Four short stories to read and discuss

BBC Student Critics

with Cambridge University

Contents

Introduction

BBC Student Critics with Cambridge University

BBC National Short Story Award with Cambridge University

The BBC National Short Story Award with Cambridge University (NSSA) is one of the most prestigious awards for a single short story, with the winning author receiving £15,000.

Over its 15-year history, the award has celebrated established writers such as Hilary Mantel, Zadie Smith, Deborah Levy, Sarah Hall, Jackie Kay, Jon McGregor and William Trevor, and new stars such as Ingrid Persuad, Caleb Azumah Nelson and Lucy Wood.

Each year the award is judged by five expert judges, The judges select a shortlist of five stories from approximately 1,000 entries, considering the originality and excellence of the prose, the story structure and the overall impact of the story on the reader.

The judges' chosen shortlist is announced in September, and the winner at the start of October during a special edition of BBC Radio 4's *Front Row* live from BBC Broadcasting House in central London.

The shortlisted stories are recorded by professional actors and interviews with the writers are broadcast too.

Please note that the shortlisted stories for the BBC National Short Story Award may contain adult themes.

...and now you can be a judge too

BBC Student Critics challenges **you** to join the judges to read and critique the shortlisted stories.

Read or listen to the stories, discuss them as a group, choose your favourites and then host a listening party to hear the winner announced live on *Front Row*.

Taking part will encourage you to read critically, and build confidence in expressing your opinions. It will also introduce you to a diverse range of exciting new writing.

Your response as a reader or listener to a short story (or a novel, piece of music, work of art or architecture) is unique and valuable – and it's fun to discuss and debate your ideas with friends.

This resource is a great place to get started. It's designed to give you:

- Plenty of practice by exploring some of the **very best short stories** – all former winners of the BBC NSSA. Each of these stories is very different and showcases what the short story form can do.
- A **discussion guide** for each story to help steer you through the reading and critiquing process. There are suggestions of things to look for in the text, questions to consider and talking points for you and your friends.
- **Activity ideas** following on from each story. If you've been inspired, have a go at some creative writing yourself!

Don't forget – you'll find lots more information about BBC Student Critics, plus tips, rexcomendations and resources, at **bbc.co.uk/teach/student-critics/zxhqdp3**

Looking for more?

Teachers and librarians can express an interest in signing up groups of 20 or more for an enhanced experience. Each year, up to 600 students will receive:

- **an invitation to the premiere** of an online Student Critics event, where there will be the opportunity to put questions to judges and writers
- **a free copy** of the BBC National Short Story Award anthology
- an opportunity to receive **a visit from a shortlisted writer or judge** from the BBC National Short Story Award or BBC Young Writers' Award (this may be filmed).

> Find out more at: **bbc.co.uk/teach/student-critics/zxhqdp3**

The Grotesques
by Sarah Hall

IF SHE'D BEEN SOMEONE ELSE, the prank might have seemed funny. The vagrant Charlie-bo, who was quite famous around town, a kind of filthy savant, was lying on his back in his usual spot under the shop awning. He was asleep or passed out. Perhaps he was even dead, Dilly couldn't tell. A mask of fruit and vegetables had been arranged over his face to create another awful face. Lemons for eyes - the pupils drawn in black marker pen. A leering banana smile. Corncobs were stacked round his head as a spray of wild hair. The nose - how had they done it? - was an upright slice of melon carved, balanced, its orange flesh drying and dulling. It was all horribly artistic. Dilly stood close by, staring. The face was monstrous and absurd, like one of the paintings in the Fitzwilliam. There was a makeshift palette of newspaper under Charlie-bo, and his feet and hands were upturned and huge. He wore as many layers as a cabbage, and over the holey, furling garments, that enormous grey gown, a cross between a greatcoat and a prophet's robe, tied with a pleated cord.

Dilly hadn't meant to stop; she was late getting home with Mummy's shopping. But the scene was too terrible. People were walking past, bustling around her. Some were making unkind comments. *Good God, look at the state.* There had even been a few laughs, and some clapping, as if this were a street performance. It might have been art, but Charlie-bo hadn't done this to himself; Dilly knew that. He was so far gone, a wreck of a man, a joke already. He lumbered around town and could barely speak. Often he was prostrate in a doorway, drunk. The prank must have been carried out in daylight - brazenly. She could hear an internal voice, Mummy's voice: *Disgraceful, who are these wretches?*

Students, that was who. They were back after the summer break, spoiled from Mediterranean sailing and expensive capital apartments, or loafing on their estates, whatever they did. There had been several esoteric japes in the city since their return. A Hallowe-en mask and nipple-peep bra had been placed over one of the stone saints outside St Giles. The Corpus Clock had been defaced, its glass shield painted with an obscene image, so the rocking brass insect looked like it was performing a sexual act - having a sexual act performed on it, actually. Edward had seen and reported back to Mummy, who was outraged and still talking about it, even though she had no association with the college, or any of the colleges. Edward had seemed rather amused, but quickly sobered in solidarity. First-term antics. Once the Gowns arrived back, they imperiously reclaimed the town, before settling in and getting on with their studies.

Poor Charlie-bo. It was really too much. He wasn't a statue on a church. Dilly wanted to kneel down and remove the ridiculous fruit, shake him awake, help him to his feet. Perhaps if she did, Charlie-bo would revert to his old self, smile and speak articulately, as he hadn't for years. He would thank her. Those reddened, free-roaming eyes would hold her gaze, kindly, shyly. Something spiritual would pass, perhaps - a blessing story, like those Father Muturi had preached about last Sunday. Dilly lifted her hand, paused. The lemon pupils were looking right at her. Charlie-bo's coat

was grimy, lined by the dirty tides of the street, and there was a strong, crotchy smell. *Silly girl,* she heard Mummy say. *Don't be so squeamish.*

Mummy was right, of course. She usually was. She could immediately detect faults, like recoil and embarrassment, in her children, even if she couldn't find her own purse or shoe, or she'd lost the car, or a bit of bacon grease was in her hair, making it rear up. Dilly sometimes thought that Mummy was like a truffle pig, rooting around and unearthing ugly, tangled thoughts in people. She especially did not like shame or reticence. You had to stride into a room; wear any dress, day or night, like you were at a gala event; speak to strangers without inhibition. *Just have a go, Dilly, for goodness' sake. Engage!* By now, Mummy would have swept the degrading parody face away and helped stand Charlie-bo up, with that superhuman little woman's strength of hers. Even if he were dead, she would have the power to resurrect him. She would buy him a cup of tea in Jarrold's. Then she'd tell the story, marvellously, afterwards.

Dilly put her hand back in her pocket. Without warning, Charlie-bo flinched. He jolted, as if struck by an electrical current. The melon tipped over, and a lemon rolled from his eye socket on to the pavement, quite near Dilly's foot. Charlie-bo grunted, reached up and groped at his head. He looked like someone on the television coming round from an operation, trying to remove tubes. The banana and corncobs fell away and the real face was revealed: discoloured skin with reefs of eczema and cold-burns, a sore, sticky mouth.

Charlie-bo kept patting his head, making panicked, bleating noises. His eyes – Dilly hadn't been this close to him before – were a mad yellowish-green. There were watery cysts in his eyelids. His gaze was trying to find purchase on something. The striped awning. Sky. Her. He sat up. He flailed an arm out, brushed Dilly's skirt, and blurted a sound that seemed fatty and accusing. Dilly took a step backwards. She shook her head. *No,* she thought. *I wanted to help.* Charlie-bo was looking at her, and through her. He made another attempt to speak. His tongue was oversized, a giant grub inside his mouth. She took another step backwards, and a cyclist tinged his bell in warning and flew past. Someone bumped her hard on her thigh with the corner of a shopping bag. Dilly turned and began to walk away.

Behind her, she could hear Charlie-bo making loud, obscene noises. She sped up, weaving round pedestrians. He might be up on his feet now, lumbering after her. *It wasn't me,* she thought. *Please please please.* She half-ran towards the punt station and Queen's Bridge, her heart flurrying. She passed Lillian's boutique. The door was open and she thought someone said her name, but she kept her head down. Before she turned the corner by the wine merchant, she cast a look behind, expecting to see him, his cloak flying, his face hideous with rage. But Charlie-bo wasn't there. She came to a stop by the river, feeling woozy with relief.

The towpath was quiet, just a few people walking and cycling. She went a little way along and sat on a bench, waited for her nerves to calm. The river was a rich opaque green. Leaves from the chestnut trees had fallen and were riding along on the surface. The river always made her feel better. It would be lovely to walk that way home, the long way round, watch the swans and the glassy fluid sliding over the weir. But she was probably very late now and Mummy would be getting cross. Mummy had only sent Dilly out for a few items – teabags, cream, jam. It had taken a long time to decide on the jam. Dilly couldn't remember if Mummy had asked for a particular kind, and she'd begun to fixate on the seeds in the raspberry jam jar. They'd seemed like a million prickly eyes.

People were coming over to the house for a little get-together that afternoon – it was Dilly's birthday, actually, though the fact kept slipping her mind. Father Muturi, who was Mummy's favourite priest at St Eligius, was coming, and Cleo and Dominic, of course, possibly Peter if he finished work in time, not Rebecca, obviously, though Dilly still sometimes forgot, and a lady was coming who could perhaps help Dilly get a job at a magazine, on the arts column. Dilly had wanted to ask Sam, but it was beginning to look like Sam didn't meet with anyone's approval. He'd been a

bit too quiet at the dinner last week, and hadn't wanted to sing when Mummy had asked him to. When Dilly had sung her number, a northern sea shanty, which she'd performed nicely but with the usual mild mortification, Sam had looked suddenly very frightened. He hadn't replied to Dilly's last three messages. And he hadn't been to their French evening class this week.

Mummy was making scones for the tea party, which was quite a production; things would be getting tense at home, even though scones, as far as Dilly could tell, were not very difficult to make. She should really go. *Get on, Dilly!* She should be thinking of interesting things to say to the lady from the arts magazine, and sorting her face out. But the river was so smooth and lovely. It felt very receptive. She'd walked along it with Rebecca in the summer, on a very hot day, and had tried to say kind things. She'd said that, as Peter's little sister, she knew him as well as anyone did, and, even if he seemed a bit *other*, she was sure he did care. It wasn't a disloyal thing to say, she'd hoped. Rebecca had been crying on the walk, silently, her face was soaked, her unwashed hair pulled back under a headband, and she hadn't replied. Rebecca had cried a lot last summer, because of the baby. And because of Peter, though Mummy maintained Peter had done nothing wrong, that he couldn't take leave from work willy-nilly, and that Rebecca had been crying to a *worrying degree* and might be becoming *a rather difficult character.* It was hard to know what to think about it. Or feel about it. Dilly had written a few letters to Rebecca, but had thrown them away. It couldn't be spoken about, unless raised by Mummy, and then certain agreements were made.

A good party story to tell would have been how she'd helped Charlie-bo, how she'd intervened, stopped the ridicule. It was so hard to make yourself the hero of your stories, be witty but still seem humble - Mummy and Cleo were masters at that kind of thing.

Dilly looked downstream. It was the usual scene. Houseboats with bicycles mounted on their sides. Joggers. The metal bridge - Sorrell's - the only ugly bridge in the city. There were some newly built houses with chalet-style balconies that Edward liked. Who lived there, she wondered. Different people. The common opened out, and the river trickled away to nothing on the horizon.

She became aware of a light rain falling. Her skirt was damp and the towpath now had a leaden sheen. The swans were tucked away, heads under their wings, holding so still in the current they could be pegged underwater. She'd forgotten to take an umbrella from the house, of course. Her hair was difficult if the rain got it for too long, unmanageable, which would be a problem later. She stood and began to walk back towards the punt station. The drops were already getting heavy; she could feel them trickling on her forehead and round her eyebrows. The punts were parked in a row, hooded and chained. Four or five people were looking over the edge on the bank opposite, up above the weir. One person was pointing. Something was probably caught in the froth at the bottom of the water's curtain. It was one of Mummy's peeves, all the junk being tossed into the river - riparian fly-tipping, she called it. Suitcases, bin bags, toasters. Almost as bad as the uncleared dog mess and barbecue scorches on The Green.

Dilly didn't have time to stop and look. She turned, walked over Queen's Bridge and continued up the road, past the charity shop, which always had lovely blouses on its mannequins, past The Blue Bell, towards Monns Patisserie. Monns was very difficult. There was a kind of pastel, underworld glory to the window. The cakes were tormentingly delicious, with such delicate architecture and sugar-spun geometrics, candied fruit, chocolate curls. She often found herself gazing at them and getting lost. It was best not even to look. But she couldn't help it. Today, the cakes seemed so perfect and beautiful that she began to feel emotional. Her throat hurt. She wanted to sit down on the pavement and hold her knees.

She was hungry; that was it. An egg for breakfast was all Mummy had allowed, no toast because Dilly was currently off carbs. Lunch hadn't seemed to materialise. Instead, there'd been a little debate about what to wear to impress the lady from the magazine. Several skirts were rejected, and there had been a lot

of frustration in the room. Mummy and the lady, her name was possibly Marion or Beatrice, had fallen out a few years ago over something written in an article. Now they were friends again. That was not uncommon with Mummy's acquaintances.

One of the cakes in Monns seemed to have a waterfall of glittering cocoa powder on its edge, almost hovering, suspended in the air. How had they done that? Perhaps her eyes were blurring in the rain. *Do buck up, Dilly.* Soon there would be scones, Mummy's speciality: warm, soft, comforting, with cream and jam. It might be possible to slip an extra one on to her plate unseen. There was an art to second helpings: you had to be confident and move fast, look as if you were helpfully clearing crockery. Dilly wondered if Charlie-bo was hungry. There was the question of alcohol, which might take priority. Of all the homeless people in town, Charlie-bo was best known, cherished even. He'd been a student at the university, studying Heidegger, or the eleventh dynamic of space, something very avant-garde and awfully difficult. He'd been in contention for a Nobel, people said. Mummy maintained Charlie-bo was from a small northern village, just like her - an unbelonger, a bootstrapping scholarship boy. Too much studying, or a drug trauma, or a stroke - some calamity had done for him, and he'd begun his descent. For a while he'd been a brilliant celebrity of the streets and shelters, until his mind dissolved. A casualty of genius. At least, that was the story.

By the time she got to Northumberland Road, Dilly felt wet and dizzy. The rain had done a very thorough job. Her hair stuck to her temples. The bottom door of the house was locked - its key had been missing for a while - which meant she wouldn't be able to slip in unnoticed. She trudged up the steps to the front door and through the window saw Father Muturi in the lounge, standing at the fireplace and talking to Edward. Father Muturi liked to stand by the fire and say how cold England was. He would say things like African children learned to walk younger because it was warmer there.

If Edward had been called down, Dilly was very late. She waited outside for a moment, very close to the front door, perhaps only an inch from it. She could feel her breath against the wood. The smell from her mouth was like pickle. She could see cracks in the red paint. Inside one was the tiniest insect - its legs poking out, awkwardly. She put her hand on the knob. She took it off again. Sometimes doors could seem impossible. Impossible to open. Impossible to walk through. She felt as if she was the door, as if her own body was shut. Her hair was wet and stupid. Her coat was dripping. *Lordy! Have you been for a dip at the river club, Dilly?* She could hear cars on the street, the squealing brakes of a bicycle as it slowed at the bottom of the hill.

Recently, Mummy had arranged a session with Merrick, the psychoanalyst who lived at number 52, to talk about things like this, and give Dilly 'a bit of a boost'. *You can tell me anything you like,* Merrick had said. *Anything about anything.* It had seemed almost like a riddle, the way he'd said that. *Should we start with why you came back from London?* Merrick had been wearing terrible socks with orange diamonds on the ankles, perhaps in an ironic way. It was strange seeing him away from Mummy's parties, where he was usually dancing, or flirting with Cleo. His practice was in the basement of his own house, and Dilly could see the shoes and legs of people walking past on the street above. She even saw the red-tipped, winking underparts of a dog. The furniture wasn't leather; it was suede, mustard colour. There was a painting on the wall that was abstract but looked like a woman with a whirlpool in her stomach. Was it supposed to look that way, Dilly had wondered, or did it look like different things to different people? Was it, in fact, a kind of test?

Dilly had prepared things to say to Merrick, all very carefully thought through, but she hadn't said much in the end. *After my bag was stolen, I didn't feel very safe in London.* The truth was, no single cataclysmic incident had occurred. It was more a series of daily stumbles, problems she couldn't solve alone. The forgetting of meals, not forgetting exactly but being defeated by so many options, and rent payments, not making the milk convert to perfect, solid foam in the

cafe where she worked. Merrick had looked rather sceptical and bored for most of the hour, then, towards the end, disappointed. He'd finished the session with a little talk about boundaries and identity within a family, he'd used a fishing-net metaphor, and Dilly had felt uncomfortable and was glad when it was over. Mummy hadn't asked her about the session.

The rain was coming down, pattering, darkening the pavement. She would be spied any moment, by Edward or Father Muturi. The scones couldn't be served until the jam and cream, which were in the bottom of Dilly's bag, had been delivered. Mummy liked Dilly to make up the tea tray for guests, using the Minton set. Dilly couldn't exactly explain her lateness; she never could. It was, it would be, more a question of absorbing the annoyance. Letting Mummy's words come into her without feeling them. One possibility was to tell the Charlie-bo story; somehow amend it and seem less uninvolved. If she told it interestingly, earnestly, with the beautiful sneer and radio tone of Cleo, or with something approximating Mummy's comedic affront, that might be good enough. She might hold the room. She would, of course, be asked about her level of activity. *Didn't you do anything, Dilly, for goodness' sake?* Perhaps she could say she had done something. Mummy would. Mummy could change a story or revise history with astonishing audacity, and seemed to instantly believe the new version.

Edward was waving at her through the window, mouthing *door's unlocked,* which of course it always was, even when they all went off on holiday. She pushed it and stepped into the hallway. There were voices in the lounge, Edward's affable small talk, and Father Muturi's lovely Kenyan laugh. *I just need to take these,* she called. She heeled off her boots and went very quietly downstairs to the kitchen. Ghost steps: she was an expert. From the kitchen came the gorgeous, golden smell of baking. The table was in chaos, bowls of spilling flour and dribbling eggshells, some lilies still wrapped in plastic dumped in a jug. The tea tray was not set up. Mummy was turned away, bent over the open oven. There was a white handprint of flour on her skirt. She had on fishnet tights and heels, which meant Dilly would have to find a pair of heels too.

The scone smell was almost unbearable. She was so hungry. If she could have just an apple before trying to make polite conversation with the lady from the arts magazine, things might be OK. But the fruit bowl was empty except for a glove. Mummy was naturally slight and trim. Her children were all taller and heavier, like their father with *broad Dutch genes,* and their intake had to be watched. Daughters, anyway. Peter and Dominic were allowed to finish the roast when they were home, then play tennis afterwards to work it off, while the girls cleared up.

The oven fan was whirring. Classical music was playing on the stereo. Mummy hadn't noticed Dilly; she was busy flapping the scones with a tea towel. Her hair was spilling from its blonde nest. Dilly put her bag quietly down on the table, removed the jam and cream. She placed them behind the flower jug, where it might seem they'd been sitting innocently for an hour, then backed out of the kitchen. She ran upstairs, past the hall mirror – yes, she looked a mess, mascara smudged, lips pale, drowned-cat hair – up to the second floor and into the bathroom. She shut the door, moved the linen basket in front of it. She looked in the bathroom cabinet for a volumiser, some kind of lacquering spray. There was a box of half-used hair dye, magazine sample sachets of face cream, Edward's cologne and an old splayed toothbrush. Nothing helpful.

Below, the doorbell rang. More party guests arriving, probably, though there were always people coming and going for other reasons. She half-expected to hear Mummy's voice calling up – *Door, Dill-eee* – as if Mummy might sense, might even see, somehow, that she was home. Dilly picked a towel up off the floor, sat on the toilet lid, and rubbed her hair. There was a comb in the bathtub and she scraped it through her fringe, tried to create something chic to one side of her head. She was sure she had a nice lipstick somewhere, a dark, sophisticated red, given to her by Cleo, who was always being sent free cosmetics. It had come in a little metallic sack, and was called something strange that didn't suggest colour at all, but a mood, a state of

fortune. *Advantage. Ascent*. She sat for a while thinking, but couldn't remember the name.

The lounge was extremely warm when Dilly went in. A furnace of coal glowed in the fire's cradle. There was simmering laughter and conversation, the gentle clanking of cups on saucers. Everyone had arrived: Cleo, Dominic and his wife, Bella, Peter, who was in his officer's uniform, the magazine lady, or at least an unknown lady in a black dress, and some of Mummy's other friends. Dilly tried to enter the room with a combination of subtle grace and moderate drama, to be seen and perhaps admired, but also pass into the throng without much notice or comment. Mummy was beside the table pouring tea into cups on saucers held out by Bella. Bella was very good at helping, and she seemed to have doubled her efforts since Rebecca. Mummy had on a little blonde fur stole and a black cardigan. There was still a faint white flour mark on her skirt. Next to the tea tray sat a plate of perfect, mounded, bronzed scones. The jam and cream had evidently been found and were set out in matching bowls. Dilly was desperate for a scone, but Mummy was right there, so she moved towards Edward, who, more often than not, would give up his plate if he saw a lady without.

As she was making her way round the perimeter of the group, Cleo turned and took hold of Dilly's elbow. *If it isn't the mystery birthday girl,* she said. What have you been up to*? Spying for the government?* She kissed Dilly on the cheek. Cleo smelled heavenly, some kind of antique French talcum, or a salon-grade shampoo. Her hair, tresses and tresses of it, was piled high. She had on a silky maroon item, not a dress, nor a jumper; it draped perfectly from her shoulders and was belted at her waist. Her face was dewy, flawless. *Goodness, you do look beautiful, Dilly, what a fabulous combination, very laissez-faire*. Dilly had put together long, wide suit trousers on loan from Lillian's shop, part of the new winter range, and a pink silk shirt rifled from Edward's cupboard. In her haste to get ready, the combination had seemed a stroke of casual sartorial humour. But when Cleo gave compliments, you could never quite be sure whether there wasn't another message. Cleo lowered her voice, conspiratorially. *Just a moment, there's a tiny bit*. She raised her top lip and pointed to her front teeth. Cleo's teeth were slightly gapped, making her somehow seem both sexual and childlike. Dilly licked around to remove the lipstick. *Thanks*. Cleo tutted. *Bit of a dull crew this afternoon, isn't it?* Her mouth rode upwards. She looked like the most beautiful snarling show dog. *Shame Sam couldn't come. But probably it's not his kind of thing? Let's say hi to the boys.*

Cleo linked her arm through Dilly's and stepped her towards their brothers. Peter and Dominic kissed Dilly on both cheeks and resumed their conversation, which sounded political, something to do with a war in Venezuela. They were disagreeing, amiably. Cleo began a funny anecdote – inserting it elegantly into the discussion – about when she had flown to the wrong airport in Venezuela, the plane landing in a field full of little horses, and getting a lift to Barquisimeto with some chaps who it turned out were not really all that savoury. Peter laughed quietly, uncontrollably; Cleo knew exactly her audience. Dominic looked as if he was gearing up for a story of his own, but he probably knew it wouldn't compete.

The four Quinn siblings, standing together in a group. For a few nice moments, it felt to Dilly like a completed puzzle. It hadn't felt that way for a while, not since things with Rebecca, which Mummy described as *one of the worst things to have happened to the family,* her attachment, her over-attachment, to the baby. Some of the words that had been said, by Rebecca when she was very upset, and also by Mummy, afterwards, had echoed in Dilly's head a long time. *Congenital. Abusive. Your son's twisted priorities and your bloody eugenics – now it's fine to destroy life?* Dilly didn't know how people could believe in exact opposites where humans were concerned. Mummy could be quite fierce about her sons, but sometimes Peter did need their help, actually, where emotions were concerned. It was awful when things, when people, went wrong. It hadn't really happened since their father had left, and that had been Mummy's

predominant brown study, until Rebecca. The greatest betrayal of all was to disaffiliate.

Dilly's tummy hurt. There was a sound in her ears that happened when hunger got to a certain stage, a kind of humming generator noise. She could hear Mummy talking loudly, saying something about *that naughty Peter not being in a proper jacket,* though Mummy quite liked it when Peter arrived at Northumberland Road off-duty, in his kit. Dilly kept her eyes busy and away from the zone where their gazes might meet. In a moment Mummy would probably come over, say something remonstrative, and want to introduce Dilly to the magazine lady. There would be one of those rapid, awkward, whispery interrogations about where Dilly had been, *mousing off again,* and then she'd have to pretend to be poised and ready for an interview, which wasn't a proper interview, but a kind of cultural conversation test that might lead to some work, or at the very least to a temporary internship that might lead to some work. Dilly had read the arts section of the papers at the weekend, but couldn't remember anything interesting. She had half an idea for an article about the colour yellow, how yellow was being reclaimed by women after years of being unfashionable. Also colour therapy, how yellow had a certain effect, psychologically, in relation to mental health. Dilly hadn't quite worked the proposition out yet, but if she started talking, hopefully things would expand. The room was stuffy and a bit smoky and she felt sick. It was a dangerous point; she knew that from the past. She really did have to eat.

She slid out of Cleo's arm, and went over to Edward and Father Muturi. Father Muturi seemed not to have moved an inch from his warm spot. Cleo, he exclaimed, *I was hoping to meet you! Actually, I'm Dilly,* Dilly said, *that's Cleo there.* She pointed. There was a pause. *Ah yes, Delia.* Father Muturi turned to Edward. *She comes to church a lot, this one. A good girl. Yes, I know,* said Edward. That's a splendid shirt, Dilly. I was thinking of wearing it myself. Edward was smiling, eyes pale and bright behind his glasses. His face was purplish-red, which made his hair look extraordinarily white. He must be cooking inside his wool cardigan. It had taken a little while, but Edward had got used to the borrowing arrangements in the house. Only his brown Belstaff was off-limits. It was very expensive, his favourite coat, and couldn't be risked, especially as the boys were known to misplace coats a lot. Mummy sometimes teased Edward about it, called it *his lucky war correspondent's jacket*, but they seemed to have reached an agreement.

Father Muturi's plate was empty on the mantleshelf, but Edward still had half a scone, the bottom piece cut very cleanly, with no scattered crumbs. He hadn't yet spread anything on top. Dilly willed him to see – to feel – how desperate she was. But Edward seemed slower than usual, or less observant, or perhaps he just assumed Dilly had eaten. Father Muturi was coming to the end of his rotation at St Eligius; he was talking about going home. It would be good to get back to those who really needed him. The English were good citizens, not believers. *Well, we shall be very sad to lose you,* Edward was saying, though Edward in fact did not attend Mass unless it was Christmas Eve and he'd had a few vodkas. The skin on his face looked so red and shiny it might burst. As she listened to them talk, everything felt very light and thin, and Dilly thought how kind it would be to reach up and prick the surface of Edward's skin with a pin. Once, twice, on each cheek.

There was a pause in the conversation. *It's my birthday,* Dilly said. *Today. It's today.* The men looked a bit startled. She had blurted it, really quite rudely. Today? Father Muturi said. *It's your birthday?* Dilly nodded. She glanced at the hovering scone plate, the beautifully baked half-wing that Edward wasn't eating. Mummy's laugh whooped out, she'd told a joke, or someone had. *That is very wonderful,* Father Muturi said. *We must do a birthday blessing. Oh, yes, marvellous,* said Edward.

Father Muturi cleared his throat noisily, stepped down off the hearth and into the room. He was a big man and when he moved it was seismic. The heads of the guests turned. Father Muturi held out his hands. He waited, professionally, horrifyingly, for attention, and Dilly began to realise what was happening, what

was going to happen. One by one the guests fell quiet. Mummy's voice was the last to ring, its notes high, its key pervasively major. She stepped round the guests and came closer, positioned herself at the front. Theatre at a party was her favourite thing.

Father Muturi waggled his fingers a little. Edward had removed himself to the side and Dilly was now, inescapably, the main scene. Everyone's eyes were on her, Mummy's especially, a concentrated, avian glare. Dilly tried to smile, to look game, and humble, ready to receive. She glanced at Cleo for help, but her sister was whispering something in Peter's ear and smirking. Dilly looked down at the floorboards. The dizziness was not airy any more, but heavy, located inside her body. She felt like a weight going down into dark water. In London, she had fainted a few times – low on iron – and been given tablets that tasted nasty and turned everything black. It was quite nice, disappearing for a little while. It would be quite nice now. But, of course, there would be the waking, the being helped up, the fuss, and knowing she had been a spectacle, more of a spectacle than she already was.

Father Muturi set his feet wide apart and placed his hands on Dilly's head. She felt her knees bend and she sank involuntarily. The hands followed her down, made contact again. Dilly tried to stay still. She tried to be present, but it did feel as if she was being towed away. The priest began. *On this very special day, this very special girl who God has given…* He paused. *How many years, please?* He was asking Dilly, or anyone. *Thirty,* called Mummy. *She's thirty!* Then, as an aside, *Lordy, can you believe it, our Dilly!* There were a few claps, though why Dilly didn't know. The pressure of Father Muturi's touch lifted. He made an um-ing noise, and seemed confused. Dilly shut her eyes, waited. Was this bad? She thought of Charlie-bo. His giant robe-like coat. His ruined hazel eyes. His terrible predicament: not the fruit joke, but his life. She thought of Rebecca, pictured her, fatally, like the painting of the goat in the Fitzwilliam with its red headband, standing in salt near the water, its amber eyes dying. She'd taken Sam to see it a few weeks ago. She'd wanted to tell him that this was what happened when you didn't belong any more, when you took the sins of others and were cast out. Like Rebecca. Rebecca was a scapegoat. It was a secret, dangerous thought, not ever to be shared with anyone. And Sam hadn't really been interested in the painting – he'd wanted to see the Samurai masks. Father Muturi touched Dilly's hair again, gently, firmly, and she thought of the river, the river's grace and indifference. She felt the river moving past her, its strong, cold muscles. She felt herself going with it. After a moment the priest spoke, issued some kind of blessing, but Dilly couldn't really hear.

When it was over, the guests went back to chatting and laughing and drinking tea. Dilly sat down on the sofa. For a moment, she felt Mummy's eyes still on her, assessing, but nothing passed between them. Mummy must have sensed, decided not to make the introduction, because Dilly wasn't hoisted over to the magazine woman. Instead, a cup of tea was handed down to her. And then a plate, bearing a whole, uncut scone, with two glistening heaps, white and red, cream and jam. Around the scone was the faded Minton pattern, a ragged botanical tangle. Dilly felt the corner of one eye dampen. Mummy didn't say anything, but the relief, the reprieve, was overwhelming. Her hands were trembling a little as she pushed her thumbs into the soft body of the scone and split it open. She took one big piece and swabbed it through the jam and then through the cream; she lifted it and bit into it. The ducts at the back of her mouth stung and saliva flooded out painfully. She almost gagged. Then the taste came, sweet, wheaty, that safe, wonderful, family taste. Merrick had been wrong. She had tried to be unmoored, tried to live without protections, but the world was full of grotesque, frightening, ridiculous things. It was full of meaningless sorrow and contradiction. Like a sick little baby, with a perfect soul. Here – didn't he see? – they could all help each other. Failure could be forgiven, good things shared. They could all be each other. Who you were, really, was who else you were.

It seemed like a miracle to be left alone on the sofa with tea and food, but there she was. The party continued. Dilly ate the scone quickly, a kind of racked,

grateful devouring. She licked jam off her finger. She went to the table and took another scone, heaped on cream – no one saw, no one stopped her – and sat back down with her plate. People were talking, sipping tea, having a jolly time, legs and shoes moved here and there. Her brothers and sister and Mummy circulated. The fire began to die. Father Muturi left, maybe for Kenya. He didn't look at her and he made no goodbyes. The front door closed. A minute later the doorbell rang. Dilly looked up at Mummy to see if she should be the one to answer, but Mummy was already en route, adjusting her pale fur stole. Dilly's duties, it seemed, were all suspended.

She heard a muffled discussion at the door, ladies' voices, ups and downs, trills of indistinguishable words. It was longer than the usual welcome-and-coat-off conversation, so perhaps not a party guest. Then she heard Mummy exclaim, shrilly, *gracious, no!* Mummy came back into the lounge with Lillian, who must just have closed the boutique. Lillian was carrying the loveliest-looking package, an immaculate silver box with a huge beige bow, probably for Dilly, because Lillian was very generous and good at remembering. She and Mummy were still talking in low tones, and Dilly heard Mummy say, well, should I announce it? Without waiting for a reply, Mummy said loudly, in her speech-giving voice, everyone. *Listen, please, everyone!* The room fell quiet again.

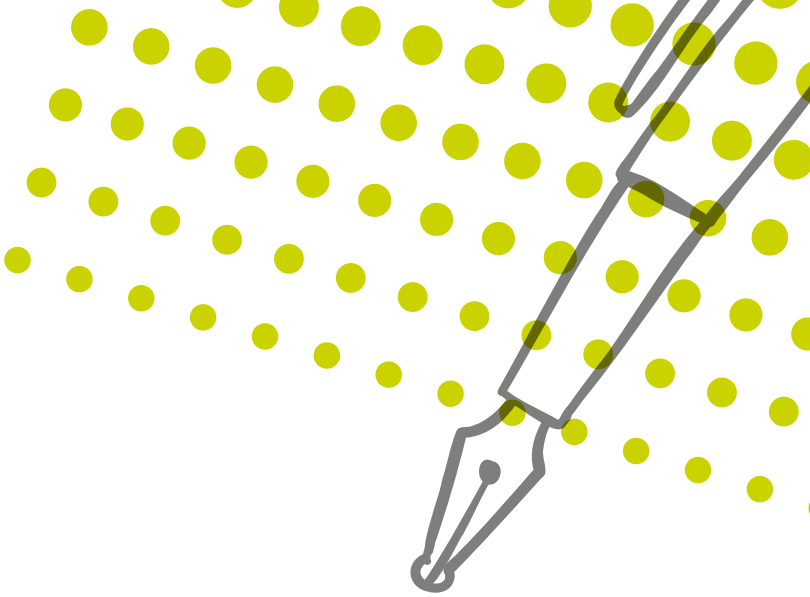
Mummy's expression was now the one related to dreadful news and dismay. An almost operatic gurn. Her brow was deeply rippled, mouth collapsing in the corners. Her hands were held to her chest. *There's been an accident. They've found, well, a body, it seems, just very close to us, down by the weir.* Her eyes were extremely bright; with tears, Dilly realised. Sometimes things did actually make Mummy very upset. There were gasps of surprise and sympathy, and a few comments and questions, awful, *who, when, should Peter go and lend a hand?* Mummy was drawn back into the group, *no, not identified yet,* she was saying, expertly, though she'd known the information only since Lillian had arrived.

Lillian set the present down on the sofa next to Dilly and perched the other side. She had on the same trousers that Dilly was wearing. The front pleat was perfect. Lillian always looked so beautiful. She smiled. *Are you all right, Dilly? Sorry about the bad news.* Dilly smiled too and nodded, looked back at the scone on the plate. *No Sam today? No, not today.* Dilly took another bite. *Oh well, never mind. This is nice.* Lillian's voice fell a little. *I ran into your dad on the way. He said to say happy birthday. Do you think he'll pop in?* Dilly looked up to see who was left at the party. The magazine lady and Cleo were engrossed in conversation. Peter had disappeared and Dominic was holding a bottle of champagne, unsure whether to open it, while Mummy still seemed preoccupied by the trauma.

It was lovely – the wrapping on Lillian's gift, the people here who really loved her, more than Sam ever would have, the second scone, feeling like giddy déjà vu. She already knew everything, could see the body laid out on the towpath, covered by layers and layers of sodden dishevelled rags, a halo of river water leaking around it. The police had cordoned off the scene, and an ambulance was parked up on the road near the punting station. Figures in white medical suits were lifting the yellow tape, stepping underneath, and carefully approaching the lump that had been dragged out of the water. They were kneeling down and gently uncovering the body, peeling off the wet clothes, lifting the heavy wet skirt of the gown away from the face, taking off pieces of rotten fruit, and the red headband, folding back the long, furred ears, and the face underneath, so peaceful and untormented, was hers.

[END]

Discussion guide



The Grotesques
by Sarah Hall

Summary

A girl witnesses a cruel prank played on a homeless man on her way home from running an errand in town, and returns home to her birthday party, where she learns that the man has died.

Questions

What can you glean from the story about what happened between Peter and Rebecca? What does the situation around Rebecca's baby say about Dilly's family?

We get the sense that Dilly's mother is a controlling, autocratic character. How is this indicated in the story?

Who are 'The Grotesques' of the story title? We begin with a strong image of the almost abstract and grotesque, dehumanising arrangement of fruit on Charlie-bo. Is Charlie-bo himself grotesque, or does that description belong to someone else?

Discussion points

Set in Oxford, Sarah Hall's story describes the contempt that the "Gowns" – the rich students attending the university – show for Charlie-bo, a local homeless man with mental health problems, despite the fact that he too was once a high flying student. Charlie-bo's humanity is disprespected by the students' prank, which involves covering his face with fruit, literally erasing his features. When he wakes, he is so distressed that he (intentionally or unintentionally) falls into the river and dies. At the end of the story, Dilly imagines that Charlie-bo's dead body wears her face.

Why do you think that Dilly might identify with Charlie-bo? Is it appropriate for her to do so, given her family's apparent wealth and privilege? Does Dilly see her future as a similarly lost soul given her problems living alone? And do her family show her a similar contempt as the 'Gowns' show Charlie – one of their own, who has failed to meet the exacting expectations of their social class?

What to look out for

Food is a strong presence in 'The Grotesques', from Charlie-bo's terrifying banana grin and the intimidating cakes in Monns' patisserie to the homely, reassuring taste of Dilly's mother's scones. Consider how Sarah Hall evokes the sensual qualities of taste and smell in her description, and what those details make the reader feel.

Hall uses Dilly's naïve voice to show but not tell the reader about endemic structures of privilege and class (particularly the "magazine lady" invited to Dilly's birthday party with the intention of ensuring her a job) and how those class and wealth assumptions impact on those outside, especially Rebecca, Sam and Charlie-bo.

Dilly's vivid imagination gives a sense of making the ordinary extraordinary, adding another layer of reality over the top of what is on one hand a reasonably mundane day. Through her eyes, we pick up subtleties and shadows where another narrator would not see them, enabling us to look beneath the surface of a family and a town's dynamics and see what is hidden.

Next steps

Write a series of diary entries for Dilly for the time she is away in London on her own working in the coffee shop. Detail her daily difficulties: how does Dilly respond to events that we might take in our stride? How does her attention deficit – getting easily distracted, forgetting things – imapct on her daily life? Refer back to the story for examples of the ways she gets distracted (e.g. the seeds in the raspberry jam) to help help you imagine her experience.

The Sweet Sop
by Ingrid Persaud

IF IS CHOCOLATE you looking for, and I talking real cheap, then you can't beat Golden MegaMart Variety & Wholesale Ltd in Marabella. Think of a Costco boil down small small but choke up with goods from top to bottom. When me and Moms had that holiday in Miami by her brother we were always in Costco. But till they open a Costco in Trinidad go by Golden MegaMart. They does treat people real good. As soon as I reach they know I want at least thirty jars of Nutella chocolate spread. And don't play like you giving me anything else. I tell them I have my reasons and that is what I want. But they always trying. Just last week you should hear them.

'Eh, Slim Man, we get a nice chocolate. It just come out. Rocky Mallow Road. Why you don't eat a good chocolate nah man instead of this chocolate in a bottle?'

'I good.'

'Is Cadbury I talking about. Try one nah. On the house.'

'Look don't hurt me head with no foolishness. And hurry up. Man have taxi waiting.'

I never used to eat chocolate all the time so. If is anything, give me a pack of peanuts or green mango with salt and pepper. Anything salty and I in that. Everything changed when my old man Reggie died. Now the only thing I eat is sliced bread with Nutella. Moms think I am going mad. I might be going mad. That is a question for the doctor them to decide. But what is as true as Lara can play cricket is that I am getting fat. Man, let's give Jack his jacket. I am enormous.

Computer work like I have mean you don't need to leave the house. In fact, most of the people I work for operating the same way rather than in an office set up. To stop me and Moms getting all up in each other's business, I turned the garage into a studio apartment as soon as I started working. I have my own toilet and bath and a small kitchen with a fridge. She is in the house proper but this way me and Moms don't have to bounce up every day. I am not a man to take more than two-three little drink but you see that woman. Ah lord. When she start up with she stupidness I does want to take a rum straight from the bottle. Is always the same tune. Victor, this bread and chocolate thing is your father fault, god rest he soul. You should have followed my example and don't have nothing to do with he. One minute you was a good looking, normal, young man and then that worthless devil sit on your head. Now look at you. You is one big booboloops. You forget how to reach the gym? I don't understand what happen to you. You don't go out. You only home eating this bread and chocolate morning, noon and night. Chocolate and bread, bread and chocolate, chocolate and bread. Watch me. Your heart can't carry this size. Keep up this madness and you go be using a plot in Paradise Cemetery before me.

In a way Moms have a point. Is only after Reggie passed away that things got real dread. They say the Leukaemia take him. That is part of the truth. I know the other part. The truth about what happened the night Reggie died is something I taking with me to the grave.

You have to understand that I didn't know Reggie

much at all until the year before he passed. Growing up I could count the number of times I saw him on one hand. Somehow he used to know when big things were happening and show up. Like when I did Common Entrance, he reached in the school and gave me a blue note. One hundred dollars. He had on shades and I didn't make him out. Then loud loud he was saying, 'But eh, eh, Victor, how you don't recognise your own father?'

I remember that because the whole class must be hear him and know all my business.

Another time he reached by the house after I got confirmed in the Cathedral of Our Lady Of Perpetual Help. Church not my thing but Moms say while I living under she roof I will learn some righteousness. Moms spot Reggie by the gate first. She shouted out for me to go and see what my father want but don't let that stinking man put a foot in this house. Then she bawl out that if he ask for me tell him to haul his ass. That kind of bad mind was not Christian but I wasn't saying boo. I am not that brave or that stupid. Reggie must have heard her because he stayed on the road. He gave me two hundred dollars and asked me how my studies going. According to Reggie, his family had brains in it except the brains run zig zag. He sure I get what he miss out. I think he was hoping I would become a big shot lawyer or doctor.

After that it was nearly six years I had to wait to hear from him. Don't ask me what have him so busy for all that time. Moms let out one long steups when she find out he get in touch. It seems the man sick bad and wanted to see me.

'Wash your foot and jump in if you want,' she said. 'You see me, as far as that man concern, I will never forgive his whore mongering and I will never ever forget what he do. He leave when you was three months. Three months. And now the Lord calling him home he want to spend time with you? Shame on he.'

It was my Auntie's mouth that opened and made the story jump out. Moms found Reggie with the neighbour's daughter and threw him out then and there. And Moms, being from Tobago, is not like she had much family to help her out. That is how strong she is. The young lady in question is none other than the woman with the bakery on Mucurapo Street. People say she does make nice Hops bread and she currants-roll sweet too bad. Me? I would rather starve than put my big toe in there. Mind you, whatever went on between she and Reggie didn't last. She ended up with Mr Louchoo and that is how she get bakery. As for Reggie, he married to one good-looking lady name Kim. Go by Kenny Khan Bookstore and Variety Shop – is downstairs the big, green building in Cross Crossing. Kim is some kind of manager there.

The same Auntie who buss the mark is the one who tell me not to mind Moms and go see Reggie on he sick bed. If I don't go, and the man dead, I might end up regretting that we didn't talk. Not that he look overjoyed to see me when I reach. He was lying down on the couch. Reggie was never a big man but now you could see all his bones jooking out. His legs thin like two pencils and his face hollow. I said I heard he not doing any more treatment.

'What I going to do that for? I have enough poison in my body.'

'But it could make you better.'

'How you know that? Like you is a doctor now?'

He had to stop and take deep breaths.

'Look I tell you already. I done with all that hospital thing. They ain't even sure it would help me now. Gopaul luck is not Seepaul luck. I take that treatment and I could end up seeing more trouble.'

Kim was nice. She looked a good bit younger than Reggie. What woman does see in old man I don't know. She claimed she was always telling Reggie to invite me home by them. Reggie was right there watching me but he didn't say much. I tried to ask him how he was doing and if there was anything I could help with. All I got back were gruff grunts and yes or no answers. After a while he ignored me completely and put on the sports channel. I stayed and watched TV with him for a good hour then I told them I have to make tracks before it get too dark. Kim gave me sweet bread straight from the oven to carry home. She say tell your mother is Kim sent it because the two of we don't have no quarrel. I was by the front door before

Reggie turned off the TV and looked up.

'So when you coming back to see me?'

I moved the bag with the sweet bread from one hand to the next.

'I might pass next week.'

'Don't give me a six for a nine. I is a dying man.'

'You go see me.'

'Make sure. I go be waiting.'

If Kim wasn't right there I think I would have let go two bad words in he tail.

He waiting.

He.

Waiting.

Lord Jesus, don't get me started. But then I remembered that he is on his way out. If this heaven and hell thing is correct, then he going where no amount of air conditioning will keep him from burning up. Things have a way of levelling out.

The only slight problem with the levelling out business was that Reggie decided he was going to take his own cool time to pass. I ended up having to go Saturday after Saturday. If I didn't go he would get Kim to call and ask me to come over. They don't have much help so Kim needed me. Poor thing. She was either working or looking after him without a free five minutes. Reggie didn't like nothing better than when was only me and he. He must have been an army general in a past life.

'Victor, bring juice.'

I would bring the juice.

'Oh lord this thing freezing cold. That is what you go bring for me?'

Two minutes later he would be hungry. Kim always left something on the stove - a little stew chicken or she nice corn soup.

'I don't care what she cook. I don't want it. I want a boil egg and a piece of bread. You could boil egg? Don't make the egg hard, hard.'

Of course the egg was always too soft or too hard. More than once, after I put it on a plate, he would push it aside claiming he was too tired to eat. It was not tiredness. It was bad mind stopping him. He enjoyed having me waiting on him like he was the king of Trinidad. A favourite of his was to ask for a glass of water and no matter how much water was in the glass he would complain and make me take it back.

'Like you want to drown me? Give me a glass with half of that.'

Or I might get:

'Well I never see more. You put water in this glass? Like water lock off?'

But you had to feel sorry for the man. Restless and in pain, Reggie would be walking up and down from the living room to the kitchen and outside patio. I never knew where I should be. To him I was always in the wrong place. I remember a day he was watching a test match - Pakistan v West Indies - and I was sitting on a chair to the side. All I did was lean forward to check out The Guardian newspaper and he started carrying on.

'I know your father is not a glass maker so move from in front the TV.'

Another time his bad temper was for a bracelet I had on. He took one look and decided that it was a ladies' band.

'I didn't know you is a batty man.'

I bit my lips and stayed cool.

'Everybody wearing bracelet like this. Is the fashion.'

'Well monkey see, monkey do.'

I good with that. Here you can still get locked up for being with a man. So, if people call you a dotish monkey, take it.

For a whole six months Reggie carried on with his army general thing barking orders at me even though he weakie weakie. I could not tell you when last he even walked outside the house. But the man still had fight in his spirit. He would point his bony finger in my face and say all you will have to wait. Is not time yet for Mahadeo Funeral Home. I kept wondering how long he would drag this out and why I was such a jackass to let myself get dragged in.

Then one Saturday he asked me to go buy him a chocolate. He was feeling for a Fruit and Nut bar. Now this was a man with stage four of the big C, plus high pressure and even higher sugar. I knew Kim didn't

keep anything like sweet biscuits or chocolates in the house. But Major Reggie wasn't backing down.

'Victor, I am dying. You hear that? I having to eat bread that the Devil he-self knead. A lil' chocolate is all I begging for.'

What to do? You should have seen how he licked down that chocolate. Half a big bar was gone before he stopped to breathe.

'How your mother?'

I nodded and made a noise to confirm she was fine.

'Well you must tell she hello from me.'

I nodded again. His brains clearly not working good or else he would have known not to be sending Moms no hello.

'Your mother ain't easy, yes. She ever learn to cook?'

It was best to keep my mouth shut.

Reggie made sucking noises as he tried to clear the bits of dried fruit stuck between his teeth.

'You want me to tell you what really went on between your mother and me?'

I looked up slightly. He was eyeing me good.

'You mother didn't understand that when you married you can't keep running by this one and that one. What go on in a man house should stay in a man house. But your mother was always broadcasting we business to the marish and the parish. And when I tell she anything she would start up one set of quarrelling.'

I swallowed hard and looked down at my sneakers.

'Two bo-rat can't live in one hole. That is the truth.'

He chomped on a block of chocolate but just because his mouth was full didn't stop him from running it.

'Is a good thing I get out from under that woman and all she foolishness.'

I took out my phone and started checking emails. Reggie gave a little, mocking laugh.

'Alright Victor, don't listen. Believe what you want. But remember, you only know chapter. You don't know the book.'

He scrunched up the purple chocolate wrapper and handed it to me.

'Take that with you when you going. Kim go be real vex if she know you feeding me chocolate.'

No joke, some days I wished he would hurry up and die.

Instead, the memory of chocolate made the man crazy to see me. I became Reggie's dealer. A voice on the phone would whisper, 'Two Kit Kat,' and hang up. The bathroom was a favourite hiding place. I could hear water falling in the background and then his voice hissing, 'Snickers. King size.' After a few weeks he say he easing back on the sugar so he only want Bournville Dark Chocolate. Who he fooling? Two days later he begging me please bring a Galaxy Caramel Bar. He can't take the bitter taste. Then he had worries about the ingredients. I should bring something organic. When I told him the organic chocolate was real money he said forget that. We don't know for sure if organic better and besides he going to dead soon.

This secret chocolate handover was our special sin. Everybody know that a little secret-sinning sweet too bad. If you don't agree I know you lying through your teeth. In them sinning moments Reggie softened, forgot his constant pain and forgot to fight the big C. He even forgot to fight me. Plus something else happened. He would be eating a Bounty Bar or Hershey's Kisses, and just so he would start giving me the lowdown on growing up in the countryside and leaving school with only a couple subjects. His parents thought he was a joker with no brains and he believed them. He said for years he felt like he lost his soul. But an uncle took him in and got him a place at the technical school in San Fernando. Reggie said that was a debt he could never fully repay. Since then he never wanted for work.

A Mars Bar (super size) helped Reggie's take his mind off the reality that he was living full time in the bedroom now. Instead he talked about long time. He told me about meeting Moms – a story she never told me. Back in the day, Moms was working as a receptionist in an office he was rewiring.

'In them days it didn't have no Tinder hook-up business like what all you young people does do.'

He laughed at my shock.

'You didn't think I know what does go on these days?'

Reggie used to wait at the bus stand when Moms finished work 4 o'clock . They used to stop at Dairy Queen for ice cream - vanilla for her, chocolate for him. Reggie would take a chance and hold her hand or play footsie under the table. But he said they should never have married. Somebody should have talked some sense in them because they were too young.

'Victor, that was a case of sweet in goat mouth but sour in the bam bam. One minute is love like dove but, before you could turn around twice, we was ready to kill one another.'

I got up and asked if he wanted some water to wash down the Mars Bar but he was far away.

Half hour later, when I was leaving, he still seemed lost.

'Reggie, I heading out now.'

He looked up, his hollow face creased up with pain.

'You could call me Dad you know.'

I breathed in hard. Reggie looked at the wall opposite then back at me.

'You know, I wanted to ask you something. Why your mother never married again boy?'

I shrugged.

'It's probably too late for she now. Mind you, she does still go to church every Sunday?'

'Yeah.'

'It have plenty randy old timers that does go church and they not going to praise the Lord.'

By now I was helping Reggie bathe or cutting up his food and bribing him with the chocolate. While he nibbled on a Twix I told him about what I did and how I liked being my own boss. He didn't understand computers and coding - not that he let that stop him.

'Victor, it don't matter if you does sweep the road or if you is prime minister. Once you could say, yes, I doing my best. Once you could say that, you go be a happy man.'

I was home eating left over macaroni pie and baked chicken when Kim called. The doctor had left having told Reggie that he should be in hospital or he would die quickly and in real pain. Reggie's response had been to throw two cuss words at the doctor. He was not budging. Kim was sobbing and begging me to speak with him. I understood that this was a moment to come out strong. This was a Lindt moment. Even his wilfulness would melt with this fancy Swiss chocolate.

From the time Reggie refused the Lindt Excellence Extra Creamy chocolate bar I knew he was ready to close his eyes for good.

'Reggie, you don't know what you missing.'

He shut his eyes tight. It looked like he was trying not to cry.

'Why you never once call me Dada or Daddy or something so?'

I felt like someone had pelted a cricket ball straight at my head and knocked me out. What was I supposed to say? Should I lie so the man could rest his soul in peace? What about me? Would my soul rest peacefully?

After one time is another and from that day Reggie went down fast fast. I tried giving him Nestle Butterfinger but he refused it. I brought him Crunchie. Same thing. I broke up a bar of Oh Henry to see if he would eat even a little piece but nothing doing. I tried Smarties, Milky Way, Aero Bar, Rolo, Charles Chocoloco, Twin and some others I can't even remember the name of now. If they were selling it, I bought it, but not one of them made Reggie even give a smile.

In his final days I was practically living in their small house, sleeping on the couch. He wasn't talking much. That did not stop him letting me know if he wanted something. Mr Army General was still there. I might be checking Facebook on my phone and suddenly feel a bony finger jab my leg. A hand taking an invisible cup to his lips meant bring water now. A pat of the mattress meant he was fed up on that side and I better turn him. There were no more stories about life in Cedros and running away from school to dip in the sea. I asked him to tell me again how he was caught thiefing Julie mango from a neighbour's tree. Or the time he get licks for taking his father bicycle and going to a party when he should have been home

sleeping. I wanted him to tell me again how he has only one picture of me – a bald baby in a sailor outfit. Tell me again how that picture never leave his mash-up wallet for the past twenty-four years.

The few times he did speak it was only about dying. He said he couldn't talk to Kim because she was still hoping he would live to enjoy Christmas and the parang season. Reggie didn't have the heart to say that this year she making black cake, sorrel and punch de crème by she-self. He begged to know if death itself, when you are actually about to die, if that was more pain. I lied as best I could.

He was always behind me to help him pass quickly. The first time he said it I wasn't sure what he wanted.

'You want some more painkillers Reggie?'

'I want you to mash up all and give me with some water.'

'You can't swallow?'

'No monkey.'

'I can't give you more than the dose.'

'Why? I begging you. Please. Let me go in peace.'

'You will go in peace.'

Tears started dripping down his cheeks.

'How you know that? You eh see how I suffering here? You should be helping me.'

'Then let me carry you to the hospital.'

We had that same talk so many times I lost track. I ain't lying. Seeing Reggie slipping away slow slow, and in so much pain, made me feel sick too. But life is life. He was asking me to make a jail for murder. Even if nobody ever find out I had to ask myself who I was doing this for. You know how many times I wished I could tell people my father dead? When you young that sounds cool instead of telling people my father ups and gone he way. But he not dead. He dying but he not dead and I didn't know how long this dying thing could stretch out for. Whole day, whole night he was restless and crying. You know what it is to hear a big man bawling all the time?

Yet, in those hard, final days, chocolate Reggie sometimes slipped back in the groove.

'Boy Victor.'

I bent close.

'I feel I go be the next Lazarus. What you think?'

He gave a feeble smile.

'I go dead and then bam, get up from this bed and live out my days cool as anything.'

The doctor came to house a few times. He left strong pain tablets while still telling Reggie to go into hospital. Reggie said if anybody wanted him to leave 30B Hibiscus Drive they would have to wait till he in a coffin.

One night I was taking a sleep on the chair next to his bed when Reggie started jabbing my leg.

'Water?'

He shook his head then whispered.

'I was dreaming about carnival.'

'You were playing mas?'

'Nah. I don't think so. I was hearing a Mighty Sparrow calypso.'

'Which one?'

He started to hum, 'All them Tobago gyal ...'

He coughed.

'Sweet sweet sweet like a butterball. La la la la la.'

I joined in.

'Anytime they call, I have to crawl, like a old football, I rolling straight to my Tobago gyal.'

I squeezed his hand.

'Rest. Is the middle of the night.'

He began to cry softly.

'I can't take this no more. No more.'

I got up. I could see myself going to the kitchen, like I was following my body. I watched as I mashed up every painkiller I could find with a rolling pin. In a cup I mixed the white powder with Nutella.

He was still crying when I followed myself back into the bedroom.

'Have some Nutella.'

He shook his head.

I took his hand and looked him straight in the eye.

'Eat some chocolate nah.'

He didn't move.

'Daddy, is what you asked for.'

His eyes opened wide wide and I felt his hand squeeze mine.

'Thank you son.'

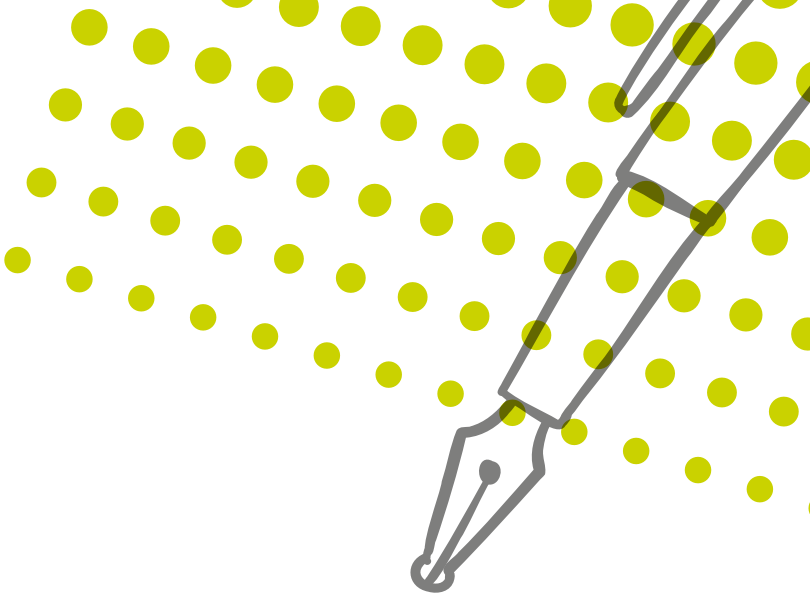
Reggie blinked and more tears spilled down his cheeks.

'Go catch a sleep on the couch, Victor. The longest day have an end.'

At the door I turned around for one last look. My dad was licking chocolate off the spoon bringing ease for him and, in time, for me.

[END]

Discussion guide



The Sweet Sop
by Ingrid Persaud

Summary

A young man makes peace with his estranged father through the medium of chocolate.

Questions

What makes a good father? Is Reggie a good father, and is Victor a good son?

Why is Victor only eating Nutella on bread at the start of the story?

What are the most effective scenes showing Reggie's character? How is Reggie's character established?

What role does food play in the story? How does the author use it as a device? What is your relationship with food like, and does it change in different situations or with different emotions?

Discussion points

In this engaging story about fathers and sons, we learn that there are two sides to every story, and sometimes villains are not necessarily as bad or as evil as we were told. What are Reggie's strengths and weaknesses? What fatherly wisdom does he offer Victor, and what elements of his character are unpleasant? How much of his character when Victor knows him might be a result of his illness, and what was he like in the past?

What to look out for

The Trinidadian cadences, rhythm and slang of the narrator and characters.

Well-drawn, idiosyncratic and honest characters.

Dynamic dialogue that develops a relationship and reveals character.

Was your experience of the story different when reading it on the page and listening to it? Why? How did this make you feel about reading?

Next steps

The plot in a story is usually defined by what the characters want: Reggie is an absent father, but he still wants Victor to recognise him as his Dad. Despite Reggie's absence, Victor still wants a relationship with his father. Write the story from the point of view of Moms. What does she want for herself and for Victor? What did she want when she was a young girl and married Reggie? How did her life and her expectations change? You could use a diary format and write one entry when she meets Reggie, one on her wedding day and one contemporary entry at the time that Persaud's story starts. Or, for a longer piece, write more entries that chart Moms' experiences of growing disillusionment.

You'll have heard the phrase, 'history repeats itself', particularly related to behavioural patterns within families. Do you think this is true? Do you think it's possible to self-determine your future and be who you want to be, or is it inevitable that you will play out what you have learned as a child from those closest to you? Visualise what type of father Victor might be in the future. If there is divided opinion in your group, split into two and each brainstorm words on a large piece of paper, using the character references from the story, to contribute to an image or scene of Victor as Dad.

The Edge of the Shoal
by Cynan Jones

[Shoal /ʃəʊl/ - noun 1: a large number of fish swimming together. 2: a hidden danger or difficulty.]

HE SWINGS THE FISH from the water, a wild stripe flicking and flashing into the boat, and grabs the line, twisting the hook out, holding the fish down in the footrests. It gasps, thrashes. Drums. Something rapid and primal, ceremonial, in the shallow of the open boat.

Flecks of blood and scales loosen, as if turning to rainbows in his hands, as he picks up the fish and breaks its neck, feels the minute rim of teeth inside its jaw on the pad of his forefinger, puts his thumb behind the head and snaps.

The jaw splits and the gills splay, like an opening flower.

He was sure he would catch fish. He left just a simple note: "Pick salad x."

Briefly, he looks toward the inland cliffs, hoping the peregrine will be there, scanning as he patiently undoes the knot of traces, pares the feathers away from one another until they are free, and feeds them out. The boat is flecked. Glittered. A heat has come to the morning now, convincing and thick.

The kayak lilts. Weed floats. He thinks of her hair in water. The same darkened blond colour.

It's unusual to catch only one. Or it was just a straggler. The edge of the shoal. Something split it from the others.

He retrieves a carrier bag from the dry bag in back and stores the fish. Then he bails out the blood- rusted water from the boat.

Fish don't have eyelids, remember. In this bright water, it's likely they are deeper out.

He's been hearing his father's voice for the past few weeks now.

I've got this one, though. That's enough. That's lunch.

The bay lay just a little north. It was a short paddle from the flat beach inland of him, with the caravans on the low fields above, but it felt private.

His father long ago had told him that they were the only ones who knew about the bay, and that was a good thing between them to believe.

You'll set the pan on a small fire and cook the mackerel as you used to do together, in the pats of butter you took from the roadside café. The butter will be liquid by now, and you will have to squeeze it from the wrapper like an ointment.

The bones in the cooling pan, fingers sticky with the toffee of burned butter.

He was not a talker. But he couldn't imagine sitting in the bay and not talking to his father.

There is a strange gurgle and a razorbill appears, shudders off the water, flicks its head and preens. It looks at him, head cocked, turns as it paddles off a few yards. Then it dives again, and is gone.

He takes the plastic container from the front stow. It has warmed in the morning sun, and it seems wrong to him, the warmth. As if the ashes still had heat.

He unscrews the lid partially, caught by a sudden fear. That he will release some jinni, a ghost, the fatal germ. No. They're sterile. He throws science at the fear.

He's had to go through so many possessions, things that exploded with memories during the past few weeks; but it is the opposite with the ashes. He tries to hold away the fact they know nothing of what they are. Wants to remind the ashes of events, moments. To make them the physical thing of his father.

After the brief doubt, he relaxes again. Can feel the current arc him out, its subtle shift away from shore. A strong draw to the seemingly still water.

He has a sense, out here, of peace. Thinks, Why do we stop doing the things we enjoy and the things we know are good for us?

When he had fetched the kayak out from under the tarp, there were cobwebs, and earwigs in among the hatch straps.

He had not told her he was going. He'd expected it to be a weight he wanted to lift by himself.

There is a piping of oystercatchers, a clap of water as a fish jumps. He sees it for a moment, a silver nail. A thing deliberately, for a brief astounding moment, broken from its element.

Round the promontory, he fades the kayak, lets it drift, wiggling his ankles, working his feet loose with arrival. The water beneath him suddenly aglut, sentinel somehow, with jellyfish. He wonders if they are a sign, of some increasing heat perhaps. Then the noise of music hits him.

A child knee-high in the water, slapping at the waves. Another coming tentatively down the stones. A mother changing inside a towel.

The ashes sit perfectly in the drinks holder by his legs.

Laid out farther off, an adolescent girl.. The sound of her radio travelling. A pile of bright things.

The child has found a whip of kelp and slaps at the waves.

It's O.K., Dad, he says. We'll come back later.

The sound of a Jet Ski, from the beach in front of the caravans. An urban, invasive sound.

We'll come back when they've gone.

Out in the distance, a small cloud. A white flurry. A crowd of diving birds.

They won't be here all day.

Then he paddles, the ashes by his legs, in a straight line out to sea.

*

It's as he's holding his hands in the water, rubbing the blood and scales from them, that the hairs on his arms stand up and sway briefly, like seaweed in the current.

The birds that had indicated the fish had lifted suddenly. They are faint implications now, a hiatus disappearing against the light off the sea.

He is far enough offshore for the land to have paled in view.

The first lightning strikes somewhere out past the horizon. At first he thinks it just a sudden glint. The thunder happens moments later, and he feels sick in his gut.

He sees the rain as a thick dark band, moving in. Starts to paddle.

Then there is a wire of electric brightness. Three. Four. A rumble that seems to echo off the surface of the water.

He counts automatically, assesses the distance to land. Another throb of light. The coast still a thin wood-coloured line.

The wind picks up, cold air moving in front of the storm. And then there is a basal roll. The sound of a great weight landing. A slow tearing in the sky.

One repeated word now. No, no, no.

When it hits him there is a bright white light.

*

He wakes floating on his back, caught on a cleat by the elastic toggle of his wetsuit shoe. Around him hailstones melt and dissipate. They are scattered on the kayak, roll off as it bobs on the slight waves. There is a hissing sound. The hailstones melting in the water.

He stares around, shell-shocked, trying to understand, a layer of ash on the surface of the water. He cannot move his arms. They are held out before him as if beseeching the sky.

Dead fish lie around him in the water.

He gets himself to the boat, the boat to him, drawing it with his leg, shaking until he frees the toggle, turns, kicks, twists, trying to lever with his useless arms. Somehow tips himself into the boat.

Live, he's thinking. *Live*.

His fishing rod on fire upon the water as he slips off the world again, and passes out.

*

He moves because he coughs, a cough made of glass. Slowly lifts himself. One eye closed with salt. His face has been in the floor of the kayak and the salt is from the evaporated water. The sun had come out hard after the storm and evaporated the water, leaving the salt in a crust on his eye. When he opens the other, the light blinds him.

It hurts to breathe because his whole body hurts. As if he has suffered a great fall. His mouth, too, is crusted with salt. He does not know where he is. There is a pyroclast of fine dried ash across his skin.

He blinks and struggles to raise himself a little, the kayak shifting below him. The world slipping, rocking. When he grimaces, his lips split and bleed.

He looks down at his hands, feels the briefest twitch in his right arm, a wave and it spasms, smashes unfeelingly against the inside of the boat and goes dead again, falls against his side, a fish flicking after suffocating.

What happened? His consciousness a snapped cord his mind tries to pull back together.

His left hand stays inert, fractalled with purple; seems tattooed, in a pattern like ice on airplane glass.

*

The right arm, for a while, is wayward. Movable, but numb, clumsy.

He does not know how long he has been like this. Who he is.

He sees a rouge burn through the dry salt on the muscle of his forearm, sees the line of his shinbone startled and red. Feels his face. Like something felt through packaging, hears more than properly feels the paper of his dry cracked lips. He has the strange conviction that if he opens his stuck eye he will see what happened.

When he tries again, it's as if that eye leaves his face and flutters by him. A butterfly.

It takes him a while to focus, to accept it. He's forgotten there is other life. It puppets around him.

He cannot believe that a thing so small, so breakable, is out here. A thing that cannot put down on the water. How far must we be from land?

The butterfly settles on the bright lettering of the boat. He watches it open and close its wings in the sun. Opens and closes his working hand.

He reaches up and scrapes the salt from his closed lid, picks at the hard crystals. He wets his hand in the water, blinks with the sting as he bathes the eye.

When he refocusses, the butterfly is gone. For a split second, he believes again it was his eye, then he spots it, heading out over the water.

He feels a confusion, a kind of throb in his head. There is a complete horizon. A horizon everywhere around and no point of it seems closer than another. It brings claustrophobia. He does not know if he's moving–if he's travelling. He cannot tell in which direction if he is.

He feels only the rock, the sway, the dip and wallow of the boat.

*

For a moment, as he lifts from sleep, he thinks the warm sun on his neck is someone's breath. Hears, far off, the sound of a speedboat engine. There is land in sight, like a presence that has woken him.

He wakes with the understanding that the paddle is gone, and with that comes low panic.

His good arm has been in the water, and it is only as he raises it that he feels the little finger has been stripped.

It is torn and frayed to the first knuckle, skinned and swollen ragged with water, the pain searing and

hot. The nail is still there but tooth-marked where the little fish have bitten at it. As he touches the finger, his head spins, and when he passes out, again, it's like another white light shoots through him.

*

The thump of the fin stirs him.

His head was resting on the gunwale as the dark fin struck.

He does not move. Cannot move. A few yards off, the fin rises again, a half-metre sail out of the water, a gun-grey body. His primal systems fire a wave of fear through him, the adrenaline trying to get through him like water poured on ice; and the fin folds, disappears.

He is frozen, urinates, cannot move his head.

When it bumps again it is as if the fin has grown tactile. It folds and flops, reaches into the boat, hallucinatory, cartoonish, like a sea lion's flipper. And then the body of the fish, clownlike, lolls side-on in the water, a disk the size of a table.

This cannot be happening, he thinks. The sunfish and he eye to eye, its curious fin folding, flopping. An aberrant ripple to the water in the otherwise lambent calm. This is it, he thinks. This is it.

*

The sunfish stayed with him for hours. It could be said it steered him. It was almost the size of the kayak in length and bumped and rubbed the boat with a droll instinct, as a cow might a post.

The sunfish is not fishable, not edible, and no instinct has been driven into it to stay away from man. And perhaps it was the warmth of the boat it liked, with the plastic heated by the sun. Or perhaps it was something more.

But it stayed and bumped the boat for hours, and by doing so steered it; and it cannot be known whether it was deliberate, benevolent, that it did not steer the kayak farther out to sea.

*

He tries the screw of the locker in the centre of the kayak, confused by his sureness that there is a first-aid kit, confused given the things he does not know. The locker will not shift. Focus, he thinks. Just accept the pain. Focus on the fact that the land is there.

He turns in his seat and reaches for the dry bag, husbanding the finger. Uses his teeth and his hand to open the bag and spill out the looser things—the sunblock, the T-shirt, the old cloth.

His ears are blistered and cracked. His skin parched and sore, stretched and gritty with salt. He rubs the sunblock in. A baffling thought of holidays. Works urgently, as if the next few moments are vital.

He rubs it on his dead hand and is frightened. That he cannot feel it. That it lies so inert. He feels a sort of horror at his body. How long has this taken to happen? How long have I been out here?

He looks again at his useless hand, the now fernlike pattern. It seems to follow his veins, mark tiny capillaries, a leaf skeleton disappearing under the tide line of ash into the sleeve of his top.

A wave of sick goes through him.

The idea of breath on his neck lies under everything. A suspicion that someone has been left behind.

*

He takes the T-shirt and wets it, wraps it on his head, the touch of it a heat at first against his burned skin. But then it cools, and there is a sort of weight lifted, as if the sun had stopped pressing.

He unzips the pocket of his buoyancy aid and fumbles out the phone, drops it into his lap as he pops open the waterproof pouch. He turns it upside down and tips the phone out, thunk on the boat, picks it up and tries to start it. Nothing.

Take it apart. Let it dry out.

He struggles with it until the back slips off. And there against the battery is a wren feather.

He traps it with his thumb. Holds it carefully. His memory like a dropped pack of cards.

Next door's cat. Its strange possessive mewling,

crouched over the wren, the bird like a knot of wood.

The bird vibrated briefly when he picked it up, a shudder of life. Then flew away.

He could not picture her, but a sense of her came back with that.

They had kept a feather each.

*

Shouts. Faintly. Loud shouts that reach him quieter than whispers. That seem to carry on the air like faintly visible things.

He notes movement, just a shifting of the air, the smallest breeze that bears the shouts; a sure current, the kayak drifts. Goes sideways past the shingle bay.

He is in a dream. He sees, there, a penguin crowd of people bathing in their clothes. In black-and- white suits. They are playing in the water. Children in waistcoats. As if a wedding has run into the sea.

Where am I?

He lifts his arm. They are far off. Tiny on the shore. Tries to shout. Shouts like a puncture. Like a hiss of air.

Hears the draw and swash of the waves breaking in the bay, sees the children jumping the water. The sound of play. A bus parked on the road behind the beach.

Are they celebrating the end of the world? he thinks. I am dreaming. They are bathing in their clothes.

*

He watches the land fade, as if it were slowly sinking into the ocean.

He has bailed out the cockpit as best he can. The cloud of dark piss, the tide mark of salt that shows how the water has evaporated.

Scales of mackerel decal the inside, here and there is a zip of dried blood.

The ringing in his head is a hum now, a low choir, the flick of water on the boat constant, random, like the sound of work in the distance.

For a while, as he drifts, it is not the thirst, nor the sun, nor the open space around him that occupies him most. It is the need to stand up.

He tries the locker again. Pressures and turns with his thumb and finger, patiently until the screw hatch jumps and, after a few hard-fought-for millimetres, rattles loose.

He fishes out the built-in pouch, squeezes the toggle and loosens the drawstring.

He unrolls the first-aid bag, the rip of Velcro a strange abrupt noise that seems to tear the fabric of sounds he has got used to. With the violence of the act, some of the dried ash falls flaked from his skin, as if drawing attention to itself.

He opens his mouth—winces at the chapped cracks of his lips—and bites down on a roll of gauze, uses an antiseptic towel on his finger. He even smells the sting, as he did as a child, Dettol on a grazed knee. He rocks it away, humming through the gauze, rocks until he can open his eyes on the pain.

He tears the dressing packet, puts the pad down on his thigh, and wraps it clumsily around his finger. The effort makes him reel. Then he pulls the papery tape with his teeth and gets an end around the dressing, jams the roll between his knees, makes a clumsy bandage. Fits on a plastic finger guard.

*

The water slapping the side of the boat picks up. It's just the angles, he tells himself. It's because I'm shifting my weight.

He leans over the front stow, unclips it, and draws out the large dry bag, sees the small pan in the hold, the rolled cloth that contains cutlery, a wooden spoon.

He feels odd little humpback lurches, an empty sickness without food. He has the bizarre sense that he could reach out, feel the same little kick in her stomach.

He pulls out a carrier bag. It is heavy with a bottle of water and a bottle of dark beer. He stares at the beer for a moment. He was going somewhere. He was going to drink a beer. Then, fumbling, urgent, he takes a

drink of water, warm, hot almost, wets his mouth, lips, lets it spill wastefully over his chin. There is a shock at the immediacy of its effect, a voice screaming, Do not waste this; do not drink too much. He brings the bottle down with a sort of fear. Don't drink too fast. Remembers watering a dry plant too quickly.

You have to save this, he thinks. Dry dirt will repel the thing it needs the most. Stares again for a moment at the beer.

He empties out the dry bag: Small gas stove. Espresso cup. Coffeemaker. Small plastic box of coffee. Tackle box with traces, hooks, weights, swivels, lures. Thick jumper. Reel of fishing line. Cagoule.

You went out. You went out too far fishing.

He keeps to hand the thick jumper. Tucks the cagoule in by the seat. Takes a brief inventory of the boat. He does not add: One man. One out of two arms. Four out of ten fingers. No paddle. No torch. One dead phone.

*

The sun drops beautifully.

He takes off the buoyancy aid and pulls on the jumper, useless arm first.

He puts the cagoule on, again the useless arm first, but cannot zip it up. Then he puts the buoyancy aid back on, and in the doing of it loses the T-shirt from his head. Watches, stoical, as it floats out on the water. There is a slight swell to the sea now, and the pan and the bottle in the forward hold roll and scrape inside, roll and scrape with the loll of the boat.

He scoots forward, opens the hold cover, horribly aware in that instant how small the kayak is, stuffs the pan and the bottle under the dry bag to jam them.

Of all the things to put up with, that would be too much: the persistent clunking. It is one of the few things he has any say in.

He has a horrible fear of falling out of the boat. Its frail platform. Of being afloat in the coming darkness.

He slips the bungee from the back bay over himself like a seat belt, fastens one end of the paddle leash to the carry handle, the other round his ankle. It is nothing. But it is all that he can do.

*

With dark, the cold hits. It is immediate, comes with a sureness that it will get colder.

For a long time he fights the need to piss. Or what feels like a long time.

The swell picks up. The boat dips, sways as if two unseen hands are shifting it, panning for rare minerals. With his empty stomach, he feels a constant bowl of nausea.

He lifts off the bungee, kneels in the boat, and pisses off the side, a weak stream, a stench he hears pattering on the side of the gunwale. But where it hits the water there is a sudden light, a gorgeous phosphorescence.

When he sits back, he redoes the bungee round himself. That some of the stars on the horizon might be the lights of ships, of land, he can't allow himself to think. Cannot allow himself to imagine the warmth, the food, the safety they would mean. It is better that they are stars.

How long? How long has it been? Is this my first night out? I would have been thirstier, wouldn't I, if I'd been out longer?

He looks. A child awake in a dark bedroom. And, after a while, the stars seem to fade, at first very slowly. He does not know if it is an illusion, but they start to go out, like houselights across a night landscape.

He unwraps the emergency blanket, the silver foil of it speaking with reflected light.

The boat shifts up and down, a lullaby hush.

*

It is cold and it is pitch-black. Blacker when he opens his eyes, blacker than it was when they were closed—a stunning nothingness. He is hardly conscious. And he hears the child's voice. Hears the clear troubling cry of a child.

This is not real, he thinks.

He feels that his heart is slow, his breathing flaccid.

Then comes the cry again.

The cold a complete tiredness. A calm. Like an acceptance of drowning.

I can go now, he thinks. I've done my best. He feels passive toward it. He is so cold that if there was any challenge to him he would let it happen, gently yield.

A spray of water covers him, pattering the plastic blanket, falls on him, warmer than his skin, and he opens his eyes, sees the green light, the perfect shape of dolphins playing round the boat.

Somewhere he feels his ticking heart, an engine trying to start. Was he nearly gone? Was he gone? The child's cry, close by now, of the dolphin calf, and the mother breaks the water, a luminous green form leaving a figure of itself in the air, bright water dropping, a glow, crashing colour landing, back, into the water.

The calf sounded so human. A baby in an upstairs room.

Stay alive, he thinks.

A bright tail, beautiful triangle.

You have to stay alive.

*

He wakes with a strange specific clarity. Three solid simple things: her, the child, his physical ability. These, now, are his landmarks. The night has left him alive.

He sits up. His skin where it is bare has tightened. Where he touches there is a fine sand of dried salt.

He is uncertain of it, but he seems to sense something from his deadened arm.

He takes the fish from the carrier bag in the dry bag, and the fishing knife, and puts the fish down on the side of the boat, bringing a hollow gawp to his stomach.

He cuts behind the gills, turns the blade flat and draws it along, feeling it bump over the bones of the spine. The fillet peels off like a flap, the meat changed and cured in the heat.

He chews the fillet, the salt meat of it, then drinks some water, cooled again after the night.

It is not possible for him to believe that he will die, but he begins to fear that he will leave her alone.

This is going to be about rhythm. You cannot control anything else. Just your rhythm. You have half a small fish and four inches of water. If you grow impatient, it will go wrong.

The foily taste of the fish grows as he swallows the water, brings a sting to his mouth.

You have to conserve energy, and you have to be patient.

When he turns round to stow the dry bag, there is the land.

*

This is just rhythm, he says. You cannot race. You will move the boat only a little, but you must not be impatient.

He takes off the jumper and folds it into a pad. Then he kneels on it, puts on the buoyancy aid, and picks up the small frying pan as a paddle.

After a few strokes, he gets the boat around.

The pain of resting on his burning shins balances the pain of using his raw finger into a tough holdable thing.

That's the land, he says. That's everything. It was a low undulating line. It's all about rhythm now.

*

All of his life he's had a recurring dream: the car leaves the road. It is never the impact that terrifies him, wakes him. His fear comes the moment he feels the car go.

His life does not pass before his eyes. There is even a point he feels calm. But then he sees the faces of the people he loves. He sees their faces as they see him go.

*

The lick came into the waves late afternoon, and with it a wide swell to the water. The clouds now were an

intentfull dark strip on the horizon and they were incoming, and the breeze came before them, bringing patches over the water like a cat's fur brushed the wrong way. He had continued to paddle on and off. Had thrown up after eating the second piece of fish, and that had affected him.

There was a thin bare moisture in the breeze, and every now and then he opened his mouth to it. Gradually he neared the land. The colours now distinguishable.

It was less easy to bear, having the land in view. He did not think, If I die you must find someone else; he could not think that. He felt a great responsibility.

He wanted to make sure she knew how to reset the pilot light on the boiler. Pictured a coffee cup, never moved, the little liquid left growing into a ghost of dust. The note: "Pick salad x."

*

He thought at first it was a bag or a sack floating stiffly in the water. It was a fence banner. He turned the boat frantically, the handle of the pan rattling and worked loose now.

Seaweed and algae had grown on the banner, so it looked somehow furred, like a great dead animal on the surface of the water.

He pushed at the fur of algae and it slid easily, uncovered a bright picture of a family car.

There were metal eyelets in the corners and along the edge of the plasticked canvas, swollen and rusted in the water, and as he lifted it into the boat the banner caught and bridled in the breeze, the car rippling.

He scraped the bigger patches of algae from the banner with the back of his knife, then doubled the fishing line and fed it slackly through an eyelet and brought it back, tying it to the cleat where he clipped his seat. He did the same at the other corner.

Then he cut the toggle away from one end and took the drawstring from the hem of the cagoule to give himself a cord. With that he tied the other corners of the banner around the carry handles of the boat.

When he put his feet to the banner and lifted it aloft, the wind caught it with a snap.

He had an idea that the land was a magnet. If he could get close, it would draw him in.

*

The light dropped prematurely with the rain. At first thin, persistent grey drizzle.

He cut the top from the bottle and filled it where the rain ran down the sail of banner. His skin loosened. His eyes stung with salt that the rain washed into them. Every so often he bailed out the boat.

It was a light, saturating rain that pattered sharply on the cagoule he had put back on. Through it the land was visible and grey. Very sparsely, lights appeared.

The wind now brushed the crests from the waves and it filled the sail, blew a fine spray into the boat.

In the falling light it seemed that a shadow lifted up from the water and went past him. A low whirr of shearwaters. A ghost.

He thought then, how for the time he had been drifting, he had not seen other birds. He had not seen a plane.

What if this is it? What if there has been some quiet apocalypse? Some sheet of lethal radiation I survived. Some airborne plague.

He thought of the sunburn on his body, a momentary scald. Of the butterfly. A sect, drowning themselves in the water. The heat, liquid. Sluicing from the air.

Partly, there was relief in the idea. That he would not hurt them if they were already gone.

He shook the thought away.

The premature evening stars. How she wanted glow-in-the-dark dots stuck to the ceiling of the nursery.

*

When it was beyond doubt that the land was nearing, he wept quietly. The tears went into his mouth.

He lifted the banner with his feet a little and saw the growing details of the land. Then he rested, looked

at the picture of the bright car. He could not get it out of his mind that she would be waiting on the beach; the bell of her stomach.

It was only then he recognized the danger, staring at the car: The car leaves the road. I have no way of steering. The land is now a wall.

The light was going. The storm was coming.

He felt it in the water first, like a muscle tensing. He would be better off farther out. If he could stay in the boat. If he could stay on it. Ride the storm.

He could hear now, distantly, the boom of water hitting cliffs. A low echo. The first sound of land.

Hold out. All you need is daylight. You could go in on your own if you could see. Trust the buoyancy aid, trust the float. Just swim yourself in.

He turned, tried to look back out to sea. A dark bank moving in.

*

The squall came in like a landslide, with a physical force.

It cracked into the sail and drove the nose down and he struggled to level the boat, the cockpit filling and spewing.

As the sea picked up, he knew it was useless. The sign sang and hissed and seemed to bolt from him. You feel the strike, he knew now. You feel the strike coming.

He cut the cord, sending the banner out like a kite. A bird flapping. Then the line snapped and it ripped free, skimmed off over the water. A car out of control.

He held the carry handle, tried to jam his useless arm behind the seat.

You should have kept the banner. You should have kept it as a sea anchor. It might have kept you on to the waves.

His father's voice was everywhere now, as if he had entered the sky.

There was no control. There was a randomness to the water. As if a great weight had been dropped into it. He was horrified, tried to convince himself they could not see him, that they were not watching.

The back tipped, tipped him, plunged with the whole body of the kayak shuddering.

In the half-light it was as if the boat had been driven into a dark rut.

He tried to press the kayak into the water, to cling on, as if to the flank of some great beast. Tried to lean the kayak into the waves. But the boat went round. The sea was up. An uprushing ground.

He thought of the land, the rock. He passed now beyond any sense of danger to a blank expectant place as he undid the paddle leash.

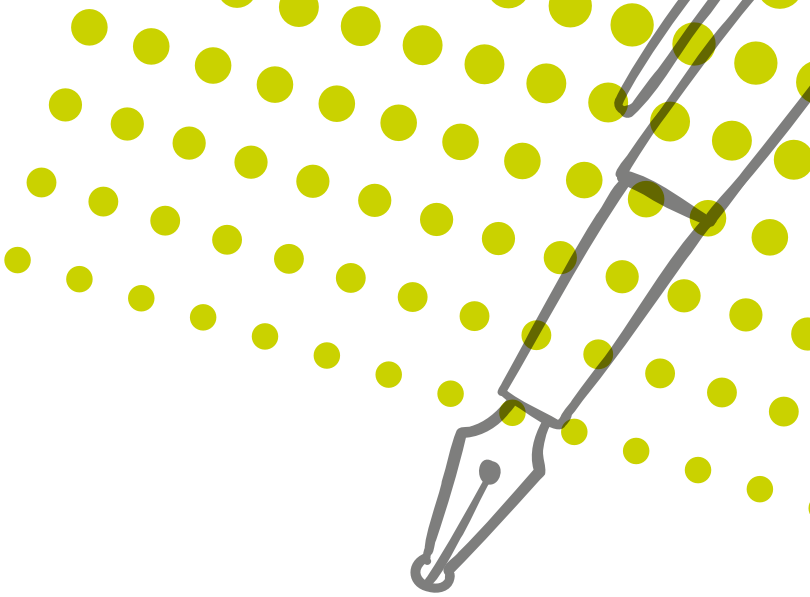
I do not want the boat to come with me. It would be like a missile.

If a bird the size of a wren can survive in the jaws of a cat.

Trust the float now. You have to trust the float.

[END]

Discussion guide



The Edge of the Shoal
by Cynan Jones

Summary

A man sets out on a kayak to scatter his father's ashes. Yet when a storm hits, he has to survive brutal days and nights at sea.

Questions

How does the sea in the story mirror the main character's grief? How does the sea become a metaphor for the violence – and apparent randomness – of loss? Think about words like adrift, shipwrecked, drowning, tortured, pain.

How is dying described? Is the passage about the man wanting to tell his partner about how to work the pilot light on the boiler surprisingly domestic?

How do fish operate in the story? What about the sunfish, and the fish that the main character catches at the beginning of the story? Do they prefigure death or act as protection against it? Or, is there an ambivalence present in all the depictions of nature – the sea, the storm and the fish?

Discussion points

Jones evokes an incredible sense of tension in his story with short sentences that echo the gasping, panicky breath of a man marooned on his kayak, attacked by the elements and at the mercy of nature. Discuss how different the story would feel if the sentences were longer and more flowing. How would you feel about the character's predicament then? The intense, unforgiving power of nature is also a strong presence in the story, with the sea almost its own character. Discuss how the setting of the story is evoked, and how the sea itself changes from one mood to another.

What to look out for

Intense description of the physical: salt, blood, ash, fish scales, flesh and bone, veins like trees, a finger stripped of flesh.

Themes of confinement and freedom: the man is mostly within the kayak, but the prison-like kayak floats on the fathomless sea. He almost reaches freedom a couple of times, but the boat both protects him and puts him in danger.

A heady sense of fear and danger: the appearance of the sunfish fin, with all its connotations of horror for the modern reader, is a masterly moment that ramps tension up even higher than it was before.

Next steps

Write a story in which a character has a positive experience at sea. Use Cynan Jones' techniques of visceral, physical description, but, in your story, use them to indicate a character's love of the water. You might still reference the changeable and awesome power of nature and its ambivalence to humans, but perhaps introduce a triumphant ending: a productive fishing trip, a sailing race, etc. See if you can take a character through the highs and lows of an adventure at sea rather than a disaster.

Kilifi Creek
by Lionel Shriver

IT WAS A BRAND of imposition of which young people like Liana thought nothing: showing up on an older couple's doorstep, the home of friends of friends of friends, playing on a tentative enough connection that she'd have had difficulty constructing the sequence of referrals. If there was anything to that six-degrees-of-separation folderol, she must have been equally related to the entire population of the continent.

Typically, she'd given short notice, first announcing her intention to visit in a voicemail only a few days before bumming a ride with another party she hardly knew. (Well, the group had spent a long, hard-drinking night in Nairobi at a sprawling house with mangy dead animals on the walls that the guy with the ponytail was caretaking. In this footloose crowd of journalists and foreign-aid workers between famines, trust-fund layabouts, and tourists who didn't think of themselves as tourists if only because they never did anything, the evening qualified them all as fast friends.) Ponytail Guy was driving to Malindi, on the Kenyan coast, for an expat bash that sounded a little druggie for Liana's Midwestern tastes. But the last available seat in his Land Rover would take her a stone's throw from this purportedly more-the-merrier couple and their gorgeously situated crash pad. It was nice of the guy to divert to Kilifi to drop her off, but then Liana was attractive, and knew it.

Mature adulthood—and the experience of being imposed upon herself—might have encouraged her to consider what showing up as an uninvited, impecunious house guest would require of her hosts. Though Liana imagined herself undemanding, even the easy to please required fresh sheets, which would have to be laundered after her departure, then dried and folded. She would require a towel for swimming, a second for her shower. She would expect dinner, replete with discreet refreshments of her wine glass, strong filtered coffee every morning, and—what cost older people more than a sponger in her early twenties realized—steady conversational energy channelled in her direction for the duration of her stay.

For her part, Liana always repaid such hospitality with brightness and enthusiasm. On arrival at the Henleys' airy, weathered wooden house nestled in the coastal woods, she made a point of admiring soapstone knickknacks, cooing over framed black-and-whites of Masai initiation ceremonies, and telling comical tales about the European riffraff she'd met in Nairobi. Her effervescence came naturally. She would never have characterized it as an effort, until—and unless—she grew older herself.

While she'd have been reluctant to form the vain conceit outright, it was perhaps tempting to regard the sheer insertion of her physical presence as a gift, one akin to showing up at the door with roses. Supposedly a world-famous photographer, Regent Henley carried herself as if she used to be a looker, but she'd let her long dry hair go gray. Her crusty husband, Beano (the handle may have worked when he was a boy, but now that he was over sixty it sounded absurd), could probably use a little eye candy twitching onto their screened-in porch for sundowners: some narrow hips wrapped tightly in a fresh kikoi, long wet hair slicked

back from a tanned, exertion-flushed face after a shower. Had Liana needed further rationalization of her amiable freeloading, she might also have reasoned that in Kenya every white household was overrun with underemployed servants. Not Regent and Beano but their African help would knot the mosquito netting over the guest bed. So Liana's impromptu visit would provide the domestics with something to do, helping to justify the fact that bwana paid their children's school fees.

But Liana thought none of these things. She thought only that this was another opportunity for adventure on the cheap, and at that time economy trumped all other considerations. Not because she was rude, or prone to take advantage by nature. She was merely young. A perfectly pleasant girl on her first big excursion abroad, she would doubtless grow into a better-socialized woman who would make exorbitant hotel reservations rather than dream of dumping herself on total strangers.

Yet midway through this casual mooching off the teeny-tiny-bit-pretentious photographer and her retired safari- guide husband (who likewise seemed rather self-impressed, considering that Liana had already run into a dozen masters of the savannah just like him), Liana entered one eerily elongated window during which her eventual capacity to make sterner judgments of her youthful impositions from the perspective of a more worldly adulthood became imperilled. A window after which there might be no woman. There might only, ever, have been a girl—remembered, guiltily, uneasily, resentfully, by her aging, unwilling hosts more often than they would have preferred.

Day Four. She was staying only six nights—an eye-blink for a twenty-three-year-old, a "bloody long time" for the Brit who had groused to his wife under-breath about putting up "another dewy-eyed Yank who confuses a flight to Africa with a trip to the zoo." Innocent of Beano's less-than-charmed characterizations, Liana had already established a routine. Mornings were consumed with texting friends back in Milwaukee about her exotic situation, with regular refills of passion-fruit juice. After lunch, she'd pile into the jeep with Regent to head to town for supplies, after tolerating the photographer's ritual admonishment that Kilifi was heavily Muslim and it would be prudent to "cover up." (Afternoons were hot. Even her muscle T clung uncomfortably, and Liana considered it a concession not to strip down to her running bra. She wasn't about to drag on long pants to pander to a bunch of uptight foreigners she'd never see again; career expats like Regent were forever showing off how they're hip to local customs and you're not.) She never proffered a few hundred shillings to contribute to the grocery bill, not because she was cheap—though she was; at her age, that went without saying—but because the gesture never occurred to her. Back "home," she would mobilize for a long, vigorous swim in Kilifi Creek, where she would work up an appetite for dinner.

As she sidled around the house in her bikini—gulping more passion-fruit juice at the counter, grabbing a fresh towel— her exhibitionism was unconscious; call it instinctive, suggesting an inborn feel for barter. She lingered with Beano, inquiring about the biggest animal he'd ever shot, then commiserating about ivory poaching (always a crowd-pleaser) as she bound back her long blond hair, now bleached almost white. Raised arms made her stomach look flatter. Turning with a "cheerio!" that she'd picked up in Nairobi, Liana sashayed out the back porch and down the splintered wooden steps before cursing herself, because she should have worn flip-flops. Returning for shoes would ruin her exit, so she picked her way carefully down the over-grown dirt track to the beach in bare feet.

In Wisconsin, a "creek" was a shallow, burbling dribble with tadpoles that purled over rocks. Where Liana was from, you wouldn't go for a serious swim in a "creek." You'd splash up to your ankles while cupping your arches over mossy stones, arms extended for balance, though you almost always fell in. But everything in Africa was bigger. Emptying into the Indian Ocean, Kilifi Creek was a river—an impressively wide river at that—which opened into a giant lake

sort of thing when she swam to the left and under the bridge. This time, in the interest of variety, she would strike out to the right.

The water was cold. Yipping at every advance, Liana struggled out to the depth of her upper thighs, gingerly avoiding sharp rocks. Regent and Beano may have referred to the shoreline as a "beach," but there wasn't a grain of sand in sight, and with all the green gunk along the bank obstacles were hard to spot. Chiding herself not to be a wimp, she plunged forward. This was a familiar ritual of her childhood trips to Lake Winnebago: the shriek of inhalation, the hyperventilation, the panicked splashing to get the blood running, the soft surprise of how quickly the water feels warm.

Liana considered herself a strong swimmer, of a kind. That is, she'd never been comfortable with the gasping and thrashing of the crawl, which felt frenetic. But she was a virtuoso of the sidestroke, with a powerful scissor kick whose thrust carried her faster than many swimmers with inefficient crawls (much to their annoyance, as she'd verified in her college pool). The sidestroke was contemplative. Its rhythm was ideally calibrated for a breath on every other kick, and resting only one cheek in the water allowed her to look around. It was less rigorous than the butterfly but not as geriatric as the breaststroke, and after long enough you still got tired—marvellously so.

Pulling out far enough from the riverbank so that she shouldn't have to worry about hitting rocks with that scissor kick, Liana rounded to the right and rapidly hit her stride. The late-afternoon light had just begun to mellow. The shores were forested, with richly shaded inlets and copses. She didn't know the names of the trees, but now that she was alone, with no one trying to make her feel ignorant about a continent of which white people tended to be curiously possessive, she didn't care if those were acacias or junipers. They were green: good enough. Though Kilifi was renowned as a resort area for high-end tourists, and secreted any number of capacious houses like her hosts', the canopy hid them well. It looked like wilderness: good enough. Gloriously, Liana didn't have to watch out for the powerboats and Jet Skis that terrorized Lake Winnebago, and she was the only swimmer in sight. Africans, she'd been told (lord, how much she'd been told; every backpacker three days out of Jomo Kenyatta airport was an expert), didn't swim. Not only was the affluent safari set too lazy to get in the water; by this late in the afternoon they were already drunk.

This was the best part of the day. No more enthusiastic chatter about Regent's latest work. For heaven's sake, you'd think she might have finally discovered colour photography at this late date. Blazing with yellow flora, red earth, and, at least outside Nairobi, unsullied azure sky, Africa was wasted on the woman. All she photographed was dust and poor people. It was a relief, too, not to have to seem fascinated as Beano lamented the unsustainable growth of the human population and the demise of Kenyan game, all the while having to pretend that she hadn't heard variations on this same dirge dozens of times in a mere three weeks. Though she did hope that, before she hopped a ride back to Nairobi with Ponytail Guy, the couple would opt for a repeat of that antelope steak from the first night. The meat had been lean; rare in both senses of the word, it gave good text the next morning. There wasn't much point in going all the way to Africa and then sitting around eating another hamburger.

Liana paused her reverie to check her position, and sure enough she'd drifted farther from the shore than was probably wise. She knew from the lake swims of childhood vacations that distance over water was hard to judge. If anything, the shore was farther away than it looked. So she pulled heavily to the right, and was struck by how long it took to make the trees appear appreciably larger. Just when she'd determined that land was within safe reach, she gave one more stiff kick, and her right foot struck rock.

The pain was sharp. Liana hated interrupting a swim, and she didn't have much time before the equatorial sun set, as if someone had flicked a light switch. Nevertheless, she dropped her feet and discovered that this section of the creek was barely a foot and a half deep. No wonder she'd hit a rock. Sloshing to a sun-warmed outcrop, she examined the top of her foot,

which began to gush blood as soon as she lifted it out of the water. There was a flap. Something of a mess.

Even if she headed straight back to the Henleys', all she could see was thicket—no path, much less a road. The only way to return and put some kind of dressing on this stupid thing was to swim. As she stumbled through the shallows, her foot smarted. Yet, bathed in the cool water, it quickly grew numb. Once she had slogged in deep enough to resume her sidestroke, Liana reasoned, Big deal, I cut my foot. The water would keep the laceration clean; the chill would stanch the bleeding. It didn't really hurt much now, and the only decision was whether to cut the swim short. The silence pierced by tropical birdcalls was a relief, and Liana didn't feel like showing up back at the house with too much time to kill with enraptured blah-blah before dinner. She'd promised herself that she'd swim at least a mile, and she couldn't have done more than a quarter.

So Liana continued to the right, making damned sure to swim out far enough so that she was in no danger of hitting another rock. Still, the cut had left her rattled. Her idyll had been violated. No longer gentle and welcoming, the shoreline shadows undulated with a hint of menace. The creek had bitten her. Having grown fitful, the sidestroke had transformed from luxury to chore. Possibly she'd tightened up from a queer encroaching fearfulness, or perhaps she was suffering from a trace of shock—unless, that is, the water had genuinely got colder. Once in a while she felt a flitter against her foot, like a fish, but it wasn't a fish. It was the flap. Kind of creepy.

Liana resigned herself: this expedition was no longer fun. The light had taken a turn from golden to vermillion—a modulation she'd have found transfixing if only she were on dry land—and she still had to swim all the way back. Churning a short length farther to satisfy pride, she turned around.

And got nowhere. Stroking at full power, Liana could swear she was going backward. As long as she'd been swimming roughly in the same direction, the current hadn't been noticeable. This was a creek, right? But an African creek. As for her having failed to detect the violent surge running at a forty-five-degree angle to the shoreline, an aphorism must have applied—something about never being aware of forces that are on your side until you defy them.

Liana made another assessment of her position. Her best guess was that the shore had drifted farther away again. Very much farther. The current had been pulling her out while she'd been dithering about the fish-flutter flap of her foot. Which was now the least of her problems. Because the shore was not only distant. It stopped.

Beyond the end of the land was nothing but water. Indian Ocean water. If she did not get out of the grip of the current, it would sweep her past that last little nub of the continent and out to sea. Suddenly the dearth of boats, Jet Skis, fellow-swimmers, and visible residents or tourists, drunken or not, seemed far less glorious.

The sensation that descended was calm, determined, and quiet, though it was underwritten by a suppressed hysteria that it was not in her interest to indulge. Had she concentration to spare, she might have worked out that this whole emotional package was one of her first true tastes of adulthood: what happens when you realize that a great deal or even everything is at stake and that no one is going to help you. It was a feeling that some children probably did experience but shouldn't. At least solitude discouraged theatrics. She had no audience to panic for. No one to exclaim to, no one to whom she might bemoan her quandary. It was all do, no say.

Swimming directly against the current had proved fruitless. Instead, Liana angled sharply toward the shore, so that she was cutting across the current. Though she was still pointed backward, in the direction of Regent and Beano's place, this riptide would keep dragging her body to the left. Had she known her exact speed, and the exact rate at which the current was carrying her in the direction of the Indian Ocean, she would have been able to answer the question of whether she was about to die by solving a simple geometry problem: a point travels at a set speed at a set angle toward a plane of a set width while moving at a set speed to the left. Either it will intersect the

plane or it will miss the plane and keep travelling into wide-open space. Liquid space, in this case.

Of course, she wasn't in possession of these variables. So she swam as hard and as steadily as she knew how. There was little likelihood that suddenly adopting the crawl, at which she'd never been any good, would improve her chances, so the sidestroke it would remain. She trained her eyes on a distinctive rock formation as a navigational guide. Thinking about her foot wouldn't help, so she did not. Thinking about how exhausted she was wouldn't help, so she did not. Thinking about never having been all that proficient at geometry was hardly an assist, either, so she proceeded in a state of dumb animal optimism.

The last of the sun glinted through the trees and winked out. Technically, the residual threads of pink and gray in the early-evening sky were very pretty.

"Where is that blooming girl?" Beano said, and threw one of the leopard-print cushions onto the sofa. "She should have been back two hours ago. It's dark. It's Africa, she's a baby, she knows absolutely nothing, and it's dark."

"Maybe she met someone, went for a drink," Regent said.

"Our fetching little interloper's meeting someone is exactly what I'm afraid of. And how's she to go to town with some local rapist in only a bikini?"

"You would remember the bikini," Regent said dryly.

"Damned if I understand why all these people rock up and suddenly they're our problem."

"I don't like it any more than you do, but if she floats off into the night air never to be seen again she is our problem. Maybe someone picked her up in a boat. Carried her round the southern bend to one of the resorts."

"She'll not have her phone on a swim, so she's no means of giving us a shout if she's in trouble. She'll not have her wallet, either–if she even has one. Never so much as volunteers a bottle of wine, while hoovering up my best Cabernet like there's no tomorrow."

"If anything has happened, you'll regret having said that sort of thing."

"Might as well gripe while I still can, then. You know, I don't even know the girl's surname? Much less who to ring if she's vanished. I can see it: having to comb through her kit, search out her passport. Bringing in the sodding police, who'll expect chai just for answering the phone. No good ever comes from involving those thieving idiots in your life, and then there'll be a manhunt. Thrashing the bush, prodding the shallows. And you know how the locals thrive on a mystery, especially when it involves a young lady–"

"They're bored. We're all bored. Which is why you're letting your imagination run away with you. It's not that late yet. I'm sure there's a simple explanation."

"I'm not bored, I'm hungry. Aziza probably started dinner at four–since she is bored–and you can bet it's muck by now."

Regent fetched a bowl of fried-chick- pea snacks, but despite Beano's claims of an appetite he left them untouched. "Christ, I can see the whole thing," he said, pacing. "It'll turn into one of those cases. With the parents flying out and grilling all the servants and having meetings with the police. Expecting to stay here, of course, tearing hair and getting emotional while we urge them to please do eat some lunch. Going on tirades about how the local law enforcement is ineffectual and corrupt, and bringing in the F.B.I. Telling childhood anecdotes about their darling and expecting us to get tearful with them over the disappearance of some, I concede, quite agreeable twenty-something, but still a girl we'd barely met."

"You like her," Regent said. "You're just ranting because you're anxious."

"She has a certain intrepid quality, which may be deadly, but which until it's frightened out of her I rather admire," he begrudged, then resumed the rant. "Oh, and there'll be media. CNN and that. You know the Americans–they love innocent-abroad stories. But you'd think they'd learn their lesson. It beats me why their families keep letting kids holiday in Africa as if the whole world is a happy-clappy theme park. With all those car-jackings on the coast road–"

"Ordinarily I'd agree with you, but there's nothing

especially African about going for a swim in a creek. She's done it every other afternoon, so I've assumed she's a passable swimmer. Do you think–would it help if we got a torch and went down to the dock? We could flash it about, shout her name out. She might just be lost."

"My throat hurts just thinking about it." Still, Beano was heading to the entryway for his jacket when the back-porch screen door creaked.

"Hi," Liana said shyly. With luck, streaks of mud and a strong tan disguised what her weak, light-headed sensation suggested was a shocking pallor. She steadied herself by holding onto the sofa and got mud on the upholstery. "Sorry, I–swam a little farther than I'd planned. I hope you didn't worry."

"We did worry," Regent said sternly. Her face flickered between anger and relief, an expression that reminded Liana of her mother. "It's after dark."

"I guess with the stars, the moon . . ." Liana covered. "It was so . . . peaceful."

The moon, in fact, had been obscured by cloud for the bulk of her wet grope back. Most of which had been conducted on her hands and knees in shallow water along the shore–land she was not about to let out of her clutches for one minute. The muck had been treacherous with more biting rocks. For long periods, the vista had been so inky that she'd found the Henleys' rickety rowboat dock only because she had bumped into it.

"What happened to your *foot*?" Regent cried.

"Oh, that. Oh, nuts. I'm getting blood on your floor."

"Looks like a proper war wound, that," Beano said boisterously.

"We're going to get that cleaned right up." Examining the wound, Regent exclaimed, "My dear girl, you're shaking!"

"Yes, I may have gotten–a little chill." Perhaps it was never too late to master the famously British knack for understatement.

"Let's get you into a nice hot shower first, and then we'll bandage your foot. That cut looks deep, Liana. You really shouldn't be so casual about it."

Liana weaved to the other side of the house, leaving red footprints down the hall. In previous showers here, she'd had trouble with scalding, but this time she couldn't get the water hot enough. She huddled under the dribble until finally the water grew tepid, and then, with a shudder, wrapped herself in one of their big white bath sheets, trying to keep from getting blood on the towel.

Emerging in jeans and an unseasonably warm sweater she'd found in the guest room's dresser, Liana was grateful for the cut on her foot, which gave Regent something to fuss over and distracted her hostess from the fact that she was still trembling. Regent trickled the oozing inch-long gash with antiseptic and bound it with gauze and adhesive tape, whose excessive swaddling didn't make up for its being several years old; the tape was discoloured, and barely stuck. Meanwhile, Liana threw the couple a bone: she told them how she had injured her foot, embellishing just enough to make it a serviceable story.

The foot story was a decoy. It obviated telling the other one. At twenty-three, Liana hadn't accumulated many stories; until now, she had hungered for more. Vastly superior to carvings of hippos, stories were the very souvenirs that this bold stint in Africa had been designed to provide. Whenever she'd scored a proper experience in the past, like the time she'd dated a man who confided that he'd always felt like a woman, or even when she'd had her e-mail hacked, she'd traded on the tale at every opportunity. Perhaps if she'd returned to her parents after this latest ordeal, she'd have burst into tears and delivered the blow-by-blow. But she was abruptly aware that these people were virtual strangers. She'd only make them even more nervous about whether she was irresponsible or lead them to believe that she was an attention-seeker with a tendency to exaggerate. It was funny how when some little nothing went down you played it for all it was worth, but when a truly momentous occurrence shifted the tectonic plates in your mind you kept your mouth shut. Because instinct dictated that this one was private. Now she knew: there was such a thing as private.

Having aged far more than a few hours this evening, Liana was disheartened to discover that maturity could involve getting smaller. She had been reduced. She was a weaker, more fragile girl than the one who'd piled into Regent's jeep that afternoon, and in some manner that she couldn't put her finger on she also felt less real–less here–since in a highly plausible alternative universe she was not here.

The couple made a to-do over the importance of getting hot food inside her, but before the dinner had warmed Liana curled around the leopard-print pillow on the sofa and dropped into a comatose slumber. Intuiting something–Beano himself had survived any number of close calls, the worst of which he had kept from Regent, lest she lay down the law that he had to stop hunting in Botswana even sooner than she did–he discouraged his wife from rousing the girl even to go to bed, draping her gently in a mohair blanket and carefully tucking the fringe around her pretty wet head.

Predictably, Liana grew into a civilized woman with a regard for the impositions of laundry. She pursued a practical career in marketing in New York, and, after three years, ended an impetuous marriage to an Afghan. Meantime, starting with Kilifi Creek, she assembled an offbeat collection. It was a class of moments that most adults stockpile: the times they almost died. Rarely was there a good reason, or any warning. No majestic life lessons presented themselves in compensation for having been given a fright. Most of these incidents were in no way heroic, like the rescue of a child from a fire. They were more a matter of stepping distractedly off a curb, only to feel the draught of the M4 bus flattening your hair.

Not living close to a public pool, Liana took up running in her late twenties. One evening, along her usual route, a minivan shot out of a parking garage without checking for pedestrians and missed her by a whisker. Had she not stopped to double-knot her left running shoe before leaving her apartment, she would be dead. Later: She was taking a scuba-diving course on Cape Cod when a surge about a hundred feet deep dislodged her mask and knocked her regulator from her mouth. The Atlantic was unnervingly murky, and her panic was absolute. Sure, they taught you to make regular decompression stops, and to exhale evenly as you ascended, but it was early in her training. If her instructor hadn't managed to grab her before she bolted for the surface while holding her breath, her lungs would have exploded and she would be dead. Still later: Had she not unaccountably thought better of lunging forward on her Citi Bike on Seventh Avenue when the light turned green, the garbage truck would still have taken a sharp left onto Sixteenth Street without signalling, and she would be dead. There was nothing else to learn, though that was something to learn, something inchoate and large.

The scar on her right foot, wormy and white (the flap should have been stitched), became a totem of this not-really-a-lesson. Oh, she'd considered the episode, and felt free to conclude that she had overestimated her swimming ability, or underestimated the insidious, bigger-than-you powers of water. She could also sensibly have decided that swimming alone anywhere was tempting fate. She might have concocted a loftier version, wherein she had been rescued by an almighty presence who had grand plans for her–grander than marketing. But that wasn't it. Any of those interpretations would have been plastered on top, like the poorly adhering bandage on that gash. The message was bigger and dumber and blunter than that, and she was a bright woman, with no desire to disguise it.

After Liana was promoted to director of marketing at BraceYourself–a rapidly expanding firm that made the neoprene joint supports popular with aging boomers still pounding the pavement–she moved from Brooklyn to Manhattan, where she could now afford a stylish one-bedroom on the twenty-sixth floor, facing Broadway. The awful Afghan behind her, she'd started dating again. The age of thirty-seven marked a good time in her life: she was well paid and roundly liked in the office; she relished New York; though she'd regained an interest in men, she didn't feel desperate. Many an evening without plans she would pour a glass of wine, take the elevator to the top floor, and slip up a last flight of stairs; roof access was one of the reasons she'd chosen the apartment. Especially

in summertime, the regal overlook made her feel rich beyond measure. Lounging against the railing sipping Chenin Blanc, Liana would bask in the lights and echoing taxi horns of the city, sometimes sneaking a cigarette. The air would be fat and soft in her hair–which was shorter now, with a becoming cut. So when she finally met a man whom she actually liked, she invited him to her building's traditional Fourth of July potluck picnic on the roof to show it off.

"Are you sure you're safe, sitting there?" David said solicitously. They had sifted away from the tables of wheat-berry salad and smoked-tofu patties to talk.

His concern was touching; perhaps he liked her, too. But she was perfectly stable–lodged against the perpendicular railing on a northern corner, feet braced on a bolted-down bench, weight firmly forward–and her consort had nothing to fear. Liana may have grown warier of water, but heights had never induced the vertigo from which others suffered. Besides, David was awfully tall, and the small boost in altitude was equalizing.

"You're just worried that I'll have a better view of the fireworks. Refill?" She leaned down for the Merlot on the bench for a generous pour into their plastic glasses. A standard fallback for a first date, they had been exchanging travel stories, and impetuously–there was something about this guy that she trusted–she told him about Kilifi Creek. Having never shared the tale, she was startled by how little time it took to tell. But that was the nature of these stories: they were about what could have happened, or should have happened, but didn't. They were very nearly not stories at all.

"That must have been pretty scary," he said dutifully. He sounded let down, as if she'd told a joke without a punch line.

"I wasn't scared," she reflected. "I couldn't afford to be. Only later, and then there was no longer anything to be afraid of. That's part of what was interesting: having been cheated of feeling afraid. Usually, when you have a near-miss, it's an instant. A little flash, like, *Wow. That was weird.* This one went on forever, or seemed to. I was going to die, floating off on the Indian Ocean until I lost consciousness, or I wasn't. It was a long time to be in this . . . in-between state." She laughed. "I don't know, don't make me embarrassed. I've no idea what I'm trying to say."

Attempting to seem captivated by the waning sunset, Liana no more than shifted her hips, by way of expressing her discomfort that her story had landed flat. Nothing foolhardy. For the oddest moment, she thought that David had pushed her, and was therefore not a nice man at all but a lunatic. Because what happened next was both enormously subtle and plain enormous–the way the difference between knocking over a glass and not knocking over a glass could be a matter of upsetting its angle by a single greater or lesser degree. Greater, this time. Throw any body of mass that one extra increment off its axis, and rather than barely brush against it you might as well have hurled it at a wall.

With the same quiet clarity with which she had registered in Kilifi, *I am being swept out to sea*, she grasped simply, *Oh. I lost my balance*. For she was now executing the perfect back flip that she'd never been able to pull off on a high dive. The air rushed in her ears like water. This time the feeling was different–that is, the starkness was there, the calmness was there also, but these clean, serene sensations were spiked with a sharp surprise, which quickly morphed to perplexity, and then to sorrow. She fit in a wisp of disappointment before the fall was through. Her eyes tearing, the lights of high-rises blurred. Above, the evening sky rippled into the infinite ocean that had waited to greet her for fourteen years: largely good years, really–gravy, a long and lucky reprieve. Then, of course, what had mattered was her body striking the plane, and now what mattered was not striking it–and what were the chances of that? By the time she reached the sidewalk, Liana had taken back her surprise. At some point there was no almost. That had always been the message. There were bystanders, and they would get the message, too.

[END]

Discussion guide

Kilifi Creek
by Lionel Shriver

Summary

A young and thoughtless gap year traveller outstays her welcome as a house guest in Kenya and has a brief encounter with mortality in a treacherous African river.

Questions

How does the sea in the story mirror the main character's grief? How does the sea become a metaphor for the violence – and apparent randomness – of loss? Think about words like adrift, shipwrecked, drowning, tortured, pain.

How is dying described? Is the passage about the man wanting to tell his partner about how to work the pilot light on the boiler surprisingly domestic?

How do fish operate in the story? What about the sunfish, and the fish that the main character catches at the beginning of the story? Do they prefigure death or act as protection against it? Or, is there an ambivalence present in all the depictions of nature – the sea, the storm and the fish?

Discussion points

Jones evokes an incredible sense of tension in his story with short sentences that echo the gasping, panicky breath of a man marooned on his kayak, attacked by the elements and at the mercy of nature. Discuss how different the story would feel if the sentences were longer and more flowing. How would you feel about the character's predicament then? The intense, unforgiving power of nature is also a strong presence in the story, with the sea almost its own character. Discuss how the setting of the story is evoked, and how the sea itself changes from one mood to another.

What to look out for

Intense description of the physical: salt, blood, ash, fish scales, flesh and bone, veins like trees, a finger stripped of flesh.

Themes of confinement and freedom: the man is mostly within the kayak, but the prison-like kayak floats on the fathomless sea. He almost reaches freedom a couple of times, but the boat both protects him and puts him in danger.

A heady sense of fear and danger: the appearance of the sunfish fin, with all its connotations of horror for the modern reader, is a masterly moment that ramps tension up even higher than it was before.

Next steps

Write a story in which a character has a positive experience at sea. Use Cynan Jones' techniques of visceral, physical description, but, in your story, use them to indicate a character's love of the water. You might still reference the changeable and awesome power of nature and its ambivalence to humans, but perhaps introduce a triumphant ending: a productive fishing trip, a sailing race, etc. See if you can take a character through the highs and lows of an adventure at sea rather than a disaster.

What next?

Further reading

If you'd like to explore some other short stories, here are some recommendations from the award's shortlisted writers and previous judges.

Madame Zero by Sarah Hall

Fen by Daisy Johnson

The Earth, Thy Great Exchequer by Jo Lloyd

The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher by Hilary Mantel

This Isn't the Sort of Thing that Happens to Someone Like You by Jon McGregor

Light Box by K J Orr

Grand Union by Zadie Smith

What is Not Yours is Not Yours by Helen Oyeyemi

The Sing of the Shore by Lucy Wood

Attrib. by Eley Williams

The Acid House by Irvine Welsh

Girl, Balancing & Other Stories by Helen Dunmore

What's *your* story?

If you have been inspired these short stories and would like to share some of your own writing, why not enter the **BBC Young Writers' Award with Cambridge University**? Young people aged between 14–18 years are invited to submit original short stories of up to 1,000 words.

Find out how to enter plus creative writing resources for students and teachers at **bbc.co.uk/ywa**

LISTEN UP

Short Stories on BBC Sounds

Listen to hundreds of short stories on BBC Sounds including timeless classics and stories shortlisted for the BBC National Short Story Award with Cambridge University.

Subscribe to the BBC Short Story Podcast for brand new stories written by today's writers, brought to you by BBC Radio 4.

bbc.co.uk/sounds
(search: 'short story')

Stay up to date

BBC Student Critics
bbc.co.uk/teach/student-critics/zxhqdp3
Follow @BBCTeach #bbcstudentcritics

BBC Young Writers' Award
bbc.co.uk/ywa
Follow @BBCR1 #bbcywa #shortstories

BBC National Short Story Award
bbc.co.uk/nssa
Follow @BBCRadio4 #bbcnssa #shortstories