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My First Fish

Matthew Ewan Thomas

I'm young (far younger than I am now), sitting by the flat face of the Lower Lliw Reservoir and beside me is my father. He's hunched over, eyes following an invisible line that goes way, way out. The pale curves of the sky are folded into the grey water where the line leads to an orange speck. In my little fingers is a damp, white triangle filled with cold peanut butter. My eyes follow my father's out to the buoy, while the soggy sandwich is brought to my lips and enjoyed in quiet chews.

It's as though he's looking underneath the gleaming sheet and can see the creature nibbling on the worm stuck to the hook - worms we caught yesterday under a hosepipe shower; worms he grabbed while I refused; ugly, wriggling worms to fill a little round tin. They're sealed away and slid inside the bulging green bag - a bustling world of fishing tricks: flies and hooks of different colours and sizes; knives and tools, sharp and blunt; pockets, hundreds of pockets, some empty, some full. He slings it over his shoulder, and we wait for tomorrow.

Early, he shakes me awake. I stagger to the car. The trees and hedges of Felindre are thick with morning murk as they blur past me. The car stops; I clamber out. He leads and I follow. We've trodden down a shallow ledge and stand beside the sleeping bank. I watch my father set up a rod. His thick fingers fiddle with the invisible string. I yawn, blinking and rubbing my eyes - struggling with string myself. We take turns casting while a glow creeps behind the clouds. The fish are waking. We sit slouched on flat rocks, watching the playful bobbing of the plastic float.

Breeze and birdsong make up for the silence. I watch a black shape soar over my head. Back to the lake, my eyes run across the water. The buoy falters in front of me. I look over at my father: he's falling forward. His prayer-clasped hands edge toward the rod. I've woken up.

The orange buoy wobbles. Our eyes are hooked to it. It dips. I stand up, rocks below me quake. It goes under. My father leaps up. He swipes at his rod, taking the cork handle into a firm fist, the other hand pinches the reel's bent appendage. The mark is still under and the line that shoots from the rod sways. My father winds his wrist around the reel and brings the line crackling toward him. When the slack is caught, he roots his feet to the ground and pulls the rod against him, sunk into his shoulder and high above his head. The rod bends and the gorgeous clean curve looks so brittle to my young eyes I fear it will break - my father does not: he fights the string toward him, then away, then back again. I watch his eyes, wild with energy, locked to the cord slicing left and right. Suddenly he turns to me, and those eyes speak: *Fetch the net!*

I scamper around our camp. *I can't find it.* Heart pounding, eyes jumping. *I see it.* I snatch it and run back to the action.

At his side, I watch my father fall backward. He hits the floor; the line loosens. On the ground he reels it in, taking the string in his hand. We stare at the broken end. Then beside us, the air is filled with a hissing alarm. We look at each other, then over to the bank, where propped on the V of a twig rests my own rod, and the line thread through little loops being sucked into the water. I'm yelled to go get it but I'm already there. In my hands the air-light rod has grown heavy. The constant stinging sound of the line being dragged away tears through me. But I do as my father did and dig my feet in.

"Take your time." He's buzzing beside me - excited again.

The action in my hands has me ridged. He tells me to bring the rod up, and I do. It digs into my shoulder. I'm told to start reeling in. My shaky eyes look at the water: there's a bulbous shadow. I lose my father by my side. It's getting closer; the reeling gets harder. I give it slack, let it fight, *let it tire itself out.* My father's back by my side, net in hand. The smooth surface is torn apart. Fins crash out and we catch sight of it: huge and lively. My father talks into my ear, then edges to the bank and lays the net in the water. I'm exhausted. Back and forth, back and forth; tight then loose, fight then lose it, then get it again. Closer it comes, flailing madly. I'm dragging it to shore, heaving the rod over my shoulder. My father jumps up, scooping the fish inside the net. The weight I fought is gone. The net he holds high rattles. He's laughing, I'm laughing. He brings it over for me to see. Tangled in hatched thread its glassy eyes look forward and its tail jerks. He says I should touch it, so I drag my finger down along its body. It pulses against my little fingers; I laugh and wipe the wet onto my trousers. My father pats my shoulder. We take the fish to the bag and kill it with a blunt handle. It's dead. And looking at it, with the fight finally out of my body, I feel rushes of upset. I wipe my eyes. My father's arm brings me to his side and I'm reminded that I've caught a fish. I begin to smile and nod along with his words. Then we pack the trout away and move back to our rods, setting them up and casting them off again in hopes of another.

Matthew Ewan Thomas, 24, is an emerging writer from Swansea, South Wales. He was Highly Commended in the Michael Terence Publishing Short Story Competition 2023, with his entry being published in the competition's anthology. He was also short-listed

for the Genesis Foundation Emerging Writers Programme 2023. And is due to be published in Blood & Bourbon magazine and Digital Dreamers magazine.

Dance Dance

Ruth Maclean-Jones

As Barbie sank deeper, Jessica started to whimper. Behind Barbie was a shipwreck: an old cannon with cannonballs, surrounded by seaweed and squid. “Oh, Ken,” she said, in a silly high-pitched voice, posing a scenario wherein Barbie was penetrated by a squid. “It wriggles around just like yours does.” Barbie would also, apparently, wrap the cannonballs in seaweed, exclaiming, “they feel just like yours.”

After we shut down the PC game, having been called by my parents, I was left with a funny feeling low down. The solving sensation hovered just out of my reach, like an unfulfilled sneeze.

The playroom at her house seemed bigger than the school assembly hall. In the sunken area in the middle, surrounded by carpeted steps, we ate popcorn and fizzy sweets whilst watching *The Princess Diaries* and *Miss Congeniality*. Jessica could watch TV without limits, and also fetch a Coke or a 7UP from the drinks fridge in the pantry whenever she pleased. I never watched broadcast TV and was allowed fizzy drinks only on holiday.

Occasionally her brother, Nick, would come in. He was just a couple of years older but seemed much more — Adam’s apple already protruding from the fuzz darkening his chin. He would attempt to wrestle the remote off Jessica, or else lounge on the sofa. It was from him I first learned the word ‘whore’.

“What’s a whore?” I asked.

“Someone who takes dick for money,” he said, his can fizzing where he popped it open. This explanation lodged in my brain like a foreign coin stuck in a vending machine. It was like when I first heard about a blow job. It was inconceivable, that such a relation had been dreamed up between people.

Sometimes, he would come in with a friend. They would manspread on the sofas as we played *Dance Dance Revolution* on the flashing plastic mat.

“Hey, you gonna dance for us?” the friend called. He whispered something to Nick, and they both laughed.

“What?” Jessica asked, turning to them, flushed. “What did he say?”

“He said,” Nick said, in a slow voice, as if spelling something out to an imbecile, “you should do a lap dance for us.”

They laughed.

“I don’t know what a lap dance is,” Jessica said.

Nick leaned back against the sofa. “It’s when a woman grinds her arse against a man’s rock-hard cock.”

I had that strange feeling again, of something foreign lodged in my body. I looked at Jessica, her horrified yet mesmerised gaze, at the boys who peered down at us. “That’s disgusting,” she said, finally.

“One day, you’ll love it,” Nick said, glancing at his friend, who stifled a laugh. “All women do.”

Jessica’s mother loved animals. A whole room downstairs was piled with mesh cages, within which dwelled gerbils and hamsters. Occasionally they were allowed out on the floor, rolling around in a little transparent ball. I was charmed by this: how the animal could explore the human-sized house, safe in its little bubble of pink plastic.

A lean-to was stacked high with hutches, full of guinea pigs and rabbits, which on occasion we were allowed to get out and stroke. Around the house, tall plum trees grew. One summer we climbed up ladders and picked them, filling several baskets. It was the first time I had eaten a plum.

Sometimes our other friend Georgia would come, and we would have sleepovers. I realised it was possible to stay up all night, wide-eyed in the playroom, playing Truth or Dare. Eventually Jessica’s Dad would pop his head in, and tell us to go to bed. This was the only time I recall ever seeing him. We’d crash on the bunkbeds in Jessica’s surprisingly small room, her cassette tape of Pollyanna on the recorder. Jessica would fall asleep immediately, gently snoring, whilst I lay till the cassette clicked off, watching the contours of the alien room emerge from the dark.

Her mother had a pad taped to the wall in the kitchen entitled *Chopin Lizst*. I knew that Chopin was a composer, but that was the first time I had heard about Lizst.

Sometimes, we went to Georgia’s. There we would wake early, when we were allowed to eat Cheerios and watch cartoons, another novelty forbidden in my house.

When I went to secondary school, I lost touch with them completely. It never occurred to me, not that there was any bad blood. I slid over them with the ease of water over a pebble.

I cannot remember how many years later it was when my mother told me that Georgia's mother and Jessica's father had been having an affair.

It had been going on for years, all that time when the three of us had been friends. Now, they were together. My parents took Georgia's dad's side. He was certainly more present than most of my friend's fathers — most of whom I could not say I had seen, let alone name.

Years later, I saw Georgia's mother on a train platform in the city. In her anorak, she looked small and old. I watched closely, and sure enough, after a while, appeared Jessica's father. They waited like that, side-by-side, with briefcases and matching jackets. I could not match the glamorous forbidden lovers with these grey people. It was like a morality tale. I watched them get on the commuter train together, their feet hitting the step at the exact same moment.

Ruth Maclean-Jones lives in London with her husband and daughter.

The Red Flag

Chris Cochran

There is nothing of greater importance in a young boy's life than determining the shortest distance between two points. The shortcut is a low-risk rebellion, a way to spit on conventions without sacrificing the innocence that childhood affords.

I was able to shave three minutes off my walk to Lancaster Elementary each morning by skirting the sidewalk and cutting through an orchard. A gauntlet of exhausted apple trees that had stopped bearing fruit by late fall instead bore witness to an eight-year-old who was making good time for no particular reason.

The orchard adjoined a chain link fence behind my school, a partition between dirt and concrete, imagination and reality. I would haphazardly toss my backpack and then myself over the fence rather than backtrack a short distance to the gate.

My older sister refused to accompany me on my excursions. Once, I took the shortcut, walked back to the gate, and waited for her. "What took you so long?" I asked. She rolled her eyes as she walked past, and I had to jog in order to close the distance between us.

The bell would ring, and hundreds of students would file into their respective classrooms, like ants scurrying to their flood-proof nests before a storm. Teachers would greet students with warm smiles; students would greet each other with fist bumps, hugs, and high-fives. Class would begin and we would all do our best to settle into hard metal chairs, legs scraping against linoleum flooring.

Spelling words. Venn diagrams. Multiplication tables. The hands of my third-grade teacher, Mrs. Refreno, would already be covered in wet-erase marker by mid-morning as she grappled with overhead projector transparencies. When she needed a break, we would be assigned seat work. Every worksheet was a race: The first few to finish could play Number Munchers on one of the three Apple computers in the back of the room.

By late morning, glances toward the faded wall clock that had held students hostage for decades increased tenfold amongst anxious eyes. Mrs. Refreno would try to teach us cursive letters, but our minds were elsewhere, the loops and swoops mere wiggles and squiggles. Kids were not meant to sit still. We had been playing by the teacher's rules for far too long; it was time to play by our own.

Recess was coming.

Mrs. Refreno would have us line up at the door alphabetically to prevent pushing and shoving. Still, the line leader could feel the pressure on her heels from those behind her trying to get closer to the hallway, looking for shortcuts that did not exist.

First, we would have to endure lunch. Our energy suddenly renewed with the promise of play on the horizon, it took all our willpower to walk in an orderly, straight line to the cafeteria. We would carefully carry our flimsy foam trays to folding lunch tables, joining our friends from other classes.

We inhaled our food. Despite the lack of precedent, we believed that the faster we finished lunch, the faster we would be on the playground. Actually, individual tables were released in a rotating order, a system that was only fair when we were allowed to go first. Upon dismissal, we would sprint toward the heavy steel double doors that allowed passage to the playground.

While the playground had physical boundaries, our imaginations were boundless. The equipment was used for everything except its intended purpose. Seesaws and slides became pea gravel catapults and conveyor belts. Swings were corkscrewed by friends as we sat awaiting the release that would send us into a spiraling frenzy. The playground provided a creative outlet the classroom failed to offer, which is why the red flag was so devastating.

I can still picture the red flag hanging, lifelessly, at the end of our hallway, an indicator that recess would be indoors due to inclement weather. I can still hear the collective groan of my classmates as the line leader relayed the bad news. She would poke her head into the

hallway as we lined up for lunch, nervously awaiting her signal. Our worst fears were confirmed when she sighed heavily, slumped her shoulders, and shook her head.

For a time, I felt sorry for her. Other announcements were made over the PA system. This should not have been her burden to bear. This process existed for one reason—pure cowardice. The adults hid behind the red flag, shirking responsibility, while the line leaders earned the resentment of their peers.

After all, there was perhaps nothing more awful to a third-grader than indoor recess. At that age, most of the world's wickedness was still concealed; however, the ruthless act of asking kids to return to the classroom after lunch was something palpable, an atrocity we had all experienced at one time or another. The freedom that recess bestowed could not be attained without fresh air, without room to move. It could not be felt within the confines of four cinder block walls that had been repainted so many times that they were closing in.

On days in which the red flag was displayed, we dawdled through lunch. The lunchroom supervisor came around to dismiss tables, but there was no longer a sense of urgency. We trudged back to the classroom, feeling sorry for ourselves.

At the start of each indoor recess, Mrs. Refreno made it a point to remind us that this was supposed to be her prep time. As a result, the only rule was that we could not bother her unless it was an absolute emergency. When she was not leaving us unsupervised to chat with the other teachers in the hallway, she would be sitting at her desk reading a paperback novel, ignoring all but the most egregious behavior.

We had various ways of keeping busy. We would scrutinize nearly identical pictures in old issues of Highlights Magazine, trying to spot the differences. We would turn the crank in Mouse Trap, hoping the chain reaction of events would work properly and the plastic cage would drop on our opponents. Occasionally, Mrs. Refreno would check out the rolling TV cart. We would watch Reading Rainbow VHS tapes and learn about Egyptian mummies, how they would live in their tombs as they lived on earth, believing a new life began after they died. Fall had come and gone in about a week that year, neglected clumps of rain-soaked leaves littering streets and sidewalks. The weather had been miserable—the line leader had been the unwitting target of misplaced anger on several occasions—and we were once again stuck inside for recess. I was sulking near the window, listening to raindrops violently smash against the glass, when she approached.

“You’re the smallest kid in class,” she said, hesitantly. Her statement caught me by surprise, as she had not spoken more than a few words to me all year.

“Yeah, I guess?” I said.

“I could use your help,” she said, biting her lip. Her eyes seemed apologetic.

She led me to a sliding cabinet which housed a variety of indoor recess activities. I saw a couple of her friends watching us intently, one whispering something to the other behind a cupped hand.

It is hard to imagine I was unsuspecting at the time when the warning signs seem so clear upon reflection. Perhaps I was too eager to please, too weak to say no. Maybe when she asked me to follow her, I assumed her authority as line leader went beyond its actual parameters. It is possible that I was so tired of being at the mercy of the singular red flag in the hallway that I simply refused to acknowledge the countless red flags in the classroom that afternoon.

“It’s locked,” she said, tugging on the right door to demonstrate.

“Maybe get Mrs. Refreno to unlock it?” I offered.

“Yeah, right. You think she would consider this an emergency?”

“So what do you want me to do?” I was clueless as to why I had been targeted until the line leader grabbed the left door and was able to pull it partially open.

“Do you think you could squeeze through?”

She had no control over the weather. She was born with a surname that came first alphabetically, determining her role as line leader, sealing her fate as a harbinger of disappointment. Was she also powerless to prevent what was about to happen?

“Do you see the Etch a Sketch?” she asked, as I reluctantly got down on all fours and poked my head into the sliding cabinet. Sure enough, it was sitting on top of a box well out of reach. I withdrew my head and met her gaze.

“I don’t think I can fit.”

“Sure, you can,” she insisted.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and I meant it. I started to pull myself up but became immobilized when she spoke again.

“Please. I really need this.” Out of pity, I pulled myself into the cabinet, wedging through the narrow opening, twisting around the corner. As soon as my legs were inside, I heard the sliding door begin to close.

“Wait, what are you—” I turned my head back toward the opening and watched the last sliver of light disappear as the door slammed shut. “No! Let me out!” My screams were indistinguishable amongst the shrieks and squeals of third-graders playing.

I wrenched my body, contorted my limbs, in order to turn around inside the cabinet. Frantically, I tried to wedge my fingers between the sliding door and frame, but the line leader must have been using all her leverage to keep it secure. There was nothing to grab on to. "Please!" The sound of my fists pounding on the inside of the door merged with the low rumble of thunder from the storm. No one was coming to help.

The air was thick, the darkness enveloping. I began to cry.

I am not sure how long she kept me trapped. Eventually, the door slid open, spilling fluorescent light inside the cabinet. Shielding my eyes, I crawled out from my tomb. She was smirking until she saw my tear-stained cheeks.

"I didn't..." she began weakly. I looked down and noticed, incredulously, that I was gripping the Etch A Sketch. I handed it to her and quickly turned away, wiping my cheeks, suddenly self-conscious. Mrs. Refreno broke off her conversation and returned from the hallway, surveyed the room, and was unable to discern any difference from when she left.

The storm had abated by the end of the school day. The apple orchard was completely washed out, so I opted to take the sidewalk home with my sister. I would never take the shortcut again.

It was my responsibility to take out Rusty, our family's Irish setter, when I got home from school each day. He was no longer the exuberant puppy I grew up with: arthritis brought on a stiffness in his gait, a cataract had developed in his right eye, and he slept most of the day.

Our after-school routine of fetch was put to an end weeks earlier when my dad saw how fatigued it made him. Nevertheless, he still carried his drool-soaked tennis ball outside with him and dropped it at my feet, looking up with expectant eyes.

"You know we can't do this anymore," I told him as I reached down and stroked his matted fur. He nudged the tennis ball closer then barked.

I grabbed the ball with my index finger and thumb and gently tossed it a short distance.

He hobbled toward the ball, off-balance, favoring his right-front leg. After retrieval, he gingerly walked back to where I was standing and, once again, dropped the ball at my feet.

I tossed the ball a bit further. Rusty fetched. He was panting heavily now, the tennis ball still housed between his jaws.

"Drop it," I said. Too weak to say no, too eager to please, he loosened his grip. I scooped it up and tossed it even further. He just stood there, whimpering.

"Go get it!" I said, pointing aggressively toward the tennis ball. He staggered away, stopping after a few steps to look back with pleading eyes. "Fetch!" I yelled, and he dutifully reeled

toward the ball, scooping it up and walking back toward the house, signaling that we were done.

I cut him off, ripped the ball out of his mouth, and threw it as far as I could.

Chris Cochran is a high school English teacher who occasionally cosplays as an established author. He lives in Michigan with his wife and son, where he spends most evenings drinking tea and falling asleep to comedy podcasts. His work has been well received by friends and family who are all completely unbiased and objective.

Smoke Legend

Laura DeGrave

Tenderly placed next to a gentle stream, lived a young boy in a small village. Travelers occasionally stopped and freely shared a tale or two. Epic tales of Cyan Thunderbolt were the young boy's favorite.

A merchant came by to rest overnight. The villagers prepared the great campfire by the stream. It was an old customary tradition they held for news of the world and storytelling. Lulling trickles of water flowed, while crackles of warmth from the blaze shifted light across the merchant's face. The young boy held fast to his father's knee. Enticing legends began to breathe. He followed the embers of ash upward, riding the merchant's words upon an endless ocean of stars. A desire started to burn within. One daring step forward called greatness closer and away from the campfire's glow.

The young boy trailed the stream's music outside the village. Shadows darted across the land before him. Rip-roaring howls echoed off the surrounding terrain. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled.

A calm voice interrupted the young boy's fear, "Don't turn your back on them. Raise your arms and scream. Throw the rocks by your feet too."

Fleeting shadows circled tightly. The young boy envisioned striking each target with each rock.

A triumph for Cyan Thunderbolt blared out per volley, "Take that, great narwhal! You too, Bermuda cannibals! Be gone, cursed pygmies! Eat rock, vampire peapods!" After excruciating moments, the young boy heard his own rushed breath accompanied by the song of the stream.

The calm voice returned. "What you choose today, you will choose again tomorrow. Be strong now, you'll further your strength toward the rising sun."

"Thank you, sir," said the young boy, "Who is it that saved me?"

"It is I, Bronze Fox. I can outwit any wolf alive. Your Cyan Thunderbolt is no match for me." A small cat shaped outline appeared in front of the young boy.

"How is that possible? I've not heard the name Bronze Fox or of anyone outwitting Cyan Thunderbolt."

"You should not trust all you hear." The silhouette faded by the ink of night.

"Wait! Please forgive me. I'm untrained in the world. Do you know the path my feet are taking?"

"Follow the waters toward the waxing half-moon." Bronze Fox's voice grew faint.

Abandoned.

The young boy gazed at the sky's bright gems. One boldly lit the heavens, a marbled lantern shared by all- the moon. He continued onward till his ears were pounded from voluminous grumbling. An insurmountable gauntlet materialized; bone shattering frothy breakers crashing against sharply pitted boulders.

"My, my, my," trumpeted a jolting voice. A large elegant bird swaggered into view. Its snowy feathers shimmered like silken moonbeams. "What have I got here? A hatchling? Are you going to introduce yourself, hatchling?"

"I'm not a hatchling. I'm a boy. Can you help me across the rapids?"

"A right ninny you are, boy. Silver Swan says so. Can you not see? It is past your bedtime."

The young boy rubbed his eyes and yawned.

"Walk this way to my home on top of the beaver's lodge. It is quite cozy and secure."

The young boy agreed. He stumbled over mounds of thick bulrushes. Then he clambered up a five-foot wall constructed from mud, rock, and sticks.

"Home sweet home, boy. Not much farther. Chin up, for the land of dreams will present itself soon."

The young boy waded passed the crescent wall toward the beaver lodge. He stood in reach of the dome-shaped stack. Silver Swan watched aloft from the dam wall. The young boy grabbed a handful of sticks, pulling himself out of the three foot water. A breeze chilled his

soaked skin. He crested the beaver's lodge and a welcomed bedding of cattails broke his fall to sleep. Silver Swan landed lightly beside the young boy.

The early morning dew nipped at the young boy's body. He spied his benefactor afloat below the lodge.

"Fine morning, boy! Hungry?" asked Silver Swan.

"Yes, ma'am! Is there anything worthy of me?"

"Tear open the cattail shoots. The white cores are scrumptious."

The young boy tore into the nearest stalk. A familiar taste greeted his tongue, bitter cucumber. It would hold off his hunger, until a proper meal came.

"Silver Swan, will you help me now?"

"I'll guide you back to where I found you. It's up to you to do the rest."

The young boy chased after Silver Swan. Her immense wingspan couldn't be missed. She pressed to the sky, high as a cloud. They reached the hostile waters and Silver Swan soared out of sight.

Abandoned, again.

Despair started to weigh his thoughts. A melody danced in his ears. He spotted a thin jolly fellow, in a crimson jacket wearing an emerald plumed cavalier hat, on the opposite side of the stream. The tune salved the young boy's heart and he decided to follow along the waterbank. He hadn't noticed when the waters flowed smoothly like honey off a spoon.

The melody stopped.

"How does the sunshine on your side of the world?" asked the jolly fellow.

Startled from acknowledgement, the young boy replied, "Dreadful. Can you help me across?"

The jolly fellow plucked a stone from the wayside edge and tossed it into the stream. He paused for a moment to decipher the plopping sound. Then he cautiously forded the stream by sidestepping and leaning toward the currents with bended knees.

"Mimic my movements. Follow me," said the jolly fellow. He offered his hand to steady the young boy.

Grateful, the young boy clutched the jolly fellow's hand. They angled their way across the slippery expanse. The young boy stepped on a patch of loose pebbles and crashed face down into the icy water. The jolly fellow fell into the currents after him.

A strong voice penetrated the young boy's water-filled ears. "Get on your back! Feet in front!" He turned up, witnessing the fleeting sky. His body relaxed to drifting, when it met a more peaceful tow. Suddenly, something tugged sharply at his waist. It was the jolly fellow dragging him to dry land.

"Did you get enough to drink?" said the jolly fellow.

"I sure did! Thanks for saving me, sir."

"Sir?" He laughed. "The name is Golden Rod. I'm the best there'll ever be. Top of the class, boy. How about you being my apprentice?"

"No. My father-" "No? No! I'm not good enough for you?" Golden Rod marched off in his drenched coat, slinging water from his fingertips.

"But-but-" No use. Golden Rod had disappeared.

The young boy sat down upon the embankment. He sought solace from the glints of rolling water while he dried in the sun. A loud slapping splash nearby ensnared his attention. With the strong arms of a fisherman, a gray bearded man retrieved a bucket tied to a rope- hand over hand.

"Hey, boy! Is this your hat?" The gray bearded man called out to him. He held up Golden Rod's cavalier hat. The saturated emerald plumes drooped pitifully. They resembled a cluster of pine needles trapped in a downspout.

"No, it's not mine."

"Well then, I'll leave it here for the owner to find." The young boy watched as the gray bearded man hung the cavalier hat on a tree branch.

"Have you some time to spare, boy? Would you carry my bucket home for me? I can pay you with a hot meal."

"That sounds good to me." The young boy got up and fetched the hefty load.

They trekked through a dense wood beyond the stream. A quaint patch of heaven opened ahead. Smoke floated above the small cottage's chimney top.

"There's a stew warming in the fireplace. Let's eat, boy, before it burns away."

The young boy followed the gray bearded man inside the small cottage. He carefully sat the water bucket next to the door.

"Seat yourself, boy." The gray bearded man gestured toward two handcrafted chairs before the fireplace.

Oddly patterned skinned furs covered the rustic woodwork. The young boy situated himself comfortably. He studied the gray bearded man as he hooked the crane with a fire poker and then scooped the aromatic stew into two wooden bowls from the mantel.

"Mind your tongue." The gray bearded man handed the young boy a bowl, along with a spoon he pulled from his shirt pocket.

"Thank you, sir." The young boy ate heartily.

The gray bearded man nestled upon the opposite chair. They both observed the fire's flames, burrowing its path through weakened logs.

"Shall I tell you a story, boy?"

"Do you know any Cyan Thunderbolt tales? The spitting contest against Medusa for a blindfold kiss? They say no one has ever seen a stone statue of his likeness! Or the great foot race? When he tricks the Sphinx of Giza out of asking riddles. They say a sandstorm blew away their tracks and that made them equals."

"They say a lot. I outran that haughty beast on two to one odds. Blasted sandstorm blocked the judge's view. All that simpleton pharaoh could see was the Sphinx's wings before it tried to devour me."

"You're Cyan Thunderbolt?" The young boy gawked at the gray bearded man.

"During a season or two." He winked at the young boy. "I've heard my tales. I'd rather listen to yours. So, tell me, what wisdom have you gained in your travels?"

The young boy contemplated his answer. "Bronze Fox informed me to never turn my back on an adversary. Silver Swan advised me to rest when weary. Golden Rod showed me that not all who journey together have the same intentions."

Cyan smiled. "What have I taught you, boy?"

"Not to judge a book by its cover. Cyan, am I wrong in my admiration?"

"Dear boy, it is never wrong to be fond of anybody. Especially those who inspire us to be more than what we think is possible."

The young boy relished in the shadow battles playing within the fire's flames. His head began to bob. Cyan stood up and tucked a thick wooly fur around the young boy's body.

"I believe you will do well in any soil you plant your heart in," whispered Cyan.

"Son, are you ready to walk?" said the young boy's father.

They raised themselves from the unforgiving cold ground. The young boy saw the campfire's coals were on the verge of extinction. He instantly missed his father's body heat instantly.

"Pop, when I get tall, can I be as great as Cyan Thunderbolt?"

The young boy's father grabbed his shoulders and adjusted his direction to face homeward.

"Lead the way, son."

Laura is an aspiring author. She lives in Riceville, Tennessee with her husband, Eric and their 3 furbabies. The eldest has his own book called 'Jake The Water Dog'. They enjoy small adventures, riding roads, picnics, and movies. You can follow along on Facebook, 'Scribbles by Laura DeGrave' or Instagram, 'JakeWaterDog'. Thankful for all the love and support. The dream is to create a tale worthy of appreciation.

Eve's Saturday Morning

Henry Vinicio Valerio Madriz

"Are you awake, sweetheart?"

"Yes, mom, I am", Eve said, and then she yawned. A nine-year-old child doesn't have much to worry about, does she? Children's work is playing and enjoying life; however, helping at home is a plus. And Eve knows it! (Hard work will never hurt any kid.)

Eve belongs to a loving family. They have worked in their workshop and store for generations. Commerce has always been a good friend of theirs. They are not rich people, but prosperous ones. It's the result of hard work, which, by the way, has given them a great reputation as very respectable community citizens.

It's a beautiful sunny morning in Eve's town -almost a city. Eve's town is just an hour away from the capital city; nevertheless, it's not a suburb. The climate is always nice, which is why the weather is perfect today. The town's early activity begins... Everybody seems to be happy

since locals are very talkative, they greet each other in the streets or visit friends, especially if they are ill or in trouble. It's their sense of community. Everyone has learned that happiness is based on simplicity.

"Honey, take a bath, and then we'll have breakfast together. Could you go to Mrs. Stone's house after we open the shop?"

"Sure, mama. I will. Let me guess, mom, it's about her new dress, right?"

"Smart girl I have! Good guess, darling! But I also need to send her a little vase. It's delicate and fragile, you..."

"Have to be careful!" Eve finished her mother's sentence, which drew a sweet smile on her mother's face.

Breakfast was energizing, and now all family members are ready for work. Eve's father and his 2 oldest sons will go directly to the workshop, while Eve's mother, her 3 daughters (including Eve), and the youngest son, Edgar, will head towards their shop. Both subgroups opened their respective doors to the public. And, as soon as they were organized, Eve's mother asked her to deliver the products, as agreed, to Mrs. Stone's house. Eve's mother was aware of the fact that Eve was still little, but there were no crimes in their town -almost a city.

"Go on, Eve."

"My blessing, mom?"

And, after Eve's mom put her hands on Eve's head and prayed to God for Eve's safety, the lively child left the store. Eve got out of the family's shop, turned right, and walked a couple of steps. The noise of many customers bargaining and arguing for a better price or product quality came to her ears. It was the Little Market's buying and selling routine on the corner. Eve moved faster to avoid the crowd. She turned right again on Liberty Street, got on the sidewalk (too many people at Little Market!), and walked in front of the drugstore, where she heard the "here, your paper with the latest news!" shouting of her friend.

"Good morning, Eve! Early delivery?"

"Hi! You're right, Mr. White."

"Whose now?"

"Mrs. Stone's."

"Go on then; she's not known for being patient."

Because Eve was talking with Mr. White, she didn't realize Tommy's father was leaving the National Bank and crashed against him, bumping her little head against his left hip.

"Easy Eve, take it easy!"

"Sorry! I didn't see you, sir."

"I can tell." Tommy's father smiled. "Say hello to your parents, please."

"Yes, sir."

"Are you coming home tomorrow to help Tommy (Eve's classmate) with homework? He needs you, Eve!"

"Yes, sir. After church."

Eve kept walking. She could have taken a shortcut by crossing Central Park; however, she loves to see the Obelisk because it's like an arrow pointing at the exact center of the town, and that's something to impress a child. After watching the Obelisk for a while, Eve turned left, this time on Main Street.

"Hey Eve! How's your rabbit doing these days?" Dr. Right, the vet, asked while she was trying to open her business door. She was carrying a sick puppy. Even though Dr. Right was insistently trying to open the door, she never stopped caressing the sick puppy.

"Much better, ma'am; thanks for asking."

"A busy girl, always busy! She reminds me of myself at her age!", Dr. Right reflected.

Eve's elementary school was almost empty since it was Saturday and there were no classes. However, there were some kids practicing soccer on the field, and the band was rehearsing. She waved at them.

"Good morning, Eve!", greeted, this time, an old couple while painting whatever they were able to see in the front yard of the nursing home, across from the school's soccer field. They've been married for 60 years, but because they didn't have any children, life forced them to fly into a safer nest.

"Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Goldbridge!"

"Are you and Edgar coming this afternoon to play cards with us, sweetheart?"

"I'll ask my dad and mom."

"Please, do so. She is such a beautiful and fine girl! Don't you think, honey?"

"Yes, darling. You're right! Eve's such an angel!"

Eve had to turn right this time, on Apple Street, as she wanted to reach Mrs. Stone's house. And she did. She rang the doorbell. Mrs. Stone herself opened the door, not her butler, since Mrs. Stone had seen Eve coming from her studio's window.

"Good morning, Mrs. Stone!"

"A bit late, aren't you?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I came as soon as I could."

"It's OK, I guess. Here's your money. Be careful."

Actually, Mrs. Stone liked Eve a lot. But, as an old-school lady, Mrs. Stone wouldn't allow herself to express affection. She even wanted to invite Eve to come in to have breakfast with her, but she wouldn't allow that either. Nothing is interesting about having servants but no family to talk to. She has lots of money and time to spend, yet nobody in her life to share it with. Eve has always been kind to her; therefore, Mrs. Stone thought Eve deserved her company. But, again, not this time...

"Hi there!", said Mrs. Stone's gardener.

"Good morning, Mr. Green!"

"You'd better go straight home, Eve."

"I will... but..."

"But you won't take the same way back, will you?"

Eve smiled.

"I know how much you love to climb that hill to see the boats near the shore."

"You're right, sir."

"You must go then. Bye, Eve!"

Eve smiled again. There was another shortcut from Mrs. Stone's house to the Obelisk. All she needed to do was go uphill. And she did. It was a wonderful view, indeed... the cliff, the woods, the boats sailing. It was a living painting, a God's masterpiece! Eve stayed still, looking at her favorite town's view.

The sound of airplane engines could be heard from a not-so-far distance. Eve was absorbed in traveling dreams, so she didn't notice it.

Suddenly, all her world was changed by one explosion. The first bomb frightened every fiber of Eve's body and soul. She was disoriented. "What is this?!" The second, third, and other bombs made Eve understand something extremely bad was happening.

Eve turned and saw her town -almost a city- being destroyed. A coordinated bomber attack was performed with military precision. Although Eve covered her ears with both hands for not listening to this recently born hell's death sentence and fell on her knees in the surrender position, she couldn't order her eyes not to see this monstrosity. One by one, bomb after bomb, all constructions were damaged... just smoke left. No house, no building, and no life were spared.

The explosions stopped after 9 minutes, to Eve, an eternity. Her legs told her it was time to check on her family's fate because they started to move by themselves.

Eve stood up and walked again; this time, nobody greeted her on her way back home. Corpses don't talk with their neighbors.

Sometimes, History is written with hope, the way Eve does; sometimes, History is written with work and respect, the way Eve's family does; sometimes, History is written with money, the way Tommy's father does; sometimes, History is written with love and compassion, the way Dr. Right does; sometimes, History is written with art and vision, the way Mr. and Mrs. Goldbridge do; sometimes, History is written with fear and hate, the way Mrs. Stone does; nonetheless, many times, unfortunately, History is written with blood and death, the way wars do...

Eve started to run home, but this time she didn't stop to see her friends bleeding and dying; she went straight home. Both the workshop and the store were burning. Eve's face was fully covered with tears of pain, wrath, and despair (she was so focused on all this destruction that she'd forgotten about crying).

"Eve, what just happened?", Edgar, her youngest brother, asked. He was in the shop's backyard when the attack began. He was pushed against a wall by a bomb's shock wave, which miraculously saved him. "Why did they kill our family?", he insisted.

Eve approached Edgar, and she hugged him slowly and strongly. She wanted to stick to something, to have roots. Then she answered her brother's questions.

"I don't know."

Born in Atenas, Costa Rica, 1969, Henry Vinicio Valerio Madriz is a teacher who graduated in English Teaching and Linguistics & Literature. He published "Strange Fate" (short story), Darkness Falls (anthology) and "Loving Shadows" (poem), Dear You -Poems Through The Heart (anthology), The Red Penguin Collection, USA; "Running" (short story), Strangest Fiction Anthology Volume One, USA; and The Cyrenian (short story), Otherwise Engaged Literature and Arts Journal Volume 11, USA. He got shortlisted (top 10) with his poem "Soldiers' Death Sentence" (North

American Continent) in Voice of Peace: 1st Intercontinental Poetry And Short Story Anthology 2021, The League of Poets.

Featured Poems

1. I Spy - The Lost Game by Madhu Mehrotra
 2. The Family Waltz by Rian
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I Spy - The Lost Game

Madhu Mehrotra

Children play games all the time.

The sporty ones and games they learn to carry to their adulthood.

I Spy

in a lisp

Ice, Pice, Dhuppa

Catch me Puppa

A popular game

Easily came

To some it's Hide and Seek

Counting, the naughty ones peep

Show their inner self clear and deep

To take advantage of a situation

To make the most of their station

Thinking of only their win

Others views in the bin

One such child was Missy Teena Snoop

She was very fond of the Hula, Hula Hoop

Swirling it up, down, round and round
She would joyfully break her bound
A taboo for her was cutting her hair
Her grandfather would say 'How dare?'
In spite, of the age old rule
She cut a fringe to look cool
Now she turned vane
Like a school cane
"Ah, I can do what I like"
She chose to ride a bike
On the road to the right
"Ah I am so brilliant, bright
All ride left, move on green, stop at red
I go through, me by no light shall be led"
Her bike hit one coming her way
The little one was out to play
"The fella needs a piece of my mind
Why should I be calm and kind?"
She screamed and shouted
Till the world the boy doubted
She was on the right
So she could fight
Even though she was wrong

She carried on for long
Many chances she did find
To give her piece of mind

She sought opporunities to do the same
This in short became her 'fav' game
She would spy on sisters and brothers
She would pitch one against the other
"I play, Hide n Seek, I spy
I can spot a tiny, hidden fly"
She would give a piece of her mind
Believing all others were born blind
To spite her grandfather
She threw the chaadar
Went off, with her classmate
Cheese and bread they ate
But the hunger to spy was such
Wanting to know more and much
She put her nose in others work
Crying and screaming like a turk
"A piece of my mind you can have
Your opinions for another day save"
She cut her pointed nose

Thinking it was her foes
The grandfather left one night
As he was hurt pretty tight
By her running away
With a haughty sway
She did huff, puff then went off
Hurting all with her snooty scoff
Then Missy Snoop
Hula, Hula hoop
Around her waist
To suit her taste
Went here and there
Without fear
Taking a mare
Sitting on a chair
She would inquire
"Madam - Sire,
Weren't you invited to the party?
Oh, anyway it was just tarty
I gave a piece of my mind
When you I didn't find
I love to spy
The tiniest fly

I can readily spot
That's my lucky lot"
She kept giving off and on
Face to face, phone to phone
Till all knew
What was true
She had lost her peace of mind
No way, it was hard for her to find
Losing those who loved and cared
Her nosy character was bared
All laughed behind her back
As her friends she did lack
They played Hide and Seek
They, her stories did leak
Of her habit
Bit by bit
Upsetting one and all
Anytime giving a call
Moved from place to place
Lost in the silly rat race
Prying into others' lives
Husbands and wives
Sons and Daughters

Spying, prying

Sobbing, sighing

As she never her peace of mind found

'I'll give a piece of my mind' to all around.

Was her favourite saying

She, with her peace was paying

She thought a child's game

It will bring a good name

It turned the other way

She lost it all they say.

The Family Waltz

Rian

when will you stop mourning the child never born and start loving the one you've always had

you are angry

for all the world did not give you

i am angry

with all i cannot take

love and duty sit the same

on your tongue

as you rip mine out

your hands are heavy
with all you try to give me
but my hands are too small
too soft in its foundations
where you are steel
i am painted clay
pretty but prone to shatter
with the right pressure rock
turns to diamond and
twinkles like stars but
charcoal
is all the stars have for me
good for burning bridges
for staining hands
we exist only in funhouse mirrors
what else am i except you in concave
what are you except me convexed
righteousness is merely bitterness with bite
fury is only hope gone sour
these hands are not only built to hold
its easy enough to learn to choke
its the family waltz
pruned and purposed

as you push push PUSH to destruction

i pull away to extinction

pack myself into moving boxes

watch calendars become countdowns

a heritage of funerals rather than forgiveness

Rian is an aspiring young writer/poet who loves the use of imagery and prose to bring out emotions and experiences that otherwise feel indescribable.