Prime Meridian: A Collection of Short Stories

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Prime Meridian
A Collection of Short Stories

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to Professor George O’Har, my advisor, for his inspiration and patience. Thank you to my parents for their love, support, and a Boston College education.
The December air was crisp, marking the eclipse of midday into late afternoon. After spending an hour in the National Portrait Gallery in London, I made my way over to a bookseller in the heart of Trafalgar Square. I browsed the shelves, deciding on a whim to make a Christmas list of books to buy for family and friends, something that I had been putting off since the beginning of the semester. Curiously, I came across a date book on the front table, wedged in between some best sellers. A guilty pleasure took over: perusing date books that I don’t particularly need. An hour later, I stood at the same table, fingering through the pages of date and address books. Finally, making a purchase markedly different from my original purpose, I reluctantly parted with my foreign money. For the remainder of the day, I wondered if my £20 was well spent.

My newly acquired date book featured Scottish-born artist Jack Vettriano. Vettriano grew up in Scotland’s coalfield community, and emerged as an untrained, self-taught painter, using his own experiences to create provocative paintings that are both successful and controversial. They have been described as “pulp fiction novel covers” and “railway posters” of the 1950s, and have an irrefutably nostalgic quality. His most famous work, *The Singing Butler*, now outsells van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* and Monet’s *Water Lilies* in Europe and the United Kingdom.

The Portland Gallery in London holds the largest collection of Vettriano’s paintings, and is the most knowledgeable resource in the work. The Portland Gallery’s Tom Hewlett notes that what attracted him to Jack Vettriano’s work “is [its] narrative quality…like reading a book, your mind puts together the scenes as described by the author…it enables the viewer to engage with the painting and then develop it.”
Vettriano’s scenes hook the viewer, providing the detail and inspiration for a range of narrative stories. One of the gifts Vettriano possesses is the ability to make the viewer use his imagination to the fullest. New York Times journalist Sarah Lyall discusses the magnetic nature of Vettriano’s paintings in “An Artist Loved By No One but the Public.”

Lyall notes that “…critics tend either to ignore Mr. Vettriano or to swat him lazily away with the backs of their cultured hands,” it is the fact that “…He paints images that are uncomplicated, easy to understand, don't need explaining to the general public and which the general public can engage with” that makes Vettriano an artist of the people.

Even after the publication of Fallen Angels, a collection of works that pair Vettriano’s paintings with famous Scottish writing, I still felt that it was necessary to compose stories that focused on the paintings themselves. The cliché stands: a picture is worth a thousand words. My “ah ha!” moment came when I realized that the artist’s pictorial narrative was not enough, and that every brush stroke, color, every scene and every event that this artist depicts is just another piece of his ongoing narrative.

This collection begins with “Tube Tension,” a story about a man who finds clarity in a spontaneous engagement through a turbulent London Tube ride. “Brick Lane” focuses not on the woman in Vettriano’s painting, but the scene behind her. It is a story about how we remember the past, and if these memories are enough to sustain us through the present. “Know Guardrails” follows a woman who has just been diagnosed with a terminal illness.

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“Street Noise” is a story in which a young woman has flashbacks to an event that changes her perception of the media and the world forever. “The Pier” proves to be anything but, when a son has to convince his mother why he must leave her, his hometown, and everything he knows. “The Zoo” is a day in the life of a London pub worker. He is forced to the Coroner’s Office when someone who he has seen at a nightclub is found dead.

When I began to write these fiction stories, my true intention was to follow closely to what was represented in each painting. I discovered that these stories began to take on a life of their own, and needed to be lassoed in to remain true to the painting. Many of these stories became swirling commentaries of not only what was present within the painting, but a background narrative that hopefully held as much, if not more, relevance and meaning.

The following is my attempt to create a narrative from Vettriano’s paintings, and proceed with the hope that I am doing them all of the justice that they deserve.

Enjoy.
London was beginning to illuminate herself against the night. Electric lights sizzled and jagged in the main thoroughfares, gas-lamps in the side streets glimmered a canary gold or green. The sky was a crimson battlefield of spring, but London was not afraid. Her smoke mitigated the splendour, and the clouds down Oxford Street were a delicately painted ceiling, which adorned while it did not distract.

from E.M. Forster, *Howards End*
“Tube Tension”
He loathed the smell that milk left on a tile floor. Marcus shook his head at the spill.

“Bloody Hell,” he whispered to no one in particular, sure not to wake Eleanor.

When he awoke from a restless sleep at 7:30 that morning, Marcus made sure to tiptoe into the kitchen, dried sculpting clay maneuvering between every one of his exposed toes. He went through the fridge, convinced that the discolored Brie was not normal for reasons other than its French descent. The produce bins were empty, which was somehow not a shock. Maybe her creative spirit hadn’t allowed Eleanor to make her way to the grocer. As he sat on the sofa bed resenting her latest words, he readjusted his Velcro oxfords to make his way for the Sunday market to buy some food, specifically her favourite dessert, Eccles Cakes.

His trip downtown consisted of a series of pushes, shoves and bodies crowding one another. Mind the Gap, the stickies screamed its silent message. Useless warnings for the apathetic. When the automated voice from above attempted enthusiasm, Marcus sighed, glancing to either side and clutching his pocket. He smoothed out the papers in his pocket, the tickets he’d booked months ago, as if their condition determined whether or not his master plan would be a success.

An old woman closed her eyes in silent prayer, as she searched for something in the train to hold onto, the flyaway of her graying hair becoming caught in the metal handrails. When her eyelids parted, a sudden halt threw the passengers forward, turning Marcus’ grin into a gasp as he managed to balance one foot, then the other, to keep from flying to the front of the car. At once, the mouth of each train car opened abruptly, spitting out its passengers as quickly as it had consumed them.

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1 Eccles Cake: Puff pastry stuffed with a spicy currant filling.
That was the funny thing about travel, Marcus thought. As a person who had spent his life moving from one place to the next, Devonshire to Chelmsford to University and now to London, he had acquired a certain kinship with strangers, especially on the Tube. There was a commonality that they all shared: it was a means to an end, a method of getting somewhere better or more important than their current situation. Marcus saw these rides as new a kind of adventure, where the predictability of his life met the unknown.

He heard her voice in the back of his mind.

“Oh Marcus, you know, let the creative spirit move you…like, do something spontaneous for once.”

Creative spirit. Spontaneity. Eleanor liked to drop these words in conversation, as if she was a real artiste. They were her weapons of mass destruction, strategically timed for when she wasn’t getting exactly what she wanted.

A wave of humidity hit him as he quickly stepped out between the moving doors. The only breeze came from the swoosh of connecting cars on their way to and from somewhere else. He accidentally kicked an empty can of digestives with his worn-out shoes, watching as it rolled haphazardly to the edge of the track, disappearing over the side. He could use a digestive, he thought sardonically, as the putrid smell of the refrigerator returned to his nostrils. Marcus ducked through a passageway that, signs said, would bring him above ground to civilization.

Only moments after leaving the train, perspiration formed on his brow. It was hotter than Hell in there. He doubted, however, that Hell had as many colorful advertisements. Marcus had no choice except to hike up the vaulting staircases that
connected all of the tangled colored lines of the trains, a marriage of parallel Metropolitan, Hammersmith and City, and Circle lines, forming sporadic intersections that made no sense to him until after six months living here. After each victorious climb upward, his cramped legs would hit a plateau, stopping just long enough to be thankful for a break. Inevitably, another flight of steps appeared before he could emerge into the main station area.

A glowing Carlsberg sign greeted him, misplaced among the battered walls. It tempted him to stop and take a drink--any drink--before his ascent up the stairs. Ignoring it, he climbed the first pyramid, making sure to place each step to avoid the rancid stains. An elderly couple appeared in front of him without warning, both with respective crutches: him with his cane and her with his arm. Unlike most days when Marcus would have audibly huffed and hurried past, he relished in the unanticipated delay. He wondered whether that would be him and Eleanor in years to come, with her holding onto him for support. That wasn’t spontaneity: that was devotion.

Marcus now comprised the caboose of the commuters, moving slowly enough to reach into his pocket and view the tickets yet again. The bright glow on the wall beside him provided the most clarity that he had encountered since exiting the train. These strips of paper hadn’t left his pocket in a week. The duo read: Victoria Station. First Class. Departure: London Waterloo 12:09. Arrival: Paris Nord 15:59.

He pulled his tan blazer toward his wrists. There was a cool fluid dripping down his forearm. Good thing that he had remembered to put on deodorant. Always conscientious, he sometimes was stunned at how different he and Eleanor actually were. She had no problem living in her own Brie and clay, while he was neat, punctual, and
efficient. This was how he made such a good living as a banker. Being precise and somewhat anal was in his job description. And this job, he had found, suited him devastatingly well. His mother recently reminded him of an occasion when he was six years old and there had been talk of spending a day at Burnham Beeches. That night, he had bounced from mattress to mattress for hours in anticipation, long after his family had gone to sleep. That morning, before any of them had made a bed, Marcus was ready with travel mugs, tea, and pasties in a picnic basket, and had fallen asleep sitting by the front door. He would always be a boy scout at heart. A smile crossed his face as he recalled these days with his family.

As he started down the stairway, he let the stale air hit his nostrils with unabashed force.

He had a feeling that what he was doing was right thing. And by feeling, he meant more than just that knot in his stomach caused by the thought of her or the aftermath of Asian fusion foods. His father had done it right outside the home that they had lived in for the past thirty-five years. He had knelt next to the chipping wrought iron banister at the entrance to the house, flowers perfectly arranged next to the door, and asked her to be his. Would Eleanor’s response be anything like his mother’s?

A flautist played on a self-made bandstand; it was something classical but catchy. Marcus stared straight ahead, trying to remember the name of the piece as the musician gasped for each note. It was probably the most popular song at weddings. She breathed in loudly for the final note, onlookers stopping to stare. Pachabels Canon: he remembered it now. Maybe, just maybe, this was his sign.
When he had told Eleanor the story of his parents getting together, she had given a small scoff.

“And they’ve lived together in the same house ever since then?”

“Yes, they have.” Marcus couldn’t help but get slightly defensive.

“Funny that some people can make it through almost thirty years together in the same house while others can’t even make it seven years with the same person.”

Eleanor still harbored bitterness toward her childhood late-night take-away dinners with Dad. Since Marcus had been with her, he had proved to her that it didn’t have to be that way. For a woman with whom nothing was ever dull and conversation never faltered, the subject of family always resulted with a change in her tone. Marcus always withheld a reaction, hoping that in time she would change her attitude. His mother had been happy for the past thirty years ushering patients into his father’s office and putting them at ease in the presence of oral drills and gold fillings. Was he being unrealistic?

The first time she met his family, Eleanor came as close as she could to saying that his family lacked creative spirit without actually saying it. When he had suggested that the creative spirit wasn’t a substitution for making a living, he had slammed a door to get his point across. She, obviously in vehement disagreement, went as far as to chuck one of her hand-made clay vases across the room at him when he ventured out of the half-bath.

The sweat began now to tumble down his forehead between his bushy eyebrows onto the crest of his Roman nose. As he topped another pyramid in the Tube, his hand
hastily placed the tickets back into his left pocket. An ad for Virgin Atlantic, “The Better Way to Fly,” appeared at the apex of the stairwell.

Ah, the tickets. They would arrive in Paris late that afternoon, stop at the Louvre before checking into their two-star hotel, where they could make passionate love until the next morning, when they would feast on croissants and *jus d’orange*, no pulp. They would then do as the Parisians did—walk along the Seine, explore Notre Dame. At night, they would climb to the top of the Eiffel Tower and after a rich dinner of escargot, he would propose. Eleanor deserved for her relationship to be an adventure, which is why Marcus had carefully planned every detail of their engagement.

A cramp took hold of one of his ambitious legs, forcing him to stop at the bottom of the stairwell. He heaved and placed a hand on either knee.

In one of their conversations, Eleanor lying askew on her sofa, puppy on her chest, Marcus sitting next to the coffee table on the floor, he had said something in his typical style that had sent her convulsing in laughter; her cute little snorts punctuating every breath. She shooed the puppy onto the floor so as to crawl over to Marcus and all but knock him over with her hug. As he hit the crest of the stairwell and began his decent, he laughed out loud. That laugh and hug was almost enough to negate every irresponsible and immature thing she’d ever done.

The cramp regained a hold on his leg, forcing him to slow down his pace substantially. No matter. Before he knew it, fluorescent lighting had fallen over the station, reflecting off of his face and exposing his soaked underarms. A security guard offered him a revolted glance. Marcus followed the man’s line of vision to his left pocket. During his many ascents and descents, Marcus had kept his hand on the tickets. He
removed it now, slowly, as if to show that he had nothing to hide. He sideswiped his jacket against the cement of the yellowish wall, anxious to get away from the prying eyes of the guard. His athletic calves made an umph as he fell to the pavement, bringing down someone with him.

“Eleanor?”

Standing again and wiping off her trench coat, she turned toward him, her tongue lodged playfully between her lips.

“Um, no,” she muttered, her forehead creasing.

She looked surprisingly like Eleanor, Marcus mused. Kneeling at her feet, he felt around his pants for the tickets and his wallet. The resemblance was uncanny. It was like his girlfriend got rid of her artsy clothing, pound thrift shop purchases, and ate two potpies.

Only someone dashingly romantic and incredibly dramatic would present trip tickets to a woman outside of a train station, on one knee. Especially to someone he’d never met before. Marcus imagined looking suave in his black suit and new shoes. The Eleanor look-alike would be swept off her feet, not knowing which way to turn as Marcus the magician pulled tricks from each sleeve. Her trench coat billowing in the wind, hair pulled back into a messy pony, tongue between her lips. As he slowly revealed the tickets from his pocket, her hand would cover her mouth in shock. Exaggerated, of course, like the old movies. He would tell Eleanor look-alike to meet him at the station when the train was leaving. It would all be very Bogart.

“Ele, you must understand, this woman was outside the Tube, and, well, I was feeling spontaneous, the creative spirit moving me, so I’m taking a short trip…”
Laughing at the look Eleanor would surely give him and trying to imagine what she would decide to throw at him, he glanced again in the direction of the Eleanor look-alike. This time she gave him a queer scowl and began to walk away from the scene.

When he arrived back at the Mount Pleasant Street apartment (a name that he had always liked because of its non-city feel), equal weight of groceries in both hands like a scale, he saw that the real Eleanor begin to stir under the covers. He sat on the cushions and stroked her head. Leaning over her, he brushed the brittle hair off of her nose. He moved his other hand to his pocket, again smoothing out its contents.

“I went to the store and bought your favourite breakfast,” he half-whispered. Proud of his early morning fly-by-the-seat-of-his-pants initiative, he gave himself a mental pat on the back. The sheets rustled as she turned her body, pretending not to hear him.

“Wake up,” Marcus whispered even more sweetly.

Just barely opening one eye, she regarded him, and closed it without a sound.

“Oh,” she said mid-yawn. She normally only took that tone with the dog when he refused to eat. “That’s really nice,” she said, the sleep falling away from her eyelids. “But I’m actually going to be out all day at a gallery opening.”

His face dropped.

“But I mean, I can bring it with me. Yes, that’s what I’ll do! I’ll bring it and eat it midday when I get hungry.”

She forced a smile from ear to ear, making her long face pucker awkwardly. Marcus immediately regretted not being nicer to Eleanor’s look-alike.
Retreating silently to the kitchen, he unpacked the grocery bag full of Eccles cakes. The screech and trickle of the shower echoed throughout the studio. As he went to remove the rotting Brie from the top shelf, he suddenly stopped and abruptly closed the refrigerator door.
“Brick Lane”
“…He’s gone, Theresa…”

The harsh words echoed in her ears. Charlene was bitter and wrong. And Theresa was left at Vibe Bar to wait hopefully for the sound of her sister’s shoes growing closer.

As they strolled down the main drag of Brick Lane, hundreds of small tents formed one monstrous, overarching circus tent that protected its loyal shoppers, nearly blocking out the slew of tall, brick buildings reaching high into the air. As always, the Sunday ambiance of the market proved to be very different than the cascading idleness of the weekdays. On the first day of the week, pedestrians passed signs for Aladin and Sheba restaurants, stopping into Beigel Bake for the best breads in the city and at produce stands for their weekly groceries.

Sunday was the one day of the week that Theresa longed for; the one-day that Brick Lane and the surrounding alleyways looked alive, like this. This was real to her; this was her. She couldn’t help but smile.

She continued to pace slowly through the marketplace, Charlene’s high stilettos clacking against the crumbling sidewalk, drowning out the street music and yells of price cuts. Charlene’s belt-buckle shrugged with every change in her hips, her pursed lips occasionally opening to let out a yawn. Theresa considered her elder sister’s indifference to their childhood stomping ground a personal affront. Every minute that Charlene glanced down at her watch made Theresa more and more upset, as if their time together, as if Brick Lane, was only to be measured in the slowly passing seconds of a long hand.

As the pair meandered past each tent with makeshift signs, pleading “fresh produce” and “best price,” Theresa heard her sister huff as she stamped her shoes on the cobblestone to release the fruits that clung to them. As she bent her knees to get better
leverage, her trench coat swept the dirty ground, staining the fabric. Shoppers and stand owners continued to step around Charlene, obstructing the lane. A bruised mango escaped from a wooden crate carried about a head and tumbled to the ground only to sideswipe Charlene’s arm.

“Drat!”

Flashing a look of disgust at the produce, Charlene continued to wipe her shoes on the ground, brush off her trench coat, and attend to the mango stain on her upper arm.

Theresa took her sister’s bag from her as Charlene cleaned herself off. Theresa always found it amazing how each precariously constructed tent held itself up, shielding the goods from the cruel weather; crude coverings held up by wobbly, rusty poles. The stands stood in front of the brick apartments and stores, some of which could be accessed by going through the tents, others that had closed up and were only doing business during the middle hours of this Sunday. The clouds hovered above the stands, and, as though the owners anticipated the chance of showers, made sure to carefully reinforce each tent with newspaper and towels.

Charlene continued to stop and wipe her trench coat every few feet.

“Just let me know when you have to be going. I know that this is your day off,” Theresa said to her sister.

“No, it’s okay” Charlene said, throwing a sideways glance to the West. Theresa knew that it was an hour trip for her sister to come here from Petticoat Lane on the other side of the City, and didn’t want to add to her frustration.
Theresa gave a small, victorious smile as they continued to walk. The streets were packed, and the women had all they could do to squeeze past small girls in saris with jeweled wrists.

Aldgate East was the Tube stop that led to Brick Lane, the one that Theresa and her sister would exit every weekend. Only a short ride from their childhood home, it was the one place where the Resnick family could go to be with some of their own, an area full of London’s Jewish population. Even though hundreds of kilos of produce surrounded them, the smell of Bengali foods and spices still cut the air and pierced their noses. Despite its transformation to a predominantly Bengali district, Theresa could still recognize old signs of the Jewish delis and stores; the “li’s” on the red brick were a faded reminder of the past. As a little girl, Theresa used to pretend that Brick Lane was the yellow brick road, becoming lost in its mystery.

Her familiarity with the streets and walkways made her calm, and asking the vendors for a price became like asking family; each vendor knew her by name. They would greet her like an old friend, and had it been later in the day, would have probably invited her into their homes for supper. A bagful of half-price goods would drag at her side every time she left Brick Lane.

She waved to Edward, who, as usual, moved from shop to shop to sweep each stoop for ten cents. He smiled back at her. Thanks to Edward, Brick Lane, their father used to joke, was cleaner than their own home. Now, Charlene stopped wiping her arm in the middle of the grimy cobblestone street. As they continue ambling and shopping, Charlene regarded each stand owner, with a mix of disgust and interest, as he proceeded with his daily tasks, something she’d witnessed hundreds of times before. Theresa always
became lost in the quickness with which they felt through the mountains of fruit for ripeness. Rapidly, each vendor discerned between the good and bad, the fresh and the bruised, discarding the unwashed produce into old wooden barrels on the side of the splintered stands.

“Sometimes I look around and can’t believe that we used to come here all of the time when we were young,” Charlene said.

Finally, Theresa thought, they could talk candidly about Brick Lane. Finally, they could talk about their father. But just as Theresa was about to ask her sister if she missed Dad, Charlene veered off of the Lane to look at merchandise, picking through some of the jewelry and scarves. Theresa watched her, wondering how she and her sister lived such different lives. She should just wear a sign that said: “not-so-secretly wishing to be in my West End sanctuary.”

“Why don’t I get us something to eat?” Theresa asked, wanting to rid herself of this brooding. She didn’t bother to wait for a response, and decided on sandesh.\(^2\) She bought it and offered it up to Charlene’s boredom.

“Here you go,” she said with a smile.

“Oh, thanks.”

“You’ve got it next time,” Theresa managed between crumbling bites. Charlene acted deaf to her comment.

“These are very fattening, you know. That’s what my new diet book says,” Charlene said.

“What do they know?” Theresa said under her breath, between bites. What she really meant to say was “what do you know?” When Theresa was six and she cut off her

\(^2\) Sandesh are Bengali sweets made from burnt milk.
own bangs, Charlene had been the first one to say that it would grow back soon enough. When Theresa ruined Charlene’s doll by giving it a wash in the tub, Charlene promptly forgave her, saying that she was dirty anyway. Apparently, Charlene did know something. It was the diet book that she didn’t trust.

Theresa used the crumbling sweets as an excuse to leave her sister’s side, asking a vendor for a napkin in hand motions and muffled words.

Of all the Brick Lane vendors, there was one in particular whom Theresa always liked to see. Today it was a special relief for her to see Kammal from across the street in the busy market. He had his stand set up at the Brick Lane market every Sunday, without fail, for the past fifteen years. Theresa remembered the time when his midnight hair blended with his dark complexion, not like the graying strands that presently laced his hair, reflecting the sky and the weather. Kammal’s stand was by far the cleanest and best kept on the entire lane, which endeared him to her even more, if that was possible. Her long history with Kammal had begun the first time that he delivered produce to her father’s store.

It was a week after her ninth birthday, the balmy summer day beginning at six in the morning when her father, Joel Resnick, opened the family store by the same name. Kammal’s home in Stepney Green was about twenty minutes from her father’s store, and Kammal was the one who would deliver the produce every day. When he pulled up in the battered automobile, Theresa ran outside, excited to be receiving fresh goods for the first time. A Pakistani man exited the right side of the truck, flashing her a smile. From that day on, every summer day that Kammal’s truck pulled up outside of the store, Theresa would be there, helping him unload its goods.
“Hello girls,” Kammal said. He busied himself wiping away the juices from the counter top and re-arranging the different fruits so that they didn’t fall from the angled stand. “How’s it been?”

Theresa greeted him warmly, and began asking about his family. Kammal continued sifting through the produce, chucking rotten papayas into the barrel next to him as he caught up on family activities with Theresa.

“Davida is engaged and will be getting married soon…”

Kammal’s smile lit up the shadows beneath the canopy. Just as Theresa began to give him warm congratulations and ask for the details, Charlene caught up with her. She stood next to Theresa, acknowledging Kammal with a faint smile and hand wave, letting out jaw-dropping yawns. Between the details of the wedding, Charlene shot disgusted looks at the duo with the lift of her eyebrows. As they went to leave, Theresa gave Kammal a hug across the fruit stand. She noticed Kammal give Charlene a hard, annoyed look. Theresa grimaced in apology for her elder sister’s actions, as if to say: “I don’t know why she is acting this way, either.” At the thud of the next mango in the discard barrel, Charlene turned to leave the stand.

Theresa departed from the mustard and green overhead umbrella, following behind Charlene, her sister’s gait moving back and forth with the click-clacking of her shoes echoing throughout the street. Her shoes became stained with the blood of papayas and nectarines, but this time she didn’t stop to clean it off.

Charlene turned to Theresa and mouthed, “I’m going to Vibe.” Theresa reluctantly followed her sister into Vibe Bar, a trendy new addition to Brick Lane, and a landmark that Theresa despised. Charlene quickly stripped her leather gloves from her
fingers and placed them lifelessly in the palm of her hand, keeping the other available to light up. Instead, the décor of the red and yellow fingers of the banister caught Charlene in its palm. Swarms of people entered and exited Vibe. Theresa followed directly after her sister, catching her pouty lips from across the room. They made direct eye contact for the first time all day. Theresa was intent on knowing what her sister wasn’t telling her.

“What the hell is going on with you?”

“I can’t come here any more, Theresa,”

“Where, to Vibe?” She was confused.

“No, Brick Lane.”

“Why not, Charlene? I mean, we have been coming here every Sunday for years, it’s like a tradition.”

“This just isn’t me any more. Seth keeps asking me why I come here every week, and honestly, I can’t give him a real answer. I don’t know. It’s silly, it’s changed so much. It’s no longer where we grew up.”

“Screw him. He’s not part of this family; he doesn’t know Kammal and he certainly has no idea about Brick Lane!”

“Theresa, Seth has nothing against Brick Lane.”

The next words to come from Charlene’s mouth regarded their father. She continued, “Coming here every Sunday just dips into those memories, and it isn’t going to bring him back.”

Theresa grabbed the closest napkin off of the dark wood bar. As Charlene continued to stand strong, the tears in Theresa’s eyes began to soften her. Charlene placed her cigarette behind her ear.
“I know, Theresa, I know,” Charlene said.

As Charlene put her arms over her sister’s shoulders and began to stroke her hair, Theresa pulled away.

“Why don’t you just go back to the West End where you belong,” Theresa whispered to her sister. She rushed from the pub, purposely slowing down when she reached the outside, waiting to hear the familiar clacking of stilettos follow her.

They didn’t.
“Know Guardrails”
The sun sparkling off of the water on the Thames mirrored Jeremy’s eyes, except it wasn’t nearly as dazzling. The color of his eyes was incredible, as if all of the world’s oceans pooled together into one deep abyss, churning and swirling beneath his petite eyelids. She held him, each of them crying for a different reason. Elizabeth, because she was the luckiest woman in the world, Jeremy, because as she would later discover, only had one kidney. Despite more hospital visits for her son than she cared to recall, but this was the second time in her life that Elizabeth had been the patient. The river reflected graying skies, industrial smoke and overcast weather, sucking the radiance out of the ebb and flow. Elizabeth grimaced in pain.

She tried to only think of his eyes, but somehow the recent exposure to doctors made her nostalgic for everything about Jeremy. Growing up, he could never roughhouse with the other boys. She would always worry about someone hitting him in the wrong place and hurting him terribly.

“But mother, I want to do that,” he said as he stood, mesmerized, in front of the television set.

He couldn’t play on a team, but she urged him to play football with the neighborhood boys; she never wanted him to think that there was anything he couldn’t do.

“Live with no guardrails, Jeremy,” she told him.

Jeremy’s first fight had been over who got to throw the football into play. With a bloody lower lip and a discolored cheek, he ran to their apartment, crying and apologizing. Elizabeth wiped the tears from his eyes and cleaned him up.
“Now, now, don’t cry, you’re a big boy. Big boys don’t cry. Just be more careful next time, ok?”

He nodded his wet, frowning mouth. Thank goodness it was just his face, she thought.

She sometimes found it difficult to raise a child who was nothing like herself. Elizabeth was obsessed with living a life with no fear and no restrictions. During her younger days, she tripped and fell on the walkway outside of the Cave, the local pub. Her hands tried to stop her jaw from engaging with the cobblestones, but she didn’t react quickly enough. Left with a cracked tooth and bleeding gums, she walked home alone and put herself to bed. At noon the next day, she woke up to her parents standing over her sleeping body and bloody pillow in horror. She got up, rinsed her mouth out, and told them it was under control.

And as she continued to walk home, even now, at forty-eight years old, she disdained the thick metal gate blocking the sandy shore. A light wind blew, head on, forcing her blouse and jacket to stick mercilessly to the fresh injection on her left shoulder. Despite the deliberate slowness of her steps, she could still hear the movement of the pill bottle inside her red purse.

Twice a day, she downed five “horse pills,” as Jeremy liked to call them, full of vitamins and minerals to keep healthy. Each pill that scratched the inside of her throat invigorated her more and more, as if each success was an endurance run. When he was a little boy, they took their pills together. Unlike herself, Jeremy always had the most difficult time taking pills, gagging on them and spitting the remnants back up. Elizabeth
made a routine out of crushing both of their pills into fine granules and mixed them into potpies. But the pills that jingled inside her red bag were different.

She continued along the canal, the wind refusing her a view of the towering buildings on the opposite side. The water stood still, reflecting industrial London. She cringed at the thought of telling Jeremy the details of her doctor’s visit.

When she entered the office at ten after nine, she was told by the secretary to sit and wait; she was ten minutes late and the doctor was with another patient. Elizabeth gave an audible huff, so dramatic that the secretary actually pulled her glasses down on her nose to glare. Elizabeth and the secretary had many telephone battles regarding this appointment time, Elizabeth essentially bullied into a nine in the morning time slot. Her late entrance, she liked to believe, was a victory for patients everywhere.

In three lines, the waiting room chairs stood at attention. The fabric screamed to be reupholstered. She sat in the best looking seat, placing her scarf neatly over the arm of the chair. There was a kind of comfort in these shabby waiting rooms. Over the past month and a dozen doctor’s visits later, Elizabeth refused to believe any of what the tests had to say. She had hoped that by getting a second and a third and a fourth opinion of what was actually causing the flashes of stomach pain and dizziness, she would eventually get the diagnosis that she wanted to hear. Her phone beeped. Three missed calls and a message from Jeremy. Nurses hurried past the front desk, speaking of the latest gossip, only allowing their clipboards to distract them when Elizabeth attempted to ask a question.

“Elizabeth Robins,”
As the rotund woman with a smiling face led Elizabeth past the reception desk, she made sure to glance at the secretary with malice.

The nurse mechanically took her pulse and adjusted the testing table, leaving her in the drafty room with only a paper dressing gown and her apprehensions. A mirror, waiting to be hooked to the door, leaned against a wall, which was desperately in need of a paint job. Laminate counter tops edged the room, littered with papers and test tubes and band-aids. Normally, Elizabeth’s watch received attention every minute that spent waiting. But all she could do was pace the room, praying that the doctor was busy analyzing her tests.

In his twenty-seven years, Jeremy underwent more procedures than she cared to think about. His arms, bruising easily, were beaten from needles entering and pieces of rubber tied around his bicep. One week, they traveled to eight cities for an accurate drug prognosis. She wondered if Jeremy was ever as nervous as she was right now.

Elizabeth was tired of all of the appointments, answering the same questions over and over, each doctor referring her to a different doctor. For once in her life, she wanted to pay off her medical bills in the hopes that this would signal an end to her visits.

She should have been in her overpriced apartment just north of St. John’s Wood, overlooking residences and greens, the detail on the front doors matching that on the car park, taking pride in the antique furniture that she had collected from thrift shops with her son. Elizabeth should have taking runs in the park and dodging police hassling her to clean up after Benjamin.

As she paced around the room in her gown, she walked over to the hand mirror on the sterile counter top. Carefully picking it up, she began tracing the lines on her face.
“Hello Ms. Robins,” the doctor hurried in, without knocking.

“I…hello doctor.” Elizabeth almost broke the mirror in surprise.

“So,” he said as if he had been in dialog with her for hours. “It took us longer than we anticipated to analyze the results.”

“Oh. Do you have some definite information then?” Elizabeth remained hopeful.

Dr. Lowenthal’s grimy laugh echoed in the unfinished office.

“Nothing concerning these types of…illnesses are ever certain Ms. Robins. All we can do is be as sure as possible.” She silently crossed her fingers that Lowenthal wouldn’t give that horrible laugh again.

“You are going to need to take these pills,” he began. “After about a month, we are going to see how they are helping you, if at all, and go from there.”

“So that’s it?”

“Like I said,” he began again.

“No, I heard what you said. After seven visits to different doctors across Greater London, I just thought you could be more definitive. What if the drugs don’t work? What then?” She began to sweat under the sheer gown.

“But, Ms. Robins, there’s no reason to get excited. This is all standard procedure.”

“I’m…not…excited, Dr. Lowenthal. But there must be something else I can do. Eat better, exercise more…something.”

“Ms. Robins, with all due respect, all you can do is follow my directions and agree to the procedures we recommend.”
As she passed the receptionist, Elizabeth made sure to give her an extra-nasty look. She would feel better once she was free of the sterile confines.

Last night was the last time she had spoken with her son.

“Mother, stop being stubborn. Please just let me come with you. I’ll sit in the waiting room; you won’t even know I’m there.”

Silence hijacked the other end of the phone. Elizabeth didn’t want him to miss work just to go with her. He worked too hard. She also resented being called stubborn. After a number of refusals, she finally acquiesced to let Jeremy drive her home after her appointment, promising a call.

Balancing the phone in the palm of her hand, she thought better of calling him. The fresh air and a walk by the water would do her good, allowing her to breathe easier now that she could be free of Lowenthal’s scrutiny. Blackfriars would welcome her on its train for the hour-long ride back home. Then, she would have more than enough time to think about how to fix herself, and what to tell her son.

The cramps in her side began to pierce harder at her middle, a lightheadedness overcoming her before she even had time to react to it pulling her down. She kneeled on the ground next to the wrought iron bars, the grass on the riverbank a callously browned and burned. In the uncharacteristic heat the city was experiencing, the grass didn’t even have a chance.

Elizabeth continued to hold the railing, grasping it with an intensity that made her knuckles turn white. With every bit of energy inside her tired arms and disturbed stomach, she held herself up. Pain shot through her arm and up her neck. She was afraid
to let go of the bar, but in pain from the ferocity of her grip. She felt through her bag, fingering her phone. Holding down the “1” button, the phone dialed Jeremy by itself. As the phone rang on the other end, her body throbbed. She could swear that the metal railing was laughing at her weakness. Taking a deep breath and closing her eyes, she shut out the burnt grass and the blue-gray currents of the river. Everything was under control. Still holding the phone loosely in one hand, she slid her thumb over the red “end call” button and pressed down.
“Street Noise”
The *swoosh* of the usual advertisements pushed under the front door was the only thing that could ever wake her. And this afternoon, the headline *Trooping the Colour Raises Flags*\(^1\) might as well have been screaming at her from the page. Alarm clocks could sing and beep, but somehow the sound of something unwanted entering the room could wake her without fail.

Her mates hadn’t particularly cared that it was the sovereign’s birthday. It could have just as easily been a celebration of the Beatles’ first tour date. Regardless, they had painted the town from the early afternoon until early morning of the next day. As Emily hoisted herself from the couch and made her way over to the door, her hands rubbed at last night’s makeup, forcing the blacks and blues and greens to pool and stain underneath both eyes. She couldn’t help but crane her neck slightly; just to be sure she wasn’t on the front page of the news. Faintly audible noises swirled outside the window, blowing wrappers and papers down streets and through alleyways—a consequence of living above a main motorway.

As she bent over to retrieve the papers, which by now had scurried across the floor in a diagonal race from the window, the glossy colors of sale prices and the perforated lines of coupons were splotchy and indistinct. Intrigued, she backtracked through the living room into the undersized hallway, flipping through them in a blurry hurry. Reaching the study, she placed the papers on her desk so that she could carefully open the drawer.

Every antique chest has one of those drawers— one that takes a little longer than all of the rest to budge from its parent chest. Pulling the distressed wood, tugging at its brass

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\(^1\) The Sovereign's birthday is officially celebrated every June by the ceremony of Trooping the Colour on Horse Guards Parade. The Queen was born on 21 April, and since the 18th century it has been customary to celebrate the Sovereign's birthday publicly on a day in the summer, when better weather is more likely.
handle, shaking the unit- all to no avail. With two taps on the desktop and a jiggle of the handle, Emily coaxed the drawer out of its hiding place.

Sifting through its messy contents, she bypassed a bundle of expired House of Frasier super-savings, and negatives that were too scratched and battered to be worth developing. Her fingers glided over the pair of over-the-counter glasses. Although she needed them to see, she decided against removing them from the drawer. As she moved each item to one side of the antique, something inside of the drawer pierced the tip of her finger.

Jerking her hand out of the drawer, she pressed her lips against the fresh wound. Out of instinct, she backed away from the desk while still probing the inside of the drawer with her eyes.

Peeking out of the manila folder were delicate contents. The overwhelming smell of aging gave her pause. It was the feeling that she always had just before the Christmas season, unwrapping each one of the twenty-odd nativity figures from cardboard boxes, the musty scrunch and tear of the matured gossip-news making her eyes water and itch. This folder’s clippings were far from the paper that wrapped a nativity.

In between the chronological clips that announced her sister’s engagement and her own graduation, there remained a page clip with a blown up quotation on the bottom left and a crisp graphic at the middle right. As she fingered through the papers again, she could hear the noises outside echoing even louder than usual. Moving her body toward the source, she wondered what was happening outside her window.

But the distractions of what lie outside the window and the daily paper and countless ads were muted when she landed on the most tear stained and finger smudged
article in the package. A lot of herself had been given up to this page over the past ten years, although not any time recently.

Emily remembered the scene between the four brothers as if it were yesterday. There was the jetty, just outside of their view. She smoothed out Ralph’s sweater on the page, her hands shakily feeling their way into this immortalized collection of moments. She closed her eyes, intent on stitching together these words and images. The memories came flooding back.

A week prior to the incident, Emily’s dirty blond hair begged to be let loose from the pony that held it hostage. When she finally took it out, the strands were more of an obstruction, denying her the pleasure, no, the duty, of studying her feet. During that morning’s walk to Miss Eunice’s Preparatory school, she had come to the conclusion that her feet were imperfect. This was not okay with her, not even slightly. Emily would never be any good at the waltz, as her cotillion instructor aptly explained, because the arch of her feet was just too high. What was she to do?

Emily worshipped those things that were the most ladylike. During lunches at school, Emily watching the other girls scarf down peanut butter sandwiches, while she broke off pieces of bread and carefully placed them between her thin lips. On some days when she was feeling truly ambitious, she would stand by entranceways, sometimes at the market, other times in the churchyard, waiting hopefully for a boy, or anybody, to hold a door for her.

“Come on then Ralphie, you can sing it louder!”

Yells from behind her told her that she and her imperfect feet were no longer alone.
Their walk was the same every day, and she knew this because she had taken notice. Sloping cement sidewalks caught their rhythmic steps, moving them across sprawling park perimeters, around twin lakes, and behind Miss Eunice’s. Such a calculated route to their boys’ school caused one of them, named Louis, to always find a new song to sing to pass the minutes. He would become so furiously involved in the lyrics that he would snap his fingers and strut to tunes down the sidewalk’s concourse. The white button down shirt of his school uniform seemed to be missing the appropriate buttons so that just a glimpse of his sparse chest hair was visible. He shoulders balanced his lean gait, resulting in an upper body like an hourglass about to tip. That day, he pushed the auburn hair from his large forehead and brushed purposefully past her with his broad shoulders. He feigned apology.

She planned on giving him the “I think I recognize you but don’t be too flattered because I am too good for you” glance and smile, one that her sister had taught her at an early age. When she turned to give him this signature look, she realized that it must have been Ralph who strolled beside Louis. She refrained from giving them a nasty glance.

All four of the Blackenwell boys were football keeper legacies at Winchester, their independent secondary school.¹ Their mother, recognizable only because their entire family looked like clones of one another, cooked and did wash like mad, always getting just one more jersey clean for the next game. She heard rumours that their grandmother was sick in the head and lived with them, and some said that Ralph was the one who brought her on walks through the park and did her grocery shopping for her.

¹ The expression ‘public school’ is different in many countries other than England. In Britain, a ‘public school’ is run by the government. The term private school is used to refer to any school that is run to make a profit. Public schools are like U.S. private schools, among the most famous being Eton, Harrow and Winchester.
One thing was for sure: she wouldn’t be saying any hellos before they acknowledged her. It just wasn’t right. As the grocery runner parted his lips, forming into what was about to be an awkward greeting, Louis slowed his bouncy walk to a strut, forcing Ralph’s nose to collide with the back of his button up shirt. Ralph gave a small grunt. Emily thought she saw an annoyed crease in his forehead, but it quickly evaporated. Louis didn’t apologize, but promptly laughed it off, lightly rubbing “Ralphie’s” hair and telling him to watch it.

Emily never stopped walking for a moment, refusing to act overly interested, but continued as Louis jived and jigged down the sidewalk, calling out “Richard!” and “June!” to every person they passed, without missing a name. All the while, Ralph ran clumsily after Louis, singing whatever harmony his big brother desired.

“My brothers and I are taking our family boat out for its first, em, send off of the season,” she overheard Louis say to some Rick or Rodney.

“Look for us if you’re at Hampshire beach on Saturday,” he said, stressing the Saturday like he thought that he was announcing a date of a ball.

Emily couldn’t help chuckling to herself. There would be no reason for anyone to be at the beach this early in the season unless they were specifically going to see the Blackenwells and their boat. Saturday might have to be the day that she wrote a report for her science course.

That evening, she ignored the dismal face that the front windows made at her when she went to unlock the door. Slipping the key back in her jacket pocket, she made a beeline for the kitchen to take the defrosted chicken from its hot bath in the sink. Immediately, she un-tucked her blouse and threw off her loafers, without bothering to see
if anybody was home. It was the same routine night after night: her mother left a chicken defrosting in the sink before every shift at the hospital. If her mother left at 22:00 for a night shift, Emily would be sure to find something in the sink the next morning.

Unlike the Blackenwells, she didn’t have a grandmother to care for or a room to share with a rowdy sibling. The saggy plastic wrapping clung onto the waterlogged chicken. Her hands full of chicken slime, Emily used her elbow to push away the cracking porcelain ashtray. She thought that smoking was the least refined thing that a lady could ever hope to do. Her cotillion teacher agreed. The tray teetered on the edge of the countertop, and just as her sticky hand reached for it, it crashed to the floor. She carefully swept up the shards of glass, leaving the chicken to continue its bath.

The week continued as usual. When Saturday finally arrived, it was one of those days in the South when the sun weaves in and out of the clouds, naughtily hiding behind each white puff at exactly the wrong moment. As pompous as she considered Louis, something inside her made her intent on going to the beach, if only to see the boys from the distance. With a pad of paper and a pencil, Emily watched from the jetty as the Blackenwell boys ran up and down the shore, terse beach grass rubbing up against their ankles and small rocks becoming wedged between immature toes. She wondered if they knew she was there. If Louis or Ralph spotted her, she expected a cordial greeting. It was only right.

“You’ll ‘ight Frankie?” Ralph said.

Emily watched a younger Blackenwell, Frank, slam the heel of his foot down onto a jagged piece of a shell. He let out a yelp. Louis and Ralph, running up from behind him, Ralph slid onto the sand to kneel in front of his injured brother. He lifted Frank’s foot up
into the air, at which point Frank yelped again. Surgeon-like, Ralph examined his brother’s foot, asking another young boy, who she presumed was also a Blackenwell due to his looks, for a bandage off of the boat. After a pat on the back, Frank continued to play, albeit more slowly and cautiously. They continued to trip over the sand dunes and across the uneven ground, making each stride look deliberate, bodies lopsided.

A slight wind blew on the willows that came sprouting up from the waters edge all of the way down the wooden sides of the dock. Louis threw his legs out from underneath his body, his pants scraping the edge of the dock. Emily strained to see what they were doing. Carelessly, Louis began pulling unsuspecting willows out from the floor of the sea, crushing each of them between his fingers. Their straw texture stung his hands as he folded each piece into smaller and smaller pieces. The others followed suit, each moving his nimble fingers to the waves for another and another. Each Blackenwell-made package of willow was then let drop into the water, the current taking them away.

When the four of the boys had exhausted every entertainment possibility, they finally decided to board the boat, without any distinct sign for the go-ahead that she could see. Louis spotted her, waving and giving her a long bow -- as if they were actually friends. On a certain level she pitied him, since she had been the only one of his “friends” to show. She smiled back. When Ralph followed his brother’s gaze, giving her a smile, wave and mouthed “hello.” She turned scarlet, self-consciously looking down at each of her small imperfect feet and the imprints that they had left in the grainy and rocky sand.

Louis climbed over four sloppily packed lunches, making his way straight for the bow. There, he captained. “Coming around!” he melodiously shouted as the boom whipped from left to right, almost knocking Ralph in the skull. “Watch it!” Ralph called,
but Louis was already tinkering with the ties on the mainsail, like an expert football
player performing heart surgery. Ralph’s gaze crept back to the shore, as if by accident.
When their eyes met, he smiled as if by accident, while she scribbled on her notepad.
Only a few times did she muster up the courage to wave back. Louis became bored of
directing the boat after about five minutes, deciding instead to hoist one leg up onto the
boat’s rim like an explorer. The boom almost hit him in the head because he failed to pay
attention.

Emily looked out onto the Atlantic, the coastline of Hampshire giving the most
perfect view of the southern face of the country. The landscape was tricky; the low
flatlands provided a mosaic of grassland and woodlands of New Forest, while a few
minute walk birthed a large port and the glistening of unexpectedly cold waters. The cold
waters. She shuttered on how cold the waves knocking against the sides of the boat must
be.

Emily watched as the quartet began to play-act on deck. From the shrieks and
giggles, she gathered that their sailboat was something else, possibly a passenger ship in
the heart of the Caribbean, or a cargo ship awaiting a pirate attack. She couldn’t be sure.
Maybe the two youngest brothers gallantly slid down the “wood rafters” that held the
sails, no more than air fabrications. Maybe Louis, with Ralph as his first mate, resolved
himself to hoarding the plummeted treasure and amorously enticing all of the captive
maidens, all played by sailboat tools. She squinted from shore, giggling, a captive maiden
herself. Ignoring the mosaic of grasslands and woods, Emily could swear that Isle of
Wight was actually an island in the Caribbean, the merciless sun beating upon their
backs.
When they were far enough out at sea that she could no longer see them without her glasses, she could only hear pieces of orders being shouted and faintly see moving bodies. Because she thought that they made her nose looked funny, she kept her glasses in the top of her nightstand drawer, far to the back. Emily would not be caught dead in them, especially today.

“…! Mutiny…aband’n ship!”

Emily replayed this part a thousand times over in her head. Two zoomed into the cold sea like cannon-balls, another jumped in dramatically afterwards, but one hesitated. He looked back at the jetty.

In the days following, she couldn’t get away from it. Other girls spoke about it on the walk to and from school, and there was even a remembrance ceremony over at Winchester. The papers sprawled over her pink bedding, “Boy’s Death on Boat,” “Drowning at Hampshire” and “Atlantic Takes Another,” littering her mattress. Emily sat, reading and re-reading the same lines of articles, comparing and contrasting stories.

Unable to go downstairs when called for supper that Saturday evening, no one had bothered to ask why. It was about a boy that she didn’t really know, but she did.

Letting out an exhausted sigh, she threw down the folder on her desk again, picked up the paper, and left the antique furniture to grow older. Still sucking at her finger, Emily moved closer to the buzzing sound. Making her way to the living room window, she gazed through the transparent white curtains, unfeeling.

At this thought she let out a visible shiver, crossing her arms over her chest, wishing that miraculously more fabric would appear to hide the bareness she felt.
She moved the Manchester United ashtray over to examine the little knats caught in the windowpane. What was the point of sheer curtains anyways? At one point in her life, those sheer curtains represented everything that her cotillion teacher embodied. Now, the sheer curtains just made her feel further exposed. The dress from last night wilted on her coldly perspiring body.

She wondered if the people across the way ever looked through their curtains and asked themselves the same questions.

On the main highway, she saw ambulances and paramedics swarming below. The fading sounds now became piercing as both hands pushed the window open. In her God-like vantage point, she wondered what could be going on. Last week, *The Times* had a front page spread about an old woman, some Mrs. Annette Something or other, who fainted in the entryway to the Chancery Lane tube. She was from Avon originally, loved to knit, and had three grandchildren, two boys and a girl. When her head hit the ground, a lobe in her head started to bleed internally, killing her within hours.

As medics loaded somebody into the back of an ambulance, Emily, still staring, opened up the paper to see just what exactly was on the front page.
“The Pier”
It didn’t surprise her very much that they ended up at the Pier. Ever since he was three, this was the place where she and her husband brought him to get some fresh air, packing a picnic of leftovers and a bottle of Frog's Piss.¹ Even after all of those years, feeling the weathered wood under her feet was comforting. The Lowestoft Pier was the town landmark, attracting tourists and housing locals, an otherwise lost village in the span of Southern England.

As a young boy, the Pier was David’s play spot, where she would buy him ten pence lollies. In his early teens, his friends would dare each other to jump off of the side of the Pier into January’s freezing ocean. Nights were spent soaking in the smells of inexpensive perfume as the boys and girls became acquainted.

But he was here now for her. The bench, a bright, aqua-blue cage holding him captive: keeping him with her. Margorie sat next to him, her ferocious timidity filling the space between them. Her long face matched the set of lanky arms that flopped cartoonishly around when she did anything except sit perfectly still. Her lankiness made her motions always exaggerated, to be taken less seriously by those who didn’t know her well.

“Well, I still think it’s perfectly absurd,” Margorie said.

“God, mother, please. Could we not right now? Not do this, I mean? Can’t we just enjoy the overcast weather?”

He flaunted his signature smile, a wry part of two stubborn lips. It was the one that looked exactly like his father’s, making her want to simultaneously cringe and cry. It proved, that in spite of everything, he would always want to be with her.

¹ Frog’s Piss is a white wine produced especially for the British, and goes for less than $1.50.
She knew that David didn’t intend to be short with her. He had a very low tolerance and tended to get frustrated easily. It was partially her own fault, her ability to understand the first time around. But she would ignore and ignore his aggravation, brushing it all to the side, saving it as something to be upset about later. It was the same way that she had never actually acknowledged the day when his father hadn’t come home for the first time, or when she had passed the neighborhood women talking about her behind her back. She hadn’t said a word, letting the bullets of words bounce off her. It was only a year later that she spent an afternoon sobbing over the bills, tearing pages from her bankbook and throwing them into the garbage. It had just gotten too hard for her to handle.

“It’s just such a bloody waste of mon--”

“I’ll figure it out. I don’t expect you to give me the money.”

“But you shouldn’t have to figure it out on yur own.” She trailed off into the steady flow of the waves. “I want to help you.”

“I know you do, I know” he paused. “But I have a bit of money. I’ve been saving it. It’s okay …”

It wasn’t okay. Margorie wished more than anything that she could have helped her son, bought him a thousand lollies, if that’s what it would take to keep him here. She was so ashamed. David must have been saving that money for years, anticipating that he would need it for something big. And if that thought didn’t make her want to throw herself off of the Pier, she didn’t know what did.

As she looked into the distance, Margorie stared over the Pier and across the water at the thick piece of land curling from the shore, away from everything real to her.
The houses on this land were grand, like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s East and West Egg homes, as David had explained to her. The servants’ quarters were comparable to her home, with guesthouses on their own acre, and finally, those convenient slots in the wall that acted as a laundry chutes.

When David was little, he would be invited to play dates at these homes. Because he was always at the top of his class, the other children must have assumed that they had money, too. Marjorie always brought him and his friends to play at the other children’s homes, feigning illness or telling parents that she didn’t want the children to be in the way of the housekeeper. But there was no illness nor was there a housekeeper. She did it so that David could get out of their stuffy flat and see how the other half lived. But it wasn’t just for him. It was her secret, guilty pleasure, one that she would never dare admit to anyone, especially her son. He would think she was a silly woman.

From the Pier, she could still point out the home she was invited into by the family of one of his classmates, a boy named Clyde. The waves tiptoed around the shoreline, being sure not to get too close to the ornate, three story home. While Clyde’s mother was busying herself and “freshening up,” Margorie hung back with the boys with the excuse of watching over them. Instead, she wandered around the enormous first floor, craning her neck into parlors decorated in color schemes and library full of books that she would never read. Each large portrait hanging on the wall eulogized some important family. Impeccable antiques, likely containing no sentimental value, were placed in a priceless display.

For a few minutes every day, she found it necessary to leave her apartment in the three-family home in central Lowestoft, where the only paintings were childhood
drawings and the antiques were merely old, dilapidated items from the Pound store. The strong smell of sauces and spices gave her headaches, and the noise until all hours made every night a battle with insomnia.

If David left, Margorie feared that there would be no one to help bring her back to reality, no reason for her to leave the Pier.

“So you have the money. But why so far away? There are perfectly respectable ones ‘round here.”

Margorie looked at her son hopefully for a moment.

“Warwick and Edinburgh are excellent, mother. If I am going to spend that kind of money, at least let me use it well. Besides, if I don’t get out of here I’m going to go mad. I’d be like one of those boys in town that you give looks to…”

“David…”

“Don’t play innocent with me, you know what I’m talking about,” He flashed the smile again.

She knew exactly what he was talking about. This place had a high rate of town boys, who were now almost all adults. They never left the block and the street and the address number that they grew up in. Maybe they were needed at home, or maybe they were just too lazy to ever leave. But she judged them either way. She didn’t want David to be one of them; pissed drunk, unshaven, swaggering around the Pier, yelling and hooting at women to impress his mates. It just didn’t suit him. He wasn’t that type of boy. He was literary; he was different. Her greatest hope for him was that he could leave this town and start a new life somewhere else. Just not without her.
She had been able to sit with him on the bench, on the bright green tacky evidence of their relationship together. She wondered if maybe she should have requested that they go somewhere else, somewhere without so much history. Now she understood why sports teams never played on their home fields for championship games. There was too much at stake. They should have gone somewhere with lots of people, a neutral, emotionless location.

“Trust me, Mother, no one in Lowenthal wants to see me pissed and reciting poetry on the Pier for the rest of my life.”

“Don’t go, please,” she said desperately, between laughs and sobs. Raising her waif-like arm to rest on his back, she gripped his shoulder with her frail fingertips.

“You know that I have to, it’s not that I don’t want to be here with you, but I just have to go,” he smoothed her dress against her knee with his rough palms, looking off into the distance, past the jetty. There was a long pause. She buried her eyes into her polka dotted dress. It was stained. However hard she had wiped it with a cloth, she would never be able to rid it of the permanent grease smudges. As her tears mingled with the grease, David began:

“So gladly, from the songs of modern speech,
Men turn, and see the stars, and feel the free,
Shrill wind beyond the close of heavy flowers,
And through the music of the languid hours,
They hear like ocean on a western beach,
The surge and thunder of the Odyssey.\(^2\)”

“That was beautiful. Did ’ya make it up?” Margorie said, lifting her head.

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“Silly woman,” David laughed out loud. She knew she was a silly woman, but hoped that this was what he was going to miss most about her. He explained to her that it was by long-dead poet Andrew Lang, a part of his *Odyssey*.

“Some day I’ll have my own Odyssey, but it won’t be called that, of course. It will be something like ‘Quest,’ or, ‘Journey’ or I don’t know. But it will be something great.”

“Dedicated to ‘ur old mum, I presume,”

She tried hard to throw his wry smile back at him, but it just wasn’t the same when she did it. Margorie continued to search the rocks on the coast for something that she didn’t miss because she never had it in the first place.
“The Zoo”
He was in the middle of a daily game of shotgun sudoku when the phone rang.

Marshall let out a heavy sigh as he hoisted himself out of the chair. Coming off a long night at work, he foggily began his day as the clock flashed 14:00. He only had seven more squares of sudoku to go from last night.

When he released the phone from its cracked base, he heard a stern recording on the other end of the line.

The voice demanded that he report to Milton Court on Moor Lane, postage code EC2Y 9BL at 10 a.m. Wednesday afternoon. The automated recording seemed to wane at just the moment when Marshall needed to hear the relevant information from the Coroner. As his phone continued to spit out times, dates, and numbers, he quickly snatched the pen from on top of the folded paper, fully aware that if he didn’t write the information down, it would be lost forever.

He would continue his game at work, even though he was sure that he would never be able to gain his intense concentration back. Some days, he focused on the word searches, other days he tried his hand at polygon. On mornings that were particularly bad, Marshall had all he could do to concentrate on the humour strips. On the whole, he liked to stick to what he knew. But days like today, when he was really up for a challenge, it was always sudoku.

Slamming the phone back into its base and sufficiently adding to the crack, Marshall’s first thought was why he was summoned to court. He had never been to this type of court, let alone the Coroner’s office. Despite this minor inconvenience, he was glad that his work schedule would allow him to go during the day. It wasn’t worth losing hours at a day job, only to be compensated by a shit stipend. The flat rate pay and the
varying tips he would receive from night to night at The Zoo were well worth it. On weekends, assuming it was bouncing with people, Marshall would walk away with a hundred or so pounds in gratuities. On a bad night, it was 50 p.

Pushing the wooden three and three-quarter legged chair under the table, he deliberated, finally tossing the daily with his unfinished game into his knapsack along with a uniform to change into later.

When he blundered into the Coroner’s on that rainy Wednesday, his longish hair was matted down on his ears, and the top of his tattoo peeked out from above his best shirt and tie. By looking extra-nice, he was hoping to get through this procedure as quickly as possible and still get to work on time. Apparently, those at the Coroner’s office didn’t go along with his plan.

In no time at all, he found himself in a claustrophobic room with three officials and a table full of evidence. Photographs of the deceased Olivia Alton were passed clockwise around the table. He stared at the photograph long and hard. Marshall put it back on the table, his hand still uncertainly hovering over it. Hastily, he picked it up again to have a closer look.

“Excuse me, Officer, so there’s just one thing,” Marshall began, trying to erase the picture emblazoned in his mind, filling it instead with numbers. The Officer and his assistant gave Marshall an eyebrow raise, surprised to have someone actually ask a question.

“Why am I here? I don’t know this woman, and I certainly don’t know why or how she died.”
The Officer’s eyes darted back and forth to one another. The eyes of the others in the room shot him disgusted glares.

“Mr.” the officer craned his neck slightly to catch a glimpse of the sticky tag on Marshall’s chest. “…Cunningham. It has nothing to do with whether or not you know Ms. Alton personally,” he spoke softly. “But everything to do with where you were last Tuesday night.”

About to respond, Marshall’s parted lips retreated back into a complacent standstill, as they considered last Tuesday.

Last Tuesday had been a characteristically long day. A water main broke in the middle of Oxford Street, and he was late, again. When he arrived at The Zoo, he got a scolding from his boss and began to take a towel to some freshly washed shot glasses. The doorway became narrower amid the people caught between only staying for a moment and those meeting someone; the room’s multicolored lights always gave an illusion of fullness.

Regulars began to sit at the first available seats in the pub, exchanging pleasantries, something that always made Marshall feel better, regardless of how bad his day had been. For newcomers who were foolish enough to order the “house special,” Marshall recommended a Carlsberg to wash away the aftertaste.

Five minutes later, while in the middle of serving up a Stella, he began to play his favorite game while on the job. He did this just about everywhere he went to pass the time. For every person who entered the bar, he tried to remember a defining feature, article of clothing, anything. He memorized it, searing it into his brain. Later in the night, he would try to find the same people, and recall their memorized attributes.
As a child, Marshall had trouble reading, something that could still be evidenced by the lack of books in his flat, to the way he mouthed even the simplest of words. While all of the other children were engaging in the latest mysteries and popular fiction, Marshall struggled to read the signs and advertisements outside his door. Passing by shops and businesses on the way to school, Marshall observed the exterior, from the way the names on the storefronts bolded or curved, to the colors of buildings in order to understand where he was and what he was seeing. He passed primary school by memorizing all of the names of European countries and exactly where they fell between a series of lines on a paper continent.

Just as he has begun to play his game, Don entered. This was where Don, Marshall’s friend and favourite regular, came for bevvy’s¹ almost every night after work. They exchanged warm greetings, and Don started out the night by buying some lager for two slightly attractive girls.

“Can you believe that game last night?” Don said.

Marshall chugged the drink that Don “purchased” for him behind the bar, making sure to duck down behind the sturdy lacquer counter every time he took a sip.

“Never in my life would I have put a pound on the fact that their keeper would miss that shot!” Marshall nodded, simultaneously standing up behind the counter from another well-deserved drink.

“Damn Manchester fanatics. I guess that’s the kind of season we’re having, Marsh old boy, I guess that’s the kind of season.” Marshall nodded with a look of disdain, but eventually he and Don were able to laugh off the defeat.

¹ Bevvy is the shortened term for beverage, but in this context bevvy implies alcohol, like going to the pub for a beer.
Don’s girls laughed and talked amongst themselves, the thought of football obviously not engaging enough for them. Don got up from the pub stool and motioned to the staircase.

“I think it’s time,” Don said.

“Have fun…Godspeed,” Marshall laughed.

*The Zoo Bar.* Marshall sometimes laughed to himself about its name. The downstairs extension to *The Zoo* was more of a zoo than upstairs, if that was possible, as if the lack of oxygen below ground level made everybody slowly lose their minds. Girls grabbed onto anyone they could find for support, the sweat and skin colliding again and again. Clinging to poles, they sat on random men’s laps, blaming their behavior on the bubbly. Different color strobe lights continued to fill the room, and the glow behind the bottles at the bar gave the eerie, crypt-like feel. It was as close to a zoo as he could imagine.

“We’ll stick around ‘till you get off?”

Don turned to Marshall from his position on the staircase.

“Go on then,” Marshall said, continuing to make change from a balding man’s crumpled bills. After carefully cutting up some limes, passing a few orders of chips down the bar, and cleaning off the countertop from a leaking tap, his job was done, if only for a few minutes. Tuesdays weren’t usually very busy.

Marshall could now get back to his game. He spotted a bowler hat from across the room—who wore bowler hats anymore? —And a sparkling red scarf that a woman wore around her neck. They seemed to be a couple, the man in the bowler pushing red scarf’s hair away from her face, gazing at her adoringly.
It was then that he was almost blinded. The woman passing in front of the bar had two huge dangling triangular earrings that would stop a bus. He remembered thinking how odd it was that they weren’t solid, but had a triangle cut out of the middle of them, reminding him of perverted, oversized cookie-cutters. They caressed the crease between her well-defined jaw line and slim shoulders. As he continued staring at her, he found that he had moved to the edge of the counter, pretending to wipe it down, while actually pushing people out of his line of vision in order to see her. She took no notice of him and continued moving to barely audible music, careful to balance her drink in her hand.

Strange that she wasn’t with anyone, Marshall couldn’t help thinking. From the corner of his eye, he saw Don ascending the stairs, presumably headed for the men’s room, a safe house in the zoo. Apparently, he and Don were on the same page. Don cupped his hands in a whispered yell.

“Go for it!”

Marshall screwed up his face in an expression that said, “Get out of here, now,” as Don continued into the alcove of toilets.

Even though his eyes had only left the earrings for a moment, they had vanished when Marshall turned back around. He hustled to the other end of the wooden countertop closest to the door, in search of her. As the bowler hat and sparkling red scarf laughed, their obtrusive bodies shaking, they obstructed his view of the front entrance. In a flash, he saw one huge triangular earring reflect the Zoo’s lights. She was gone.

Marshall once again found himself in the Coroner’s office.

“That’s why you’re here.”
The Officer’s comment took him out of his trance and shot him back to reality. Marshall refused to respond to this inquisition. He closed his eyes, Olivia Alton’s face becoming one of his many matching games, storefronts, and mental list of every pub’s street address in London. As the Coroner’s Office continued to pull evidence out of their monogrammed tote bags, he passed the photographs on and fingered through the hard evidence.

One bag in particular caught his eye.

“Majorca Pearl Triangle Earring: Majorca pearl from the Isle of Majorca, Spain. Finest simulated pearls made.”

An earring. As he let the shape tumble around in the confines of the plastic bag, he realized that this was the same triangle that swept the side of her face. The way the silver pearl shimmered when the light hit it a certain way. The way the colors swirled around like a mix of rainbow pastels. He glanced over at the photograph of Olivia Alton for further examination.

“Are these the earrings… I mean, hers?” Marshall questioned.

“When we found the body, she was wearing them, I mean, that” another officer said.

Marshall was 99% positive that he had seen this woman and those earrings at The Zoo Bar. But he was working, there was bad lighting, he had been drinking, and hell knows, he was sure that there were a million pair of earrings that looked just like the ones that he had seen that night.

But the side of her face—he closed his eyes and could see the earrings caressing the curvature of her neck, hanging and glistening against her dark hair.
A fit of questions commandeered his brain. Why was he the called to the Coroner’s Office in the first place? Had someone at the pub seen him staring at her? The most probable answer was that his boss told the authorities that Marshall had been working that shift, but he couldn’t be sure. How did they know that she was there at all?

When he peeked between his closed eyelids, he noticed one of the officers eyeing him from the corner of the small room.

“Mr. Cunningham, do you find the earring to be of particular interest?” He had lost track of the time spent palming the baggie, forgetting that he was being watched.

“No, no, I was just…reading the description on the bag. The print has begun to smudge a bit…”

“With your eyes closed, Mr. Cunningham?”

Marshall pushed the baggie containing the earrings to the side and picked up another.

When he arrived home from a day of cryptic interrogation and a so-so night at The Zoo, he jiggled the lock on the door so that the key slid into it without a fight. Marshall let his knapsack slide off of his arm, landing forcefully on his weak kitchen table. He began to open the zipper, reaching across the room just far enough to hit the ‘play message’ button on his answering machine. A series of beeps ensued, and as he reached back to empty his things from the knapsack, the three legs of his kitchen table wobbled, spilling its contents all over the kitchen floor. He let out a grunt as he peeled his dressy tie off of the sticky linoleum. Bending over again, he picked up the folded daily. As the thinly paper rustled and creased in odd places under Marshall’s grasp, a shimmering triangle fell from the paper.
Notes

1. Thanks to my roommate, Susan Berube, for collaboration on the front cover.

2. Jack Vettriano is represented exclusively by the Portland Gallery in London.

3. The painter has had no input or involvement with this senior thesis.

4. Vettriano Paintings
   - The Runaways, p. 7
   - The Main Attraction, p. 18
   - Just Another Day, p. 29
   - Yesterday’s Dreams, p. 38
   - A Walk on the Beach, p. 50
   - The City Café, p. 58
Working Bibliography


