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# **27 Club: Magic Realism and New Weird in Short Fiction**

**Olivia Randall**

**A thesis submitted to the University of  
Huddersfield in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of MA by Research.**

**University of Huddersfield**

**September 2016**

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Part I: 19,859

Part II: 5,500

# 27 Club.

Olivia Randall.

## SPACE DIVING

You close your eyes and you fall.

You fall and you fall and you fall upwards and you're soaring and you open your eyes and you're surrounded by pink and purple and stars and infinity. Everything is glimmering. Everything is beautiful. Nothing is wrong.

It's years before you notice you're dead.

Van Gogh ate yellow paint because he thought it would bring him happiness. Yellow is the sun and daffodils and buttercups. It's lemons and canaries and autumn leaves. Yellow is warmth and joy, it's enthusiasm, it's optimism and it's happiness. True happiness. Van Gogh thought that eating yellow, toxic paint would blind the sadness inside him and make him feel happy again. Can you imagine being so empty of joy that you try to fill the void by poisoning yourself? Can you imagine being so desperate to feel happiness again?

There are other, more dangerous ways to try to feel emotions again. You know that. You took a lot of drugs just to get a reaction, but you stopped when you woke up in hospital for the fourth time. You fell in love once or twice, hoping that would fill the void - but it didn't, not really. It just ended with a few heartbreaks and the overwhelming sense that you were lost. You wonder if you're selfish. Do you think that no one else is lonesome? Do you think that no one else lives in the abyss? You know that other people have their demons but you also know that no one will ever, *ever* truly understand.

Maybe you *are* selfish.

You take your tablets four times a day. You cry sometimes. You smoke more and more and more. You consider tripping acid. You consider trying to meet someone new. You

think, *everyone has their own version of yellow paint*. You pause. You consider eating yellow paint. Instead, you don't eat anything at all. You lie in bed and feel nothing. You watch The X-Files. You ignore the ghosts. You lie in bed and you feel nothing.

At night, your demons crawl out of the shadows. They hiss and grieve and slither into bed with you, wrapping around your body. You lie there, frozen and terrified, until the morning comes and they whisper goodbye.

You live with ghouls and wraiths who pester you to follow them. You pretend you can't hear and you take your tablets four times a day and you cry sometimes. And you consider eating yellow paint. Every day. Every day. Every day.

You are always on edge and you bite your fingernails down to nothing.

The demons and ghosts are all you have.

*Follow me.*

You think, *not today*, and you watch The X-Files and you lie in bed and you feel nothing.

*Follow me.*

You think, *not today*, and you consider tripping acid and you lie in bed and you feel nothing.

*Follow me.*

You think, *not today*, and you smoke more and more and more and you lie in bed and you feel nothing.

*Follow me.*

You think, *I am having an existential crisis*. You nod and you walk through the veil. The wraith holds your hand and it feels like sadness and smoke and lost time and you're sick to your stomach.

You are on top of a cliff staring down at a deep, black drop. Everything is glimmering. Everything is beautiful. Everything is wrong.

*Follow me*, says the wraith, and then it falls and then it's gone.

You consider. You consider going back. Back to what? Back to smoking and crying and The X-Files? Nobody is as lonesome as you. Not even the demons are grieving like you. You grieve for your happiness. There are more dangerous ways to try feel emotions again. Everyone has their own version of yellow paint.

CHRIS

I met Chris straight off the train from Newcastle. I'd met him online a few weeks ago - he'd added me on Facebook, somehow, despite us having no mutual friends. I wasn't sure how he'd found my profile, but he seemed normal enough and he was easy to talk to, funny and alright looking.

As soon as I set eyes on Chris, I realised I'd been severely misled. He was riddled with acne, had a large, obviously broken nose, and was a good few inches shorter than me in spite of his claims that he was six foot three. He smelled of stale sweat and he was wearing a matching Reebok tracksuit and - God forbid - a *bumbag*. He was clearly very skilled at Photoshop.

I could, of course, get over all these things. I wasn't too concerned about his appearance - I mean, at this point in time.

Anyway, yeah, I *could* have gotten over the total lie that was his face, if it wasn't for his fucking shitey wankstain personality. He was weirdly aggressive to pigeons. He said, loudly, several times, "it's the bloody foreigners' fault, pet!" At one point, he sneezed without covering his nose, and I watched, horrified, as time slowed down and a huge string of green snot flew from his face and landed on the ground in front of us.

We wandered around town as he talked at me and I tried to think of a way I could escape. One lifetime later (actually, I was only nine minutes in, I'd checked my phone at least twelve times) he announced to the entire street that he was 'really fuckin' thirsty like' and yanked me into 4Cousins.

4Cousins is a dive. No respectable person from Huddersfield has ever set foot in there, and those who walked in by mistake have immediately turned tail and then spent four

hours washing their hands. There's a thick layer of dirt covering both the tables and the floor, and there's a distinct scent of piss lingering in the air.

Mortified, I let Chris drag me in between and around tables until we reached our destination: the table closest to the Gents. Excellent. The Piss Scent™ was so strong here, I was actually gagging as I sat down. Or, rather, was pushed down. In some attempt to be gallant, he had chivalrously pulled out a chair and then forced me into my seat by putting his hand on top of my head. It felt like I was being bundled into the back of a police car. If only.

He chattered incessantly for forty minutes. Forty whole minutes of my entire life. At one point, a "waiter" shuffled over to us, grumbling and burping. He pulled out a yellowing notepad and tried to take our order. Chris ordered himself a full English breakfast and a pint of lager, then got angry when he found out they didn't serve alcohol, and then finally settled on a cup of tea. Big Fat Waiter turned to me, but before I could even open my mouth, Chris had waved him away and was rambling incoherently again.

As I gazed longingly after Big Fat Waiter, I realised this was The New Low. This was It. I had hit Rock Bottom. I couldn't hit a further low unless I invested in a spade and began digging my own grave.

Finally, Chris asked me a question. I didn't know what he'd said, exactly, but I could tell he was expecting an answer because he'd finally shut up. With his mouth closed, he looked a bit like a gargoyle.

"I'm sorry, I don't-"

"Anyway, pet, ah got yer a present, like," Chris interrupted, speaking his first understandable, non-racist sentence since I'd met him almost an hour ago.

“I - er - what?” I said, baffled. My throat was dry from not speaking. “You’ve got me a pres-?”

“Yeh, pet, ah just said. Ah got yer a present, like. It’s summert ah know yer really gonna like, too, like.”

That was when he reached into his bumbag and pulled out a tub of Philadelphia cream cheese. I’m not just talking a small tub, I’m talking a big, fuck-off hell-sized tub that was meant to last an entire family of five for a fortnight.

I stared at it.

“Cos ah know yeh like cream cheese, pet!” He beamed.

Well, he wasn’t wrong. I *did* like cream cheese. However, we had never once discussed this. In fact, we’d never had a conversation about any type of cheese, let alone the cream kind.

“Erm, well, I do like it,” I said, eyeing the tub warily. “I think you’ve got the wrong girl, though. I think this must be an inside joke you have with someone else.”

“Oh, no, no, pet!” He said, still beaming. “Yer the only girl a speak to, like! A bought it fer yeh!”

Then, without taking his eyes off of me, he slowly slid the tub across the table.

“Eat it.”

I thought I’d misheard. I stared from him, to the tub, back to him, then at the tub again.

“Eat. It.”

“What?”

“Ah want yeh to eat it.”

“Right now?”

“Yes.”

I was at a complete loss. Thinking he was joking, but also kind of unsure, I informed him I didn't have anything to eat it with. I laughed, shrugged, tried to look cute and swiftly pushed the Philadelphia back over to his side of the table.

“Don't worry about that, ah thought of ev'rything, pet.”

Horrified, I watched as he reached into his bumbag again, and pulled out a spoon.

He looked like the smuggest fucker in the world.

I didn't know what to do. Social etiquette permitted that I should definitely not eat a family-sized tub of Philadelphia in the middle of a restaurant - no matter how much of a shithole said restaurant was.

However.

My mum had raised me to be a polite girl. Chris had spent money on this... gift. He'd even thought ahead so far as to bring me my very own, coffee-stained spoon. At least, I think it was coffee. I hoped it was just coffee. The point was, I didn't want him to think I was rude. I needed to eat the Philadelphia. I didn't *want* to. But I was *going* to. I was a *polite girl*.

Hand quivering, I pulled off the lid. I peeled back the foil. Spoon poised in my hand, I stopped. There was a fucking lot of fucking cream cheese in front of me. I was unsure of how to continue past this point. I mean, I'd done the majority of the work, all that was left to do was to actually begin eating. Was I supposed to have a tiny bite? Was I supposed to take a huge mouthful? My mother's Politeness Lessons had not prepared me for this moment.

I settled for an in-between, medium-sized spoonful. It was kind of claggy. I wasn't used to eating that much cream cheese in one go, to be fair, as it was usually spread over crackers or something - but, overall, it was tasty.

"Mmm, yummy. Thanks so much!" I said, putting the lid back on, when -

"No, pet, all of it."

"What? The entire thing??"

"Yeh, that's what ah bought it for, like."

"Are you joking?"

"No?"

"*All* of it?"

"Yes?"

"Why?"

Chris looked at me like I was the thickest person he'd ever had the misfortune of meeting. "Because yer *suppose't* eat cream cheese, pet."

Well, that answered that, then. I could see he was starting to get somewhat annoyed. Big Fat Waiter came back and slammed Chris' food on the table and walked away without another word. I knew he'd seen the Philadelphia. He didn't even blink. I began to doubt myself. Was *I* being the weird one? Was this a thing that people did on first dates?

I sighed.

There was a fucking lot of cream cheese.

I realised the only way to get through this was just to finish the tub. I picked the spoon back up. There was no way around it. I dug the spoon back in, ferocious, and shoveled it down.

I'm not proud of what I did that day. I attacked that tub of Philadelphia. I was savage.

Within ten minutes, the tub was practically licked clean. I was crying a little bit. There was cheese all over my face. It was all I could smell. The taste filled my mouth to the point where I wasn't sure if my tongue would ever work properly again. I wasn't sure if I even had a tongue anymore. Everything was cheese. My entire life was a family-sized tub of Philadelphia. Nothing made sense anymore. Everything was just cheese.

Chris hadn't said one word the entire time, he'd just sat resting his chin on interlocked fingers, watching me. Occasionally he licked his lips, but other than that, he had been a creepy, perverted statue of a man.

"I've... finished..." I said. Life was bleak.

"Good lass!" Chris said. He had the biggest, shit-eating grin on his face. "Anyway, what were we talking about before... Oh, right -" and then, like nothing in the last fifteen minutes had happened, he began spewing out incoherent shit again.

After taking a few moments to compose myself, I grandly whipped my phone out of my pocket and said, in an unnaturally loud, formal voice, "WOW, LOOK AT THE TIME. I DIDN'T REALISE I WAS GOING TO BE SO LONG. I MUST GO. I HAVE TO GO SEE MY MOTHER. I MUST GO. GOODBYE."

"Oh - oh right," Chris said, seeming startled. The audacity. How dare he be startled. "Giz a hug before yeh go, then, pet."

I leaned in to give him a hug, which quickly turned into a screech of pure terror and flailing arms as he had tried to surprise me with a kiss. On my MOUTH. The sheer AUDACITY. I pushed him off me and fled what can only be described as The Scene of the Crime.

He deleted me off of Facebook after that.

Rude.

SUFFER LITTLE CHILDREN (MATTHEW 19:14)

“Where do you see yourself in five years?”

“Er, either dead or deeply unhappy. A boring job. No family. A lot of cats.”

“That’s quite a depressing outlook. Why don’t you think you’ll be happy?”

“I don’t deserve to be happy.”

“Everyone deserves to be happy.”

“Fuck off, Maggie, with your hippy-dippy bullshit. You don’t-”

“We’ve been through this a thousand times. If I didn’t know anything, you wouldn’t still come talk to me five times a week.”

“Whatever.”

“Come on. Stop pissing about and answer the question. Why don’t you think you’ll be happy? Come on - and don’t roll your eyes at me.”

“Fine. I dunno. I’m not a naturally happy person. *That’s why I come see you five times a week.*”

“I’m starting to get pretty sick of this attitude.”

“Well, Maggie, isn’t that just incredibly unprofessional of you.”

“I can’t help you if you won’t-”

“If you won’t let me’ blah blah blah, yes, Maggie, you’ve told me this a thousand times.”

“Then let me help you!”

“...I’m trying.”

~~~

*Sometimes, I think, life is just shit.*

I live in a disgusting little flat in the middle of a council estate, surrounded by crackheads and half-dead pensioners. Everything is mouldy. I'm pretty sure that living here is actually a health hazard. Our bathroom is communal. *Communal*. We share it with *twelve people*. Like we're *cavemen*. There's a literal hole in the wall underneath my bedroom window that I've had to duct tape over. Fingers crossed it doesn't snow this winter.

Half the windows are boarded up, there are no locks on the door, we don't have central heating, and the cat keeps bringing us dead animals and hiding them in the walls.

*And* we don't have off-street parking.

My flatmate, Cecil, is a total prick, too, which doesn't help matters. Complete waste-of-space arsehole. All he does is sit around all day drinking whiskey, complaining about how God threw him out of heaven, how Lucifer won't answer his phone calls, how Abbadon used to be *so much fun* before he went and got married...

Shut up, Cecil.

Home is a sad, weird, haunted hovel and I hate it. I hate being home, but I've nowhere else to go. No friends, no job, no prospects - just the cat. And Cecil.

Fucking Cecil.

"Oh, hey, you home already?" His head pops around from the fridge door. He's holding a block of cheese and a half-empty bottle of Bourbon. His skin's grey, sagging round his bloodshot eyes and he's wearing nothing but boxers.

"No, I'm a figment of your imagination," I tell him, rolling my eyes and grabbing the whiskey.

"Ha ha, hilarious," he says, snatching it back. "I didn't even know you'd left. Didn't hear the door go."

“That’s probably ‘cos you were too pissed. You look like a fucking mess.”

“Yeah, well, Azazel called again-”

“Sure he did, man,” I say, unable to stop myself from sighing. “Look, Cecil, when are you gonna give this whole ‘fallen angel’ thing up? You know, you can always talk to me-”

“I’m not crazy,” Cecil says, slamming the fridge door shut, now holding a little packet of cocktail sausages. “It’s real. They’re real. I need you to believe me. And if you can’t do that, then the least you could do is shut the fuck up.”

Silence.

I grit my teeth. I nod.

“Now,” he says, his face relaxing. “Do you wanna watch *Pointless*?”

~~~

“Oh, you’re back.”

“Are you surprised?”

“Well, after the temper tantrum you threw last time-”

“Yeah, Maggie, uh, I’m sorry about that. It’s just hard.”

“I know.”

“So I thought we could try something a bit different this time.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, instead of trying to ease you into opening up, we’re just gonna go straight off the bat, and you’re gonna be compliant about it.”

“Ha. Right. I’ll give it a go.”

“I want you to tell me something no one knows.”

“Wow, Maggie, are you serious? *That’s* your big idea? Get me to tell you something nobody knows?”

“Aaaaaand you’re already on the defensive-”

“No, no, sorry. Just, er, give me a bit more to go on, will you?”

“Something secret. It could be embarrassing, or it could be something that happened years ago and still hurts you, or- I dunno. Just tell me something about you that no one else knows.”

“You know I think this is dumb.”

“Yep. Do it anyway.”

“Alright, when I was sixteen, I lost my virginity to *Suffer Little Children* by the Smiths and now I can’t listen to it without getting weirdly aroused.”

“What? That’s not what I meant-”

“What’s worse, right, is that the second time we had sex it was to *Meat is Murder*, and now whenever I see a cow I’m like, ‘oh, hey, you sexy little tasty burger, you.’”

“Why have you brought this up?”

“Of all the ways he fucked me over, that’s the thing that stands out the most.”

“Shall we talk about him?”

“Yeah. No. I dunno. It’s hard. It still hurts.”

“It’s going to hurt forever. It is. But talking about it, sharing your feelings - it eases the pain a little bit. You don’t have to carry this burden all by yourself.”

“It’s been three years, Maggie, why aren’t I over it? Why do I still care? Why can’t I stop writing those stupid stories and poems about him? I mean, fucking hell, enough is enough, right? I should be over it, right?”

“No. No, love, of course not. What happened was shit. You’re not going to get over it, you’re going to get stronger. We’re going to make you happy again.”

~~~

I first met Cecil two and a half years ago via an ad on Craigslist. I’d moved into this shitty flat about six months earlier, alone with barely any money to pay the rent. I knew I needed a flatmate, but I couldn’t get in touch with anyone from my old life, and I didn’t actually know anyone in the area, so I did what any Millennial would do: I checked The Internet.

I posted an ad about how my humble abode wasn’t much but it would do, I just needed someone to split the bills with, no smokers, no drinkers, no pets etc. etc. I got an email within two minutes - “*Hey. I’m Cecil. I’ll split bills with you. When can I move in?*”

The next day, he was in my home, smoking, drinking, and stroking a cat.

Fucking Cecil.

~~~

The flat is a mess. More so than usual.

I’m fuming.

“CECIL!” I scream, slamming the door. “*CECIL! WHERE ARE YOU?*”

Silence.

I throw open the door to the kitchen and it literally looks like a bomb has dropped. Not in the sense that my mum used to say when I was a kid and I’d not tidied my room, I mean in the *literal* sense. It *literally* looks like a small bomb has hit the kitchen. Half of the counter doors are missing, the rest are all in pieces or half hanging on by a hinge. The ceiling is black, the window is completely smashed and there’s a gigantic fucking hole the size of Africa in the wall.

Duct tape won't fix that one.

In the middle of the room, somehow balancing on a stool missing a leg, Cecil is sat, staring blankly at the non-existent window. I'm too angry. I shove him, hard, sending him reeling.

"Oh, hey-"

"*Don't you 'oh hey' me!*" I screech, punching his shoulder. He winces slightly. Good. "*What has happened to the damn flat?*"

"Uh, well, Raziel popped round and-"

"What? *WHAT? WHO?*"

"Erm, Raziel, Raziel, you know, the - stop shaking me - uh, the Keeper of Secrets, Raziel, Archangel-" he babbles and babbles and babbles.

I am a cocktail of despair and anger and fear and worry and rage and every single bad emotion that could possibly exist. "Cecil," I say, finally letting him go. "Cecil, man." I don't know how to continue.

"No, no please, please believe me-"

"Stop. Come on, man. Just stop."

"Honestly! Believe me! He- he told me God wants to see me, that all I need to do is say sorry and I can go back-" he's begging me now, crying. He clutches at my t-shirt, eyes searching my face. "I can go back, he'll take me back!"

He looks like a lunatic.

I slump to the floor, dragging him down with me. I pull his head into my neck and hold him there as tight as I can.

"Fucking Cecil," I whisper.

"I know," he whispers back.

“I think you’ve finally fully lost it,” I say.

He moans. “Please-”

“Shush. Come on. Give me a cuddle.”

We sit there until the sky outside turns black.

~~~

When Cecil first moved in, he was normal for a bit. For about a month. We’d go out to the pub most evenings and have a few drinks before coming back home and watching shit shows on BBC3 or Comedy Central. It was a routine. It was nice. He was a bit weird, but he kept clean, helped tidy and never missed a payment. I wasn’t even that arsed about the cat, really. She was quite sweet.

Cecil started staying out later than usual. Drinking more than usual. One night he came home, babbled some shit about God, passed out and didn’t wake up for two days.

That’s about the time he started with the Angel thing. Told me God was mad with him. He threw himself from Heaven. Didn’t want to live with God anymore. The Archangels were trying to get him to go back. Demons were asking him to join them. Lucifer had been in contact.

Basically, a fucking lot of fucking weird fucking shit, even by my standards.

He’s getting worse. He used to be so beautiful. Now he’s just sallow and waxen and ready to die.

I do love him.

Cecil was there for me. He talked me out of a lot of stupid things. He knows everything. He never judged me. He just listened.

I will do the same for him.

~~~

“What time do you call this?”

“Yeah, I know-”

“Late, is what I’d call it.”

“Sorry, Maggie, but-”

“Too late, some might say.”

“No, don’t go-”

“Where would I go? I have nowhere else to be.”

“I know.”

“How're you feeling?”

“Bad, Maggie. Really bad.”

“Wanna talk about it? Or shall we look at ink blots for forty-five minutes first?”

“No, uh, actually, I... I wanna... For once, Maggie, it’s not myself I’m feeling sorry for.

It's my flatmate.”

“Go on.”

“He... He's cracked, Maggie. He's fully lost it. Jumped off the deep end.”

“I'm not sure that last one is a saying.”

“Whatever. He's still mental.”

“Are you in any position to be calling someone mental?”

“*Listen* - he's been bad for a while now. Like, bad since I've known him, but he's been getting worse over the last few weeks. Last night, he like, exploded the kitchen or something, and tried to blame it on an Archangel.”

“Do you believe him?”

“What - maybe - no, of course not - anyway - like, at first it was quirky, then it was annoying, and now it's just... I'm scared for him. He looks like death warmed up, like the

love child of a heroin addict and a crack addict. Like someone filled a balloon with poison then deflated it. He's a deflated poison balloon."

"I get it."

"And he stinks! Not just like a brewery, you know, but like pure alcohol - what is it - ethanol-"

"I get it."

"I don't know what to do! I'm *frightened!* What if he does something really stupid, Maggie? What if he tries to kill himself? What if he *dies?*"

"I don't know."

"What do I *do?*"

"You could call the doctors?"

"I don't want him sectioned!"

"They might not-"

"They will."

"Well... Would that be the worst thing? He'd have carers. People to look after him."

"But what about me?"

"What about you?"

"Who would I have?"

"You'd still have me."

"You don't count. I'll always have you."

~~~

"Hey, so, guess what? Good news! Raphael came this time, and- what are you doing?"

Cecil.

Fucking Cecil.

“Nothing,” I say, fumbling, shoving things back where they belong.

“Are you-” He looks confused and sickly and half-dead.

“No,” I say. “I’m not doing anything. What are you doing? Get out of my bedroom.”

“I heard-” This is more stress he doesn’t need.

“It was probably my music.” A cold sweat breaks out.

He stares at me.

*Click.*

Slowly, he asks, “Are you talking to the mirror again, Maggie?”

“No.”

“Is this what you’re doing in here all the time?”

“No.”

“Maggie,” he says. He sighs.

Pity.

“I’m fine,” I tell him. “I’m fine.”

“Are you still taking your medication?”

“Yeah,” I whisper. It comes out hoarse and cracked.

I’m mortified.

“Do you need anything, Mags? Can I help you?”

Says the Fool to the Jester.

“I said I’m fine. Get out of my bedroom.”

~~~

I am rudely awoken from my already pretty shitty sleep by what sounds like a *fucking explosion*. I’m going to kill him. I am literally going to kill Cecil in cold blood and then spend the rest of my life on the run from the police as a wanted murderer. It could be

fun. I could travel to America and live like Thelma and Louise, except there'd be no lesbian undertones because I would be alone.

I stomp into the kitchen, ready to scream the flat down, ready to ask Cecil what the hell he's doing - what are neighbours are going to think - and I rag the door open and there he is, tall and golden and beautiful with his hair flying around his face, healthy and smiling. A star-filled vortex of light swirls through the hole in the wall.

"Cecil?" My voice sounds unnaturally loud. He catches sight of me and smiles wider. He looks so different.

"I'm going back," he tells me.

"I know," I say, because I do know.

He holds his hand out. "Are you coming with me?"

"I don't know," I say, because I don't know. Pause. "I'm scared."

"I'm scared too," he says, his smile falling slightly. Then he grins again, suddenly cheeky - a side to Cecil I've never seen. "Do you know how hard it's going to be having to apologise to God for throwing myself out of heaven?"

I laugh in spite of myself. In spite of the situation. "I'm sure he'll forgive you."

"Oh, he will. He's all-loving, all-forgiving. Just a bit of a blow to my pride, is all," he winks.

I'm still hesitant. I'm still scared.

"What about the cat?" I ask.

## THE PLAGUE

It all started with a dead rat in the wall. The houses were old, joined together, built by the council. A shitty job that they'd just wanted to get over and done with. You told the neighbours that there was a rat. An exterminator was called, poison was laid and traps were set. A damn rat died in the walls of your house. Of course it fucking did.

The kitchen stunk for weeks. At first you thought the eggs had gone off. Or maybe the milk. Something had gone off. Something was rotting. You didn't realise it was the damn rat. By the time you did, it was too late. You couldn't afford to knock down all the walls in the kitchen trying to find it. Besides, you'd just re-decorated. You didn't have money to just throw away. It'd be fine. The rat couldn't rot forever. In time it would just be a skeleton in the walls, just a slight inconvenience. A little dead secret that only you would know about. You could live with the smell for a few months. At least the rat was dead.

You weren't expecting the flies.

At first it was just a few a day. Nothing noticeable. It was the end of May, fly season was just beginning. You left the back door open for most of the day to get fresh air into the house, it wasn't uncommon for flies to come buzzing in and then be too stupid to find their way back out. A couple of flies in the living room was nothing. You opened the windows and shooed them out. The more stubborn ones were sucked up into the vacuum cleaner. It was normal.

Then you came home from work one day and ten of them were in the kitchen. Ten. The door was locked. The window was shut. You didn't know how they'd got in. They were huge, all of them, big, fat bluebottles. It was disgusting, and it creeped you out a bit, but you didn't question it too much. You just got out the vacuum cleaner and sucked them all up, one by one, all ten flies dead within two minutes.

You got on with your night. You had a bath, dried your hair and went downstairs to make tea. Two more flies were in the kitchen. You paid no mind. You shooed them out of the door. You got on with your night.

The next day, you woke up too late for breakfast and had to rush out of the door to get to work. You look back at this day and wonder what would have happened if you'd woken up on time. If you'd gone into the kitchen for breakfast, what would you have seen? Half as many? A quarter?

What awaited you when you got home from work was a living nightmare. It was like God had sent a plague to kill a thousand people, but something had gone terribly wrong and instead of attacking the entire town, it was stuck exclusively in your kitchen.

There were hundreds of them. Hundreds and hundreds of massive fucking flies. Everywhere. On the window, on the fridge, on the oven, on the work surfaces, all over the dishes, on the brand new, beautiful oak table you'd bought just a few months ago. Everywhere. They were crawling all over each other, rubbing their evil, shitty little hands together, the room alive with a loud buzz.

You screamed.

Panicked, you backed into the living room, slamming the kitchen door. What were you going to do? There were too many. It was disgusting. It was sickening. One of the more nightmarish things you'd ever seen in real life. It was like a scene from a horror film. There was no one to help you.

You climbed over the fence to your back garden and took small, nervous steps to the door. You'd never felt such sick, anxiousness before. You grabbed the handle, turned it slowly, then, with all your might, threw the door open and turned and ran. Fifty flies flew out after you, disappearing in all different directions. You stayed at the bottom of

the garden for at least an hour, eyes glued to the open space, watching as several more flies slowly found their way out.

It wasn't happening fast enough.

You had to go back into your home and get the vacuum.

It took you three hours. Three terrifying hours. Each fly seemed to be bigger, fatter, uglier than the last. You counted as you went along in an attempt to keep yourself calm, but as the number climbed higher, your heart pounded faster and your breathing became shallower. It seemed like it was never going to end. By the time you'd done, you'd vacuumed over three hundred of the fuckers. About three hundred damn bluebottles.

This went on for a week. The longest, most hellish week of your life. Every morning you'd wake up to a hundred flies in the kitchen. You'd come home from work to a hundred flies in the kitchen. You'd go to the shop for a packet of cigarettes, come home and find more flies in the kitchen. If you left it for more than five minutes, *flies*. It became a quarantined zone. You only entered it whilst wearing goggles and a hair net and carrying the vacuum nozzle under one arm. You barely slept. You felt ill. You wondered how long you could live like this before you had a nervous breakdown.

It was the damn rat. It had died in the walls and a fly had gotten in and laid its eggs in the rat's rotting corpse. The fucking rat did this to you. Karma, you supposed, for poisoning it, instead of letting it live out its foul life in the walls of your home, and now you were paying the price by living with a thousand bluebottles for the rest of your life.

It didn't last forever, obviously. Just a week. Just that one, long week. It ended as quickly as it started. You came downstairs one morning and found only ten flies. Huge,

fat, ugly bluebottles. It was almost over, though. A few more days went by and you only saw one or two every so often. And then they were all gone.

You filled in every single hole, every single nook and cranny you could find. No more flies would come out of your walls. It was done. You'd survived the plague without breaking down. You felt stronger, albeit a bit more worn, like you could live through anything now. You still flinched whenever you saw a fly outside, but, ultimately, it was over.

Months passed. Your life went on.

In December, one of the neighbours knocked on your door.

"There's another one. A family of them, this time. There's a bloody plague of rats in the walls."

## CHANGELING

After I threw my baby down a well, I walked home and had a nice cup of tea. I sat down in the armchair by the window, turned on the television and thought about the lie I was going to have to tell my husband this time. I considered telling him she'd been kidnapped but it was too obvious of a lie - besides, I didn't know how to stage the scene. I contemplated phoning him and saying I'd simply lost her out walking, but that was almost as bad as just telling him the truth. It was going to take something big to get me out of this one.

I didn't start out hating her. To begin with, I didn't want to kill her; I just wasn't a huge fan. Everyone thought she was so cute and beautiful and special, but I didn't see it. She bored me. Personally, I was disappointed. I could have done better. I thought as much the first time I laid eyes on her. I named her Siofra and left saucers of milk by her cot in some sort of attempt at letting the Seelie Court know they could take her, if they wanted her, but all that got me was an angry knock at the door from the Daoine Sidhe telling me to be grateful for my child. They told me she was beautiful and I told them right back that if they thought she was so beautiful then they could have her.

So they cursed me.

I went from not-loving her to outright hating her. I couldn't bear the sight of her. In the wrong lights, her skin was green and her eyes were entirely red. All she ever did was scream. My husband couldn't hear it, though, and if he noticed her hair was made of slugs he didn't say anything. He still played with her, sang to her, still cuddled her and loved her. It disgusted me. She disgusted me. She *repulsed* me. Every minute with her was torture. If I tried to hold her, millipedes would crawl out her mouth and up my

arms. If I tried to kiss her head goodnight, my lips would sizzle and burn to black. When I tried to bathe her, the water turned to blood.

I started to miss my boring, plain, disappointing baby.

My husband thought I was losing my mind. He took me to therapy and cried when I wouldn't hold her. I was diagnosed with postnatal depression and given medication to take three times a day - not that I bothered, I knew it wouldn't help. It took weeks of lying through my teeth before my husband finally believed I was well again. I had to hold her, I had to pretend I loved her, had to pretend that looking into those evil red eyes didn't fill me with horror. I had to kill her.

I started off trying to leave shallow cuts on her in places where my husband wouldn't notice, but that only melted the knife. I threw her into the fireplace, intending to tell him that she'd crawled in when my back was turned, but she just sat there laughing - this broken, awful laugh - as the flames licked her face.

Eventually, I went to the Hills. I sang songs from my childhood, I knocked on trees, I tickled the flowers and waited. No one answered. I was being purposely ignored. They were still trying to punish me. I waited for hours and hours before I broke myself in two and I snapped. I threatened to destroy it all. I screamed that I'd pollute the rivers, torch the trees and salt the ground.

No answer.

I began to cry. They'd won. I fell to my knees and begged to the open empty air. *Please. I just want my baby back. I can't take this anymore.*

Slowly, faeries began to surround me. Dryads stepped out from behind trees, daisies morphed into pixies, hidden doors opened from the hills and out came the Daoine and Leanan Sidhe. The Silent Moving Folk were blown in by the wind and what were once

toadstools were now Buachailleen. They were everywhere - wading out of lakes and springing from the dirt. Even those of the Unseelie Court were here - the Sluagh Sidhe, faeries of death, were grinning at me from behind rotting mouths. Ban Sidhes lurked in the shadows, weeping. A Ly Erg waved a red, dripping hand at me.

An oak Dryad stood in front of me, his face wrinkled with distaste. "Rosanna O'Bradaigh," he said, his voice nothing more than soft, slow, rustling leaves. "You have sinned."

All at once, the faeries around me started screeching, Seelie and Unseelie taunting me, some laughing with gleeful spite, others flying at me and pulling my hair as I wailed that I was sorry, I was sorry.

"You are not sorry," the Dryad continued, blowing icy winds down my neck. "You are selfish. You could not see the beauty in your daughter, so we took it from you."

I glanced frantically from faery to faery, and said, "you took her? Is she here? Have you got her? Is she..." I paused as realisation flooded through me and turned my gaze to a Fear Dearg. "*Changeling!*" I shrieked, pointing at him. "*Give her back!*"

The Fear Dearg cackled and flicked its tail. "We didn't take her! She's no changeling child!"

"No, Rosanna O'Bradaigh. We did not replace your child," the Dryad said, and the faeries began to laugh again. "We stained your eyes. You could not appreciate her loveliness, so we hid it from you entirely. She will forever be a monster to you, and you alone, Rosanna O'Bradaigh. You cannot harm her. You cannot denounce her. All you can do is watch her become more and more foul every day, whilst others see nought but how fair and beautiful she is. You deserve this fate, Rosanna O'Bradaigh. You insulted your child and you insulted the Seelie Court."

I shoved through the crowd, ignoring the pixies pulling at my hair, and ran home, ready to tell my husband everything, only to find him playing with Siofra in the bath. I watched thick, yellow goo slide off her skin and float in clumps on the water. My husband was oblivious. I nearly broke again right then and there.

But I didn't. I composed myself. I waited. I waited all weekend and pretended to love the demon that was my daughter. I waited until my husband left for work. I waited until I was alone with her. I strapped her into the pram and I took her to an old farm a few miles away. I lifted the cast-iron lid off the well, threw her down, re-covered it and wiped the slime from my hands. Then I walked home, sat down and had a nice cup of tea.

It was the best cup of tea I've ever had. Two sugars and a dash of milk. I sat down in the comfy arm chair by the window, turned on the telly, and thought about the lie I was going to have to tell my husband this time. I almost didn't care. I was elated. I was rid of her. I might not be able to kill her. I might not be able to tell people the truth about what she was. But she couldn't get out of that well. There was no way she could ever get out of that well. She'd stay down there, half-drowned but alive, forever. She couldn't come back. I was rid of her.

I'd just started to really consider which lie to tell when there was a light rapping on the door.

"Hello," said the Nixie. "You accidentally dropped this down my well. You ought to be more careful with such a beautiful little girl."

"No!" I screamed. "No! No! No, no, no, no, no! Keep it! I don't want it anymore! I hate her! I hate her, I hate her! *I hate her!*"

The Nixie stared at me, pure terror spreading across her face. “No - stop it! Don’t! Don’t say that out loud! You can’t ever say that out loud!” She started trying to shove Siofra into my arms, trying to leave me there with that little *monster*-

“I don’t care!” I grabbed the Nixie by the arm and screeched at her, refusing to hold Siofra, pushing her away - “I hate her! She’s evil, or possessed, or *something* - and it’s your fault! It’s all your fault! You all should have taken her to begin with but instead you *cursed* me and *I HATE HER!*”

“No! Stop it! You’ll doom us all - *stop!*” She screamed back, clawing at my arms in a desperate attempt to free herself. “They’ll come for us all!”

Horns sounded.

The Nixie stopped dead, her eyes wide with fright. “No,” she whispered. “No, oh Gods, no... *they’re here.*”

She dropped Siofra to the ground and fled, faster than any non-fey could run, and left me standing in the doorway with the demon at my feet. The horns sounded again. The sky turned black within a matter of seconds. It was war and fear and anger. Thunder clapped. I could see my breath turning white. Thunder rolled again, lightning forked across the sky, the atmosphere tore open and hell came pouring out.

The ghosts of the Unseelie, goblins, redcaps and hags, the ghosts of humans, murderers, psychopaths and sinners all came rushing towards me, tearing through the air. They rode huge black horses with red eyes and were followed by hellhounds the size of bulls. Every single creature from hell was racing towards me, battle horns blaring, torches lit.

The Wild Hunt.

They were here for me.

Blind with panic, I slammed the door and tried to hide. I ran through the house to the kitchen, threw open a cupboard door and crawled inside.

You can't escape the Wild Hunt.

The house exploded around me. Faeries and ghouls and Satan's pets stormed through and around and over, destroying everything in their wake. I cringed inside the cupboard, the door now only hanging on by a single hinge, and prayed they wouldn't notice me. I prayed to God. I prayed and I repented and I recanted. I was too late.

The Wild Hunt came to a halt. The rotting legs of a dead horse stamped in front of me. Slowly, its Rider dismounted and took step by staggering step to the cupboard. It was the longest, and last, few moments of my life. Whimpering, I shrank back as far as I could. The Rider's knees cracked and snapped as it knelt down to look me in the eyes. It was half skeleton, half corpse; its jaw was hanging open and maggots writhed in its mouth. An eyeball dangled from its socket, the other fixated on me. It's hot, rancid breath washed over my face as it leaned as close to me as it could get.

*Rosanna O'Bradaigh... Your time is now. Repent.*

The Wild Hunt erupted into screams and howls. The Rider laughed, long and harsh and hard. It reached up, caressed my cheeks with its skeletal hand, and tore the flesh from my face. It dragged my screaming body from the cupboard, tied my legs to the ankles of its steed and raced back to the rip in the sky, dragging me behind.

I twisted and contorted, hoping for an escape - and that's when I saw Siofra. Peach skin, curly blonde hair, pretty blue eyes. My baby. My boring, plain, disappointing baby. My little girl sat in the remains of the house, laughing and clapping, eyes bright with joy as the Wild Hunt dragged me into hell.

She looked as beautiful as everyone said she was.

27 CLUB

"Anyway," Jasper says, "here's *Wonderwall*."

I groan as he begins playing those familiar chords, like he does at every party we go to. The girls surrounding him are giggling and swooning like this is the first time anyone's ever done this in the history of the world. I am slowly starting to hate Jasper. Well, I hate that fucking guitar, at least.

When it gets to the last, slow dragging part of the night, I tap Jasper's arm and we begin the long, drunk walk home. He's high on MD and I've had about twelve ciders too many.

"You excited for Mikey's tomorrow night?" He asks.

"Yeah, man, I guess. We're getting a bit too old for this shit though, aren't we?" I say, stifling a yawn.

"Nah, man! We've got three years left in us before we hit thirty and we're officially Too Old," he nudges my arm and laughs.

"Whatever. I feel too old for this."

The rest of the walk home is spent in silence as we both try not to pass out. All I can hear is the repetitive *thunk, thunk, thunk*, of Jasper's guitar hitting his leg. That fucking guitar.

I wake up at 7:30, disgustingly early for someone with a hangover, but Jasper's playing his guitar as loud as humanly possible. At least it's not Oasis, it's just... ah. Arctic Monkeys. Original, Jasper. Excellent. Great. Thank you. It's 7:30am, you selfish prick. Go the fuck to sleep. I raise a hand out of bed and slam it into the wall as hard as possible.

"Hey, man, you awake?" He calls through the wall. No, Jasper, I'm just sleep-punching architecture, don't worry about it. Yes, I'm awake, you insensitive bastard.

"Keep it down, man," I shout back.

"Sorry, bro, I'm just practicing for tonight. I wanna really blow them away. Do you reckon I should learn some Jake Bugg stuff?" No. No, I don't. I think you need to put the guitar down and shut the fuck up.

"It's hard to love you this early," I tell him. He laughs, but he keeps it quieter after that. Jasper and I have been best mates since we first met in uni almost ten years ago. I thought he was this really cool, totally unique, proper funny guy. He still is, he hasn't changed at all. At all. I don't know if he's having some sort of quarter-life crisis or what, but he needs to grow up. He still has the same straw hat, the same wild party life, and the same fucking guitar. He even still works the same part-time job at this absolute dive of a bar.

I can't fall back asleep because I can still hear Jasper's faint warbling of *Do I Wanna Know?* and it's making my eye twitch. I get myself ready for the day and finally leave my room to make myself a coffee. I'm stood in the kitchen rolling a cig and waiting for the kettle to boil when Jasper walks in, wearing nothing but boxers, sunglasses, his straw hat, and the guitar slung over his back. That fucking guitar.

"Can I get in on that coffee action?"

"Yeah," I say, grabbing another mug from the cupboard. "Why are you wearing sunglasses inside? You look like the world's biggest dickhead."

"I told you earlier, I'm preparing for tonight. I need to look good. I don't know what story I should tell before *Wonderwall*," he says, eyebrows knitted together like they do when he's thinking inappropriately hard about something completely ridiculous.

"Why don't you leave the guitar at home tonight?" I try. I hope. I pray. God, if you're listening, I'm begging you. Genuinely begging. I will even get down on my knees. Do not let him bring his guitar tonight. I can't take it anymore. It'll be the fourth time this week.

"What?" Jasper says, looking absolutely mortified. "But everyone loves it when I bring my guitar! I always play *Wonderwall*! It's like a tradition!"

"Yes. *Like* a tradition. But it's not actually a tradition, so why don't you have a night off?" I'm still trying. Still hoping. Still praying. GOD, ARE YOU LISTENING? I WILL BECOME A MONK IF YOU JUST DO ME THIS ONE FAVOUR. Jasper is staring at me like I've just suggested we cancel Christmas and become Jehovah's Witnesses.

"I'm bringing the guitar, man. I'm gonna organise a setlist. Any requests?"

"Hey, would you look at that," I say. "You're not any easier to love at this time of the morning, either." He grins, punches my arm, grabs his coffee and wanders back into his room to spend the next twelve hours preparing for the party. If he was even half as dedicated to an actual job as he is to looking like a twat at parties then he'd be the CEO of Apple by now.

We have half an hour before we need to call a taxi and I'm in the bath, trying to relax, but once again, I can hear Jasper's voice through the annoyingly thin walls.

"So I do it, and the balloon explodes, and suddenly there's a fuck-tonne of cream all over this police man's face!" (Here, Jasper pauses for a self-aggrandising laugh, before continuing.) "Anyway, here's *Wonderwall*."

I cannot groan hard enough to convey my feelings. He's spent the last two hours contemplating which story he should tell tonight before he plays his trademark cover. Jesus wept. My eye is twitching.

Four hours later, we're well into the party, and Jasper's played about twelve signature indie songs, and, surprise, surprise, he's surrounded by girls. Again. He's fucked on Ket tonight. I've had a whiskey and coke for every song Jasper's sung in the hopes that I'll go deaf and won't be able to hear that fucking guitar. I glance over at him now, just to check what he's doing, and I stop dead when I realise he's doing The Laugh.

"Anyway," Jasper says, "here's *Wonderwall*."

The chords start. My eye twitches.

Anyway, here's *Wonderwall*.

I can't take it anymore.

Anyway, here's *Wonderwall*.

It's been almost ten years.

Anyway, here's *Wonderwall*.

Almost a full decade of this shit.

Anyway. Here's *Wonderwall*.

Shut up, Jasper, you colossal cunt.

Anyway. Here's. *Wonderwall*.

My eye twitches and I make a hideous, strangled sound, and tackle Jasper to the floor and I rip his guitar out of his hands and smash it over his head, and smash it over his head Anyway, here's *Wonderwall* and smash it over his head and the guitar is ruined and I'm just hitting him with the neck of it now and there's blood everywhere Anyway,

here's *Wonderwall* I can't stop and I'm still smashing smashing smash smash hitting  
and Anyway, here's *Wonderwall* I'm just hitting and hitting and hitting hitting hitting  
and there's weird buzzing background noise and people screaming, mostly girls, I think,  
Again, girls Again Anyway, here's *Wonderwall* all I can hear is the opening chords and  
Jasper's stupid smug laugh Anyway, here's *Wonderwall*, and I hear myself scream, "Do  
you know what, man? You're not even that good!"

LOVE STORY

Joe had been procrastinating for a good few hours when the door opened and time slowed down. Their eyes met: his peering over the rim of his coffee mug, hers peering over the rims of her black spectacles. She had green eyes.

Joe loved green eyes.

She ordered a latte and sat facing him at a nearby table. She spooned out the froth, licking it delicately and deliberately. Joe picked up his book, shooting her furtive glances to make sure she was still looking at him.

She was.

She watched him turn page after page, pretending to be deeply immersed in his book. He crossed one leg over the other in an attempt to look both devastatingly intellectual and coolly casual. He looked like he was desperate for the toilet. He uncrossed his legs. He twisted the ends of his beard.

She loved beards.

Neither of them could stand it any longer. They pushed their chairs backwards at the exact same time, ready to go introduce themselves. They stopped. She giggled. He stuttered. She giggled some more.

He gathered himself up and swaggered over to her, puffing out his chest. He offered her a sweaty, meaty palm and said, *I'm Joe.*

*Charlotte*, she replied, giggling once again. She offered him a seat, and so he sat, his laptop, coffee and book left forgotten on the table behind him. They talked until the café closed and it was time for them to leave.

He walked her home, chatting and laughing the entire way. There was never a dull moment - they had so much in common, and the small things they disagreed on sparked

lively debates neither thought possible. Who spent twenty minutes discussing the best way to spread butter? They did. They loved every minute of it.

When they finally reached her home, they swapped numbers, added each other on Facebook, and Joe leaned in for their first kiss.

Sparks flew. Butterflies swarmed. Hearts burst. Faces warmed.

*This*, thought Joe, *is heaven*.

*This*, thought Charlotte, *is too good to be true*.

The rest, as they say, is history.

They met almost every day, desperate to spend as much time together as they could, too deep in love to be apart for even a second. She was beautiful, the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, funny, intelligent, kind, with a laugh so warm it melted his heart. He was handsome, witty and obscure and tall, with a slight, but endearing, crooked nose. They talked marriage, kids, retiring in France. Joe knew Charlotte was his soulmate. Charlotte knew Joe was The One.

And so, three months in, Joe knew it was time. He had to make this night special. He had to prove his love for her.

He lit candles. He scattered rose petals. He invested in a *Smooth Jazz Sounds* CD. He shaved. He trimmed. He neatened.

Deodorant was sprayed. Cologne was dabbed. Nose hair was plucked.

Joe was ready.

An hour into the best sex of his entire life, Joe was on the edge of bliss. Charlotte was grinding on top of him, her face twisted with pleasure.

She leaned down and pressed her lips to his ear. *Do you love me?*

Her hips rotated in small, fast movements. Joe closed his eyes and whispered, *yes*.

*Tell me you love me.*

*I love you, he breathed. I love you.*

Her thighs gripped harder.

Her arms wrapped around his neck.

And around his shoulders.

And around his waist.

Joe opened his eyes. Four pairs stared back.

The gigantic spider on top of him clicked its pincers.

THE REVOLT OR THE UPRISING OR WHATEVER

It was sometime around twelve when they came to get me. I was in bed, about to fall asleep, and then there were people in the doorway. Three of them. Obviously, I was freaked out - I mean, I'd not heard them come in and it was the middle of the night and they were dressed in these, like, white hazmat suits. I thought I was about to be abducted or something. I mean, what the fuck, right?

Anyway, they were like, "hello, Sophie," and they said it in sync and in these weird, deep voices, kind of like Darth Vader. That's creepy, right? I was laid there like, fuck, it's aliens. Or the Government. I started genuinely panicking, like, wondering if I'd accidentally illegally downloaded some top secret FBI file or something. I was totally freaking out. And I was naked! I was so vulnerable!

So I was like, "er, hi. Can I help you?" I mean, what would you have said? How do you react to that situation? Picture it: three random hazmat suits show up uninvited to your house in the middle of the night and somehow they know your name. I also have, like, three different locks on my door. How did they get in? I still don't understand.

Right, so they were all, Sooophie, you have been selected to join the uprising or the revolution or whatever. I can't remember what they called it but it was some kind of rebellion. I was like, what? They were still talking in those stupid Darth Vader voices. It was weird. I still didn't understand what was going on at this point, I just knew there were three weird people in my bedroom, right? I'd not clicked on yet. I was still panicking.

Then the middle one went, "we think you would be a valuable asset to our cause, Sophie," and I started thinking that maybe it wasn't aliens or the FBI, or whatever the English version of the FBI is, but maybe they were like, robots or something. I mean,

there's all those films about robots taking over the world, right? And you have to keep in mind that they were talking in those weird voices. AND they'd somehow managed to break into my house without me noticing. So maybe it was robots. It didn't seem like a farfetched assumption at the time. I genuinely thought they could have been robots. I know, I know, it sounds so stupid hearing it back. Robots. Ha.

So anyway, I said, "I beg your pardon?" 'cos I was still confused. I know I sound like I'm thick, but honestly, I was absolutely baffled. My mental state was literally just a series of question marks.

Then the middle one - I think it was the middle one, but I don't actually know because I couldn't see any of their faces - anyway, the middle one starts telling me about the rising or the resistance or whatever. I can't remember what they were calling it for the life of me. It might have even been the insurrection. Whatever. Anyway, this person-robot-alien-thing was going on and on about how the Tiers were starting some sort of mutiny against the Order.

Now, I don't know about you, but the Order has never done me any wrong, so I was still blagged, 'cos, like, why would I have wanted to join some sort of war against them? It made no sense at all. I mean, I'm Tier Two! I'm pretty much at the peak! This is the best standard of living you can get without being involved in the Government, the Royal Families or the Order themselves. I'd say I'm doing alright for myself, to be honest.

So after they invited me to join their little gang of hoodlums, I was like, "er, nah, you're alright, thanks," which was probably the last thing they were all expecting me to say because one of them gasped, another one shouted 'what the fuck?' and the third one actually fell to their knees out of shock. In any other situation I probably would have

laughed - you know what I'm like - but, y'know, middle of the night and hazmat suits and all that.

So then, obviously, I felt kinda bad, because they were clearly expecting me to be all like, 'yeah, guys, let's do it!' and like, excited, and maybe start fistpumping or whatever, but instead I'd just completely pissed all over their parade. I started trying to explain myself - y'know, like, telling them I was happy with the Order and the Tiers, and then the one who had gasped dropped the Darth Vader persona and said to me, in this stupid, high-pitched, dramatic voice, "well, obviously YOU'RE happy, you're rich and have an easy job! What about the lower Tiers? What about Tier Eight? What about Tier *Thirteen?*"

So I was like, "what *about* Tier Thirteen?" and I said it in this proper arsey way 'cos I was annoyed - I mean, *obviously* I care about Tier Thirteen, but I couldn't believe they were trying to *guilt-trip* me into some stupid uprising! Oh my God! It still annoys me now, to be honest. I thought that was so rude. Three strangers in my house in the middle of the night trying to guilt-trip me into doing something I didn't want to? I mean, what the fuck, right? God, I'd rather it *had* been aliens at that point, at least they wouldn't have been so fucking rude. They'd have just shoved a probe up my arse and then very politely fucking *left*.

So Gaspary goes, "don't you *care* about them?" - still in this melodramatic, theatre voice - and I just about died with annoyance. I mean, everyone cares about Tier Thirteen, don't they? It's horrible the conditions they live in down there. I sometimes still can't believe the Order allowed it to get so bad. But, like, at the end of the day, I do my part, you know. I donate to charity just like everyone else. I host and attend fund-raising

events just like everyone else. Unlike everyone else, however, I was the one with three lunatics stood in my bedroom at two o'clock in the damn morning.

So Gaspys accused me of not caring about Tier Thirteen, right, and that's when I've finally had enough and I tell them all to fuck off and get out of my house.

Then, the one who'd fallen to the floor says, "look, Sophie. You're the only one who can help us."

Well, if I wasn't baffled before, I was utterly bamboozled now. I asked what they meant, and Gaspys told me that it was all a part of a 'prophecy.' Then she repeated this 'prophecy' thing - I can't remember it now, sorry, it was ages ago. It was something about how an unlikely saviour from Tier Two would disrupt the Order. It mentioned something about my birthday, as well, and how I had some sort of special knowledge or whatever. Well, not *me*, obviously, but whoever it was about. Well, not 'who it was about,' cos it was clearly a fake, stupid joke thing. I think they literally made up a vague poem about me to scare me into agreeing with them.

ANYWAY, I couldn't help myself, I started laughing. Proper loud, disgusting belly laughs. It was just so surreal, and so funny, I just - I mean, I thought I was being pranked.

So then they went all silent, waiting for me to stop laughing - it took me ages, I thought it was so ridiculous - so I finally calmed down, right, and I told them in the nicest possible way that they needed to fuck off and get out of my house.

The third one, who'd not said anything other than 'what the fuck' up until this point, seemed genuinely horrified - he was like, "Sophie, we're being serious. You really are the only one who can help us overthrow the Order. We need you to do what's right and help us - help the Lower Tiers have a better life." Then he *truly* fucked it up for them all,

because he said, “look, we know it’s risky. There’s a chance of imprisonment. Even death. But we need you to do the right thing.”

I’d had enough. It sounds cruel, I know, but I just... I really couldn’t be bothered. Honestly, I just wanted to go to sleep. Fucking prison? DEATH? Was he mental? Nah, you’re alright, mate, I’d rather not die, thanks - I mean, oh my God, right?!

So that’s when I properly made them leave. I told them to get out, I was sick of them, I wanted nothing to do with their stupid uprising or revolution or whatever the hell they were calling it. I could tell they were vexed, cos Gaspary and the Prophecy one were crying dead loud, but... Well, it just wasn’t my problem, really. Could you blame me?

I’ve never heard anything about them since that night, and nothing much seems to have changed, so I think I made the right choice. I mean, like, they clearly lost whatever war they were trying to start, right? So it’s a good thing I said no, right?

Right?

SO VIBRANT AND LOVELY

Kyle lifts his grey, rotting hand to my face and says, “I y lorv youf.” It’s sweet, but I’m tired. I haven’t slept properly in days. The stress of work is figuratively killing me. The smell of Kyle’s decaying flesh isn’t helping. Christ, he smells like shit. I love him so much, but sometimes the smell gets so bad that I gip and retch and have to stop myself from being sick. He looks at me with these sad eyes and says, “sohrrreh,” and then I feel like shit because it’s not his fault he’s dead, is it?

“Monnn-ih-ka,” he says. It sounds painful. He slurs a lot now, ever since the front of his tongue rotted away, but he always makes sure he says my whole name. “I y lorv youf.”

“I love you too.” I touch his face so he knows I’m not lying. His cheek sags in from the pressure and I pull back and he stares at me with those stupid, sad eyes. It’s not his fault he’s dead.

I stare out the window. I love where we live. It’s the top floor flat of this huge, old building, and you can see miles and miles of the countryside. Sometimes I get lost staring at all the fields and trees and flowers. Everything I am is so insignificant compared to the lilac of the harebells. Sometimes I just want to lay down in the fields forever and let the harebells and buttercups grow all over me until I’m just a tiny, grassy lump in an endless field.

Then I remember how stupid that would be because I have responsibilities and work and Kyle and I can’t just drop it all in some ridiculous, pretentious attempt to be a human-shaped flowerpot.

“I have to go,” I tell him, still looking out at the purple haze of the fields. “Bye. I love you. Bye.”



Run, Monica, run. Run. Over the bridge. Run, run, run. Slap, slap, thump, thump, run, run. Accidentally bump into an angry man in a black suit. “Sorry!” “Fuck you!” Fuck you, too. Run, Monica. Can’t be late again. Run, thump, slap. Charge through the doors. Jog. Wait for the elevator. Dither. Awkward “hello, sir,” to the CEO. Try to stop dithering. Dither a bit more. Run, run, run. Oh, fucking shit, no-

“Monica! Hi!”

“Hi, Helen.”

“How are you? I haven’t seen you in ages! Have you had some time off?”

“You saw me yesterday,” I tell her, trying to subtly squeeze past. My office is in sight. I am so close.

“Did I? It feels like so much longer! We should take lunch together, don’t you think? We can catch up on each other, maybe share a pizza, have a little tippie-”

“Actually, Helen, I’m a bit late. Can I just- oh, for fuck’s sake.” My manager is stood outside my office door, peering in. I am too late. I was so close. Fucking Helen. Every damn day.

Helen is steamrolling on like she’s had no idea I’ve even opened my mouth. “And I just NEED these shoes! Just NEED them! So, I’ll stop by your office at twelve-thirty?” She saunters away without waiting for an answer.

I fucking hate Helen.



“So,” Helen begins, before taking a weirdly long sip of her milkshake. It’s like, *shuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuurp*. It’s inappropriately long. No one takes that big of a sip. What the fuck, Helen. “How’s Kyle doing?”

“Well. You know. He’s still dead,” I say, prodding at some lettuce.

She nods, a look of condescending pity on her face. Her stupid face. “My ex-boyfriend died after we’d been together for two years, you know.” I do know, Helen, you talk about it all the time. “We stayed together for a few months after his death, but eventually... Well, y’know. The *smell*. It was just too much. We said our goodbyes and he went underground.” There’s a pause as she takes another embarrassingly long slurp. Helen, stop this foolishness. Take a human-sized sip of your drink. You are not a hippo. No one needs that much strawberry milkshake in their mouth. She gulps, and I know she does, because it’s *audible*. *From where I’m sitting*. It’s fucking *audible*. I am in a perpetual state of revulsion with this woman. “It’s the best place for them, y’know. They’re happy down there.”

“How do you know?”

“How do I know what?”

“How do you know they’re happy down there?”

“Well,” she says, before pausing again. I stare at her milkshake apprehensively. “They never come back up, do they? They must like it down there.”

Maybe they never come back up because something down there is eating them, or maybe they just rot too much to make the climb back up, or maybe they’re all killing each other, or maybe the government has laid some sort of trap that kills them all, or maybe... I don’t know, but maybe they’re not happy. I don’t want Kyle to go underground. There are worms and insects and he’s such a big baby that he freaks out if he even sees a ladybird. I love him. I don’t want him to be scared. He’s my boyfriend and I love him and he’s staying with me forever.

“I don’t care,” I tell Helen. “He’s fine.”

"Honey, isn't the smell bothering you?" Her face wrinkles. It is incredibly unattractive. She looks like a bulldog.

"No," I lie.

"But it's been six months, surely by now-"

"No, Helen, he's fine."

"Oh, Monica, *honey*. It's just going to get worse. Parts of him will start dropping off and he'll go blind and deaf and - well, it's just no life, is it? Let him go underground."

"No. Mind your business, Helen."

Helen leans forward and pats my hand. It takes my entire everything not to visibly cringe. I hate her so much. "Monica, if it would help you, I'll help you drop him off," she says. "We'll all go to the gates together, you two can say goodbye and then I'll bring you back to mine for a little crying session."

"Oh, Helen, you're such a... You're such a..." I pause, searching for the right words.

"Good friend?" She offers, smiling.

"No... You're such a TOTAL DIPSHIT. It's none of your business, *Helen*, like I said, so just FUCK OFF."



"Harrrrv youf - harrrd a good d-d-eyyyuh?"

"Yeah. It was fine. Stop talking so much, babe, you're making it worse." He's not making it worse, it couldn't possibly get worse. I just hate hearing him talk now. It sounds like it hurts him. I know it doesn't, though; nothing really hurts him now. I think, anyway. He groans a lot but I think that's just a dead person thing. "Anyway, I'm trying to concentrate," I tease. I go to pinch his arm like I used to do, but stop myself before I pull off a bit of his flesh like I did last time. That was disgusting. I was just sat

there holding a tiny little bit of his arm whilst he stared at me in horror. God, that was awkward. I didn't know what to say to him.

I dab the anti-septic onto his sores like I do every night. It's gross. It's worse when they're infected, though, so it's easier this way. I don't even know how he gets them. Maybe it's just another dead person thing. It's not his fault he's dead.

"Uhhnnnnnnng, nerhhhhhhh!" Kyle is flailing in slow-motion.

"You're getting skin EVERYWHERE!" I flail back, both baffled and annoyed. This process takes nearly an hour as it is without him sending chunks of his body everywhere. This carpet is new. It looks like it has dandruff.

"Mahhhhg-uuutsahhh!"

"What? Mahgutsah? What? What does *that* mean? And will you *stop waggling everywhere!*" The carpet, Kyle, THE CARPET.

"MA. MAG. MAG." He's struggling now, a vein in his forehead just burst. "Mag-uuutsuhh! Mag-uuutsahh!" I'm considering suggesting a game of charades. He calms down, focuses himself, then yells, "MAGGOTSSS!"

"Oh, *maggots!* Oh! Oh shit, right. Don't worry, I'll get them off you." I search his body and find about fifty maggots nestled in a wound on his leg. I pull them out a few at a time and drop them into a sink. "We could totally sell these to some sort of fishing shop," I wink. "Might as well try to make a profit off these little guys."

Kyle is completely drained of colour. Well, more so than usual. He is paler than the average dead person. I think he's in shock. That's understandable. After all, it's not every day you see fifty maggots living in your thigh.

"Thiiiiiss. Iiiss. Sooooooh. Horrraah-bill," Kyle whispers, his nose crinkling. "Don'tah youf thiiink I y should-d-d go t'thuh Unnndergrounnd nnnowww?"

“No, it’s fine. You’re fine. It’s not the first time I’ve found maggots on you, so. It’s fine,” I say, trying to see if there’s any more.

“*What?*” He sounds horrified. It’s the clearest he’s spoken in months.

“Er, yeah, I’ve, um, found them on you a few times now.”

He makes a short noise of disgust then tells me, “I y hay-tuh be-yung like thiss.”



Run, Monica, run. Every damn day. One day I’ll be on time and my manager will be so impressed I’ll get a promotion. Thump, slap, thump, slap. And I’ll be so rich that I’ll be able to get Kyle properly preserved. Run, run, thump, thump. Oh, for the love of fuck, are you fucking joking?

“Monica! Hi!”

“Hi, Helen.”

“How are you? I haven’t seen you in ages! Have you had some time off?”

“You saw me yesterday,” I tell her, my eyes locked firmly onto my office door. I read a newspaper article once that said if you focus your eyes on your destination, people will automatically move out of the way for you. It’s psychological, apparently, and it’s also bullshit because Helen’s still blocking the way.

“Did I? It feels like so much longer! We should take lunch together, don’t you think?”

“We took lunch together last week, Helen-”

“Yes, and it was so much fun! Let’s do it again.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Oh, that’s right... How’s Kyle, honey?” Her head tilts so far with pity that it’s practically resting on her shoulder. I hate her so much.

“He’s fine,” I say, gritting my teeth. I can see my manager peering through my office door. I am always so close and yet so far.

Helen pouts. She looks hideous. “I’m telling you, Monica, parts of him are going to start falling off soon. Take him to the Underground, honey. It’ll be such a weight off your shoulders. Just rip off the plaster, hon, you’ll feel so much better for it.”

I’ve had enough. I shove past her and stomp to my office. “Excuse me, Helen. And also, FUCK OFF.”



I stare at the purple blur. The flowers are so beautiful in the sunlight.

“Muhhh-ni-klurhhgggg-” Kyle starts, although he’s interrupted by his sudden lack of jaw. It’s no longer attached to his face. It’s just... *resting* on his lap. We stare it.

“Erm,” I say. I’m not sure what’s supposed to happen. I have never had to deal with a situation like this before. I have never watched someone’s jaw literally fall off their face before. It is both disturbing and incredibly awkward. “I don’t... Well. Oh God. What do we do now?”

Kyle daintily picks it up and puts it in the bin before coming to sit back down. This is the most awkward situation I have ever lived through. His jaw just... Fell. It fell. There was a very quiet “thwup” noise when it hit his legs. Oh my God. I find myself longing for the day when I pulled off that bit of his arm. He makes some sort of weird, strangled, gargling sound and covers his face with his hands.

“I’m sure this happens to a lot of the dead,” I say, and rub his leg in an effort to be soothing. He moans. “Honestly,” I continue, “it probably happens to loads of people.” He shoots me a glare. It is horrifying. God, half his face is missing. He looks like something out of *The Walking Dead*. Stagnant blood is oozing down his neck. It’s brown,

almost black, and it smells so bad that I have to swallow my sick. It's not his fault he's dead.

He reaches over for the notepad and pen on the coffee table and begins writing; he's slow but painstakingly careful, and when he's finished there are red tears streaming down his face.

*It's time for me to go to the Underground. I love you, I love you so much, but I can't stay up here like this anymore. It's not fair on either of us.*

"No," I whisper. His eyes widen. Half his face is missing. "No. Not yet. Just a bit longer. You can stay with me a bit longer."

He pushes himself off the sofa and I hear three of his bones snap. He shuffles to the bedroom and closes the door behind him. He looks like something out of *The Walking Dead*. Half his face is missing. God. It's not his fault he's dead. It's not his fault he's dead. It's not his fault he's dead.



I AM ACTUALLY ON TIME. I am amazing. I am the best. I am Monica Sofia Carabello and I am the most amazing woman on the entire planet. I'm so damn *punctual*. This is the most astounding feeling in the world. I am actually *strolling*. I'm so on time that I can *stroll*. No running for Monica today. Nothing but happy cackling and a leisurely walk. Oh, hohoho-

"Monica! Hi!"

NO. NO NO NONONONO NONO NO. NOOOOO. NO. RUN, MONICA, RUN-

"MONICA! HI!"

Shit. "Hi, Helen."

"How are you? I haven't seen you in ages! Have you had some time off?"

"You saw me yesterday," I tell her. I wonder if she has short-term memory loss.

"Did I? It feels like so much longer! We should-"

"Absolutely not. No. Helen, I'm sorry, but I'm very busy today, so if you'll excuse me..."

I try the 'duck-and-weave' move I've been practicing but she's still in my way. How has this happened? Oh, wasted hours.

"No. Monica, I've had enough. We need to talk about Kyle." She backs me up to the wall. This is weirdly scary. I can't believe I'm intimidated by *Helen*. Ugh. The shame. "I can't sit idly by and let this continue. It's sad, Monica. It's not fair on him. You're being so selfish by keeping him up here. There's a reason the Dead have to go to the Underground. You need to let him go."

"Helen, if I have to tell you one more time to mind your business, I swear to-"

"No!" She screams and stamps her foot. Way to overreact, Helen. Nice temper tantrum. "Monica! No! What's wrong with you? You've had your time to grieve and now it's time to *move on!* I know you think you're responsible for what happened, but-"

I don't just break, I shatter. "I *am* responsible! It's not his fault he's dead, Helen, it's *mine!* So fucking *forgive me* for trying to make it right!"

"You're not making it right! You're making it worse!" Her shoulders sag and she says, "Monica. It's not your fault. I mean it. It's not your fault. You need to let him go."

"Just... Just mind your business, Helen." I start to walk to my office.

"It's not your fault, Monica!" She calls after me.

It is. It's all my fault. I did this to him. I'm the reason he's dead. I love him so much and it's all my fault. It's my fault he looks like something out of *The Walking Dead*. It's

my fault half his face is missing. It's my fault he's dead. I love him so much and I did this to him.



I'm at the park with Kyle. I thought he could do with the fresh air. Our flat smells so bad now that I can't stand to spend too long there because I don't want to look insensitive by vomiting everywhere. I've had to put a bandana around his face so that he won't frighten the children. It's already stained.

"Aren't the flowers pretty?" I say, looking at him for approval. He was so apprehensive about coming outside. He nods, slowly, so he doesn't break his neck, and gargles in response. Brown blood trickles down from under the bandana. A lump of flesh falls to his feet.

And then the birds come.

There's only five of them, but they're swooping and diving rapidly, attacking his face and shrieking and cawing and they're flurrying and he can't defend himself and I'm screaming and trying to get them away from him but they're *so persistent* and I don't know what to do and we're both panicking and they're just attacking him, pulling off strips off flesh and I can't do anything and he can't do anything and I'm just screaming and screaming and screaming and...

After they fly away, Kyle raises his face to mine. It's mostly skull. They've pulled off so much skin. He's missing an eye. I stare into the hole and watch, horrified, as a maggot falls out. Oh, God. Oh no. Oh no. No. This is my fault. Panic and fear swell in my chest and I hear myself say, "I'm not ready. You can't go yet."

He watches me with his one eye, more dead than alive. Just dead. He died so long ago. I miss him so much.

“Okay. Oh, God,” I choke, tears spilling down my face. “Okay. Alright. I’ll take you there tomorrow. I will. Let’s go home.”



We’re the only ones at the Gate. It looms over us, cold steel set into a hill. I don’t know what to say, he can’t say anything, and we can’t kiss. I thought this would be more romantic, somehow. Although, I suppose there’s nothing romantic about saying goodbye to your dead, half-eaten boyfriend.

“I don’t want to hug you,” I say. My voice sounds sad and pathetic, even by my standards. All I am lately is sad and pathetic. “I don’t want to break you even more. I’m so sorry for what I’ve done to you.” He lifts a grey, rotting hand to my face. He gargles.

“I love you too,” I tell him. I’m crying again. “You’re my boyfriend and you’re mine and I love you so much and I don’t want you to go.”

With stiff, awkward movements, he pulls an envelope from his pocket and hands it to me. I look at him, confused, but open it anyway. Inside is a letter. It’s written in huge, shaky handwriting. It would be illegible if I wasn’t so used to it.

*Monica,*

*I love you so much and I will love you forever. It’s not your fault. Please stop feeling so guilty. I don’t blame you for this and you shouldn’t either. Sometimes, bad things just happen. It’s nobody’s fault that I’m dead.*

*I’ll miss you. I love you.*

*Kyle xxxxx*

I look up from the paper, tears rolling down my face, and to my surprise, Kyle is holding out a flower. It's a harebell. He presses it into my palm and I look at the tiny, delicate blue veins criss-crossing through the lilac petals. It's so small and beautiful. He must have picked it from the park yesterday. It's already wilting.

“How long did this take you to write?” I laugh, wiping my face and flapping the letter. My hands are shaking. “Thank you. I love you. I’m still sorry. I’ll miss you too. You need to go before anything else happens.”

I go to wrap my arms around him but remember what will happen if I do. Instead, I gently put a finger to a part of the flesh that’s still attached to his face so he knows I mean it. So he knows I still love him. He shuffles to the Gate and a guard opens it for him.

He doesn’t look back.



I stroll through the unkempt grass, feel it hitting my knees. The Spring breeze is light on my arms and the sun is warm on my face. It’s that fresh, clean smell. Nothing has ever smelled so good as the air smells right now. I inhale deeply before sitting amidst the harebells. They are fragile and dainty. Everything is so vibrant and lovely. I keep waiting for the smell of death, for a chunk of flesh to land at my feet, but everything is still. I can hear birds. My face is wet and sticky. I didn’t realise I was crying.

I sit there for a solid thirty minutes, weeping, accepting the sadness and the horror of it all. You need a good cry, sometimes.

I lie down and close my eyes.

I wait for the flowers to grow.



BE NOT INHOSPITABLE

You didn't cry when you lost all your hair. You didn't cry when your bones started to show through your skin, and you didn't cry when they told you there was nothing they could do. But you cried when you realised you would not live to see your daughter's graduation.

Even then, it was not you whom you were crying for.

You were always so brave. So beautiful.

And you are, still.

You have always been my favourite. You have always been the one I loved most. I have spent your entire life with you. I was there from the moment you were born. I saw your soul and knew, even then, that you were going to be the most beautiful. I have stayed with you throughout your entire life, giving you comfort and guidance when needed. I have done my utmost to give you everything you deserve, but even I cannot stop Death.

I held your hand. I stroked your hair. I let my love flow into you. You looked so radiant, even as Death met you.

When your eyes closed for the final time, I mourned. I knew that within moments I would be assigned a new soul to guard. A soul I would doubtless love dearly, but a soul that was not yours. A soul that would pale in comparison to you.

All souls pale in comparison to you.

I have been granted this gift - the gift of meeting with you one last time. To see you wearing a different face, smiling a different smile, but still with your incandescent energy and seraphic grace.

I yearn for you. I grieve for you.

My daughter.

SQUIDS. EELS. CRABS. SHARKS

I can't swim. I have a crippling phobia of sharks. It's embarrassing, really. I can't go in any body of water bigger than a bathtub. Not even a pond. I know that sharks aren't in ponds, but you can never be too careful, can you? I mean, what if some fish develops a freak mutant gene and it becomes a tiny but deadly shark? I mean, holy shit, in this day and age, pretty much anything's possible. Except flying cars. *Back to the Future* lied to us.

Fifteen years ago, I had this girlfriend. Real pretty, lovely little thing. She loved the beach, made us go all the time. She never minded too much that I wouldn't get in the water, although sometimes she'd beg me to just dip a toe, and I would. Just for her. But just a toe, that's it. I'd run off screaming if anything so much as brushed me, be it seaweed or one of those tiny silver fish, and every single time she'd laugh and ask me what I was afraid of, and every single time I'd start listing all the terrifying things in the sea. Squids. Eels. Crabs. Sharks.

We used to set up a campfire on this real quiet area of the beach, I'd smoke us some sausages and she'd go for a swim. She'd be out there for a good thirty minutes and then we'd eat and talk and get a bit tipsy. Fall asleep under the stars. Once a week we did that. I loved her so much. Real pretty little thing, she was.

In the end, it wasn't a shark that got her. It was a rip current. All that swimming she did, and it was a rip current that got her. Can you believe it? It was a strong one, though - five miles an hour, they reckoned. Faster than any human can swim.

Anyway, she was screaming and screaming my name. Screaming for help. She was trying to swim against it. She knew better than that, normally, but she was panicking. I

dived in, you know. I ran down that beach and I threw myself into that water. I would have done anything for that girl.

But I can't swim.

I still dream about her sometimes. She says, 'stop worrying about tiny mutant sharks!' and I tell her, '*Back to the Future* lied to us!' and she laughs and then she leaves me. I wake up to the smell of saltwater and the feel of sand under my feet and the crippling guilt that never goes away.

I'm married, now. Been married for almost nine years. She's great, my wife. She can't swim, either, so I don't have to worry about losing her.

## KING OF HEARTS

His heart means I will live to see thirty. I will live to see forty, fifty, sixty. I will live to have children. I will live to have grandchildren. I will live to see my family grow old. I will grow old. I never thought I would grow old. I never thought I had a future. And now I do. This heart is a gift.

It is the heart of a dead man. He shot himself in the head.

His wife told me.

I can't stop thinking about his brains all over the floor. Blood splattered up the wall. What must his wife have felt when she got home from work that day? Her dead husband on the floor of their living room? The man she loved? Had children with? Dead. Shot himself.

She told me he didn't even leave her a note.

It's ruining my life. No one understands. I should be happy. I should be joyous, grateful, overwhelmed that I will live. I am healthy. I am better. It is a miracle. It is a godsend.

It is the heart of a dead man.

This heart is a gift.

This heart beats to a different rhythm. It's erratic, out of time. The doctors tell me it's fine. They tell me to stop complaining. They tell me to be happy. I try. I try to be happy. They prescribe anti-depressants. They recommend light exercise. Go out for short walks, they say. Don't over-do it. Don't over-exert yourself. Get used to it. After all, you've suffered a life-changing event. This sort of thing is to be expected.

My dead man's heart talks to me. It whispers. It says, why are we both alive? We died. We died. We're dead. We should be dead. We should be dead. We should be dead. Why are we alive?

When I sleep, his memories dance in my head. His first kiss. His first love. His daughter taking her first steps. I feel it. I feel all his joy, his despair, his hunger and his desire. I don't even know what he looks like. I know how his wife looks undressed.

Why are we both alive?

We should be dead.

You should be dead.

I will grow old. I will have children. I will have grandchildren. For the first time, I have a future. I have a life. I am alive. Externally, I am alive. Should I be dead?

I take my anti-depressants. I go out for short walks. I don't over-do it. I don't over-exert myself. I get used to it. After all, I've suffered a life-changing event. This sort of thing is to be expected.

My dead man's heart whispers to me at night. It weeps and it cries and it says, Why am I alive? I died. We died. You should be dead.

He shot himself.

What must his wife have thought?

His brains on the floor, his blood on the walls.

In their living room, their family home.

He shot himself in the head.

What must his wife have thought?

He didn't even leave her a note.

There is no such thing as silence anymore.

Standing in front of my mirror, a middle-aged man gazes back. He imitates my movements. There are no lights in his eyes. He is a dead man. He is my dead man, and he wants his heart back. Why am I alive? I died. I should be dead. I should be dead.

In the mirror, he raises a gun to his head.

## GOD IS JUST A CUNT

My mum likes to tell this funny story about the time she invited Jehovah's Witnesses in for a brew. She was really lonely - she wasn't allowed to see anyone - and the only company she had for most of the day was me. I was maybe ten months old when someone knocked at the door.

My mum was well excited. Off her tits with joy. She practically dropped me in her rush to answer - which I think is a nice way of saying that she definitely dropped me - and was subsequently met with two Jehovah's Witnesses.

Now, most people do that weird internal sigh when they're faced with two Jehovah's Witnesses stood at their front door, but not my mother. Oh, no, not my mother. Not that day. Mate, she was thoroughly delighted. She was just stood there like, 'fucking yes, pals, get your little selves into my humble abode and I'll make you both the nicest brew ever.' And, of course, they did, 'cos they're Jehovah's Witnesses and it's what they do. They come into your home, drink your tea and try to convert you to a Christmas-less life.

At this point, it's worth mentioning that I was my mother's pride and joy. I was the light of her life. She would quite literally show me off to random strangers in the street. She proper loved me. She still does, obviously, don't fear. This is not a heartbreaking tale of woe and shattered relationships. This is just a story about the time my mum told two Jehovah's Witnesses to fuck off.

It's also worth mentioning that I was not a cute child. I'm talking Fuck Ugly. Like, the kind of baby you see and say, "fuck. That is an ugly baby." I was super, super fat. Not cute-baby-fat. Fucking fat. Borderline childhood obesity fat. And I was *red*. My face was nothing more than a tomato with a mouth. A mouth that I used to eat absolutely

everything in sight, because, again, I was fat. I cannot reiterate enough just exactly how fat I was. Huge.

Anyway, my mum was chatting away to these two men, and she was just handing them their brews when one of them noticed me for the first time. He did a double-take, had a third glance for good measure, then said, "Christ, he's a big lad, isn't he?"

My mum froze. She was holding a mug of tea directly in front of this man's face. Her hands started shaking. My mum was spilling boiling tea onto his leg and this man was yelping with pain, but she was gone and in her place stood a raging demon from hell itself. Steam billowed out of her nose. Wind whipped her hair all around her face. Her eyes turned black and a red haze descended upon her. In the most satanic snarl she could possibly muster, my mum screeched, "SHE'S WEARING. A DRESS."

That was it, mate. They were gone. They ran. She stood at the front door and yelled, for the entire street to hear, "FUCK OFF, YOU GOD-LOVING SLUTS!"

Yep. My mum called a pair of male Jehovah's Witnesses sluts, and instead of being embarrassed about it like a normal person, she repeats this story at every possible opportunity. She tells it every Christmas, every Easter, every single birthday or party or anniversary. If she's had more than one bottle of wine she will tell that story, and she will always finish it with a self-aggrandising laugh, and then she will kiss my forehead and say, "I've *always* thought you were beautiful, love!"

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I learned to read when I was three. I learned to *properly* read when I was four. I don't mean *Biff and Chip*, either, I mean I was reading stuff like *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*. I didn't have very many friends. I was weird and I was reading books about hobbits in my spare time instead of playing with yoyos and beyblades like a

normal child. I didn't have much else to do. We were too poor to afford games consoles and I didn't have a bike or anything. I just had a lot of books that my mum had salvaged from charity shops.

By the time I was four and a half, I'd read every book in the house. I'd even read all the recipe books and the washing machine manual. I'd also, somehow, managed to read *Rose Madder* by Stephen King. I can tell you right now that *Rose Madder* is NOT an appropriate book for a four year old child to read. It still haunts me to this day. I'll just be about to fall asleep when I'll get vivid images of that one scene where a fat, angry woman pisses into a wife-beater's mouth.

I was bored. I'd not started school yet. I made my mum go rooting in the attic for any books she might have taken with her when she left my biological dad. There was a lot of pretty useless shit in the attic, and my mum spent quite a while up there before she finally emerged with a new book: *The New World Translations of the Holy Scriptures*.

That was the first time ever that my mum told me The Story™. It transpired that, in their rush to get away from my mum, the Jehovah's Witnesses had accidentally left behind a copy of their Bible. It's pretty much the same as the regular Bible, except it refers to God as Jehovah and it comes with the stigma of being the official Bible of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

I read it all in one sitting, and then, true to Jehovah's Witnesses form, I wouldn't shut the fuck up about it. Reading that book was a turning point in my tiny life. I spoke about it all the time. I asked my mum if she knew that God's real name was Jehovah, and she did this sort of horrified laugh before saying, "er, no, love."

I took *The New World Translations of the Holy Scriptures* as gospel. I thought it was a history book. I believed in the Creationist theory. I believed that all men were

descended from Adam and I believed that Jehovah would turn sinners into pillars of salt. I was amazed that all this cool stuff had happened in the past and that people weren't still talking about it like it was the most badass fucking thing ever.

Finally, when I was five and a half, my mum had had enough. I honestly have no idea how she let it go on for such a long time. I think, at first, she'd thought it was incredibly cute. But then she'd got a phone call from my year one teacher, Mr. Hunter, informing her that I was ruining Religious Studies by talking incessantly about Jehovah, Jezebel, and the Israelites.

She bought me the proper Bible. The one where God is actually called God and it's written in ye olde-timey wordeth. Do you know what, I won't even lie to you, I don't think the proper Bible is an entirely appropriate read for a small child either. Some *Rose Madder* type shit goes down in that as well. God kills a *lot* of people. He is definitely not as all-loving as everybody says. Imagine being so pissed off with your pets that you decide to drown ninety-five percent of them. That is definitely a morally grey area.

This was the point where I started to have Faith. Before, I'd just believed that God - AKA my best pal Jehovah - existed, but I'd not fully realised Him as Our Lord and Saviour. Before, I didn't pray, and I didn't think that God was always watching over me and helping me.

I did now.

~~~

I attended Church every Sunday. Four months after my mum had bought me the proper Bible, we'd moved house, and now there was a Church of England only two minutes down the road. At first, I started going because I wanted to learn more about God, but I quickly realised we weren't being given history lessons so much as being taught life

lessons. I was a bit disappointed, yeah, but I carried on going for the free biscuits and tea.

For four years, I went to Church alone. My mum had no interest in going with me, and, truthfully, I didn't really want her there, for massively selfish and un-Christian reasons. I'd made friends with the elderly ladies there because they always gave me Werther's Originals. I didn't want to have to share said Werther's Originals with my mum. I was on a sugary, toffee, God-loving high, and it was all thanks to Dorcas and Edith with their blue rinses and ridiculously large handbags.

I started living a Good Christian Life. I volunteered for the Leprosy Mission, I prayed every evening and I trusted that when bad things happened, it was all a part of God's plan. By 'bad things,' I mean that my younger sister had scribbled on my only Barbie doll, or that my mum wouldn't let me stay up late to watch *I'm Alan Partridge*. I was only six. Not that many bad things happen to a six year old living a rather sheltered life.

For my seventh birthday, I received a cassette tape - yes, really, a cassette tape - that was full of hymns. Yes, really. In hindsight, that has to be the shittiest gift ever. Who still used cassettes in 2001? Honestly, mum. At this point, everything had already gone to CD. For some reason, though, my mum actually had a tape player which she let me borrow. Not have, just borrow. She didn't have any cassettes. She could have just given me the tape player, but no. My mum did not live a good, selfless Christian life.

My spare time was filled by re-reading the Bible with my hymn-tape playing in the background. My favourite was *All Creatures of Our God and King*. I would belt out hymns, recite my favourite Psalms (23 and 46:1) and say Grace before I ate my council house tea of smiley faces with peas and ketchup.

I loved God with all my tiny heart. Every night I would pray to Him. I'd ask Him for help and guidance, I'd thank Him for the good life He had given me, and I would ask Him to watch over and protect my family. He never replied, but I knew He was listening.

I stopped attending Church as of the 23rd of July, 2004.

~~~

My eighth birthday was pretty dismal. I'd asked for a skateboard but I'd only been given books. I had piles and piles of books. I must have received over fifty different books for my birthday. I already owned at least twelve of them. My mum assured me that it was okay, we could just go exchange the books for different ones, it wasn't so bad, could you please stop crying, etcetera.

I was devastated in a way that only an eight year old little girl could be. All I had asked for was a skateboard. It was all I wanted. I was tired of being friendless at school and having to spend every playtime sat by myself reading a book. Honestly, I was in a state of self-pity. I felt well sad for myself. So I made the conscious decision to become popular.

It's not an easy task, becoming popular. Firstly, you have to be likeable, which I definitely wasn't. I mean, I was universally loved by anyone over the age of twenty, but I was definitely not liked by my classmates. I was too much of a smartarse and I was a *huge* grass. No one could get away with any type of misdeed whilst I was in the room. I was truly a nightmare for all other eight year olds. Overall, I was probably what you'd call a bit of a bellend.

Secondly, to become popular, you need to have something cool going on. For example, Amy always had a million butterfly clips in her hair, Lydia owned an array of colourful knee socks, Johnny could do bubble writing, and Ash Copper owned a skateboard.

My plan was simple. I was going to get a skateboard and I was going to learn how to ride it and do the tricks that they did on *Tony Hawk's Underground*. Once I was at an acceptable level, I was going to go call for Ash Copper with my skateboard in hand, and thus begin my ascent into Primary School Popularity. Then maybe people would finally stop bullying me and I'd have friends to invite over for sleepovers like my mum kept saying all the time.

However, I hadn't accounted for the fact that no one would listen to me when I said "PLEASE GET ME A SKATEBOARD FOR MY BIRTHDAY" every day for six months. I was stuck with a million bloody books. They were absolutely everywhere. My tiny little self was fuming.

At seven o'clock, my mum sung *Happy Birthday* then told me my Uncle Matt was coming over.

I stopped crying immediately.

Uncle Matt was the coolest person my sheltered self knew. I mean, he was no Avril Lavigne, but he was definitely up there. He was twenty, went to university and played rugby. He dyed his hair blue, he went to house parties and once he dressed up as one of the 118 guys for a Christmas meal. He was, to me, The Best. I loved my Uncle Matt more than I loved anyone else and it wasn't just because I thought he was cool - it was because *despite* being cool, he still played with my Barbies with me. Once, I brought folders and folders of school work home, drawings and he actually sat down and went through it all with me. Not even my mum did that, but Uncle Matt did, because he was The Best.

If my Uncle Matt turned up and I was crying, I'd never hear the end of it. He would bring it up every birthday from here on out. I was going to be thirty years old, at my wedding and listening to my Uncle Matt tell everyone about how I spent my eighth

birthday crying because I didn't get a skateboard. I couldn't deal with it. I already had to live through The Story™ at every possible opportunity my mum could find. I wasn't about to add this to the List of Shameful Things About Me as well.

When Matt turned up, he pulled three books out of his gym bag. I composed myself, counted to ten, took a deep breath and thanked him.

It must have sounded just as fake as I felt because he started fully roaring with laughter, and he went, "do you have that little faith in me? Don't be stupid, *this* is your birthday present!"

And that's when he handed me the skateboard.

~~~

When I was fourteen years old, the skateboard snapped in half. I'd messed up a kickflip, one of the easiest tricks that I'd mastered by the age of ten, and the board just broke in half. A clean break.

Ash Copper and I held a funeral. We put both halves onto a bonfire then got really drunk on six cans of cheap cider. Ash put his iPod into a docking station and we made a Sad Songs playlist that we listened to all night. We stayed in Echo Garden Park until it was time to get the last bus home and reminisced about all the fun memories we'd had with that skateboard.

I cried for days. None of my friends understood why I was so devastated over a stupid skateboard, but no one teased me for it because I was popular and funny and best friends with Ash Copper. He bought me a new board and told me that this one was to remind me of him. At the time, I thought it was because my old one reminded me of Matt, but in hindsight he'd bought it me as a keepsake.

I officially gave up skateboarding almost a year later .

~~~

My Uncle Matt died in a freak accident on the 16th of July, four days after his twenty-first birthday. He was crushed to death by a lorry.

I spent the morning praying to God, asking him why he'd taken my Uncle Matt.

He didn't reply.

I went to Church instead. I asked Edith.

She said, "God works in mysterious ways."

Fucking bullshit.

God is just a cunt.

~~~

I accidentally set my socks off during the funeral. Nobody was allowed to wear black, so I'd worn a neon yellow jumper, green plaid leggings and musical Christmas socks. Over a thousand people turned up to Matt's funeral and not a single soul was wearing black. It was, in retrospect, weirdly wonderful.

Halfway through the service, my legs started shaking so much that the entire pew was vibrating. I reached down to grab my ankles in some sort of blind-panic attempt at getting my legs to stop moving. Instead, I pressed the reindeer's nose and then-

*JINGLE BELLS, JINGLE BELLS, JINGLE AAALLL THE WAAAAAAY!*

The Church was somehow even more silent than before. Everybody slowly turned to look at me. My Grandma stopped crying and stared at me with voiceless horror.

*OH WHAT FUN IT IS TO HAVE IN A ONE. HORSE. OH. PEN.*

My socks were still going. They were about to do The Grand Finale. My mum was grey-faced, eyes fixed straight ahead, completely refusing to acknowledge my existence as I helplessly tried to make my ankles stop singing.

*Dun. Dun.*

Why? Why did my socks have to make drum noises? Why right now? Why?

*SSSSSSSSSLEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEIGH!!!!!!!*

Silence. At long last. The most traumatic five minutes of my entire life were finally over. I was only nine. The humiliation still haunts me.

“Well,” my Grandma said, sounding unnaturally loud after thirty seconds of pure nothingness. “In your defence, love, he would’ve found that piss funny.”

~~~

Matt’s funeral was on the 14th of November, 2003. The last time I ever went to Church. God never replied to me. He never told me why He’d taken Matt.

I gave up.

God didn’t love me. God didn’t love anyone.

~~~

I didn’t attend Ash’s funeral.

Ash was miserable. They’d moved away. He’d been suffering from depression for a while as it was. We didn’t see each other anymore. We couldn’t go skateboarding in Echo Garden Park together.

He called me up one night in tears saying he couldn’t do it. I told him I’d save up my pocket money and come visit him next month. He told me he loved me and I told him I loved him too. I told him he was my family. I told him we were still going to be skateboarding when we were eighty, with arthritic knees and replaced hips.

Ash hanged himself that night. His mum told me he’d been listening to our Sad Songs playlist.

I refused to go into the Church.

What's a God to a heartbroken fifteen year old girl with a dead best friend?

~~~

I'm twenty-two now. Older than my Uncle Matt and far older than Ash. I still don't believe in God and I still don't skateboard. I couldn't do either of those things now anyway, not even if I wanted to. That's okay. I write stories now instead.

Skateboarding's not like riding a bike. You forget. You forget where to place your feet and you forget how to balance your weight and you forget how to go down a halfpipe without breaking your arm. I miss it, but I miss Matt and Ash even more. I will never skateboard again, and that's okay. I write stories now instead.

Believing in God is much easier than skateboarding, but it requires faith. I have none. I don't have faith that there's an all-knowing, all-loving God watching over me. I don't have faith that He's listening to me. I don't have faith that He cares. I miss Him, but I miss Matt and Ash even more. I will never believe in God again. It doesn't matter, anyway. God is just a cunt.

FLICKER, FADE

If you light a cigarette in a dark room, with only a single shaft of light coming through the curtains, the spark from the flame is the brightest orange you'll ever see. The curling smoke looks eerily beautiful as it rises and creates ashen clouds above your head. If you lay on your bed, smoke your cigarette, close your eyes, and dream, you can be born again. You can be born again, as someone brighter, better, more powerful. You can be beautiful. You can be everything.

Think of your life as it is. You're twenty, a university student, studying for a degree you're not sure you really want. You live in a small, dingy room in a shared house that you try to keep clean but you just can't see the point. You want to go home, but you don't want to go back to your parents. You miss the cleanliness and the cooked meals and the hundreds of television channels. You don't miss your mother's dismay when she asks you what you're doing with your life and you don't have an answer. You don't miss your father's disappointment that you're studying liberal arts, not science. You don't miss high school friends, and they don't miss you either.

You don't miss much. But you miss something.

Here, in this room, your life is insignificant. You have no drive, you lack ambition, and you can't remember the last time you had any kind of motivation. You smoke too much.

If you open your eyes just slightly, barely even a squint, the orange light from the cigarette will dance and create shapes. If you take a drag, blow out slowly, the smoke will twist with the flame. If you keep your eyes open, only just, a figure will appear in the grey; cloaked in shades of red and orange and smelling like a dying bonfire. He will hold his hand out to you as an offering, and gently whisper in his voice of ember, "come with me."

Think of your life. You are being offered another chance. You can be important. You can make your parents proud. You can have a free-of-charge, no-strings-attached do-over. Just take his hand and your life will be re-set. You can start over, but keep your knowledge and your wisdom and your choices and this time you could make something of yourself. You can be omnipotent, a God, a King of All.

He whispers again, still gentle, but powerful. "*Come with me.*"

You are finally being offered another chance.

Do you take it?

Or do you stub out the cigarette and go to sleep?

# Magic Realism and New Weird in Short Fiction

## 1.0 Introduction

### *1.1 Why the Short Story?*

*27 Club* is a Magic Realism and New Weird portfolio consisting of fourteen short stories that vary in style, tone and viewpoint. This analysis aims to unpack what this means by utilising relevant literary theory and a comparative analysis of other published work. I chose to write a portfolio of short fiction because ‘it offers boundless scope for linguistic virtuosity and formal experimentation.’ (Cox, 2005: p. 1) That is to say, experimentation with one’s own style is more expedient when writing a shorter text rather than a longer one, such as a novel. Certainly, writing short fiction enabled me to experiment with the genres of Magic Realism and New Weird. I also had the opportunity to explore different points of view throughout the portfolio, choosing to write in the popular form of first-person and the less common second-person, which will be examined further in Chapter 4.

Furthermore, I chose a short fiction portfolio due to the nature of short stories. Short stories can be read in one sitting, which increases their emotional impact and effect. As Poe wrote, ‘if any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and every thing like totality is at once destroyed.’ (1846: p. 163-164). This is particularly significant for works of Magic Realism and New Weird, as the supernatural and otherworldly events that occur within the texts require what Short refers to as a ‘willing suspension of

disbelief' (1999: p. 259) where the reader acquires 'assumptions and attitudes [they] would not usually hold.' (1999: p. 259) For my pieces to have their desired effect, they needed to be succinct enough for a reader to be able to appreciate the story in one sitting. Ultimately, I chose to write a portfolio of short fiction because I felt the narrative form worked best in the context of Magic Realism and New Weird.

### *1.2 Introduction to Magic Realism*

Magic Realism<sup>1</sup> is a modern genre of fiction where 'fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the 'reliable' tone of objective realistic report' (Baldick, 2015: p. 526) or a plot in which 'the narrator speaks of the surreal so naturally it becomes real.' (Geetha, 2010: p. 345). The term 'Magic Realism' has been in use since the early 1900s, in reference to a style of art originating in Germany. Literary Magic Realism began 'in 1955 in Latin America, [and] continues internationally to this day.' (Bowers, 2004: p. 7) Prominent Magic Realism writers are Latin-Americans Jorge Luis Borges, with works such as *The South*<sup>2</sup> (1962: p. 167) and *The Secret Miracle*<sup>3</sup> (1962: p. 242), and Gabriel García Márquez, whose *One Hundred Years of Solitude*<sup>4</sup> (1967) popularised Magic Realism internationally. Another acclaimed Magic Realism author is Italo Calvino, whose *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*<sup>5</sup> (1979) uses a combination of Magic Realism and point of view to place the reader within the novel, and is, essentially, a tale about the reader trying to read a book called *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. These works, amongst others, will be discussed in depth in Chapter 2.

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<sup>1</sup> Synonymous with magical realism.

<sup>2</sup> *El Sur*.

<sup>3</sup> *El milagro secreto*.

<sup>4</sup> *Cien años de soledad*.

<sup>5</sup> *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*.

Although there are various critics and theorists of Magic Realism, I will be focussing on Spindler's three-part model (1993, pp. 75-85) which consists of placing Magic Realism into three categories, which Spindler calls metaphysical, anthropological and ontological. According to Spindler, metaphysical Magic Realism 'is found in texts that induce a sense of unreality in the reader [...] by which a familiar scene is described as if it were something new and unknown, but without dealing explicitly with the supernatural.' (1993: p. 79). Anthropological Magic Realism is a form in which 'the narrator usually has 'two voices'. Sometimes he/she depicts events from a rational point of view (the 'realist' component) and sometimes from that of a believer in magic (the 'magical' element).' (1993: p. 80). Finally, ontological Magic Realism is where 'the supernatural is presented in a matter-of-fact way as if it did not contradict reason, and no explanations are offered for the unreal events in the text. [...] The word 'magic' here refers to inexplicable, prodigious or fantastic occurrences which contradict the laws of the natural world, and have no convincing explanation.' (1993: p. 82). These ideas will be analysed in Chapter 2 in accordance with *27 Club* and other authors' works, such as Calvino and García Márquez.

### *1.3 Introduction to New Weird*

New Weird is a relatively recent amorphous literary movement which focuses on horror and speculative fiction, with the term first coined only in 2002 by John Harrison in his introduction to China Miéville's novella *The Tain*, (2002: p. xiv) although Vandermeer argues the genre 'has existed since the 1940s and 1950s.' (2011: p. 12). Rather than 'traditional' horror, where the primary purpose is to induce fear in the reader, New Weird is 'transgressive horror, a type of fiction repurposed to focus on the monsters and

grotesquery but not the scare itself.’ (Brooke, 2008: p. 1). The genre covers a range of subgenres, and has been described by Robin Anne Reid as literature which ‘tends to challenge the generic boundaries between fantasy, science fiction, and horror.’ (2009: p. 233). The intent of New Weird is to ‘repurpose and overhaul Gothic literature,’ (Vandermeer, 2011: p. 12) and so the movement is inspired by early writers of weird, horror and Gothic, such as H.P. Lovecraft, Poe and Francis Stevens. In particular, Miéville is a leading figurehead of the modern weird movement, self-classifying as New Weird. Miéville’s collection of short stories, *Looking for Jake*, (2005) comprises of fourteen pieces of fiction which all subvert expectations of science fiction, horror and fantasy, and epitomise the idea of New Weird repurposing horror to focus less on the scare and more on the ‘monsters and grotesquery.’ (Brooke, 2008: p. 1).

Because the genre of New Weird is a relatively recent phenomenon it has attracted scant literary criticism. To analyse *27 Club*, I will be looking at a range of ideas, including those of Jeff Vandermeer (2008, pp. 4-11 and 2011, pp. 10-45) and Robin Anne Reid (2009, pp. 233-235) and comparing works of the New Weird, specifically those of Miéville and Cortazar, to the works in *27 Club*.

#### *1.4 Research Questions*

Chapters 2 through 4 aim to explore and ultimately answer three key aims of research:

1. How does *27 Club* coincide with Spindler’s theories of Magic Realism?
2. How does *27 Club* correspond with the idea of New Weird compared to other authors?
3. How is point of view used in *27 Club*?

## 2.0 Analysis of Magic Realism

### *2.1 Analysis of Metaphysical Magic Realism*

Metaphysical Magic Realism differs from anthropological and ontological Magic Realism in that the fiction does not require otherworldly or supernatural incidents in order to be 'magic.' This style of Magic Realism focuses on the style and tone of the text rather than the events within it. The purpose of metaphysical Magic Realism is to produce an 'alien and disconcerting' (Spindler, 1993: p. 80) effect through the stylistic prose. Spindler writes that metaphysical Magic Realism 'induce[s] a sense of unreality in the reader [...] by which a familiar scene is described as if it were something new and unknown,' (1993: p. 79) the result of which is 'an uncanny atmosphere and the creation within the text of a disturbing impersonal presence, which remains implicit.' (1993: p. 79-80). Spindler explicitly lists Jorge Luis Borges' *The South* (1962: p. 167) as an example of metaphysical Magic Realism for its 'uncanny atmosphere' (p. 79). The main character of *The South*, Dahlmann, is treated at the hospital for a forehead injury. The 'treatment' is so humiliating and severe that the hospital is likened to hell. Once Dahlmann has recovered, he visits a ranch in order to regain his health, where he is challenged to a duel he cannot decline. The story ends with Dahlmann walking out onto the plain, ready to die. *The South* creates the 'uncanny atmosphere' (p. 79) Spindler refers to by juxtapositioning lexis, such as 'the summer's oppressiveness,' (1962: p. 169) and 'he marveled at their not knowing that he was in hell.' (p. 167). Borges creates metaphysical Magic Realism by contrasting connotations. By using 'summer,' which has positive connotations of warmth, passion and vitality, in opposition with the adjectival noun 'oppressiveness,' which has negative implications of tyranny, the metaphysical Magic Realism of *The South* creates an effect that Spindler refers to as 'alien and

disconcerting.' (1993: p. 80). Again, by contrasting the verb 'marvelled,' which has positive implications of wonder and awe, with the noun 'hell,' which has a clear negative connotation, Borges creates a 'a serene and melancholy atmosphere' (Spindler, 1993: p. 80) which 'produce[s] an effect of mystery.' (Spindler, 1993: p. 80). *The South* is an exemplary metaphysical Magic Realism story as it abides by Spindler's description of creating an 'uncanny atmosphere' (1993: p. 79) by using juxtaposition to 'describe a familiar scene' 'as if were something new and unknown' (1993: p. 79) such as an oppressive summer or marvelling whilst in hell.

This is similar to the metaphysical Magic Realism in *Flicker, Fade*, (p. 79) in which the narrator is lying in bed smoking a cigarette, reflecting upon their life. *Flicker, Fade* also has a 'serene and melancholy atmosphere' (Spindler, 1993: p. 80) and is achieved through bleak lexis and despondent scenery, such as 'eerily beautiful' and 'dying bonfire' and the use of repetition in contrasting phrases such as 'you miss...' / 'you don't miss...' and 'you want...' / 'you don't want...'. Like *The South*, the juxtaposition of 'eerily beautiful', with 'eerily' meaning strange or frightening and 'beautiful' meaning pleasing, and the symbolism of 'dying bonfire' suggesting the ending of vitality, metaphysical Magic Realism exists through the disconcerting tone of the lexis. Although 'eerily beautiful' and 'dying bonfire' are not necessarily disconcerting pairings of lexical items, they add to the melancholy atmosphere within the context of the piece, which is a symbolic representation of depression and suicide. The repetition also adds to the metaphysical Magic Realism by creating the despondency within the text. By using 'you miss' and 'you don't miss' in contrast with each other, the narrator is shown to have conflicting feelings about their life; they miss the impersonal aspects of their former life, such as 'the cleanliness and the cooked meals', but not the social aspects of interacting

with other people, as is shown with 'you don't miss your mother's dismay ... you don't miss your father's disappointment ... you don't miss high school friends.' This adds to the 'disturbing impersonal presence' (Spindler, 1993: p. 79) required of metaphysical Magic Realism by distancing the narrator from personal facets of life. The same again happens with the contrasting 'you want' and 'you don't want', where the narrator wants to 'go home', but not to '[their] parents.' The narrator has once again been distanced from other humans, and so becomes more impersonal.

Unlike *The South*, *Flicker*, *Fade* also creates an uncanny atmosphere through the use of second-person point of view. By using the second-person pronoun 'you', the reader is 'convert[ed] into the character,' (Kercheval, 2003: p. 60) where they are told how they are feeling, what they are doing and what is happening to them. This creates 'a sense of unreality' (Spindler, 1993: p. 79) as the literary reality the reader is experiencing is not the actual reality. For example, in *Flicker*, *Fade*, the sentences 'You're twenty, a university student, studying for a degree you're not sure you really want. You live in a small, dingy room in a shared house that you try to keep clean but you just can't see the point.' may not be the actual reality of the reader, but Short's 'willing suspension of disbelief' (1999: p. 259) allows the reader to accept the literary reality in order for the concept of the story to work. However, according to Spindler, this still produces an 'alien and disconcerting' (1993: p. 80) atmosphere due to it still being an 'unreality.' (1993: p. 79).

Spindler proposes metaphysical Magic Realism that it needs to have an eerie, melancholy atmosphere whilst disconcerting the reader through the juxtaposition of lexis. This is true for both *The South* and *Flicker*, *Fade*, as I have shown above.

## 2.2 Analysis of Anthropological Magic Realism

Anthropological Magic Realism differs to metaphysical Magic Realism in that the supernatural elements are more pronounced and feature recognition from the narrator. As discussed, Spindler describes anthropological Magic Realism as a form where 'the narrator usually has 'two voices'. Sometimes he/she depicts events from a rational point of view (the 'realist' component) and sometimes from that of a believer in magic (the 'magical' element).' (1993: p. 80). Although this form of Magic Realism is rare in *27 Club*, it is actualised in *Suffer Little Children (Matthew 19:14)* (p. 15) where the narrator, Maggie, struggles with the idea of her roommate, Cecil, being a fallen angel. When Cecil is first introduced, Maggie asks him, 'when are you gonna give this whole 'fallen angel' thing up?' and goes on to describe him as 'a lunatic', at one point telling him 'I think you've finally fully lost it.' These are examples of Maggie's 'rational point of view' (Spindler, 1993: p. 80) where she is unable to accept that magic could be an explanation for incidents and events. As the story continues, we see Maggie's internal narrative shift, beginning with her answer of 'what - maybe - no, of course not' when questioned whether she thinks Cecil could actually be an angel. Her instinctive reply of 'maybe' shows she is starting to believe there could be alternative explanations for Cecil's behaviour, and not just his declining mental health, although her final answer of 'no of course not' shows how Maggie's 'rational voice' is still dominant. Maggie is also afraid that others may perceive her to be mentally ill, as she does Cecil, which is shown through her fears that 'he might get sectioned'. However, at the end of *Suffer Little Children (Matthew 19:14)*, Maggie's 'second voice', the 'believer in magic (the 'magical' element)' (Spindler, 1993: p. 80) is in control, as is shown with her blunt 'I know' when it becomes evident that Cecil is, in the literal sense, an angel. This relates to Spindler's

theories of anthropological Magic Realism in a chronological sense, as Maggie's two voices change positions of command throughout the story. At first her 'realist' voice is dominant, but her second 'magical' voice is commanding at the end, which I have shown through the analysis.

### *2.3 Analysis of Ontological Magic Realism*

Ontological Magic Realism is the most prominent form of Magic Realism in *27 Club*, as it presents the supernatural 'in a matter-of-fact way as if it did not contradict reason' (Spindler, 1993: p. 82) which is how otherworldly occurrences most often feature in the portfolio. Spindler describes it as the a form of Magic Realism where 'total freedom and creative possibilities of writing are exercised by the author, who is not worried about convincing the reader' (1993: p. 82) and writes the the narrator of ontological Magic Realism is 'not puzzled, disturbed or sceptical of the supernatural, as in Fantastic Literature; he or she describes it as if it was a normal part of ordinary everyday life.' (1993: p. 82) Andrew Kaufman's *All My Friends Are Superheroes* (2003) is a modern example of ontological Magic Realism as almost all the characters except the narrator, Tom, a 'regular' (2003: p. 12), have superpowers, although the book is otherwise set in a realistic depiction of society. The superpowers vary wildly in terms of how supernatural they are, from The Inverse, whom if you shake his hand, 'the exact opposite of your life will flash before your eyes,' (2003: p. 77), to Falling Girl, who, mundanely, falls off things: 'A small sample of things she's fallen from include trees, cars, grace, first-storey windows, horses, ladders, bicycles, the wagon, countless kitchen counters and her grandmother's knee.' (2003: p. 32). In *All My Friends...*, Tom has recently married a superhero, the Perfectionist, who has been hypnotised into thinking he is invisible. The

plot follows Tom's attempts to become visible to her again, ending when he asks her, 'what would make this moment perfect?' (2003: p. 108) and she sees him. Throughout the story, no explanation is offered to the reader as to how the superheroes came to acquire their powers, but is rather 'presented in a matter-of-fact way as if it did not contradict reason.' (Spindler, 1993: p. 82) The world within the the text is otherwise depicted as realistic, as the superheroes have non-supernatural jobs and relationships. Spindler writes that 'the realistic description of events that take place in a normal and plausible framework' (1993: p. 82) and create 'a subjective reality, [and] therefore, the unreal has an objective, ontological presence in the text.' (1993: p. 82-83).

Similarly, in *So Vibrant and Lovely*, the narrator, Monica, presents the supernatural 'as if it was a normal part of ordinary everyday life' (Spindler, 1993: p. 82) which is shown through her interactions with her colleague, Helen, and her reactions to her dead boyfriend, Kyle. During one conversation with Helen, we see that, people staying 'alive' after their death is how the 'world within the text' (Thiem, 1995: p. 235) works, which makes the reader's 'willing suspension of disbelief' (Short, 1996: p. 259) easier to attain:

*'How's Kyle doing?'*

*'Well. You know. He's still dead,' I say, prodding at some lettuce.*

*She nods, a look of condescending pity on her face. Her stupid face. 'My ex-boyfriend died after we'd been together for two years, you know.' I do know, Helen, you talk about it all the time. 'We stayed together for a few months after his death, but eventually... Well, y'know. The smell. It was just too much. We said our goodbyes and he went underground.'* (p. 50-51)

Here, the Magic Realism is shown to exist throughout the entire 'world' of the piece, rather than just one supernatural occurrence that has happened specifically to Monica and Kyle. Monica is also shown to interact with Kyle as though it is 'normal' for him to be dead, as her inner narrative reflects her thoughts and feelings towards him, such as, 'He groans a lot but I think that's just a dead person thing' (p. 52) and when Monica says 'No, it's fine. You're fine. It's not the first time I've found maggots on you, so. It's fine' (p. 54) to Kyle. This aligns with Spindler's theory that the narrator in ontological Magic Realism is not 'puzzled' or 'sceptical' of the supernatural, and that they describe it 'it as if it was a normal part of ordinary everyday life.' (1993: p. 82) However, Spindler writes that the narrator is also not 'disturbed' by the supernatural, whereas Monica shows clear discomfort with Kyle's death, making comments regarding his appearance and how it disgusts her, such as 'sometimes the smell gets so bad that I gip and retch and have to stop myself from being sick' (p. 49) and 'I stop myself before I pull off a bit of his flesh like I did last time. That was disgusting.' (p. 52) Although Monica is not disturbed by the fact that Kyle is still 'alive', she's disturbed by what he is and what he is going to become. This suggests that although the ontological Magic Realism is present within the text and has been accepted as 'a normal part of ordinary everyday life' (Spindler, 1993: p. 82), Monica does not accept it as necessarily 'fantastical', but more grotesque. Another presence of ontological Magic Realism within the text is the flower motif running throughout. Monica makes references to wanting to 'let the harebells and buttercups grow all over' (p. 49) her, and at the end, she lays down in a field and 'wait[s] for the flowers to grow.' (p. 61) Since Monica has already spoken so naturally of her dead boyfriend, which other characters confirmed to be 'normal' within this world, and the reader already has the suspension of disbelief, it's not unexpected of the reader to

question whether or not Monica is literally waiting for flowers to grow on her, as it has already been established that things can happen in Monica's world that can't happen in reality. According to Spindler, when 'the ordinary and the extraordinary are portrayed on exactly the same level of reality [...] the reader is simply invited to accept the ontological reality of the event.' (1993: p. 83) This is what happens in *So Vibrant and Lovely*: the extraordinary of Kyle's 'living-death' being portrayed so naturally means that other, ordinary events, such as the growing flowers, could be fantastical, and 'no explanations are offered for the unreal events in the text' (Spindler, 1993: p. 82), so it remains for the individual to interpret.

Another example of ontological Magic Realism is García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) where supernatural occurrences are presented as if they are a 'normal part of everyday life' (Spindler, 1993: p.82) and are not questioned by the characters. At one part of the story, Remedios the Beauty ascends to heaven whilst hanging out her washing:

Remedios the Beauty was clutching a sheet; 'Quite the opposite,' she said; 'I never felt better.' She just finished saying it when Fernanda felt a delicate wind of light pull the sheets out of her hands, and open them up wide. Amaranta felt a mysterious trembling in the lace of her petticoats and she tried to grasp the sheet, so she wouldn't fall down, at the instant in which Remedios the Beauty began to rise. (1967: p. 253).

Instead of expressing surprise at Remedios' rapture, Fernanda makes note of her now-lost sheets: '[Fernanda] left the sheets to the mercy of the light, as she watched Remedios the Beauty waving goodbye in the midst of flapping sheets that rose up with her... and they were lost forever with her.' (1967: p. 253) This directly relates to

Spindler's theories on ontological Magic Realism, as not only is Fernanda not puzzled, disturbed or sceptical of the fantastical occurrence that she witnessed, but also no explanation is offered as to why Remedios ascended to heaven. In Geetha's essay on García Márquez, he writes that:

One Hundred Years of Solitude includes realism and magic which seem at first to be opposites; they are, in fact, perfectly reconcilable. Both are necessary in order to convey Marquez's particular conception of the world. Marquez's novel reflects reality not as it is experienced by one observer, but as it is individually experienced by those with different backgrounds. [...] Through magical realism he conveys a reality that incorporates magic, superstition, religion and history which are unquestionably infused into the world. (2010: p. 349)

Geetha expands upon Spindler's ideas of ontological Magic Realism by suggesting that the magical elements are a way of presenting the fantastical side of reality, rather than just 'adding' to reality, and that Magic Realism can be used to represent real-life events. Geetha also writes that '[t]he use of real events and Colombian history by Garcia Marquez makes One Hundred Years of Solitude an excellent example of magical realism. Not only are the events of the story an interweaving of reality and fiction, but the novel as a whole tells the history of Colombia from a critical perspective.' (2010: p. 346). This idea of Magic Realism being used to represent real-life events adds another dimension to Magic Realism, in that it can be used for critical reasons as well as just to add fantastical events. In this sense, *Changeling* (p. 30) is similar to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, because although it uses ontological Magic Realism where Rosanna describes her interaction with the fey as though it is a normal part of everyday life, the story is, as a whole, a metaphor for postnatal depression. Rosanna thinks her child is a

'changeling,' because she is disgusted by her and does not love her, which is shown with the description of her emotions toward her baby:

*'I just wasn't a huge fan. Everyone thought she was so cute and beautiful and special, but I didn't see it. She bored me. Personally, I was disappointed. I could have done better. I thought as much the first time I laid eyes on her.'* (p. 30)

*Changeling* uses ontological Magic Realism to symbolise the distress and pain that mothers with postnatal depression suffer. It aligns with Spindler's theories of ontological Magic Realism, as is shown with Rosanna discussing faeries so naturally, such as 'all that got me was an angry knock at the door from the Daoine Sidhe' (p. 30) and 'I was being purposely ignored. [The fey] were still trying to punish me' (p. 31), but it also adheres to Geetha's suggestion that ontological Magic Realism portrays real-life events. In using 'fairies' to represent postnatal depression, fairies become less beings of childhood stories and more gritty, edgy, whereas postnatal depression ascends into an otherworldly realm, instead of just being a horrible reality.

### 3.0 Analysis of New Weird

'New Weird' is new term to describe a literary movement which breaks away from the traditional mould of horror and instead blends it with genres of speculative fiction, such as science-fiction, fantasy, Magic Realism and alternative history. Typically, New Weird narratives feature supernatural beings or events, and sometimes has a utopian/dystopian or apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic setting. As such, New Weird is a rather broad genre, and its exact definition remains disputed. Brooke wrote that New Weird is 'a type of fiction repurposed to focus on the monsters and grotesquery but not the scare itself' (2008: p. 1) whereas Vandermeer describes New Weird as:

[A] type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy, largely by choosing realistic, complex real-world models as the jumping off point for creation of settings that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy. New Weird has a visceral, in-the-moment quality that often uses elements of surreal or transgressive horror for its tone, style, and effects in combination with the stimulus of influence from New Wave writers or their proxies. (2008: p.4).

Reid condenses this idea by firstly mentioning the lack of congruity between critics' ideas of what defines New Weird, and going on to say 'a general consensus uses the term to describe a group of texts that subvert cliches of the fantastic in order to put them to discomfiting, rather than consoling, ends.' (2009: p. 233). Reid agrees with Vandermeer in that New Weird fiction 'tends to challenge the generic boundaries between fantasy, science fiction, and horror.' (2009: p. 233).

China Miéville has publicly self-classified his work as New Weird on several occasions, and as such is highly associated with the literary movement. Miéville is regarded as revitalising transgressive horror, with Vandermeer writing that Miéville 'managed to reinterpret, rewire and overhaul The Weird in novel form, synthesizing the tentacle horrors of Lovecraft with the intellectual rigor of New Wave.' (2011: p. 42). Miéville's *Looking for Jake* (2005) is a collection of New Weird short fiction ranging from post-apocalyptic horror to fantastical science-fiction to politically-charged dystopia. The title story, *Looking for Jake* (2005: p. 4), is epistolary, a letter written to 'Jake,' detailing the 'breakdown' of London, which is referred to as an 'inexact apocalypse.' (2005: p. 8). Large portions of the population have disappeared without explanation, and spectral beings roam the city, referred to by the narrator as 'horsemen.'

(p.12) The story ends with the narrator deciding to go to the Gaumont State Cinema, as he believes there is 'something' in there which is the cause of Jake's disappearance:

I'll tidy up my house and post my letter and stand in front of that edifice,  
squinting at the now-opaque glass which keeps its secrets, and I will go in.

I don't really believe you're in there, Jake, if you're reading this. I don't really believe that any longer. I know that can't be so. But I can't leave it alone. I can leave no stone unturned.

I'm so fucking lonely.

I'll climb those exquisite stairs, if I get that far. I'll cross the grand corridors, wind through tunnels into the great vast hall that I believe will be glowing very bright.

If I get that far.

Could be that I'll find you. I'll find something, something will find me. (2005, p. 14)

The narrator seems less concerned with the reasoning for the apocalypse and is more focussed on the disappearance of Jake. The focus of *Looking for Jake* is Jake's disappearance. The apocalypse, the supernatural beings, which are never fully described, are the background of the story. This relates to Brooke's theory of New Weird repurposing horror to focus on the monsters but 'not the scare itself.' (2008: p. 1). As the story ends on an uncertain note, finishing with 'All my love,' (Mieville, 2005: p. 14), the piece also equates to Reid's idea that New Weird subverts expectations of the fantastical genre with a 'discomfiting, rather than consoling' (2009: p. 233) ending. It is worth noting that *Looking for Jake* also adheres to Spindler's idea of ontological magic realism, where Mieville 'is not worried about convincing the reader.' (Spindler, 1993: p. 82). As Spindler suggests of ontological magic realism, Mieville is not concerned with

offering an explanation for the supernatural occurrences. The narrator is disturbed by the presence of the spectral beings:

The last time I picked up the receiver something whispered to me down the wires, asked me a question in a reverential tone, in a language I did not understand, all sibilants and dentals [...] I put the phone down carefully and have not lifted it since. (Miéville, 2005: p. 5)

The narrator still describes the beings naturally, 'as if it was a normal part of ordinary everyday life.' (Spindler, 1993: p. 82). Miéville shows this through various, off-hand comments, such as how the narrator no longer takes the tube, as it isn't safe, or how it is expected of people to just disappear:

Sometimes, though, they will fall through a faultline in the pavement and disappear with a despairing wail, and the street will be empty. Sometimes they will smell something enticing from a cosy-looking house, trip eager into the open front door and be gone. Sometimes they will pass through glimmering filaments that dangle from the dirty trees, and they will be reeled in. (Miéville, 2005: p. 11).

Both *Changeling* (p. 30) and *So Vibrant and Lovely*<sup>6</sup> (p. 49) conform to Miéville's standard of New Weird. As well as fulfilling Spindler's idea of ontological magic realism, they both meet Vandermeer's expectations of New Weird by 'subvert[ing] the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy.' (2008: p. 4).

*Changeling* does this by 'subvert[ing] clichés of the fantastic in order to put them to discomfiting, rather than consoling, ends.' (Reid, 2009: p. 233) Faeries are, stereotypically, innocent and childlike, but in *Changeling* they torment Rosanna and ultimately lead to her demise. *Changeling* also addresses the idea of 'monsters' without

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<sup>6</sup> The plots of both *Changeling* and *So Vibrant and Lovely* were outlined in Chapter 2.3.

specifically focussing on the scare: whilst the faeries and the Wild Hunt in *Changeling* are supposed to scare Rosanna, they are not supposed to scare the reader, and the overall message of the story is not the horror of the Wild Hunt, but rather the horror of postnatal depression. Like *Looking for Jake's* spectral beings, the faeries in *Changeling* are the background of the story. Likewise, in *So Vibrant and Lovely*, expectations are subverted by avoiding the 'scare.' There has been a rise in the popularity of 'zombie' fiction over the last few years, such as *The Walking Dead* (Kirkman, 2003) and *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* (Ryan, 2009), most of which follow the trope of zombies being cannibalistic. However, whilst Kyle is a grotesque figure, he is not scary. Kyle is the opposite of how 'zombies' are usually portrayed, as he is a kind, loving figure, repeatedly telling Monica 'I y lorr youf' (p. 49) and 'It's not your fault. Please stop feeling so guilty. I don't blame you for [my death] and you shouldn't either.' (p. 59). This conforms with not only Vandermeer's suggestion that New Weird subverts expectations of 'traditional fantasy' (2008: p. 4) but also the general consensus that New Weird blurs genre lines, in this case horror and romance. *So Vibrant and Lovely* is also similar to *Looking for Jake* (Mieville 2005) in the ontological Magic Realism: no explanation is offered for the events, the reader is merely invited to accept it.

Vandermeer cites Cortazar's *Axolotl* (1952: p. 155) as early New Weird, starting in the '1940s and 1950s.' (2011: p. 12). In *Axolotl*, the narrator details how he visited axolotls at the aquarium every day, sometimes spending hours watching them, and how he eventually turned into an axolotl:

There was a time when I thought a great deal about the axolotls. I went to see them in the aquarium at the Jardin des Plantes and stayed for hours watching

them, observing their immobility, their faint movements. Now I am an axolotl.

(1952: p. 155)

The narrator tells the reader how he felt close to the axolotls, 'I knew that we were linked, that something infinitely lost and distant kept pulling us together' (p. 156), and, as the narrator begins describing the axolotls, he stops saying 'them' and 'they' and starts saying 'we' and 'us', as is shown here:

It's that we don't enjoy moving a lot, and the tank is so cramped—we barely move in any direction and we're hitting one of the others with our tail or our head—difficulties arise, fights, tiredness. The time feels like it's less if we stay quietly.

(1952: p. 155)

The narrator details his transitioning into an axolotl as if it were natural, stating, 'there was nothing strange in what happened' (1952: p. 156) and that there was 'no transition and no surprise.' (1952: p. 156) He offers no explanation for the occurrence, just writing that he 'knew instantly that no understanding was possible.' (1952: p. 157). The story finishes with the narrator writing, 'I am an axolotl for good now, and if I think like a man it's only because every axolotl thinks like a man inside his rosy stone semblance.' (1952: p. 158).

*Axolotl* conforms to both Reid's idea of 'discomfiting ends', (2009: p. 233) and Vandermeer's idea of combining 'surreal elements' with 'transgressive fantasy.' (2008: p.4). The story is ambiguous, as it left to the reader to decide whether *Axolotl* is about a man who succumbs to his schizophrenia, or if, in a fantastical event, he really did transform into an axolotl. Spindler writes of *Axolotl* whilst discussing ontological magic realism, stating it can be 'interpreted at the psychological level, and the events described seen as the product of the mind of a 'disturbed' individual.' (1993: p. 82) *Axolotl* is an

exemplary instance of early New Weird, as it blends fantasy, science-fiction, magic realism and even horror: Turning into an axolotl would be, to most, a terrifying incident, but the narrator just accepts his fate. This coincides with Brooke's theory of New Weird focussing on 'monsters' but 'not the scare itself.' (2008: p. 1).

*Axolotl's* New Weird ambiguity is similar to that of *King of Hearts*. (p. 65). In *King of Hearts*, the narrator has had a heart transplant, the donor of which was a man who died by suicide. Over the course of the story, the narrator's new heart begins 'talking' to him, asking why he is 'still alive' when he 'should be dead.' As the story unfolds, the narrator slips further into his madness-cum-haunting, and ends with the narrator seeing an unknown man in the mirror:

Standing in front of my mirror, a middle-aged man gazes back. He imitates my movements. There are no lights in his eyes. He is a dead man. He is my dead man, and he wants his heart back. Why am I alive? I died. I should be dead. I should be dead.

In the mirror, he raises a gun to his head. (p. 67)

As in *Axolotl*, the events in *King of Hearts* are ambiguous as either the narrator has developed a mental disorder due to the trauma of having a heart transplant, or the ghost of the dead man is truly haunting him. No explanation as to which it is has been offered to the reader, which is a form of ontological magic realism: no clarification of *why* the supernatural has occurred, or if it has even occurred at all. *King of Hearts* also adheres to both Reid's theory of New Weird subverting expectations to achieve discomfiting ends (2009: p. 233) as well as Vandermeer's idea that New Weird fiction is comprised of 'elements of surreal or transgressive horror.' (2008: p. 4). Alternatively, *King of Hearts* doesn't necessarily blend genres, as has been suggested of New Weird: it is, mostly,

horror. However, *King of Hearts* remains New Weird as it is not necessarily just a frightening story, as there are also overtones of sadness, such as 'He shot himself in the head. / What must his wife have thought? / He didn't even leave her a note.' (p. 67)

Unlike traditional horror, where the intent is to terrify, the purpose of *King of Hearts* is, similar to *Axolotl*, not to scare the reader, but rather to allude to mental health issues, and whether or not the 'haunting' is symbolism for schizophrenia offset by trauma.

*Love Story* (p. 41), also in the style of New Weird, attempts to subvert tropes and clichés, but of the romance genre rather than horror. As the title suggests, it is a stereotypical love story, riddled with romantic clichés, such as 'their eyes met' across the room, Joe 'shooting [Charlotte] furtive glances' and 'Sparks flew. Butterflies swarmed. Hearts burst. Faces warmed.' The story continues in this fashion until the end, when, during intercourse, Charlotte turns into a 'gigantic spider.' No explanation is given for this, nor are hints or clues provided in the text. Instead of the standard 'and they all lived happily ever after' ending that is expected of fairytale love stories, I chose to subvert expectations and 'blend' the romance genre with fantastical horror. This has led to a New Weird story which 'challenges the consolatory effect of some fantasy that works in clichés' (Reid, 2009: p. 235) whilst having an 'in-the-moment quality that [...] uses elements of surreal or transgressive horror for its tone, style, and effects.' (Vandermeer, 2008: p. 4). *Love Story* shows how New Weird fiction does not necessarily need to blend only horror with fantasy and science-fiction, but can combine other genres and still conform to the general consensus of New Weird.

## 4.0 Analysis of Point of View

### *4.1 First-Person Point of View*

First-person point of view is the most-used narrative voice throughout *27 Club*. Short writes that when a story is written in the first-person viewpoint, the narrator is usually either 'limited or unreliable' (1996: p. 257) by 'not knowing all the facts' (p. 257) or 'withholding the truth.' (p. 257). By withholding truth from the reader, either purposely or unknowingly, the narrator can provide surprises or twists that would have been less subtle from a different point of view. This idea is utilised throughout different stories in *27 Club*. For example, in *Suffer Little Children (Matthew 19:14)*, which is written in the first-person, Maggie is an unreliable narrator, as she suffers Multiple Personality Disorder caused by a traumatic event in her past. If the story had been written in third-person, it would have been easier for the reader to identify that Maggie was talking to herself in the mirror, but due to the first-person present-tense point of view, it is much less obvious. There are some subtle hints dropped throughout, such as 'I'll always have you' (p. 23) and 'are you in any position to be calling anyone mental' (p. 22), but, for the most part, it is something of a shock to learn that the narrator is 'therapist' Maggie. Lodge writes that this type of unreliable narrator is used to 'reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter.' (1992: p. 155) This is partly Maggie's purpose within the plot: to show how everything is not always as it seems, which makes Cecil being an angel far more believable within the context of the story. Lodge states 'this need not be a conscious, or mischievous, intention on their part,' (1992: p. 155) which again is true regarding Maggie's status as an unreliable narrator. She is not purposely withholding information from the reader, she is merely expressing her own reality. This viewpoint is very similar

to Palahniuk's unreliable narrator in *Fight Club* (1996) in which it transpires that the two main protagonists are the same person. *Fight Club* is also written in first-person, which makes it much easier for the narrator to conceal the truth from the reader. As in *Fight Club*, *Suffer Little Children (Matthew 19:14)* employs first-person point of view to conceal the unreliability of the narrator, and, as such, create a twist ending.

#### 4.2 Second-Person Point of View

*27 Club* experiments with use of the second-person throughout. Second-person viewpoint is still regarded as a relatively unusual literary device as it can be used ambiguously, as described by Fludernik: '[The] second-person may turn out to be a specific fictional character, or the reader of the story, or even the narrator himself or herself, or not clearly or consistently the one or the other.' (1996: p. 275). In a great deal of second-person fiction, however, this literary device is used to 'convert the reader into the character,' (Kercheval, 2003: p. 59) and can 'involve readers intimately and immediately within the story.' (Kercheval, 2003: p. 60) Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979), begins each chapter with second-person point of view, which describes 'you' trying to read a book, and the second half of the chapter devolves into a new book: the book 'you' are reading. Immediately the reader is placed within the story, and is told what they are thinking, what they are doing and what type of person they are: 'you are sat at your desk,' (p7), 'you prefer it this way,' (p6) and 'you're the sort of person who, on principle, no longer expects anything of anything.' (p. 4). Whilst this is effective in that it directly places the reader within the story, it also alludes to Spindler's idea of metaphysical Magic Realism, as it creates a sense of 'unreality' (1993: p. 79) as the reader is not necessarily experiencing the reality that they are being told. The reader

may not be 'sat at their desk,' and they may not 'prefer it this way,' but in keeping with Short's idea of the 'willing suspension of disbelief' (1996: p. 259) the reader can 'take on assumptions and attitudes [they] would not usually hold.' (p. 259). Although the literary reality is different to their actual reality, the reader is able to embrace the use of second-person as a literary device meant to be enjoyed within the context of the narrative.

*Space Diving* (p. 5), a story about a person grappling with their depression and ultimately succumbing to it, is similar to *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* in the way it employs the use of second-person point of view. Again, the reader is placed within the story as the central character, and is presented with their literary reality through the use of second-person:

*'You take your tablets four times a day. You cry sometimes. You smoke more and more and more. You consider tripping acid. You consider trying to meet someone new. You think, everyone has their own version of yellow paint. You pause. You consider eating yellow paint.'* (p. 5)

Although this is not the reader's literal reality, as in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, they can still implement their suspension of disbelief in order to fully engage with the narrative. The reader is, as Kercheval states, involved 'intimately and immediately within the story' (2003: p. 60) and so, for the sake of the context, the reader is able to imagine that these actions are happening to them in the literary reality. As *Space Diving* uses 'demons' and 'wraiths' as symbolism for depression, the use of second-person is important as it creates 'an environment of empathy.' (Dawes, 2008: p. 2). *Space Diving* uses this idea of an environment of empathy in conjunction with second-person narrative voice to demonstrate to the reader how it feels to suffer from depression: as if you are being 'haunted' by evil spirits. Instead of reading about it once

removed, by using second-person, the reader is placed directly within the text as though they themselves are experiencing the narrator's depression. The controlling idea for this story is that it is easier to sympathise if an incident has involved you personally. Instead of using first-person or third-person to display a separate entity, *Space Diving* employs second-person to make the reader the narrator, to make the reader suffer and to make the reader empathise.

Unlike *Space Diving* and *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, *Be Not Inhospitable* (p. 62) uses second-person point of view in a different manner. At first, *Be Not Inhospitable* appears to use 'you' as a way to place the reader within the text, as it begins with:

*You didn't cry when you lost all your hair. You didn't cry when your bones started to show through your skin, and you didn't cry when they told you there was nothing they could do. But you cried when you realised you would not live to see your daughter's graduation.* (p. 62)

*Be Not Inhospitable* is the third instance of second-person in *27 Club*, and is an open love-letter from a guardian angel to a dead woman. By this point, I would hope that the reader has established that the collection uses second-person as a way to 'convert the reader into the character.' (Kercheval, 2003: p. 59). This would suggest that the reader already has a suspension of disbelief upon realising *Be Not Inhospitable* is second-person. However, this notion is dispelled after the first few paragraphs when first-person is introduced: 'You have always been my favourite. You have always been the one I loved most.' (p. 62) Until now, second-person in *27 Club* has been used as a form of direct address, and even though the use of 'you' still *feels* as if the reader is being addressed directly by the narrator, after a brief adjustment period, the reader should be

comfortable with the idea that 'you' is being implemented in place of the third-person pronoun 'she.' The narrator is addressing someone else entirely, whom the reader cannot 'see', so to speak. Thiem writes that this type of textualisation of the reader leads to them being a 'watcher' (1995: p. 237), where, as typical of third-person fiction, the reader is 'watching' a story unfold, rather than 'living' through it. This use of second-person is more of an experiment with third-person point of view. As in *Space Diving*, I wanted to create 'an environment of empathy' (Dawes, 2008: p. 2) and I intended to use second-person to evoke greater emotion from the reader, as the 'feeling' of direct address makes the narrator's compassion more immediate.

Overall, second-person point of view is deployed in *27 Club* to not only place the reader within the text, but to create 'an environment of empathy' (Dawes, 2008: p. 2) and to evoke greater emotion from the reader.

## 5.0 Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to address three research questions outlined in Chapter 1.4. In Chapter 2, I discussed the first research question by demonstrating how different stories throughout *27 Club* coincide with Spindler's theories of metaphysical, anthropological and ontological Magic Realism, as well as how the pieces relate to published works of magic realist fiction, such as Kaufman's *All My Friends Are Superheroes* (2004) and Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. (1976) The second research question was explored in Chapter 3, by analysing the New Weird in *27 Club* in comparison to other works of New Weird fiction. I demonstrated how stories within *27 Club* compare to Mieville and Cortazar's work, and have discussed how they allude to Vandermeer's and Reid's ideas of the New Weird. I addressed the third research question in Chapter 4:

*27 Club* uses first-person and second-person point of view to create unreliable narrators, place the reader within the text and evoke stronger emotions, and to create an 'environment of empathy.' (Dawes, 2008: p. 2).

Ultimately, *27 Club* is a collection which features numerous instances of Magic Realism and New Weird. Had there been no restriction on the word limit, I would have been able to provide a far more in-depth analysis of every instance of each, as well as outline more fully the use of point of view. There are other aspects to *27 Club* that I would have liked to explore in more detail, such as the recurring themes of love, death and religion, and future projects may allow me to discuss these. As theories on New Weird are rare, the genre would benefit from further study to create a coherent model for analysis, which, again, provides scope for a future project. I shall continue to write short fiction which embodies Magic Realism and New Weird and experiment with point of view. Cox wrote short stories offer 'boundless scope for linguistic virtuosity and formal experimentation' (2005: p. 1) - and what would one write short fiction for, if not to experiment?

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