of this?' And the male cops rolled their eyes and said, 'It doesn't matter what she thinks. That's the whole *point*.'

Jasper was in the news last year because he constructed an elaborate underground chill-out room furnished with a beer fridge and a TV and a beanbag chair in a remote wooded section of a large public park.

Then Jasper started making tacos for a living, and the business took off because everybody wanted to buy a taco made by That Guy, the guy who needed to get away from his girlfriend so bad that he basically dug a hole in the ground where he could finally have a little peace.

And Judy really wanted to be happy for all of his success, but it was hard. It was pretty hard to get out of her own way and not feel sorry for herself over the whole situation, because she personally was not having success at her chosen career, which was voice acting, and so far she had worked as a voice actor exactly once and then never again.

Everybody wanted to buy a taco made by That Guy, the guy who needed to get away from his girlfriend so bad that he basically dug a hole in the ground where he could finally have a little peace.

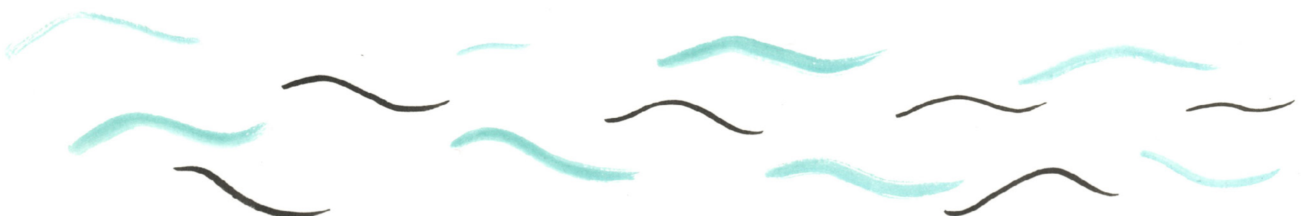
And meanwhile Jasper started sleeping with Lisa, because she was gorgeous and could walk around on high heels like they were part of her body, like they were dainty, spiky gazelle hooves that could slice Judy wide open if she ever encountered Lisa in a forest, which would be weird, but then again, weird things happened all the time, especially in forests. And because, Jasper told Judy in his overly mellow explaining voice, Lisa actually listened to him for a change instead of just talking about how she wanted to make meaningful use of her wasted creative potential all the time. And besides that, Lisa supported him in what he wanted to accomplish with his life, which was finally to do the CN Tower EdgeWalk, which Judy had never let him do, because she was too scared he would fall. But he wasn't going to fall was the moral of the story that Judy had never understood. He was going to put on the protective suit and the safety harness and listen to the instructions and follow them and then when he was done having the biggest thrill of his entire existence, he was going to celebrate and go for beers. With Lisa.

But things are looking up for Judy, because the other night while sleeping in her bed all alone she had a dream, which took place in her old high school. The halls were empty and all the classroom doors were closed, and she kept opening them and finding her old teachers, but instead of being the age they were when they taught Judy, they were newborn babies. And yet they spoke in their regular voices and still knew lots of things about maths and science and English literature. A few of them asked Judy what she was up to these days, and she shrugged and said, 'Oh, this and that.' Her geography teacher, who had always been her favourite because she used to write reassuring geography-related adages on the blackboard such as, 'Remember that here is not the only place', shook a pastel-pink rattle under Judy's nose. 'Hey,' she said, 'remember, like the ancient peoples who migrated across the Bering Land Bridge while tracking large game herds, you've come a long way.'

Judy woke up feeling valued and encouraged, and shortly afterwards she had the idea to manufacture a doll and use her specialized voice-acting skills to record a bunch of phrases that would be inspirational to shy children. Judy had been a shy child herself, and maybe if she'd owned such a toy she would have grown into a less timid adolescent who would have actually enjoyed high school instead of hating every minute of it.

The uplifting phrases will go on to a computer chip and the computer chip will go into the doll, so that when a shy kid presses a button, or maybe squeezes the doll's hand for comfort or companionship, they will hear Judy's soothing and melodic vocalizations and become instantly self-assured. Marketing is important, so she'll need a catchy slogan to get people's attention. A call to arms for bashful children and their care-givers, such as, *Unharness the more ebullient part of yourself from deep down inside*. Or maybe something more straight to the point, like, *Freedom*.

Once her invention is available for purchase both online and in stores, Judy is sure the demand will be huge. She'll make tons of money, of course, but the tsunami of gratitude from millions of formerly shy souls, plus spin-off voice-acting work in major motion pictures, will be her true reward. All she needs now is a factory to make the dolls and a studio to record her messages and an IT department to figure out how to put the messages on some chips and then how to put the chips in the dolls. Into their heads, maybe? Behind the mouth? Would there have to be a speaker somewhere? Judy still has a lot of questions, but as a no-longer-shy person (because hey, she *has* come a long way!) she is confident she'll find the answers.



Judy is no fool, but there were definitely warning signs about her and Jasper's impending break-up that she failed to recognize at the time.

She was feeling mostly satisfied in the relationship, but was also going for a lot of walks and listening to a lot of 10,000 Maniacs and singing along in a voice that was full of outrage. When winter was finally over, Judy started getting excited that all the snow was melting, but Jasper didn't seem excited at all, which was weird for him because he had always been a big spring fan.

She could think back on those things now and smack herself in the forehead for not realizing what was going on, but that would be an act of self-hatred, and self-hatred is not what Judy is about. What she is about is owning a wallet shaped like a fish, which is a cute and quirky conversation starter that helps her instantly connect with other human beings.

The other day she was getting out her Visa card to pay for a box of white wine, and the liquor store cashier remarked, 'Hey, now that's a wacky wallet if I've ever seen one!' He went on to wink and ask, 'Is it waterproof?' To which Judy replied, 'No.' Then she got the joke – *because fish swim in the water!* – and she bobbed her credit card up and down as if it were being gently manipulated by waves, and the cashier smiled but didn't full-on laugh, and he rang in her wine and then she was on her way.

So here comes somebody named Lisa all of a sudden and she's hanging around the taco stand all the time and turning the hot sauce bottles upside-down and dripping sensuous habernero drips on to her fingers and licking them and squealing, 'Ooh, that *burns!*' And Jasper's giving her free tacos and even naming a signature taco after her, like who even wants to eat something called The Lisa, because it brings to mind absolutely *nothing*.

And meanwhile Judy had been there as the official Taco Girl since the beginning, meaning her job was to wear short-shorts and high heels and a baby tee that said, 'My Taco Is Your Taco', and mostly the people who that advertising worked for were guys who would harass her, and she'd be trying to direct them down the alleyway to where Jasper had set up the hibachi and they'd be trying to corral her up against the wall. And she'd be yelling for Jasper to come and kick their asses but he wouldn't hear her over the Beastie Boys he was playing on his old boom box that he'd grabbed from his mom's house, also to entice patrons, but mostly the music just served to cover up her shouts for help. So she'd have to constantly explain to these gropey guys that she wasn't what was for sale, and they'd call her a whore, which was the exact opposite of what she'd just told them, and maybe they'd go and buy a taco but probably not.

It was either that, or people asking her if she knew that annoying bitch the taco bro was dating, like was she a total psycho or what? And Judy would say, 'I'm the annoying bitch.' And they'd go, 'Really? You're not that bad looking.' And they were giving her a compliment so she'd have to say thank you, or else her mother's voice would fill her brain and demand to know why she hadn't thanked the person who'd gone out of their way to say something nice, and that would be worse.

And yet, after all that, was there a single item on the menu called The Judy? Nope.

She's going to air this grievance with Jasper the next time she sees him, which will be tomorrow, because that's when he'll be selling tacos at his very first outdoor community event, and Judy is going to be there to cheer him on because that's the kind of supportive ex-girlfriend she is.

Even though he called her up earlier today and said, specifically, 'Judy, please do not come to the Donkey Rescue Fair. I don't want you there and Lisa doesn't want you there and neither does her kid, who hasn't even met you but if she did, she would definitely not want you there. So please, please, please stay away.'

So she's going. Also, Lisa has a *kid*?

The next day, Judy buys some candyfloss and thinks to herself, *You might see one homeless donkey in your life, if you're lucky. You might be out walking in a field, and whoa, what is that over there, is it a horse? Nope, it's a donkey.* But right now Judy is surrounded by dozens of them.

Although they are no longer homeless because they have been given sanctuary, which is part of Lisa's job – she goes out into the world and finds donkeys just wandering around, and shoots them with a tranquilizer gun and loads them on to a flatbed and brings them here, to the Donkey Rescue Farm, which is being called the Donkey Rescue Fair today, because the other part of Lisa's job is to annually drum up funds for the animals' upkeep by renting a candyfloss machine and a bouncy castle, and (this year) hiring her new boyfriend to sell tacos.

Of course there is a massive lineup in front of Jasper's truck – he is definitely the main attraction, which makes you wonder about the convenient timing of Lisa's hook-up with him – so Judy waits her turn patiently because what else is she supposed to do, yell and scream and pretend to be crazy and scare all the customers away? Which, yes, is something she did after he broke up with her, but nobody could blame her for that, because she was upset and distraught and definitely not in her right mind at the time, due to being overwhelmed by sadness.

But she's going to keep it together today, because today is about the donkeys.

Jasper sees her at the back of the crowd and scowls. He mouths, 'Fuck off.'

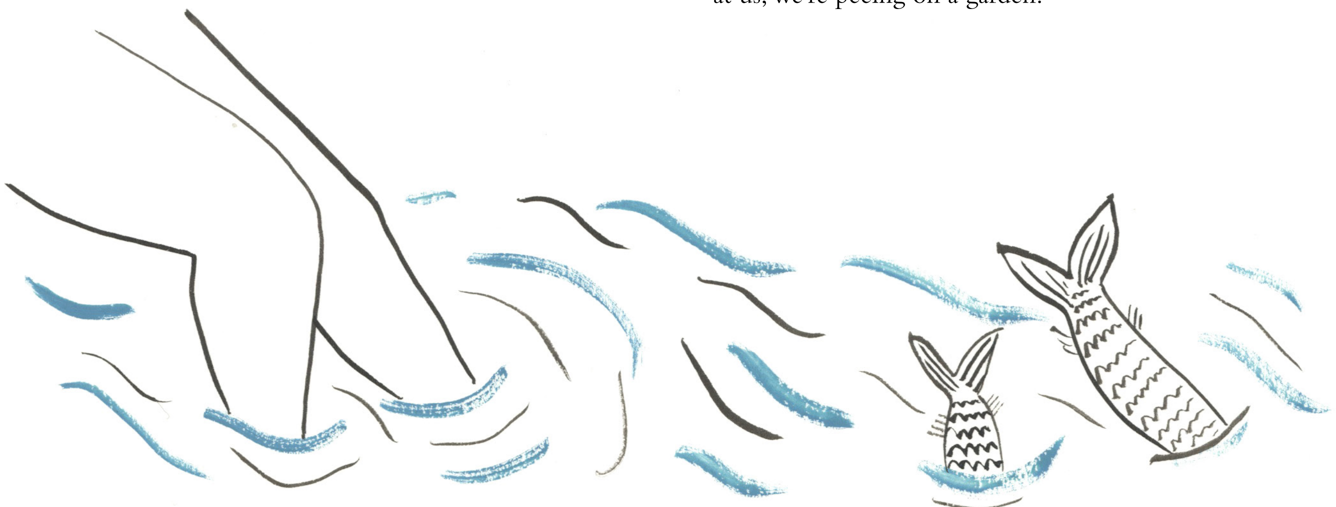
She mouths back, 'Where's Lisa? I haven't seen her anywhere. And where's this kid I've heard so much about? Actually, all I've heard is that she exists, which was pretty surprising. So what, all of a sudden you're Mr Commitment *and* a responsible parental figure? Give me a break.'

He shakes his head and points to his ears and does an overly violent shrug, then continues assembling meat and condiments and tortilla shells and wrapping everything in his new branded napkins. She's seen them floating around town – they say, 'MyEX-ICAN MADE ME DO IT.' Which doesn't even make sense, but when she thinks about it now, she realizes it's sort of like he's named something after her, after all. So she steps out of line, still hungry but satisfied she got her basic point across.

Judy has been working on her assertiveness. She recently came close to ending a toxic friendship that has historically and presently exerted a very negative influence on her self-esteem.

The way she and this other woman used to be such good friends was, back during high school they had this ritual at least one night a week where they'd drink a bunch of lemon gin mixed with Gatorade and then run around the neighbourhood and pee on people's gardens. It was this special, rebellious thing they did together, like they were blatantly disregarding social norms and risking potential humiliation in order to declare their unique sisterly love to the world. Even though they never got caught, so it was only ever the two of them who knew that the mutual urination was going on.

The part that made squatting over flowers in the dark less appealing for Judy, though, was how good her friend looked doing it. She was like a sexy magazine ad for outdoor toilets, with her classic faded 501s coiled around her sleek, sunkissed calves and ankles. And then there was chubby Judy, dribbling onto her shoes. But it was sort of like her better-dressed and more attractive friend was giving her permission, like, 'Yeah, you can pull down your baggy pleated cords in front of me and reveal your puffy white legs, I don't mind. It's cool, because we're friends and I won't judge you for not having a body that's as nice as my body. Okay, look at us, we're peeing on a garden!'



Then Judy went to voice-acting college and learned new things and lost a few pounds, and met new people who she's not in touch with any more, but at the time they were fun and kind and interesting, and her friend was not with her because she went somewhere else.

For two years, Judy felt as if the whole benevolent universe was opening up to her, like, 'Hey, here I am, dive on in.' She drank Strongbow and played pinball and attended concerts and bought an oversized yellow leather jacket from a thrift shop. She experimented with different hair products because she had always used mousse, but maybe mousse was not the way to go. She wore army boots with skirts and asked random guys for shoulder massages, and they gave them to her.

A few weeks ago, Judy and her toxic friend were having lunch, and Judy found herself remembering how the whole campus had sparkled like a sparkly playground, even the toilets. She thought about how funny and poignant and raw the graffiti in those college cubicles had been – what a slice of life! – and how she used to just sit there and read and be filled with optimism.

Her friend was telling some sort of anecdote about how great she was and by extension how lacking in greatness Judy was, but in a highly indirect way so that Judy couldn't quite pinpoint why this story was causing her pain, and Judy tuned her out so she could focus on recalling all the good times she'd had with this friend, but also all the bad times.

After a while, her friend stopped talking and said, 'Are you listening to me, or what?'

Judy sat up straighter. She said, 'I think part of my problem is that when I'm around you, I still feel like your fat sidekick.'

'Aww.' Her friend smiled and reached across the table to pat Judy's hand. 'You're not my sidekick any more.'

Judy finds Lisa having a cigarette outside the bouncy castle. She goes over and stands next to her.

'Fuck,' says Lisa. 'I thought Jasper told you not to come.'

Judy peers through the murky window of the inflated fortress. There is a single tiny child jumping up and down inside. 'That your kid in there?'

'Yep.'

'She's cute.'

'Thanks.' Lisa blows some smoke in Judy's face.

Judy coughs. 'What's her name?'

'Collins.'

'Like Tom Collins?'

'Yep.'

'Cool, those are good.'

'Uh huh.'

'Can I ask you a favour?'

'Are you serious?'

Judy takes a naked plastic baby out of her purse.

Lisa says, 'Jesus.'

'This is a prototype for a doll I'm going to make to help shy kids, but I have to do some market research first. I need to get feedback from some actual shy kids. Is Collins shy?'

'She's moody as hell, I can tell you that.' Lisa takes a last haul off her cigarette and then crushes it underfoot. 'She'll throw a fit if I don't give her the right colour of bendy straw and then she'll be all in my face wanting validation or whatever. The only book she ever wants me to read anymore is about this mother aardvark who tells her baby aardvark that she would love her even if she wasn't an aardvark. Like if she was another animal or something. It's a stupid story, but it's her favourite. She's only three, though, so you can't expect much. She's always saying weird shit too. The other day I'm listening to the news in the car and they're saying, "A woman's body was found, blah, blah, blah", and Collins says, 'Why did they have to find the woman's body? Can't she find it herself?' And I'm like, Fuck, I have to tell her about death now, and probably rape and everything else. But then she got distracted by a red truck she saw out the window, and she says, "Mama, is that a fire truck?" And I say, "No, it's just a red truck." And she goes, "Why is it red?" I said I had no idea. But I guess I'm going to have to give her the death talk and the rape talk at some point, right? I mean, it's coming. She can't live in a bubble or whatever. She's got to know about the world. And it's got to come from me.'

Judy says, 'What if there was a doll that could do it for you?'

'Fuck,' says Lisa. 'That would be amazing.'

When Judy first met Jasper, he grabbed her hand like it was a big handful of candy that was being handed out for free.

That made her happy because her previous boyfriend had expected her to take a bus all the way to another city so he could see her one last time and make sure he definitely wasn't attracted to her any more. And nope, he wasn't.

After he dumped her and before she rode the bus back home, Judy went into his bathroom and stood in front of the mirror for a long time trying to figure out exactly what was wrong with her. She'd lost weight since high school, so what else was there?

She cheered herself up by going out to dance clubs and listening to songs about forgetting all your troubles temporarily so you can cut loose and enjoy yourself for one crazy night at a dance club, which is where a cute guy named Jasper said he was really glad to meet her, but he was really drunk so she should probably do some shots with him.

And he didn't even know, until she told him, that she was a very talented person who had once worked in an extremely competitive creative field. And then when she told him, he didn't care, because it was in the past and he said all he cared about was the future, and the possibilities that would spread out before him like the view of Toronto he would some day have from the top of the CN Tower.

Judy said, 'That's really high up,' and Jasper said, 'Hey, don't limit me, okay?'

Collins rocks the plastic baby in her small arms and sings it a nonsense song about peanut butter being good and frogs being bad.

Judy says, 'Do you like it, Collins?'

'It goes in my sandwich,' the little girl coos, 'but they are too sliiiimy!'

The two of them are sitting side by side on a hay bale. Judy has her pen poised over her notebook.

Lisa is off somewhere doing fair-related business, because she said Judy seemed trustworthy enough to be alone with Collins if she wanted to ask her some research questions or whatever, and Judy said she was flattered but maybe she should get Lisa's cellphone number, just in case, and Lisa said don't worry about it, she'd get Judy's number from Jasper if she needed to get in touch.

'What do you think of the doll?' Judy asks Collins now. 'I want your honest opinion.'

'I love her,' Collins whispers. 'I love her more than dogs.'

Judy frowns. 'Did you say "dogs" or "frogs"?'

Collins kicks her legs against the hay bale and laughs uproariously. 'Grass can't be yellow *and* a chair! That's funny.'

'What if she could talk to you and say things to make you happy, plus teach you all about life? Would you like that?'

'Oh-oh.' Collins drops the baby on the ground. 'She fell down.'

Judy's cellphone rings and she answers it. 'Hello?'

Lisa says, 'You guys having fun? Because Jasper's going on break so we're gonna go on break together. Eat something or whatever.'

Collins climbs off the hay bale and lays next to the doll. She closes her eyes. 'Put us in the donkey truck, Mama.'

'Is she talking about the donkey truck again? I bring her with me one time and she's scarred for life. I told her, "I'm not killing them! They're going to wake up later!" But that's not how she remembers it. Take her for some ice cream, if you're looking for something to do. There's a place across the road from the farm. She goes mental for it. It's funny to see. She'll do tricks if you want. Okay, I'll call you later.'

Judy listens to the silence on the other line, then hangs up too. She closes her notebook.

Collins says, 'All babies cry when they get born.'

Judy's one and only voice-acting gig was an ad for a home security system.

It was a few years ago, but if somebody stopped her on the street today and asked her to recite the entire radio spot, which nobody ever would, she could do it, word for word.

There was that time when she and her mother were out for dinner, and after they ordered their food, Judy started telling her mom that when she asked her friend Annabelle what she thought of Jasper, Annabelle said he couldn't be trusted because he'd taken way longer than any of Judy's other boyfriends to check out Annabelle's breasts, which were much larger than Judy's breasts.

Their waiter suddenly ran back to their table and jabbed a finger at Judy. 'I knew you sounded familiar. You're the Arma-Get-It-Done girl! Say one of the lines for me. Say the line about the really bad thing!'

'Oh my goodness,' said Judy, quietly bursting with joy, 'you've caught me off guard here.'

'Ha!' He clapped his hands. 'Look at you, being all contextually punny. Now let's hear it.'

Judy blushed and grinned and cleared her throat.

Judy's mother said, 'You know, now that you're here I think I'd rather have the Greek dressing.'

'Oh yikes,' said the waiter, 'I'd better get that into the computer pronto or the kitchen'll be pissed off.'

'That's all you used to do when you were little,' said her mother when the waiter hurried away. 'Just sit around doing a bunch of weird voices. You never played with other children. I was so relieved when Annabelle came on the scene.'

'Mom,' said Judy, 'Annabelle is a toxic friend. She makes me feel bad about myself. I don't think I should spend time with her any more.'

'Well,' said her mother, 'that would be a mistake.'

Alone in her apartment that night, Judy sat in front of a mirror and said, 'You know how you can be going about your daily business and an alarm goes off for no apparent reason? You're in the middle of grocery shopping, for instance, and there's the alarm, but there's no announcement about why it's going off and if there's actually danger somewhere. So you're waiting for someone in a position of authority to come along and reassure you or else tell you to evacuate and leave all your cherished personal belongings behind because they will only slow you down and you seriously need to run. But nobody comes. So you keep doing what you were doing previously, AKA grabbing cereal, but meanwhile you're thinking, *Damn, that alarm is really loud. But okay, I guess it doesn't mean anything. Maybe they're testing the system. Systems get tested all the time, right? For sure.* Then you slowly start looking around for evidence that something might have gone horribly wrong with society and there's about to be mass anarchy with ordinary people tearing each other apart in the streets. Those clanging bells certainly sound like they're heralding doom. A few of your fellow shoppers seem to be shopping a bit faster, perhaps anxious to get home and ensure the safety of the family members and pets and priceless heirlooms that are important to them. Like you, they came here to pick up their second-favourite kind of cereal because it's on sale this week and it's normally very expensive cereal. And like you, they're wishing either the alarm would stop, or the Really Bad Thing would just hurry up and happen already.'

Judy paused to smile at her reflection, and her reflection smiled back.

'With Arma-Get-It-Done, say goodbye to the annoying uncertainty of false alarms, and say hello to the Really Bad Thing. Because if you hear us, it's happening. Specifically, it's happening in the place where you live. But, hey, at least you'll know for sure.'

Judy buys Collins some ice cream but doesn't ask her to do any tricks. They make their way over to Judy's little car, and Judy tells Collins she can sit in the front seat and finish her cone but only if she is very careful.

Judy buckles her in and leaves the radio off, and on their way to the forest she reflects that there is a special type of security that comes with having a family.

'Collins, do you know what you want to be when you grow up?'

The little girl is quiet for a moment. Then she answers in a hushed, reverent tone, 'Maybe the ocean.'

Not only do you have the shared sensation of loving and being loved in return, but you all have a common goal, which is to go forth into the world as a coherent unit. And if one of you were to say, 'I'm a bit sad today,' the others would rush to comfort you, and you'd feel better. Then you'd go out for dinner at a family-friendly restaurant and draw on the placemats and eat chicken fingers shaped like dinosaurs. Of course, sharing the jubilation of being a parental figure with a committed partner and thereby achieving a true sense of belonging is not the only game in town. Maybe Judy could go to the Humane Society and take home a cat that would otherwise be euthanized. How fulfilling would that be? Totally fulfilling. She'd be saving a life! But then she'd have a cat, and a cat is something she has never wanted to have.

Then you've got parents like Lisa, who is the problem at the heart of everything.

Plus, seriously, who calls their daughter Collins? It's not even a name. It's the less-namey part of an alcoholic drink. But Judy has to admit it suits her somehow. It's actually perfect for her, because she's plucky. She's a plucky kid.

When Jasper broke up with Judy, he said it was because of her Facebook pregnancy announcement.

She said, 'But it was just a joke for April Fools' Day. I thought you'd think it was funny.'

People had still fallen for it, though, which was the problem. They'd left comments such as, 'Congratulations!' for her, and on Jasper's page they wrote stuff like, 'Oh, shit.'

Jasper had texted her a series of question marks, and Judy knew she was in trouble. The thing was, they hadn't even gotten to the point where they'd talked about having kids with each other, so she'd figured he'd know she was making it up. But he didn't.

After he packed up his things and left, Judy cried herself to sleep. But then it was like someone was looking out for her, because that night she was comforted by her favourite recurring dream, which she hadn't had since high school. It was the one about the two old-fashioned gangsters who were polite in that gravelly, threatening way from the 1950s, so you instinctively knew you weren't supposed to cross them. They had broken into her childhood home and there was Judy, an innocent teenage girl in a flimsy nightgown, and the second-in-command perverted gangster was eyeing her up and down. But the head gangster, who was a gentleman, told him to 'Stay the fuck away from her, do you hear me?' Judy was not to be touched. So she felt protected, even though the head gangster had just shot her mother and father in the back of the heads, execution-style.

She wept for a while for her murdered parents, but then the head gangster offered to make her some coffee and she felt better, because she was only fifteen and had never been allowed to drink it. But here was a handsome adult criminal straight out of a black-and-white movie pouring her a huge hot mug. She thanked him, and savoured it while he pistol-whipped his creepy partner in her honour.

And then in walked Annabelle, looking sexy as usual, and she immediately started flirting her slutty face off like she always did. And Judy sat there and waited for the men to smile at her friend and take turns admiring her long curly hair and perky little butt and then tell her all the disgusting things they wanted to do to her. But they didn't. They didn't even look at her. They only wanted Judy.

When Judy woke up, she felt invigorated by imaginary caffeine and filled with a sense of purpose. And even though she didn't know what that purpose was yet, it didn't matter, because it was something, and something was always better than nothing, wasn't it?

Judy had not imagined there would be so many trees. She had figured, how wooded could a park actually be? Pretty wooded, as it turns out.

Collins hugs the plastic baby to her chest and tells it not to worry.

'You can keep that one if you want,' Judy tells her. 'I got it at the dollar store and its face is kind of wonky. The real ones are going to be cuter.'

'I think she's nice,' says Collins.

Judy smiles, and reaches down to give the girl's tiny hand a squeeze.

'Whoa,' says Collins, 'this is deep grass.'

'You seem like a good person,' says Judy. 'I'm sad to say that there will be people in your life who will be mean to you for no reason.'

Collins cradles the baby doll and hums softly to it, and begins to skip.

Judy takes a deep, cleansing breath from her diaphragm. 'There will be other people in your life who will get lots of fame and adoration for nothing very special. They'll have tons of fans who'll do crazy things to show their devotion, but they won't deserve it, because they never even tried very hard. They just did something, and people liked it.'

Collins says, 'I'm still hungry.'

'Collins, do you know what you want to be when you grow up?'

The little girl is quiet for a moment. Then she answers in a hushed, reverent tone, 'Maybe the ocean.'

Judy nods. 'Like a person who works in the ocean? That's cool. Well, let's say you go to ocean-worker school, which is the opening chapter on the path to realizing your greatest aspiration, and your instructors tell you that you have a natural talent, so you feel encouraged. Then you go out into the world with your diploma and all your abilities, and you get your first job doing ocean work and you love it so much and you're so thrilled to actually be getting paid to do this thing that you love so dearly. But then for some reason you can't understand, nobody ever calls you again, and you never get another chance to work in the ocean while feeling self-actualized and proud of yourself.'

Collins looks up at Judy with wide, anxious eyes. 'Crabs have claws that pinch us.'

'Yes, they do.' Judy takes the child's hand again, and holds on.

Collins says, 'Tell me another story.'

'Okay,' says Judy.

They keep walking, and Judy tells Collins that back when she used to get lonely and wander the city trying to find where Jasper was hiding, before the headlines and the tacos and Lisa, when it was just the two of them, she would step off the sidewalk into any grove-like area she came across. She knew he was somewhere in the wilderness because he'd told her from the beginning that he was an outdoorsman, and she had said great, but secretly hoped he would never ask her to go camping with him because she hated camping. In the end it didn't matter, though, because he never did.

She would stand there amid the trees and look up at the sun filtering down through the branches, and feel the most at peace she had felt in a long time. And then she'd hear a twig crack somewhere and start to worry that an animal was sneaking up to attack her, so she'd get back on the sidewalk.

'I don't like animals,' says Collins.

'Me neither,' says Judy.

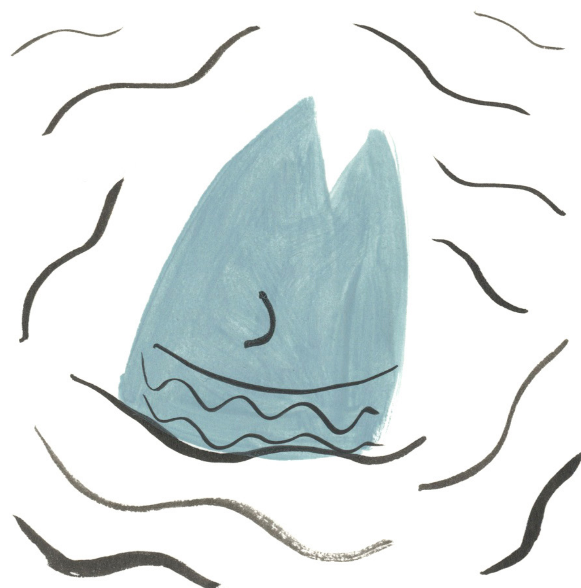
'Look!' Collins hops up and down. 'Some mud!'

Judy's cellphone rings and she ignores it.

She had really thought they were going the right way, but now she's beginning to give up hope.

Then she sees the flowers. Just a few at first, scattered here and there. Judy quickens her pace and pulls Collins along with her. After several more steps they come to a clearing, and suddenly the blossoms are everywhere, covering the ground like a multicoloured shag carpet.

Collins scoops up a handful of cloth petals and sniffs them. She frowns. 'I don't smell something.'



There are wreaths too, and candles, and poker chips. Scotch bottles and beer bottles and stubbed-out cigars.

Someone has even built an altar, and when Judy gets close enough she can see that the pillars are two giant piles of *Sports Illustrated* and *Men's Health*.

Perched on top are an old Atari joystick, a bong shaped like a cobra, the complete Blu-ray box sets of *Dirty Harry* and *The Fast and the Furious* and an oversized novelty shot glass with the contours of a buxom lady's décolletage and the inscription, 'Boobs are something that guys like'.

She glances at Collins, who is taking everything in, and wonders if it was a mistake to bring her here.

And then the little girl giggles and picks a miniature vanity license plate off the ground. 'Ooh, look, this came from a tiny vehicle!' She shows it to the googly-eyed plastic baby. 'Maybe from a *doll* car!'

The plate reads, 'Freedom.'

Judy says, 'Isn't that funny.'

She backs away, condom wrappers and peanut shells crackling underfoot, and shivers. She's not scared of falling because she knows Jasper's pit was filled in soon after it was discovered. But it'll be night soon, and she forgot to bring a flashlight.

Then Collins says, 'I have to pee.'

'Hmm.' Judy peers at the darkening sky. 'It might be a while until we get to a toilet.'

But the little girl is already squatting by the shrine.
'Huh,' says Judy. 'You know, now that I think about it, I have to pee too.'

'Do it!' shouts Collins. 'It's fun!'

'Collins,' says Judy, 'I'm really glad we met each other.'

Their united tinkling is musical, like gentle rain on leaves, and Judy closes her eyes and just listens for a moment.
Then there's a scuttling noise, and both girls jump and scream. A squirrel emerges from an empty pork-rind bag and scampers into the bushes.

Judy pulls her jeans back up shakily, heart hammering, and helps her ex-boyfriend's new girlfriend's daughter with her tiny, pink shorts.

'I want to go home,' says Collins.

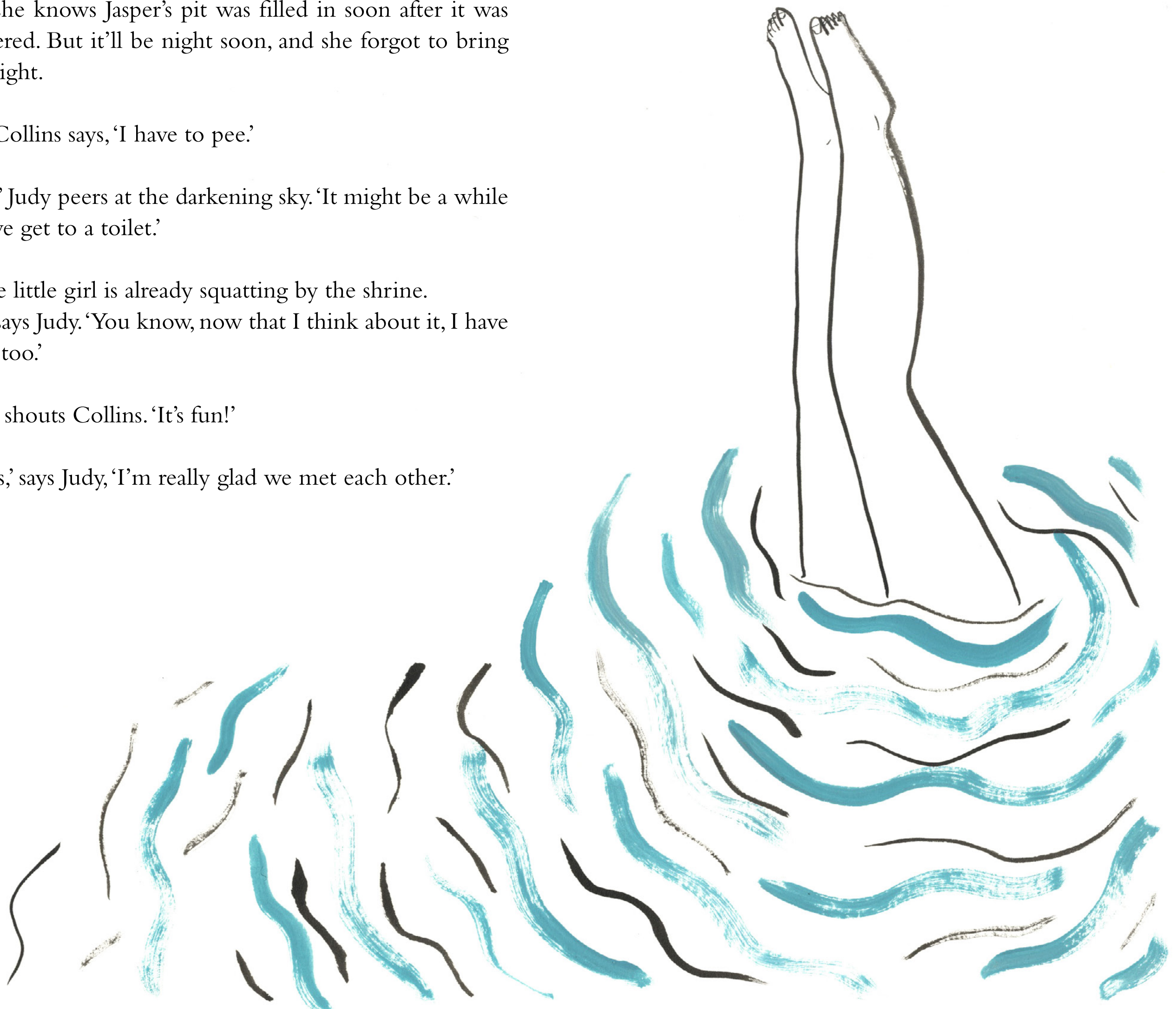
'Me too,' says Judy.

Collins yawns and rubs her eyes, then lifts her arms. 'Carry me.'

Judy picks her up. Her cellphone rings again, and she switches it off.

Collins lays her head on Judy's shoulder and sighs.

'I just wanted to see it,' Judy whispers to her. 'But it's really not that big a deal.'



POEM

Peace

By Sophie Collins

A CENTO

You fear and desire
his brain to be the size of a pea, his head so light, all that

POEM

The Saints 2: What the Saints Do

By Sophie Collins

The saints see through roofs
and through the centuries
They see your thoughts
the future
your future thoughts
all of this at once
and from a great distance

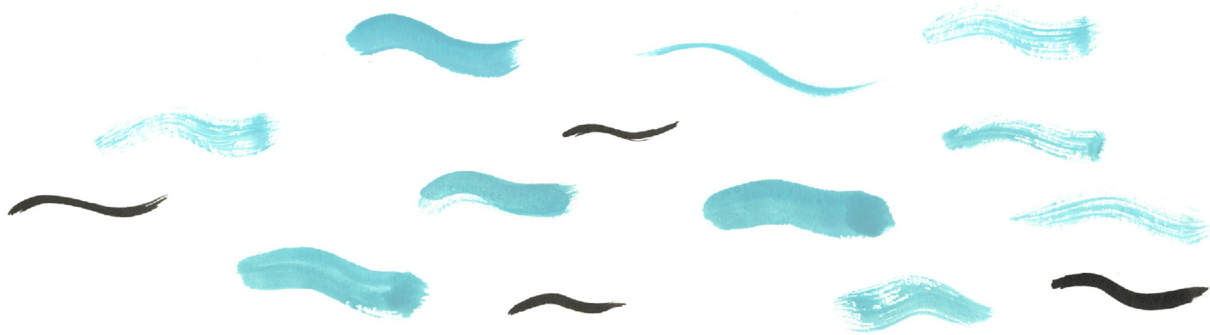
You can't but imagine it
in terms of colour
perhaps a time-lapse sequence, fast heat

•

The saints manifest in burning homes
The homes are their minds
but they're also real homes
Love is air (worthless)
Consciousness
consciousness is just the idea
that keeps you here

•

The saints cause drama
dump cylinders
whumping cylinders by the ditch



OUR SCATTERED CORRESPONDENTS

Glass House

Spending Time with the Superintelligent

By Trevor Quirk

Stephanie Link has made predictions and I mean to test them. So far she's been correct: the 'hug dots' were displayed at the registration desk, bright and motley in their stickered grids, social indicators to be affixed to names. Though she wishes them 'abolished', Link admits the hug dots have occasionally helped. In the scheme, a green dot = 'hugs welcome', yellow = 'ask before hugging' and red = 'no hugs'. Blue dots denoting marital status are available upon request.

I have selected green.

I am now struggling with my puzzling name-tag in the very back of the dim Hospitality room of the sumptuous Hilton hotel, which is crowned by a tall pyramid of glass at its marquee. Through the spanning window of Hospitality comes the drear of north-eastern autumn in Dedham, some corporate module of Boston, to and from which heavy trains shuttle tired businesspeople, those without the salary required to sleep at the center of the city's technocratic core. Inside, a docile heavyset man, who apparently prefers his bare feet against the Hilton's tile and carpet, has been trolleying various accoutrements hither and thither since I arrived. He is the Barefoot Man. At the far centre several male Mensans – newly acquainted – share drinks and refreshments after checking in. Link has already corrected my silly presumptions of what members of a high-IQ society like to talk about. What did I think? Particle physics? Epistemology? Hermeneutics? Not here. A radiologist talks radiology. Another Mensan touts his business model. Someone recounts deer hunting, in which 'the weapon was a car'. A man of Asian descent, who seems to be one of the few not wearing glasses, repeatedly mentions that he's a new member, and sips his diet soda while the rest enjoy beer. They talk education, politics, engineering, professional sports, college sports, the merits of the show *House MD*. One of them quaffs his drink and shares a cringingly bad joke. The new Mensan laughs gratuitously and says 'Encore!' He reminds everyone that this is his second Mensa event – ever – this Regional Gathering (RG) of Mensa's New England contingent. His dot is green, like mine.

I've been dispatched to observe these Mensans, to chart the inner workings of a self-described 'round-table society, where race, colour, creed, national origin, age, politics, educational or social background are irrelevant'. Mensa – Latin for 'table' – discriminates only by intelligence, at the 98th percentile across a wide battery of tests. Turns out that in the world of high-IQ societies, this standard is quite low. Intertel, 'an international society of the intellectually gifted', admits at the 99th percentile. The ISPE, the One-in-a-Thousand Society and the Triple Nine Society all admit to the 99.9th percentile. The Prometheus society trumps them, admitting higher still to the 99.997th percentile. The Mega

Society, 'most elite' according to Guinness World Records, admits to the 99.9999th percentile. It has thirty members globally. Mensa, 110,000-members strong, is the only one with any real social activity.

With every greeted guest, Link's fluttery laugh emits from the registration table at the room's front. I've got the impression that she, for her gregariousness, was administratively *selected* to mediate or at least massage my perception of Mensa. Her matronly sensibility is known among Mensans. She provides hotel-sized toiletries to houseguests, pampers them with bed-making so errorless it would make a cadet blush. The man who introduced us is also widely known and adored. The LocSec – as he's called – will arrive shortly to greet me, I've been told.

I soon hear Link utter his name as she leans over the registration table, her big eyes searching. She then twists to point and identify me. He's wearing one of the two suits in the joint; stately, with thin red tie, the LocSec's bleached and tight collar forces a crease of skin from under his neck. Our eyes connect, and he takes one direct stride towards me, only sharply, intentionally to turn at the refreshments trolley to select finger food and mingle with the Mensans he knows – which is evidently all of them. He takes his time. There is something seriously political about the man, nothing cynical but a sort of practised eminence. You can tell his handshake is firm before it grips you, he melds conversations together expertly, spatially, finishing the words of a salutation only to then begin those of a greeting – all in his stride. He doesn't so much stand as forebode, maybe six inches from my prematurely extended hand, still speaking to the two older Mensans camped by twin bowls of pretzels and crisps. He says my name before he looks at me.

He pulls his chair way back for legroom, sits, immediately leans forward and retrieves a few M&Ms, gently threshing them in his palm. He gives me the Mensan bromides. Mensans are a 'truly diverse and interesting group of individuals'; 'Some are intelligent and did well in school, some are intelligent and didn't do well in school.'

He asks me which school in Boston I attend. I tell him. He chews, replenishes his palm's stock, chews.

'You couldn't get into one of the good schools?'

'Apparently not,' I say, unable to discern sarcasm.

There always seems to be an M&M in his mouth, yet by his speech alone you could never tell. He speaks of Mensans in the generalized, detached way common to any sort of leading figure. He boasts for them, showcases them. He says there's a child among us, somewhere in the Hilton, an elfin Mensan whose teacher is trying to teach him astronomy while he teaches her about 'black holes and space quarks'.

He stands, grips my shoulder, says, 'Eat. Drink. Be Merry. And stay away from these two', pointing to the elderly men sitting by the bowls, who laugh and nod knowingly. Link had said he was a character.

Stephanie Link had made all her predictions weeks before, in Boston, when the sky was storm-tousled and low. I was early and hadn't yet seen Link in person or a photo, so I waited and scanned the coffee bar where we'd arranged to meet. I soon felt stupid stalking the boisterous lounge using my eyes to plead with strange women who seemed like they could be meeting someone. It was a kind of social stupidity, a position of ignorance, shame. I made two women visibly uncomfortable before giving up the tactic. Not long after, Link called. She was behind me.

She gracefully refused my offers of coffee, tea, at-least-something. It was anyway evident that the hyperkinetic, jocular Mensan had little need of it. Her hair was red, face-framing, and she had glossy eyes, slightly recessed, big, at once attentive and vulnerable. She gesticulated with smooth, arcing

gestures, used them to track her thoughts, pausing to ask, 'Does that make any sense?' Her voice was brassy, percolated with the static of a coming cold. For this she apologized.

Link joined Mensa in 2003 to alleviate her post-undergrad malaise, the loneliness of being displaced from her Cincinnatian home. She'd moved to Orlando to be a teacher, due to a shortage in the profession, abandoning her brief stint as a chemist, a socially limited job that she summed up as being 'isolated in a fume hood all day'. In Boston she now research and developed for Proctor & Gamble, specifically labouring on razor design for its subsidiary Gillette. A vocation of Newtons/m², blade angles and glide (n.), her job of late involved the 'formulations and whatnot' of shaving, but never abrading, thousands of delicate male faces. Besides friends and boyfriends, she even met her husband at a Mensa meeting, and followed him to Germany and lived there for two years until he suddenly died. Afterwards she moved back stateside. She makes a point not to waste her vitality, emphasizes action over deliberation. I'd always regarded this sort of naivety as socially disastrous, but then considered that Link might just mean it when she says she joined Mensa for solidarity, friendship. She shrugged at my prods at intellectual elitism, human desire for hierarchy.

'I've found two camps,' she declared. 'Some people join Mensa as a social outlet, and others do it to prove "I did it! I got the card!"'

I asked her if it was in her possession, this card.

'Yeah,' she smiled. 'Do you want to see it?'

'I'd like to see it.'

She laughed, dug through her handbag. 'I don't even know why I carry it. It's not as if anyone ever asks for it.' She retrieved it, said, 'Are you ready – bam!' slapping the card on our table.

'They say that only 20 to 30 per cent of any chapter is actually active. I know that in Boston Mensa' – here she consulted her phone then peeked coyly over it – 'I checked the numbers today, in case you asked.'

'In case I quizzed you,' I corrected her.

'Yeah,' laughing. 'So there are 1,142 members of Boston Mensa, but our Facebook group only has about 300 members.'

Admittance to Mensa is permitted in one of two ways:

Option 1) is submission of prior evidence, in which the aspiring Mensan provides record of satisfactory results on one of nearly two hundred tests that Mensa accepts: the GRE, the Standford-Binet, the LSAT, the Miller Analogies Test (MAT), the SAT, the PSAT, the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test (NNAT), the ACT Composite, the GMAT, the

California Test of Mental Maturity (CTMM), the Army and Navy GTCs, the CEEB, the OLSAT, the AFQT, and the Woodcock-Johnson Test of Cognitive Abilities, not to be confused with the Woodcock Johnson Achievement Test, which is not sanctioned or acceptable. And so on. All documentation must be in the original or notarized in copy. Tests must be administered by neutral third parties – teachers, professors, private psychologists – and all results are subject to appraisal by Mensa's in-house 'supervisory psychologists'.

Option 2) is to take a test designed and administered by Mensa International itself, a test not all that different from an IQ assessment. The LocSec is proctoring the Boston Chapter's testing session at this year's Regional Gathering. Link did not take the second option, preferring to provide prior evidence. Very prior evidence. 'So,' she said, 'my test scores are from, like, *second grade*,' her voice and head low, as if the room was bugged. These ancient scores haunted her a few years back, when she decided to get her MBA. 'The GMAT is one of the qualifying tests for Mensa. I was nervous. I thought "What if my GMAT score wouldn't qualify me for Mensa any more?" Can I still show up to meetings?'

I knew she could, still. You only had to qualify once. But that wasn't the point. 'My score was still good enough...but, I don't know,' she hesitated. 'It was almost like I was more nervous about *that* than getting a good score for my application to business school.'

These Mensans perplex me. I find broaching my own boundaries hard enough. To map them against another's seems, to me, a formula for green-eyed rage and shame. We parted and walked into the drizzle.

Link also predicted the cache of obscure strategy games, and here in Games, a Hilton room with the staleness and dimensions of a very large coffin, I see that she is correct. The boxes have been marshalled along a pristine tablecloth, glowing preciously under tiny dulcet overheads. Here we have Kakuzu, Stratego, Quiddler,

Telestrations, Cornerstone, Coerco, TriBond, Rummikub, Anomia, Eleminis, UPWords, Kings Cribbage, Dixit, Clever Endeavor and Flashpoint, the only board game I've ever seen with a byline.

One faction of gamers is huddled around the board of Innovation: two older women, a man and a younger woman – green dot, green dot, green dot, red dot, respectively. The younger woman, still wearing her denim jacket with polychromatic scarf, is at the centre of an unmistakable milieu, in which someone trying to teach a game can't quite resist her desire to also win that game. She overwhelms the others with the game's jargon, announces complicated moves and asks if they understand what she has just done to them. Do you understand? Do you? She has a trove of Reese's cups, which, she admits, could be used as bribes. A flake of chocolate is smeared at the corner of her mouth.

Soon the others stop playing and just sit, except the one male, who agrees to finish the game only if they end it early. They've been playing for hours and there is dinner – 'tacos!' a drunk Mensan screams – and you can already see the Barefoot Man scuttling around with TexMex viands. Soon people leave Games altogether, only one of the older women remaining with the domineering tutor. They begin discussing dating etiquette, relevant sociological experiments, anthropological oddities, team-building exercises. One thing Link did not predict: Mensans prefer a procedural discussion of social dynamics more than any other topic. The young outlast the old; the older woman tries to end their conversation with a platitude, 'There is no 'I' in team'. But, alas, upon hearing it the younger woman gets very excited and corrects her. There is – in fact – an 'I' in team, and the older woman waits while she spends the next few minutes drawing an illustration, a proof:

TEAM

This young woman's name is Crystal, and she finds me moments later in the foyer, tidying notes as everybody enjoys tacos. A certified accountant, Mensan of ten years, Crystal quite literally found a new family in Mensa. Both her parents died when she was young, and after she qualified for Mensa she met her 'adopted' parents at another RG, in Prague. She has unruly blonde hair that breaks passing light into colour and a small voice that often trails into a whisper. The smear of chocolate I'd noted earlier is actually a scar at the corner of her mouth.

'In elementary school some guy kept pulling me out of class, and I didn't trust him at all. He was asking me questions. But I didn't trust him. I remember, he poured water from a short, fat glass into a tall, skinny glass and asked 'Which one had more?' I folded my little arms and said, 'More *what*? More height? More width? Or more water?' He said 'More water.' And I said, 'Well, the first glass, because there are still drops of water in it.' Then he said, 'Assuming, all the water from the first glass is transferred into the second glass which one has more?' I said they'd have the same amount.

'And later, when I was at home, I noticed a little piece of paper with my name on it. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to see it, and I thought, 'Oh this must mean I'm smart.' And my Dad, cool as a cucumber, looks over my shoulder and says, 'Oh no, sweetheart. You have to score at least 200 to be considered smart.'[1] 'So I grew up *knowing* I wasn't smart because I wasn't 200. A secondary schoolteacher told me I was smart, but I *remembered* this incident.'

Eerie how much Crystal's story echoes the fears of Alfred Binet, the French psychologist who invented the first psychometric test. A progenitor of what we call the IQ test today, the Binet-Simon Test was originally commissioned by the French Ministry of Education to identify students in need of special education. Binet was quick to say that this was *all* it was designed to do. It was not a test that measured the native intellects of children, intellects that could be ranked, sorted, threshed. Despite this, a Stanford psychologist named Lewis Terman revised Binet's test and created the Standford-Binet test in 1916, a test which became the most pervasive method for ranking the American population for decades on, especially after it saw success during the First World War.[2] Binet feared the stigma such psychological labels could impose – the self-fulfilling prophecy of not believing, but in Crystal's words 'knowing' that they were a little dimmer than the rest and having a number, such as 200, as unequivocal evidence.

Her father was evidently wrong and Crystal is still acclimatizing to the fact of her smartness.

The Barefoot Man scampers by, followed by a woman who advises me not to believe anything Crystal says. She rests an arm on Crystal's shoulder and they both laugh.

Crystal says, 'I'm practising flirting right now, Anne! I don't have my book on me. I'm on my own.'

Anne squints, looks to me with portent, nods. 'Well, all right,' she says, retreating.

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1. It's unclear what test this score belongs to, though it's certainly not a standard IQ test, as 200 is literally off-the-charts and would disappoint only the cruellest of fathers.

2. My historical summary here isn't the half of it. See Nicholas Lemann's The Big Test for a detailed, comprehensive treatment of the bizarre American meritocracy.

Book? I ask. What book? Crystal explains she owns a compendium of pick-up lines, which she has challenged herself to use. Some of the lines aren't really pick-ups, more like extremely nice compliments. Others are 'job-specific'. Some are strange and don't make sense to Crystal. Some are risqué, as she says, comments on how someone's clothes would look just great on your bedroom floor, and such. Crystal says she needs to learn to deliver the sexually charged lines in such a way that she sounds like she doesn't mean it, but sort of does. She tests out a few on me.

One thing Link had not predicted: Mensans don't employ or register much irony. The exception being the LocSec, of course.

'Here's another sad little story for you,' Crystal says. 'But don't worry. I think I've had a fairly happy life.

'Do you remember the toy when you were young, the yellow box with the different holes in it – squares, triangles, stars – the toy with shapes, and you could put the shapes in the correct holes? When I grew up I felt – *a lot!* – as though somebody were trying to shove me into a shape in which I didn't belong.'

I ask her if she thinks that had something to do with her IQ.

'Well, yes.' Crystal has a theory for why smart people are ostracized: 'Smart people...they're born smart, like someone is born with blonde hair. It's genetic. In our society we look up to people who are born with artistic ability, we look up to people who are born with athletic ability, and we shame and put down people who are born with a high IQ.'

To illustrate where this minority lies, she draws a bell-shaped curve with her hands, the shape that has been a point of scientific, academic, racial and political tension for nearly a century.

In the early 1900s, after ignoring Binet's warnings, Western psychologists began asking questions of human intelligence. Is it a thing, a number? If so, how can it be measured? Charles Spearman, a British psychologist, thought it could and so employed the statistical method that is still used by psychometricians today: factor analysis, the basic idea being that all permutations (or 'factors') of intellectual ability – verbal, mathematic, linguistic, associative, comprehensive, etc. – form the base of a pyramid, and by using statistical analysis these base factors can be correlated to an even smaller layer of factors or, simply, to the next layer of the pyramid. And that *layer* can be correlated to an even smaller layer above it. And so on. Eventually, Spearman's theory asserted, we can eliminate all other factors but the one at the very top of the pyramid. Spearman called this the general or *g* factor.

'There is no 'I' in team.' But, alas, upon hearing it the younger woman gets very excited and corrects her. There is – in fact – an 'I' in team.

Time, it seems, has only introduced more layers, more factors. The popular contemporary theory, CHC Theory, posits the existence of nine broad factors and over seventy base factors. Many psychologists, though, have come out

in strong opposition to even the basic idea of one native, measurable factor. One of the common refutations – the popularity of which is owed, in part, to Stephen Jay Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man* – is that top-of-the-pyramid factors, such as g or IQ, are guilty of the reification fallacy. (It had been a while since my freshman philosophy, so I had to look this up.) Reification is the treating of an abstraction, like IQ, as though it were a real, concrete thing. Consider a statistical abstraction: say for every three Mensans who select a green Hug Dot at a Regional Gathering only 0.47 select a red Hug Dot. Now let's make the abstraction concrete and commit the reification fallacy: If tonight I spot three green-dotted Mensans I should expect to see 0.47 of a Mensan – a sort of half-Mensan – red-dotted and scuttling among the rest.

That would be absurd. Many psychologists and scientists have argued that there's no real difference between this and the idea of IQ or *g* or in adding someone's verbal, reading, writing and mathematical scores – as done on the GRE and SAT – to some grand total.

Crystal rises to leave, then pauses, turns around. 'You should really take the qualifying test tomorrow,' she says. 'About 75 per cent of people who take it pass it.'

'Really?' I say.

'Uh-huh,' she says, then adds. 'It's self-selecting, of course.'

The most recent movement in psychology has steered away from factor analysis altogether, away from the very idea of the pyramid. Perhaps the most famous work in this vein is that of Howard Gardner, whose *Theory of Multiple Intelligences* has gained clout in the past two decades and argues that the correlations between the wide varieties of human intelligences – for example, between what he calls interpersonal and musical intelligence – are very weak, if they exist at all. There is no pyramid, so to speak.

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'Really?' I say.

'Uh-huh,' she says, then adds, 'It's self-selecting, of course.'

The low-ceilinged hallway that splits the difference between Hospitality and Games is more cushioned than carpeted. Boots shush like slippers on them. The walls are thick and absorb the RG's cacophony in little quivers. Posted rosters for 'BACKGAMMON, COMPETETIVE ONLY! and ominous signs everywhere for qualifying tests, held on the ~~SECOND~~ THIRD FLOOR, administered and overseen by the LocSec himself. The spotlights and their ebullient bulbs are recessed in the ceiling; walking under them you feel sort of impelled to have a brilliant idea. In this light at the centre of the russet carpet is a number-two pencil – ExecutiveChoice™ – perfectly parallel with the wall, sharpened, Scantron-friendly, its eraser so fresh you can smell it; the kind of pencil provided for tests all over the world. I pocket it and walk to the hall's end to rest in a plush leather seat in the empty lounge with the overstuffed couch and cherry-oak table. It feels like I'm sitting at a desk, though.

I have with me some sample questions from the Mensa qualifier and figured I'd try my hand. After fifteen minutes I abandon the first problem and reluctantly move on to the next, which I solve quickly and feel a washing relief I haven't felt in years, one I can *physically* feel – a warmness, like a drink on an empty stomach. I revisit the first problem, struggle again, then notice some old but familiar things: my hand is trembling, appetite gone. I turn the pamphlet upside down and become irate when I see the answer – because, personally, I don't consider 'milepost' a word that anybody would or should know. I toss the pamphlet on the chair rest. A red-brick mantle runs up through the Hilton's stairwell to the skylight at the ceiling, which opens to another glass pyramid. I'd forgotten how self-conscious test-taking makes me, how much I resent being measured.

As an undergraduate, I studied physics. Quite honestly, I think I chose to do so because it seemed the 'smart' thing to do. I thought of myself in those terms, as did many of my peers. This was not the best time for me. I refused to study with others. I lied about grades, scores. I hoped that others would perform poorly so that I would, by comparison, seem smarter. For the first time in my life, I *envied* people. Shelves of melodramatic novels could be written about the anxious and agonizingly piteous lives of insecure physics students. This much I know.

One thing I can say about students who identify with their 'smartness' is that they quickly understand the comparative nature of contemporary intelligence – something Mensa knows very well, wittingly or not. Declaring yourself 'smart'

is not quite the same as announcing your age or weight. For when a person says he's 'smart' we around him feel somehow implicated in the assertion, insulted on some deep and visceral level. The logical response becomes, 'smart compared to whom, sir?' It is an exclusively comparative assessment, for which to be significant people *must* be measured against each other. Think of it like a footrace. Or combat.

Yet there's a price. Anyone who defines themselves by a measurable characteristic – the sprinter, the weightlifter, the IQ jockey alike – is going to dread the day, as I did in college, when they hit their ceiling. The day you painfully learn that some folks are measurably, inherently, immutably, inarguably smarter than you. And there's nothing you can do about it.

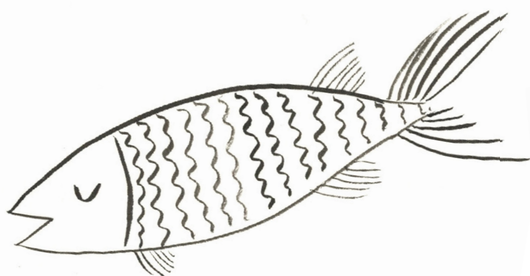
As college became a flickering memory and I learned that the world of jobs and money and politics did not care one iota for how smart I was, I found the temerity to question the mental tyranny of my undergraduate days. This proved somewhat illuminating. Every human being possesses an *intelligence;* there's no arguing that. They differ, undoubtedly, and we should be grateful they do, for the very texture of our culture depends on those differences. I believe that people like Alfred Binet knew enough to know how little we understand about human intelligence – an ignorance that has not been corrected since his day. Throughout linguistics, perceptual psychology, neuroscience and cognitive philosophy, the human mind has emerged as astoundingly sophisticated even in its most basic aspects. To say nothing of consciousness and creativity, the ways in which you unconsciously assemble a coherent picture of the world from your senses, visually focus on simple objects, or understand this sentence are not well understood. Though *what is* understood about our shared, ordinary intelligence reveals fantastic intricacy and depth. You're already smarter than we know.

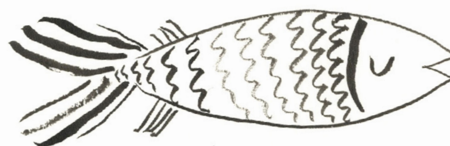
The version of intelligence we colloquially mean by 'smarts' or 'brains' or 'brightness' is our ability to work on the edge of human understanding.

The version of intelligence we colloquially mean by 'smarts' or 'brains' or 'brightness' is our ability to work on the edge of human understanding. The Games room holds many examples of puzzles that human beings aren't innately adept at solving; but therein lies the fun of it – people enjoy cerebral challenges, seek to expand their minds. Certain professions (e.g. logicians, theoretical physicists) are perhaps the most extreme practitioners of this sort of fringe play and are commonly regarded as our most brilliant souls. But they represent just one kind of intelligence, and it's premature and unhelpful to place it upon a pinnacle. I have no doubt that people who labour in factories will know things about the world that I will never grasp. As will politicians, dancers, phlebotomists, luthiers, chefs, biologists, the homeless, gardeners, hotel managers, inmates, athletes, electricians, IRS agents, soldiers, cabbies, upholsterers, and on. Every human vocation harbours an immensity of insight, novelty and particularity, which is precisely why we find them interesting; the special knowledge so obvious to them comes to us as total surprise. But it might generalize further. Consider the mental world of a typical chemist and that of someone who suffers a cognitive pathology. Is one necessarily *less rich* than the other? Is it inane to think that someone with ADHD or severe Down's syndrome is capable of thinking in ways that I cannot? I'm honestly not so sure.

So what is the purpose of arranging these intelligences hierarchically? Different academic disciplines offer various answers to this question. One of the more compelling and imperforated ideas is that a given society's theory of intelligence will reflect a set of values – often unquestioned – that the society maintains. You don't have to think terribly hard to realize why someone who excels at quantitative analysis might be regarded as 'smarter' than someone who excels at acrylic painting – and as a pleasant side-effect the quantitative analyst is likely to enjoy a cushier lifestyle.

But this widespread evaluation damages far more than materially rewards. Here's a well-known fact about the human psyche: if an individual is victimized enough she will not only submit to it, but will come to believe the terms of her victimization are correct. The bullied child often thinks that he carries some unique defect; ultimately he not only accepts his appalling circumstances but believes that they are justified. We perpetrate crimes of this nature against ourselves the world over, all the time. The realm of intelligence and our ideas about it are no different. I bet you've personally seen the human cost too.





It's a quiet violence, but we all know the symptoms of someone marinating in their intellectual inadequacy. At sight of a bad grade or failed task, their face will crumple, eyes soften, shoulders droop; the volume will drain from their voice as they shrivel into themselves, intimating all the minutiae of someone who has suddenly become chilled. It's like witnessing a person walking into a glass door; that special wounded confusion of someone abruptly denied a destination they assumed they could reach. They find their place.

From my vantage in the lounge I can see the illuminated lettering of five exit signs. I had to recount them a few times. Link emerges from the stairwell's bottom, dressed for her upcoming talk, in high black boots and shimmery stockings, a comely jacket. She didn't expect to see me sitting here, alone, and seems confused. Her eyes widen, 'Oh. Did you just take the test upstairs?'

Link's talk, with the exception of meal time, is the most popular RG event so far. Everyone is here, it seems, including the Barefoot Man, the LocSec and Crystal. When I arrive seats are no longer available; people stand, crane. Two inventive Mensans lie supine on a narrow counter.

The crowd represents the best demographic of Boston Mensa I've seen yet. Enough persons to fit a bell curve, you could say. Most are fairly old, average age hovers around the upper fifties. Nearly everyone is white. Glasses are more often the case than not. The average Mensan is slightly overweight (Link's prediction). Women have slight numerical superiority.

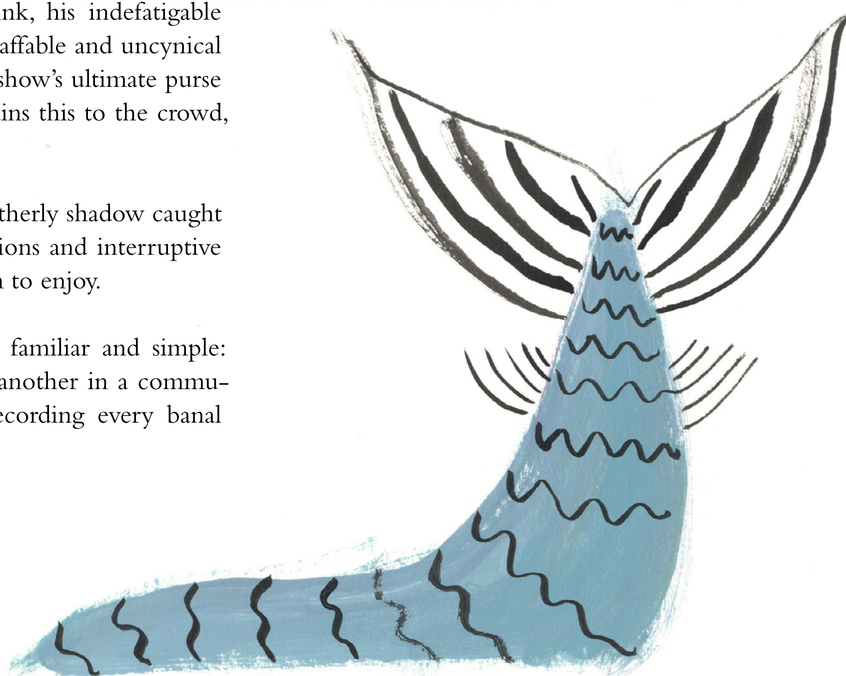
Link has everyone in the room transfixed. The young Mensan is presently dancing – shimmying, really – beer in hand, other hand to the ceiling, to the music of a television promo she's projected on to a screen. Link spent the summer of 2012 competing in ABC's *The Glass House*, after the show's casting agent, looking to fill an archetype, approached the LocSec, who in turn thought of Link, his indefatigable membership co-ordinator. And Link, affable and uncynical as she is (plus not one to scoff at the show's ultimate purse of $250k) figured why not. She explains this to the crowd, shaking out her last itch to dance.

The LocSec sits just behind her, his fatherly shadow caught by the projector, barking out instigations and interruptive stories of his own, which people seem to enjoy.

The template of *The Glass House* is familiar and simple: fourteen contestants abide with one another in a communal house, with live-feed cameras recording every banal detail, every sob and toilet visitation (!), every tantrum, sexual escapade and argument – and inevitably some sort of politics emerge. The show makes a big thing of 'viewer participation'. As such, the format allows the viewers to decide where the contestants sleep and what they eat and wear. Viewers also decide which contestant gets 'evicted' each week. The last contestant remaining gets the bounty. And for what appear to be purely metaphorical reasons, the swanky and modernistic set-house is made entirely of glass. Link describes it as a weird 'sociological experiment'.

The Glass House, as a show, is unsurprisingly awful. Most Mensans seem to believe this, and if you press Link she'll concede it. But like all television that purports reality, its awfulness has almost nothing to do with the cast – that is, the *real* people – but with the caricature the show imposes on them. Here, in *The Glass House*, we have the incorrigible narcissist; the cosmetic-obsessed menopausal mother; the lovable overweight gay man; the jaded cocktail waitress; the direly insecure nymphet; the sardonic, moralizing police sergeant; the self-deprecating mid-life male; and Link. Where do you think she fits in this line-up? I do wonder what the casting agent had in mind when he or she approached LocSec of Boston Mensa, querying for contestants.

Link has a theory: 'I was the know-it-all, brainy, logical one. *Chu-chootu-chootu* –' so goes her mimicry of computers from the 1980s. Technical sounds. Intelligent sounds. 'It's sort of funny,' she once told me. 'The casting call on the ABC website asked questions like, "Do you always have to be the centre of attention? Are you the life and soul of the party? Do people either love you or hate you?" But the flier they distributed to Mensa asked, "Are you a strategic thinker? Do you like problem-solving? Do you always have to be right?"'



Link had decided, per strategy, to keep her involvement with Mensa from the other contestants. She couldn't think of a tactful way to announce it, and in her experience doing so almost always engendered resentment.

'Snobs,' she said, 'don't get far on socio-televisual competitions.'

Her strategy failed, though, as one of the other contestants had heard elsewhere that Link was a Mensan and brought it to the fore. Link's still a bit sour about this, thinking it hurt her chances of winning.

Humiliating mental and physical challenges seem to be a staple of reality television, and *The Glass House* is no exception. The exigencies of its weekly competitions are complicated, so much so that the editors repeatedly use the same contestant to explain the rules to the viewer. It was Link. If this isn't evidence enough of what the show thinks of her, have a look at the complete transcript of Stephanie Link during introductory Episode 1. Running time: 59 minutes:

I'm Stephanie. I'm 32 years old. I'm a scientist living in Boston, Massachusetts. I'm not one of those wannabe models, actresses...fake people. I'm a real person.

[...]

I was so super-excited when I saw the challenge because I'm smart and that's definitely going to be helpful. I am in Mensa. So I definitely think my brains are going to be a big part in solving that challenge.

The omnipotent audience of *The Glass House* evidently agrees with this portrayal; in a later episode they vote Link most likely to have been 'the nerd' in high school. Link, hardly surprised, thought it was a laugh.

There is one moment in the show that shatters her caricature, one she doesn't discuss now during her presentation, when the recent and precipitous death of Link's husband is revealed to her housemates. She wells up, struggles for words through crying, and you get the impression that if you'd been there with her, if you weren't subjected to a melancholy score and stark reaction-shots of other contestants, if the whole thing didn't precede a commercial break and you weren't watching it happen on reality television, Link's story would have been moving and sad. But the show couldn't broach such a serious subject without leveraging it as a point of tension between two other contestants. Indeed, when Link violates her designated role as 'the smart person' and becomes human, the show, in turn, is as disrespectful to her as it could ever be.

I once asked her if she felt the show had handled anything poorly. She said no.

Toward the conclusion of *The Glass House*, Link was offered $32k to drop out early. She made what she called the 'rational, logical choice'. She took the money. Link had feared she'd been too successful with the show's challenges to win the audience's sympathy and votes (ultimately, the police sergeant won – which Link had predicted.) Generally, she feels 'people don't endear themselves to smart people'.

Even Link does not escape this social bind. Late in the season, nearly an entire episode is dedicated to a scene of her crying – over something different this time – struggling to expound some social dynamic with the other contestants. During their discussion, she uses the word 'reciprocity,' by far the most SAT-ish word in the entire season. The juxtaposition is not incidental. The Link of *The Glass House* seems as articulate as she is hysterical, as brilliant as she is socially incongruous. There's a bizarre balance to it. In the show's logic, for her every IQ point above the norm, Link seems to lose a point in some other crucial capacity. But this lopsided persona is not the Link I've met, and see now, enchanting this crowd of Mensans.

Before she finishes, Link implores everyone to stay for her talented friend's presentation, yet another Mensan, recently limelit by national television, one J. Mark Inman, multi-instrumental musician, singer, executive film producer, philosophy PhD candidate, all-trades artist, who at 32 years, he explains, lives with his parents and has spent the last of his money on this Hilton overnighter. He is presently unsheathing wires, monitors, hubs and cables behind Link, and despite her pleas around two-thirds of the audience has risen to leave, presumably to catch the last half-hour of Oreo flavour-grading. I want to follow them, at least out of the door. Link has already lobbied for Inman's presentation, but when she said he'd be recounting his travails on *The X-Factor*, I struggled to keep my upper lip uncurled. I hope to exit surreptitiously when Link leaves for a fresh beer and Inman is still mired in equipment – and boy he's got a lot of it.

Link, however, returns double-quick, sort of falls into her seat, beer in hand, swaying a bit. I am here for the duration. The pockets of Inman's dark and ankle-cuffed jeans are bulging with electronic apparatus. His hair is brown, thick, moppish, and his eyes alternate between beady and soft, almost pained. He's removed his leather jacket – collar flared – and has begun lifting what seems an excessive amount of heavy equipment off the dolly he trundled in. He proceeds to unveil twin KRK V8 speakers, wattage at 180 rms, elevated on stands the height of podiums. 'Bad speakers are one of my pet peeves,' he says. Unfortunately, he encounters major technical difficulties and tries to appease his waning audience with self-deprecations as he troubleshoots. The Barefoot Man gallops forward and offers assistance.

Those remaining in the audience eye the towering speakers as if they might suddenly explode. I'm sandwiched between an elderly gentleman who I believe is either asleep or having mild respiratory issues and a woman who seems to have no filter between her internal monologue and her speech. She recently sat beside me and asked who this Inman person was and what he was going to present, and before I could explain she grabbed the programme out of my hands and squinted at it. She wasn't sure if she wanted to stick around for this.

'What's your talent?' she calls out to Inman, still struggling to set up. People are advising him to use Link's speakers, which are the size of staplers and have fallen over on the projector's table. Inman is not keen on this idea, even as his laptop seizes up.

'Dance around!' she says, laughing. She wears a centipedishly-segmented down coat, fluff-lined loafers and has gnarled fingers. 'Just ad lib for us! You're a Mensan, you don't need a computer!'

Repeatedly, Inman's eyes dart her way in that unmistakably pleading way. I'm starting to think there's something wrong with her.

'What was the world like before computers?! You're a Mensan, you don't need a computer!'

After a while, Inman reluctantly consents to using Link's middling speakers and soon presents to us a screening of his bizarre moment of fame on *The X-Factor*. He first gives the viewers his personal formula for success:

J + Mark + X + Factor = $5 Million

Then, on screen, hailing from stage-right, coolly, Inman says, 'Hello Chicago', eyes sparkling manically, hair positively vitrified in gel – a person wholly different from the flustered man in the room with us before. 'I had a plan,' he's told us. It soon becomes obvious that Inman's *X-Factor* performance has begun long before his chosen song – Radiohead's 'Creep'. There is a social strategy at work. When Simon Cowell enquires, 'Where do you see yourself in ten years' time?' and Inman responds, 'At the helm of a renaissance', it's clear that Inman had decided to adopt some kind of unnerving persona, as that sometimes works on national talent shows. And it does. After Inman's 'trip-hop' rendition of 'his least favourite Radiohead song' the judges are flabbergasted not by his talent but by his strangeness, by his socially engineered effect. He is permitted to the next stage of the competition, where he is promptly cut. And this would have been all well and good, this peculiar anecdote from a Mensan whose formula of personality differs radically from that of a successful *X-Factor* contestant (which everyone sort of knew all along), that would have been fine if Inman wasn't so direly disappointed in himself for not getting further in the competition.

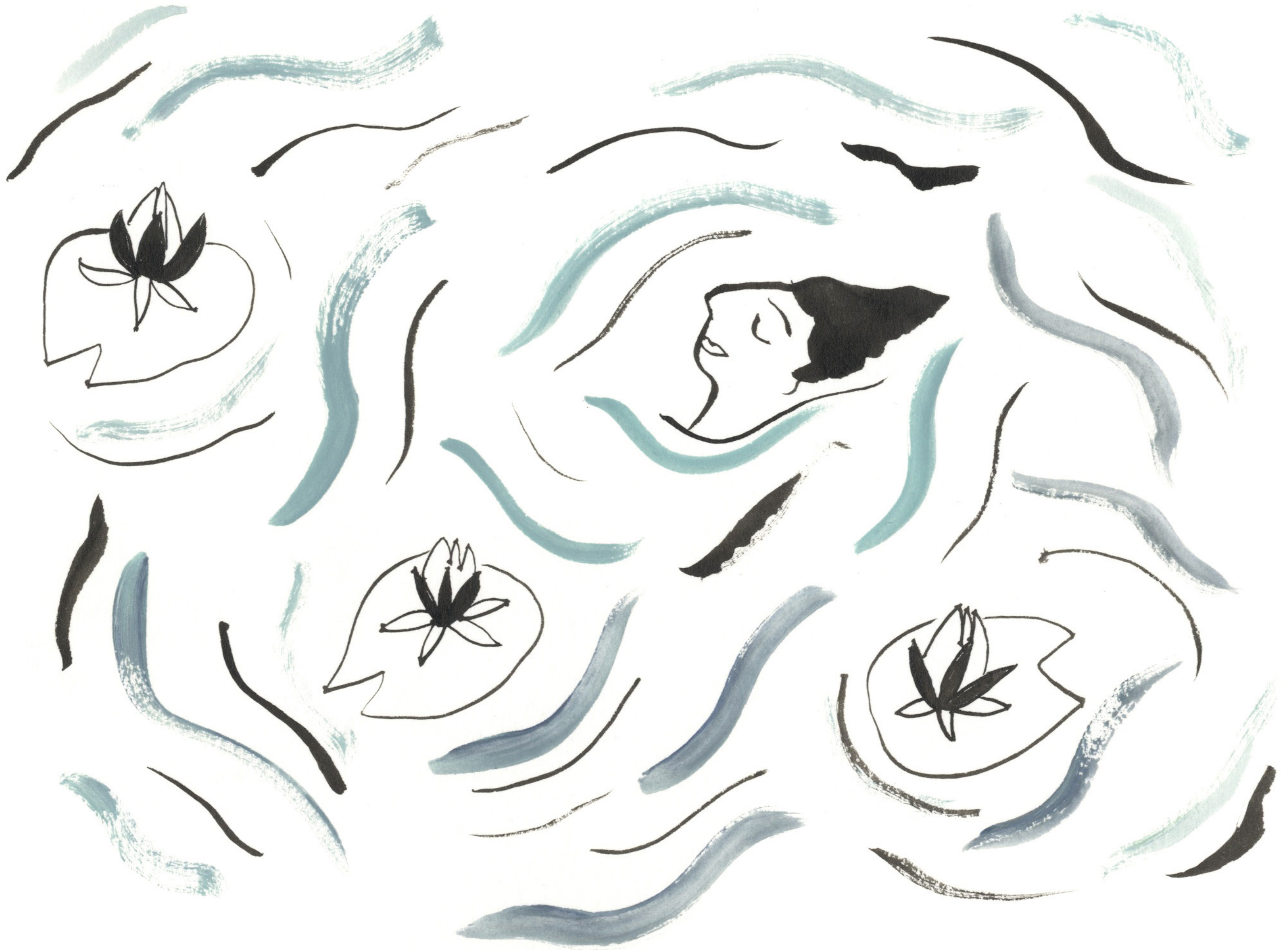
'Your voice is too soft...' the woman beside me says.

He showcases some of his music for us, and I realize he thinks of this presentation as less of an opportunity to share his art and television experience, perhaps even to self-aggrandize a little, but more a last-ditch plea for support. More than once he asks us for money.

The first track sounds wretched through Link's speakers and each crackle elicits a slight wince from Inman, but you can still hear it: a slow, auto-tuned rock ballad à la Freezepop, with the interjecting ambience and dense emotional registers of Radiohead. The woman beside me burps, twice, and a few moments later I can feel wetness from her unshielded cough. She zips up her winter jacket and shivers.

'Is it all New Age music?! All of it?' she says.

Inman corrects her, then plays us some riskier material: two tracks, one on piano, the other on a heavily delayed violin, both very atonal, sort of like Schoenberg, maybe Webern. Atonal music tends to be an acquired taste, which does not escape her beside me.



She begins laughing at him. 'Hard to listen to...'

Other Mensans have begun glancing at her, nervously.

'I've done stuff that's even harder to listen to,' Inman retorts. Now the audience erupts, Link's brassy laugh cutting through.

'Why would you want to make music that's hard to listen to?! My God!' the woman says. 'The object of music is to make people *want* to listen to it.'

'I guess I would consider this 'artistic' music...it's more about exploring the sonorities.'

'Well, I guess.' She then assures us that she's been to all of the 'Yale concerts', so she knows good music.

'I'm sorry,' Inman, lowering the volume, 'I don't want to make you gag.'

People laugh again, with about half the mirth.

This gets to be like watching a drawn-out stoning, and it occurs to me that Inman has handled this situation far better than I ever would. I'm not as socially durable. I don't even have the gumption to ask her to cover her mouth when she coughs.

Inman pitches again for financial support. She asks if he has a business card. He retreats to his dolly, rummages, then returns with a stack of them. The card is thick, black-on-black, so much that you expect it to be heavier than it is – pretty swanky, but the letters of his email, number and address have to catch the light to be readable.

'A terrible design. Do you have something we can read?' laughing, again.

He ignores her, incredibly. But after he notices that his time has almost expired he becomes distraught. 'I didn't do *anything,*' he says and just lets that last word smoulder.

'...I was working with the speakers all that time...' He looks up at us. 'I'm so sorry...I didn't even get through half of it.'

He reluctantly concludes with a song featured on his upcoming album. He hits play and retreats to his seat, leans forward with his hands married at the fingers and crossed at his knees. The song is cheery, warm, major-keyed and complexly layered – like a gentle variation on The Flaming Lips or Karen O and the Kids. At this juncture, whether we in the audience enjoy it or not seems irrelevant.

Inman's eyes soften and ears perk at the sounds over which he's taken such delicate care. With every wrinkle on his face released, his posture slack, therapeutically calm, he stares at that non-specific angle that intimates a mind at work with something it loves.

When we all leave, someone is whistling Inman's melody, and I wish that was where it ended.

Two people find me tidying my notes in the lounge with the leather chairs and the pyramidical skylight. One, an older Mensan I've seen carting around electronics and Tupperware all day, sits beside me and without a word falls asleep. The other is J. Mark Inman, who bustles in, rests his hands on his beltline, then sits behind me, like a psychologist would. 'That went terribly,' he says. 'I was so flustered.' I crane my head around the arm of the chair and tell him I enjoyed the last song he played for everyone, said it reminded me of The Flaming Lips. He smiles, thanks me. We talk a bit and discover some surprising things we have in common. For one, we were both born on 13 September. We both think the Radiohead song 'Idioteque' is gorgeous and don't understand why more people don't like Tool. We both would like to make a living doing the thing we love.

Coming down the hall, cradling her laptop, *she* arrives, sliding along the floor in her loafers. Without compunction she sits with Inman on the love-seat and asks him if he needs money, because she needs a new investment. She more or less dangles the prospect before his nose. He says of course he could use the money. He's broke. She then interprets this as an opportunity to edify him, says he needs to focus, to work on his voice (too soft!), to 'grow up', market himself properly. She hands him a book – *Fame 101* – which parses and methodically explains the social construct; she wants him to know she knows the author. He asks if he can keep this copy and she says no, he has to read it tonight and return it. They start an abstract debate on modern music, self-branding and social media. The man next me to me shutters occasionally in his sleep. It's sort of amazing how long these two can argue without repeating themselves; I start hearing counter-counter-counterpoints. A bell hop arrives to inform her that all of her luggage has been moved to a new room with functional temperature control. She does not thank him. The bell hop mentions the room number and Inman says, with shock, 'That was my room...last night.' The last night his money bought him.

Their argument continues, but Inman soon loses his nerve, again. 'I have a lot of work to do,' he says, cutting her off. 'A *lot* of work to do.'

Ultimately, though, as Inman leaves to get me a copy of his recent album, she gets the last word.

I leave her tweaking her investment portfolio on her laptop, muttering.

Dumbstruck, tired, I figure I'll let these Mensans enjoy the waning evening unobserved. Tonight they have some sort of thematic ball planned. Drinking is ramping up, a burly DJ has arrived, costumes have emerged, the Barefoot Man is afoot, the LocSec does his rounds, out of his suit. Another of Link's predictions confirmed: Mensans do indeed seem comfortable here, wholly *themselves*. Walking down the hall, I rub my eyes – opening them to see Link dancing just before me, waving her hands. I start, lean my back against the wall, and we both laugh. Her eyes are glassy, and I ask if she's having a good time. She asks if I'm leaving, and when I reply yes, we shake hands. She then announces a social imperative, as dictated by the Hug Dot scheme, and gives the only hug this green dot has ever got me.

Outside, the sky looks like a concussion: bruised grey-blue folds of cumulous, a wash of tinny red from the evening; no stars yet. At the fringe of the Hilton's landscaped campus spans a commuter lot, empty, across which I amble and scuff, alone, waiting for the next train to return me to Boston. I would never take the LocSec's test or any "intelligence" assessment; even if I somehow knew I'd ace it. I contemplated the idea as some premeditated writerly gimmick for all of ten minutes. I enjoyed meeting these Mensans, but I'm content leaving my precise measurement forever shrouded. Though in college, I might have considered it. But as I remember, back in the heyday of my arrogance, it wasn't so much the nerves or the nausea or the sleeplessness that hurt as much as the self-contempt. It's an emotional paradox most young adults encounter: the surest path to feeling inferior is to imagine yourself as superior. Because the best English synonym I knew for "smart" was simply "better," and specifically seeming "better" in the eyes of others. It's interesting to ask how much of our intelligence is busy trying to convince other people of the immensity and confidence of that intelligence – it's interesting to ask myself now. What kind of mind is only viable once validated? And how can something so empty have so much weight? And do these Mensans, if any, feel this weight? For me, and maybe just for me, designating myself "smart" was radically dishonest. I am not and have never been confident with my understanding of anything. I've been called smart but have never *felt* smart – not once. People occasionally admit to sharing my bewilderment, and I find that relieving every time. It's the truest condition our minds share: ignorance, confusion, and fraternity. Though those are hardly the bywords of any elite society.